

Office of the Student Advocate
School Year 2015-16 Annual Report
Official Written Testimony: Faith Gibson Hubbard, Chief Student Advocate

Good Evening, members of the Board. Thank you for this opportunity to share with you the work of the Office of the Student Advocate for school year 2015-16. Today we publicly release our SY 2015-16 Annual Report, which outlines the work of the office in a very detailed way. Tonight, I want to share with you some of the highlights of our work from SY 2015-16 and note some of the projects and programs that our office has on the horizon for this current school year, 2016-17.

So let me start by saying that my name is Faith Gibson Hubbard and I am honored to lead the Office of the Student Advocate as the Chief Student Advocate. The mission of the Office of the Student Advocate is to support and empower DC residents to achieve equal access to public education through advocacy, outreach, and information services. In our work, we provide step-by-step assistance for students, parents, families, and community members to be informed, be connected, and be empowered.

Last year, around this time, I was brand new to this role and presented to you the hopes for our office. At that time, it was truly a pleasure to share with you my vision for the office and that vision has now evolved into real functions, programs, and resources that serve and support the students and families of the District of Columbia in a very tangible way.

The work of our office takes place in a THREE of ways.

First, through gaining insight into the needs of families and communities. This is done by:

- o Addressing the needs and questions about the public education system through Requests for Assistance line to streamline the information gathering process for parents and students.
- o Visibility in the community to have direct dialogue with families and communities to gain input and insights into relevant issues and areas of opportunity.
- o Organize and participate in community events to establish relationships and provide opportunity for discussion.
- o Develop partnerships and coalitions to engage in formal and informal discussions with community leaders, community based organizations, and government agencies to elevate the issues and barriers that students and families are dealing with to the forefront.

Second, our office works to connect students and families to resources and tools that address their individual needs and supports their ability navigate the education landscape, and nurtures self-advocacy.

Third, our office works to interject parent, student, and community voice into policy-making and implementation processes. This is done through special interest working groups, on a host of topics from safe passage to special education, in order to create solutions or work plans on specific issues of interest to families and the needs of their students.

The work of our office would not be possible without the collaboration of partner agencies, community-based organizations and nonprofits, community leaders, our public education LEAs, and, each of you, the State Board of Education – but most importantly, the work would not be possible without the amazing families that we exist to serve.

An office like ours is rather unique. While advocate offices or functions like ours exist in some kind of form, the structure envisioned for this office is something that I have not seen functional in any other jurisdiction. The structure of our office allows us to address community concerns on a systemic and day-to-day level by aligning community and governmental goals, providing access to all levels of government, and closing silos. But getting to the place where we are today, as an office, required a lot of work and an entrepreneurial spirit. So much of my work over the course of the SY2015-16 entailed creating the mission, structure, and vision of this office in concert with the needs of families. I would be remiss to not mention some of the challenges our office has experienced in the journey of standing up an office; this works to illustrate the many exciting opportunities for growth within our office.

Our office was developed in a crowded and confusing landscape, a landscape created to serve our community with the best of intentions. Our shift to mayoral control of schools improved the quality of education in many areas but also reduced the opportunities for student, parent and community voice in our overall system of public education and the processes that shape the way we provide public education for our children. There are a host of organizations, agencies, and offices exist to support the needs of families, but a void persisted due to efforts of coordination that fizzled and the absence of a centralized place to gain public education information and resources, or just a place to have your basic education questions answered. Differentiating ourselves from past initiatives and gaining the trust of families has required consistent and meaningful engagement, which, due to our staffing challenges in our first year, proved to be quite difficult. It is no secret that in our first year, our office was essentially an office of one, with only one full-time staff member (myself), a shared Program Associate (who I share with the Ombudsman), and two fellows. There were other budget constraints that presented

challenges but even with a host of barriers there were many opportunities. The opportunities are what allowed our office to do the work that we have done to date.

My staff's commitment to going above and beyond to serve our families has meant that we were able to complete some incredible things despite these constraints. Our tiny team has served 135 families through our request for assistance line, and has identified how to further engage families through steady transition to live answering of our hotline that we hope to have fully implemented by early 2017. Last year, we were not able to answer our request for assistance line live due to staffing and that caused us to miss the calls of over 80 families who were likely looking for support for their issue in real time – not when we were able to return their message in 24-48 hours.

Since starting the 2016-17 school year, we have started to answer our request for assistance line live between the hours of 9:00am - 5:30pm. Since changing to this process, we are already on track to surpass the number of calls addressed during the fall of 2015 and expect to interact with more families via our request for assistance line in school year 2016-17.

Outlined in our statute is a provision for creating and operating Public Education Resource Centers (PERCs) to advise students, parents, and families on all matters regarding public education. Our current staff capacity made meeting this statutory provision a challenging task. In lieu of a physical location presence, our office developed the online Education and Community Resource Guide to fill the void of centralized public education information and resources. We launched this resource guide on our website in August 2015.

This guide serves as a starting place for self-advocacy. The online Education & Community Resource Guide is the first publicly available citywide initiative of its kind and is a continuously evolving resource that currently has more than 400 resource listings organized into 33 category areas. The guide provides students, parents, families, and communities across all 8 wards with a roadmap to getting started in navigating the public education landscape in DC. This guide not only features education focused resources and organizations but also resources and organization that impact education; such as homelessness, nutrition and wellness, and more.

Through concerns communicated by families to our hotline, and by our extensive engagement in the community, we recognized a need to incorporate community voice in the Deputy Mayor for Education's (DME) efforts around safe passage of our students to and from school. To support that work, our office established the Safe Passage Community and Collaboration Working Group to support the policy-solution work of the DME by including parent, student, and community voice in the process. This work allows us to address the issues of safety with

the multiple modalities students use across all sectors get to school in a comprehensive and collaborative way. As a result, we have been able to provide numerous deliverables for both community members and schools. Some of our deliverables include:

- School-facing survey on safe passage challenges, needed supports, and relevant contacts
- Dialogue-centered community surveying, which has been disseminated via an online survey and in hardcopy. We are also conducting this survey in high-traffic areas, such as major metro stations.
- A District based Safe Passage Resource Toolkit to create and sustain the safe passage of our students and communities based on the National Safe Routes to School's best practice for engagement in order to utilize a comprehensive, integrated approach to addressing safe passage.
- Social media campaign supporting safe passage to engage all community members in supporting our students and #DCSafeRoutes within our neighborhoods.

This work allows our city to address the recurring issue of safe passage from a multipronged, collaborative approach that is inclusive of not only the national lens of safe passage, but most importantly, supports student, parent, and community voice in the process.

Through our hotline and stakeholder engagement we saw a trend from parents echoing a sentiment that their voice was not being welcomed in direct conversations about the school their child attends. School administrators and staff often express frustration that parents were not engaged, and parents lacked a willingness to be part of the educational community of their children. Our office thus convened the Ward 7 Parent Empowerment Summit Series, in partnership with the Vice President of the State Board, Karen Williams, and the Ward 7 Education Council, to empower Ward 7 parents to better engage at their schools through a shared framework, resources, and through the support of other parents. This series not only focused on equipping the school communities with the tools to revive or establish a parent organization, but also focused on capacity building tools to support parent organizations in a way that ensures that they can thrive and have longevity; create a communication forum for support amongst parents and parent organizations; and fosters engagement by leveraging parent power and voice. We have engaged parent leaders in Wards 5 and 8 to similar parent support work in their wards.

I mention some of these successes to highlight why I am so excited about the second year of this office and to provide a snapshot of the possibilities moving forward. Thanks to the Board's support of our office, we have been able to hire a full-time Student Advocate, Dan Davis, to further support our work and improve our own capacity. With our increased capacity, we look

forward to continuing the work of our office. We are excited to finally be able to launch our Volunteer Advocate Training program to provide Office of the Student Advocate trained community leaders the tools to launch PERCS per our statute. We will also further our outreach to non-native English speaking families, continue disseminating our resource guide, streamlining our internal processes to better serve families, expanding our programming, trainings, and series to additional wards, and further developing and increasing our partnerships.

It is with excitement and optimism that I present to you the inaugural annual report for the Office of the Student Advocate.

Before I close, I want to remind anyone watching or in this room, that if you would like to reach out to our office we can be reach by phone at 202-741-4692 or online at studentadvocate.dc.gov.

I thank you for the support of our office and I welcome any questions that you might have.
Thank you!