



202-741-4692 (phone) • student.advocate@dc.gov (email) • <https://studentadvocate.dc.gov> (web)

Written Testimony of Dan Davis, Chief Student Advocate

Office of the Student Advocate

FY 23 Budget Hearing

Committee of the Whole

Tuesday, March 30, 2022

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, committee members, and staff. My name is Dan Davis and I serve as Chief Student Advocate for the Office of the Student Advocate for the District of Columbia. Our office supports and guides families with concerns through our public education system in the District. We are tasked daily with ensuring that students and families have the tools and resources to advocate for the outcomes and changes they want in their public education. Our focus remains on clarifying systems, reducing barriers, and providing resources and avenues of access for families.

We work to help families and our public schools improve communication, move past unrealized expectations and focus on solutions centered on the best interest of the student. We know that families are the experts on the needs of their own children, so we help families and schools by providing parent and family education, one-on-one coaching, resource supports, and trainings. As COVID continues to shift where and how families connect with education in the District, our office has grown to meet the needs of families returning to the classroom.

We continued to operate our Request for Assistance hotline – also known as the RFA line. Last school year, we received 507 total unduplicated RFAs from families seeking clarity, support, and resources to help them access the best possible education for their children. This school year, our office has already served more than 400 families through our RFA process, putting us on pace to exceed the number of requests received in any year of our office's history. This increase can be attributed to the expanded approach in which parents and families are able to connect with our office. Families are able to not only call us Monday through Friday from 9-5 on our hotline, but this school year as part of our website redesign we offered an online portal for families to submit RFAs which we reply to within 24hrs or the next business day. As we improved functionality, the Office also expanded staff capacity with an additional Student Advocate bringing our total staff count to 4 FTEs and 2 fellows.

As our schools move to in-person learning, we are employing a hybrid community outreach model utilizing virtual and in-person strategies to further meet the needs of students and families. We host virtual meetings with families and re-started our in-person engagement following the safety guidance outlined by the Center for Disease Control. In SY2020-21, we engaged with over 1,500 stakeholders -- mainly students and families, as well as school staff, community-based organizations, and government agencies. So far in SY2021-22, we engaged with more than 1,200 students, families, and educational stakeholders with about 37% of those meetings being in-person. As COVID transmission rates continue to decrease to safe levels, we are positioning ourselves to again offer in-person supports to students and their families.

Our office expected demand for resources and support from families to increase across the city this school year and sought to reevaluate our internal processes looking to gain efficiencies in how staff capacity is utilized. We rely on data from our RFA line to prioritize how we develop resources for families. For too long we didn't have the tools needed to make our data evaluation process efficient, staff would collect data in Excel, manually clean for errors cell by cell, then reformat for an analysis all in Excel which proved to be time and labor intensive. This school year we were able to move to a QuickBase platform that has allowed us to manage our data in a more succinct and labor time reducing fashion allowing more staff time to be devoted to families.

As we seek out more efficiencies in internal processes that will allow us to dedicate more staff capacity to working with families, we again turn to how we manage and collect data and seek support to obtain a technology solution. Currently we rely on two unconnected systems to manage call intake data from District students and families. Calls to the RFA line are answered on one system and then the information collected is inputted in another. Our office is aware that there is software that will allow our systems to speak with one another reducing staff time wasted on re-entering info and eliminating missed or inaccurate data.

As we search for ways to ensure our office is connecting to students and families, a portion of our community continues to be underrepresented in those seeking support from us. Families who identify as Latinx represent slightly over 20% of the school system but only 4% of families who contacted us with an RFA. While in the past we have ensured all our resources are translated into Amharic and Spanish and materials were distributed in those communities, with translation services accounting for nearly 18% of programmatic spending, we also recognize that these voices are often left out of conversations and decisions across our city. This school year we added a bilingual staffer and revamped our outreach efforts partnering with community organizations and agencies with established relationships in these communities to begin focusing on solutions and supports tied to those families' unique experiences and needs. For instance, we are in the planning phases of developing a section of our website to become a district-wide resource hub for EL students and families. One of the tools we plan on highlighting in this section will be a LEA cheat sheet for families that lay out the steps EL families can use to navigate our education system, from how credits earned abroad are evaluated to what required documents are needed for before and aftercare.

In FY22 we pulled back on staff development opportunities, trimmed supply costs, and devoted more of our spending to increase pathways for families to access our services. A portion of our supply costs were redirected to building out a more secure database to house and track requests for assistance. We received funding to bring on a fourth FTE to expand the work of our office and ease the burden of the demands for assistance on our existing staff. We are thankful for this addition as it has allowed our team to give more attentive care to the families reaching out to us. However, the level of demand our office has seen is still putting a strain on our full-time team even with the additional FTE. As more people continue to learn about our office and seek assistance, more staff will be required.

Our FY23 budget will allow us to fulfill our mission to guide and supports students, parents, families, and community members in navigating the public-school system in DC, but it doesn't allow us to connect with all the students and families that could be accessing our services. We expected to see a continued increase in students and families seeking support and resources as we continue recovering from the pandemic. We will continue to work to fulfill our mission, but the lack of investment will result in less tools for families, limited supports for households with unique learners, and a reduced scope for engagement within target communities who need support the most to recover from the impact of the pandemic. Substantial obstacles for families existed before COVID-19, and those barriers will continue to magnify as we recover.

The work of our office is made possible through the invaluable commitment of our now 4 FTEs and 2 part-time fellows. With the addition of a new FTE to our staff, we have continued to increase our levels of engagement. Last school year, we were able to engage with over 3,500 students, families, and community members were impacted by our outreach, virtual events, and request for assistance services. So far in school year 22-23, we have already exceeded 3,000 engagements with more than four months remaining to start of the next school year. As we work to serve more DC residents, we continue to meet barriers in scaling our impact due to the limitations in our staff size. To meet the current demand for services, our staff often works beyond office hours and do not have the capacity to develop, and support more initiatives throughout the city. While our staff always finds innovative ways to meet the demand of our city's residents, being able to add more full-time staff members would help us reach more families in need of support.

Adding another full-time employee would allow us to use our knowledgeable full-time staff to reach communities and families we have not yet been able to engage with as intentionally as we have hoped. It will allow us to increase our outreach and maximizing our impact in all eight wards and would allow our staff to focus on meeting the needs of students and families who need it the most. We hope that funding for FY23 will allow us to retain and incentivize staff who stayed committed to supporting students and families during this pandemic with opportunities for merit increases. We hope that this budget will allow our office to grow and support more District residents by adding additional FTEs. We also hope that this budget will allow us to manage and fortify the data we collect as requests for assistance continues to elevate.

As we grow to meet the needs of district families our shared space with our sister office the Ombudsman for Public Education and their pending launch of OSSE Special Education Parent Hub has presented unique demands on our workspace. Namely we have outgrown our current suite and need support with DGS to secure a workplace that is accessible to students and families.

Before I close, I want to thank the Council for your continued support and encouragement for our office. The growth of our office and the expansion of the supports that we can offer families is possible in part thanks to your support, and the support of many Councilmembers and staffs, by sharing information about our office and the services we provide.

If there is anyone in need of public education related assistance, they can contact our office by calling us at 202-741-4692 or emailing us at student.advocate@dc.gov. We also host a wide array of resources and tools on our website at studentadvocate.dc.gov. I thank you for this opportunity to testify and welcome any questions that you might have.