



Council of the District of Columbia
Committee of the Whole
Performance Oversight
Wednesday, March 10, 2021
Official Written Testimony of Serena M. Hayes, Ombudsman for Public Education
Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, and members of the Committee of the Whole. I am Serena M. Hayes, Ombudsman for Public Education. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

The Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education is an independent office housed within the State Board of Education. The purpose of the Ombudsman's Office is to serve as an external, neutral resource for current and prospective public-school students and their parents or guardians in the resolution of complaints and concerns regarding public education in a way that furthers the students' best interest.

Day-to-day we talk with families and schools discussing concerns and deliberating about choices that were made, whether their choices were correct, assessing the impact of that choice on children, and providing information. We coach families on how to advocate for their child(ren) by providing information, helping them organize their thoughts before conversing with school administrators, helping them draft a letter, informing them of possible solution, and supporting them through the various options available. We schedule and attend meetings. We facilitate meetings sometimes unexpectedly after realizing that a parent, guardian, or educator was triggered, and the only way to move the conversation forward is to allow space to process emotions. When deliberating with schools about an issue, particularly when the solution falls within a gray area, we work to help the school shift away from concepts of right and wrong and refocus on what resolution is in the best interest of the student. Under ordinary circumstances the office's work is challenging. As we all know, the last year has been extraordinary.

Like other agencies throughout the District, the Ombudsman's Office transitioned to full-time telework in mid-March. We continued to offer high-quality conflict resolution services in a virtual posture. Many of the complaints we received during distance learning involved special education services. Families requested additional IEP supports, dedicated aides, increased service hours, tutoring, increased one-to-one support from schools, as they watched their students' regress. There was also a subset of students that had been awaiting an initial evaluation or re-evaluation. At the beginning of the pandemic, most LEAs were not conducting virtual evaluations. Students who would have otherwise qualified for special education services did not receive an IEP.

Despite challenges during distance learning, we have also experienced positive outcomes in our casework. For example, the parent of a 4th grader contacted our office to request that her student be placed in a special education classroom. The parent was worried about the student's behavior and believed a smaller classroom would provide more supports. Our office contacted the school to schedule a meeting. The parent was able to share her concerns directly with the school. The team decided to add behavior supports. The school also developed a relationship with the student's medical and mental health providers to ensure that the student received wrap-around services.

As schools prepare for in-person instruction, our office is preparing too. Our primary concern is whether we have the capacity to meet the growing demand for our services. For the past two years, we have reported growth in call volume and cases handled. During SY 2019-2020, before the pandemic, our call volume was 40% higher than the previous year. We also continue to experience high call volume for special education cases. The challenge, however, was that for too many students, there were no viable solutions that would remedy the concerns. Some of the solutions applied during distance learning were band-aid fixes to get families through this difficult time. As schools reopen, we would like to reconnect with some of these families to ensure that their students are receiving supports that were not available during distance learning. This is something that we will not have the capacity to do should our numbers return to normal.

Distance learning has been a challenge for nearly everyone. Yet it is important to recognize the opportunities for growth that crisis present. One growth area that our office experienced was increasing feedback loops with stakeholders, engaging in numerous conversations to identify common issues, and exchanging information. We are hopeful that we can build upon these communications even as schools reopen.

I want to thank the Council again for giving me the opportunity to testify before you today. The work of the Ombudsman's Office requires dedicated staff who care deeply about our city's children's education and overall wellbeing. I am grateful to have supportive staff who exemplify commitment to the work every single day. Having the privilege to serve my city is an honor. Thank you again, and I welcome any questions you might have.