

Bill 21-918 – State Board of Education Omnibus Amendment Act of 2016

Written Testimony of Faith Gibson Hubbard

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DC State Board of Education

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Good Afternoon, Chairman Grosso, members of the Committee on Education, and staff. My name is Faith Gibson Hubbard and I am honored to lead the Office of the Student Advocate as the Chief Student Advocate. I thank you for this opportunity to testify regarding the importance of the legislative provision outlined for the Office of the Student Advocate in State Board of Education Omnibus Amendment Act of 2016.

The Parent and Student Empowerment Act of 2013¹ established the Office of the Student Advocate as an “essential resource for those seeking to navigate the complexities of the public school system.” In our work, we provide step-by- step assistance for students, parents, families, and community members to be informed, be connected, and be empowered. Through our day-to-day work we aim to:²

1. Shift the balance of power in favor of students and parents by convening stakeholders at all levels around topics of community importance;
2. Develop and support the knowledge base of students, parents, and community stakeholders;
3. Ensure that family and community perspectives are included in all relevant public education conversations;
4. Mobilize community-level leadership in grassroots education advocacy.

Our office serves as the vehicle through which meaningful engagement of students, families, and communities can be sustained on a citywide level in a collaborative way across all sectors. Our work provides an avenue to ensure that families and communities are equipped to fully

¹ Committee on Education Report on Bill 20-314, the “Parent and Student Empowerment Amendment Act of 2013, 2-3 (October 2, 2013).

² Office of the Student Advocate Annual Report SY 20-15-16. Retrieved from: http://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/publication/attachments/OSA_AnnualRpt2016_we b2.pdf

access public education in the District of Columbia.

To be quite honest, an office like ours is rather unique. Our office was developed in a crowded and confusing landscape, a landscape created to serve our community with the best of intentions in order to improve the quality of public education but yet sparked unintended consequences which reduced the opportunities for student, parent and community voice in our system.

This independent advocacy is at the very core of our work. 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.² The central role of advocacy and empowerment that the Office of the Student Advocate plays is critical in building the trust of the community and ensuring that the voices of parents and students is interjected into the public education system. Our office must be able to provide support to students and families in the areas that matter most to them even when those areas do not perfectly align with the ideas of our governance structure.

The Parent and Student Empowerment Act of 2013¹ established our office “...within the State Board of Education” to address the office’s need for independence and administrative and facilitative support. Although the State Board of Education does have agency level independence, the Office of the Student Advocate inherently needs independence separate from the Board to manage its day-to-day operations. This will allow the office to maintain its focus on students and families and ensure the effectiveness of its operations. Dedicated funding to the office ensures the ability to carry out its mission with fidelity. This need for independence is essential because the missions of the office and the State Board do not perfectly align. Of the 15 jurisdictional areas of the State Board of Education, our office only has clear alignment with their goals in 4 areas:

- Development of the state accountability plan for the District of Columbia
- Development of state policies for parental involvement;

- The categories and format of the annual state report card
- Approval of the state rules school attendance requirements

Because the 11 of the State Board's jurisdictional areas do not align with the work of our office, this means that there are areas addressed by our office that the State Board is not inherently focused on due to the nature of their work. This means that the interests the State Board can at times be contrary to focus of the office and the services that we provide to meet the needs of the families and students we serve. From our perspective, the language outlined in this omnibus bill speaks to that need for inherent independence and operational structure in a way that allows our office to address the individual needs of students and families to help them manage the system, make the system manageable for them; and make a system which is informed by them. This was the intention of the original legislation.

Some of the most challenging aspects of opening the doors of the Office of the Student Advocate was funding and staffing support. Prior to the introduction of this bill, there were no dedicated funds for the office. We are housed within an agency that is dealing with fiscal resource challenges just like many others. The lack of clarity around the financial resources allotted to the office means that competition for resources are introduced into my work, which has made it more difficult to support the most vulnerable of families and students that we needed to serve. Our office has spent the majority of its establishment only being staffed by one FTE with only 20 hours of support for the rest of the needs of an office tasked with supporting the District. The language in the omnibus bill speaks to the office's need to prepare its programmatic resources in a way that will allow our office to expand its reach and serve all families in the District.

We appreciate the bill's recognition of our office's need to be able to issue and publish reports in way that truly reflects the work of the office and the voices of the families that we serve. As we previously stated, the work of our office does not perfectly align to the mission of the State Board but provides opportunities for collaboration in a way that does not require day-to-day oversight of the office. In fact, this independence will ensure that the needs and voice of the community is central to our office's work regardless of the needs or priorities of an agency that

could be subject to the needs of their partners and other political factors. Our annual report summarizes the work that we have done throughout the school year and other reports that we publish work to highlight the system issues we are seeing and speak to the specific needs and issues of students and families.

At the most basic level, the legislative amendments that we've asked for in this bill speak to actual practice of our work rather than the original legislative intent. Over my tenure, our office has been able to further clarify how our office needed to adjust in order to best address the needs of families. This legislation thus serves to align statute with our actual practice.

Although we need to manage the day-to-day needs of our office, our need for independence also respects and depends upon the professional respect and practice of our office. This requires performance oversight, and we believed the State Board is best equipped to offer that to our office. This omnibus bill clarifies that relationship in a way to meet the needs of the office while respecting and facilitating the role of the State Board. Our need for independence in order to serve students and families does still acknowledge a need for oversight and governance. We believe that with the structure that the omnibus bill outlines that our office will be able to focus on serving families in the way that the office was designed to do.

The work of our office is guided by the needs of students and their families and thus requires a great deal of confidentiality to provide the support and advocacy that families need. In order to do this work, our office needs a degree of independence that acknowledges that our work is different from that of the State Board and that difference is actually okay.

The placement of our office in the State Board has been challenging for all, including State Board members. My hope is expectation is that this language presented to you today will help to clarify roles in a way that allows the State Board and our office to work efficiently and productively. The structure of our agency has been a challenge. The Office of the Student Advocate and the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education serve families in a very specific

way that can be hard to understand or value when we are all in need of resources and additional support. In a very similar fashion to the important work of the State Board, I see our office and an important accountability check on our system of public education that ensures that the voice of students, parents, and the community are included in our education system and values knowing that families can fully access the system that has been so carefully crafted for them.

Before I close, if there are any students, parents, or community members that if you would like to reach out to our office you can do so by calling us at 202-741-4692, email us at student.advocate@dc.gov, or find us online at studentadvocate.dc.gov.

I thank you for your support of our office and for this opportunity to testify. I welcome any questions that you might have. Thank you!