



Council of the District of Columbia

Committee of the Whole

Budget Oversight Hearing

Wednesday, March 30, 2022

Official Written Testimony of Serena M. Hayes, Ombudsman for Public Education

Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education

Good afternoon, 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 today on behalf of the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education to discuss our budget plans for the Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23).

The Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education serves as a confidential, neutral, informal, and independent resource to help students and parents resolve concerns as they engage with the public (DCPS) and public charter schools in the District of Columbia. Families and schools contact us looking for help regarding discipline, safety, special education, communication, and attendance concerns. We meet with families and schools to discuss their concerns, deliberate about why certain choices were made and whether they were correct, assess their impact on children, and provide information. Occasionally, we remind schools about legal requirements and explain the limitation of laws to families. Additionally, we coach parents and guardians to make informed decisions in the best interest of their children.

This year, we have experienced a significant increase in cases compared to last school year. So far this school year, we have supported over 448 families. Many of our office's questions and concerns this school year involved special education-related concerns and safety and bullying concerns. The office has managed the increased call volume because we received funding for two additional assistant ombudsman positions—one from the Council and the other from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). The new Assistant Ombudsman provided by the Council receives complaints from all families, regardless of the subject matter. The Assistant Ombudsman provided by OSSE exclusively handles special education concerns. Both determine the validity of the complaints and resolve the complaints either through dispute resolution or another informal measure. The additional staff members allowed our office to support the increased caseloads.

Finally, as we mentioned in our performance oversight hearing, the office is currently developing the DC Special Education Hub (the "SpEd Hub"), set to open this summer. The SpEd Hub will be staffed with four full-time employees (FTEs), three of whom will be hired in FY2022. We are grateful and elated to have the staff needed to continue supporting families. We are also thankful for the opportunity to expand our work within special education by creating resources that families have needed for a long time.

As we celebrate the opportunities to continue serving families, we also recognize challenges with our existing office space. While much of the DC government has begun transitioning to consistently working

in-person, our office (as well as the Office of the Student Advocate) cannot transition to return to in-person operations. The suite that we occupy has six (6) offices—one "office" was originally a closet that was converted into an office. However, between the Office of the Ombudsman, the Office of the Student Advocate, and now the SpEd Hub, we will have fifteen (15) full-time employees in FY23. Even if we shared offices, the space would be insufficient to house all staff. Therefore, we have begun working with the Department of General Services (DGS) to obtain new office space. We were warned that the process would take twelve to eighteen months.

DGS also provided a cost estimate for a ten-year lease in the amount of \$600,000, with two to three percent annual escalation over the lease term duration (\$60.00 per square foot for 10,000 square feet). Therefore, we respectfully ask Council to fund the relocation of our offices in the FY23 budget.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify. I welcome any questions that you may have.