

2018 ANNUAL REPORT



OFFICE OF THE
STUDENT
ADVOCATE

Faith Gibson Hubbard, Chief Student Advocate
DC State Board of Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In school year (SY) 2017-18, we focused on expanding the services our office offers in support of students and families throughout all eight wards of the city. By leveraging our partnerships and increasing our strategic outreach efforts, our office has nurtured vital working relationships that are student and family centric. This focus creates access to quality educational opportunities, resources, and services. Leveraging the power and voices of students and families at the decision-making table is an essential step as the city works to tackle the myriad of systemic issues surrounding public education in the District.

Therefore, we decided to focus intently on the following issues for SY 2017-18:

- Answering our Request for Assistance line, which is a “311” system for public education, LIVE Monday through Friday from 9:00am – 5:00pm to address any education-related questions public school families, or prospective families, might have and to provide connection to resources and referrals.
- Increasing the amount of families we served through our Request for Assistance line from 336 calls in SY 2016-17 to 425 calls in SY 2017-18.
- Engaging with over 3300 individuals outside of our office walls and Request for Assistance process by increasing our outreach to parents, families, service providers and government agencies that serve families in need of more support from the District’s social safety net by over 100 events and meetings citywide to be a part of relevant public education conversations.
- Continued our partnership with the Howard University School of Law to collect and analyze local education agencies’ (LEAs) student discipline policies. This partnership was established in an effort to craft and share policy recommendations for a streamlined discipline policy based on our analysis.
- Revamping our Know Your Rights Special Education Series from a panel into workshops, and hosting 4 sessions with over ten partners from special education specific agencies and service providers throughout the city with over 250 parents, teachers and community leaders.
- Developing and releasing the Parent & Family Go-To Guide, a collection of parent-centered documents and resources designed to help families navigate the public education system in the District.
- Translating and creating resources and materials for non-English or limited-English speaking families in 6 different languages.
- Continuing our parent leadership work and advocacy training series in Wards 7 and 8.
- Sharing vital resource information to families and communities through our easy to access online Education & Community Resource Guide, which includes over 400 educational resources.

We are honored to have the opportunity to serve our families and assist them in becoming informed, connected, and empowered to take control of their children’s education, and we look forward to a successful year!

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LETTER FROM THE CHIEF STUDENT ADVOCATE

November 2018

To: District of Columbia State Board of Education

I am honored to present to you the School Year 2017-18 Annual Report for the Office of the Student Advocate.

Since opening the doors of our office in 2015, we have worked diligently to support families in navigating public education in the District of Columbia through parent and family education, one-on-one coaching, resource supports, and trainings. Our commitment to amplifying the voices of families and communities throughout public education and the governance structures in our city is paramount. Our work is focused on supporting the power families and communities already possess by ensuring families are included in processes and decision-making; gain access to valuable resources; and have a clear understanding of systems, processes, and policies.

In this report we are excited to share the ways we have been able to scale and grow our work, resources, and supports for District families. Our work acknowledges how foundational students and families are to a quality system of public education. We see it as our role to not only partner with education-focused agencies and organizations to support the needs of students and families, but our work is also to continue to impress upon those entities the vital role families should play in their individual work.

As the proud mother of two children, one who is a public school student in the District, there is one thing of which I am certain—students, parents, and families are experts. We must continue to value their expertise by affording families the information and resource access they deserve and by taking a step back to make room for the collective power of families at our decision-making tables.

Thank you for your commitment to this work. We look forward to continuing to find ways to work closely with the Board to support the needs of students and families.

Warmly,

Faith Gibson Hubbard





OFFICE OF THE STUDENT ADVOCATE

Staff

Faith Gibson Hubbard, *Chief Student Advocate*

Dan Davis, *Student Advocate*

Tiffany Wilson, *Program Associate*

2017-2018 Student Advocate Fellows

Ryvell D. Fitzpatrick

Renatta Landrau

Jordan Triplett

Who We Are

The word “advocate” is synonymous with trust, champion, and support. When individuals are confronted with issues or challenges, they look to an advocate for support and guidance. For families in the District of Columbia, the need for support and guidance is pronounced when it comes to public education. Unfortunately, most families do not feel adequately equipped to be effective advocates for their students due to knowledge gaps regarding our public education system. With an education landscape comprised of more than 60 local education agencies (LEAs), various layers of governance, and a host of agencies and organizations connected to the city’s public education system, families need advocates. Since 2015, our office has worked to fill that gap by partnering with families to keep them informed, connected, and supported in their advocacy and ability to access a quality education for their child. The Office of the Student Advocate is an independent office, housed in the District of Columbia State Board of Education, that provides guidance and resource supports to assist families in navigating the complex system of public education in the District of Columbia.

The work of our office focuses on strengthening community voice in public education and supporting the needs of families in seven distinct ways:

FIRST, by providing outreach to students, parents and guardians regarding public education in District of Columbia;

SECOND, by supporting the education and achievement of all public school students and their families in interactions with school personnel through support and advocacy;

THIRD, by assisting in the facilitation of the school enrollment process for current students and prospective families;

FOURTH, by operating a public education hotline to answer questions and provide information regarding relevant public education resources and agency/ organizational referrals;

FIFTH, by offering support to families prior to the mediation process and conflict resolution proceedings held by the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education;

SIXTH, by tracking trends and inquiries presented to the office and their referral or resolution;

And **SEVENTH**, to recommending policy changes, staff trainings, and strategies to improve the efficient and equitable delivery of public education services.¹

What We Believe

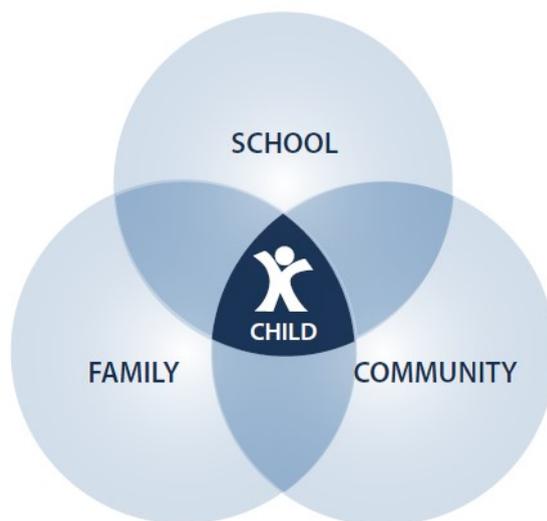
Our Lens for Change

Defining Equity Through Family Engagement & Partnership: Voice, Access, Power

The District of Columbia has a storied history— one rich with culture and significance, but closely connected to the persistence of inequities related to race, class, and access. Though public education reforms have shifted our methods of accountability and increased opportunities for transparency, gaps in student achievement and opportunity continue to widen. Our city’s historical lack of deep community engagement, coupled with our current state of public education, highlights a need for continuous student, family, and community engagement efforts both at the school level and citywide.

We recognize the need for equity in all areas that directly and indirectly impact public education, but in our work we have narrowed our focus on equity within family engagement. Due to the critical role family engagement plays in student success, our work focuses on equity through the lens of parent, student, and community voice, access, and power. As a lever for achieving equity, our focus on family engagement is rooted in the belief that families, students, and community members are powerful and grossly underutilized catalysts who can provide meaningful programmatic and systemic change once given the opportunity to do so.

EPSTEIN’S OVERLAPPING SPHERES OF INFLUENCE



Epstein, J.L. (2009). Conceptualizing and Defining Family Involvement for Research: Setting New Directions [PowerPoint Slides]. Retrieved from http://iaprnl.edu/videos/ppts/1_Epstein.pdf.

Our lens for equity recognizes that families are the ultimate source of knowledge regarding the needs of their children. We know that families, as equal thought-partners in this work, are essential in education policy and practice decisions. Through the unique lens of their lived experiences, families are highly invested in the success of their children, other children, and their community.



We work in partnership to equalize the balance of power between families and schools by increasing family voice, access, and power in our system of public education. We achieve this goal by ensuring families are connected to resources and supports, informed of their rights, and understand how the system works.

Our work is focused on equity through collaboration and partnership with families. The sharing of power between schools, families, and communities must be relational.² This concept of relational power promotes the idea that power is not finite and that sharing power with families does not limit the amount of power that schools have; rather it recognizes the roles that families, schools, communities, and other stakeholders each have in the educational achievement of all students. This concept reiterates the notion that the experiences, philosophies, and practices of the school, family, and community influence the success of a child, thus requiring responsibility for and shared power over the educational success of students.

Our commitment to promoting equity in family engagement through voice, access, and power is reflected in the day-to-day operations, work, and initiatives of our office.



HOW OUR OFFICE WORKS WITH FAMILIES & COMMUNITIES

In our day-to-day work, we serve as liaisons and conveners focused on supporting, equipping, and positioning families to be their own best advocates through training, resource sharing, and leadership development.



REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE LINE

The Office of the Student Advocate operates a public education hotline, or the Request for Assistance (RFA) line, which is answered live Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. The RFA line supports our ability to work directly with students, parents, families, and community members to answer public education related questions and inquiries. We consider our RFA line to be a “311 system” for public education through which we provide relevant resources, information, and appropriate agency or organization referrals to meet the specific needs of the caller. In addition to resources and referrals, the RFA line allows our office to provide one-on-one coaching to families on a variety of public education issues.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, PARTNERSHIPS AND COALITIONS

Our ability to work within the community to address the needs of students, families, and communities is made possible through our outreach efforts, stakeholder engagement, and development of partnerships and coalitions. During school year 2017-18 (SY 2017-18), our office had the opportunity to present and meet with numerous community groups, educators, parent groups, community-based organizations, and government stakeholders through our stakeholder listening tours. These efforts have afforded our office the opportunity to extend our services deeper into the community. As a direct result of our office’s relationship building and resource sharing, we consistently receive

referrals from DC Council, State Board of Education, school and local level administrators, and community-based organizations.



EDUCATION & COMMUNITY RESOURCE GUIDE

One statutory provision for our office is the creation and operation of Public Education Resource Centers (PERCs) to advise students, parents, and families on all matters regarding public education. Our Education & Community Resource Guide serves as a way for our small staff to fill the void of centralized public education information and resource centers. The online Education & Community Resource Guide is the first publicly available citywide initiative of its kind and is a continuously evolving resource that currently highlights over 400 resource listings, organized into over 20 categories. The resource 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. Updated quarterly, it highlights organizations and government agencies in the sphere of public education that provide critical services to residents across DC. This guide not only assists our office in fulfilling our mission, but also provides access to a wealth of resources, agencies, and organizations that directly impact education and educational attainment. Along with providing information, the guide serves to acknowledge the work that is already being done by countless government agencies, offices, and community-based organizations while connecting families to those vital resources in one centralized location.



ONLINE INFORMATION & RESOURCE TOOLS

In an effort to streamline information that helps parents better understand the public education system, policies, and procedures, we have developed various resource supports available on our website, accessible twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Our online resources include:

- Advocacy & Lobbying Toolkit
- Attendance & Truancy Resources
- Behavioral & Mental Health Resources
- Bullying Resources
- Effective Communication Toolkit
- Enrollment Resources
- High School Graduation Requirements & Information
- Homeless Children and Youth Resources
- Parent Leadership Toolkit: Parent Organization Resources
- Right to Know Ask Sheets
- Safe Passage
- Special Education & Other School Supports
- Student Leadership Information & Resources
- Testing & Assessments Resources
- DC Public Education Governance Structure





TRAININGS & EVENTS

The information gleaned from our RFAs and community outreach allows us to further develop additional resources and trainings to better support families around specific topic areas. We use our trainings as a forum to provide families with access to information on relevant topics; as an opportunity to share tools and skills for effective advocacy; to foster partnerships and collaborative efforts with schools, District agencies, and community-based organizations who work with families; and to bring resources directly to families and communities. Through these efforts, our office is able to promote equitable outcomes by eliminating the barriers to information and entry that families often face.



A list of the trainings and events hosted by our office can be found on our website at:
<https://sboe.dc.gov/page/training-events>.



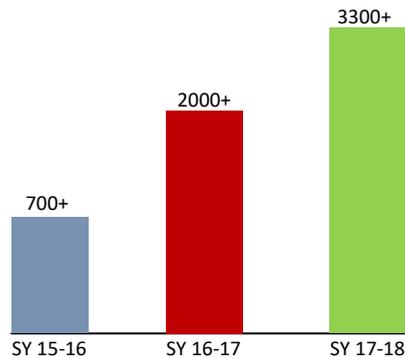
DATA, TRENDS, & ANALYSIS - LOOKING INTO AND BEYOND THE NUMBERS

Data collection, and the analysis of this data, is a critical part of our work. Our office's ability to be responsive and meet the needs of families relies on the assessment of the state of public education gathered from our interactions with education stakeholders.

Requests for Assistance: A Three Year Comparison



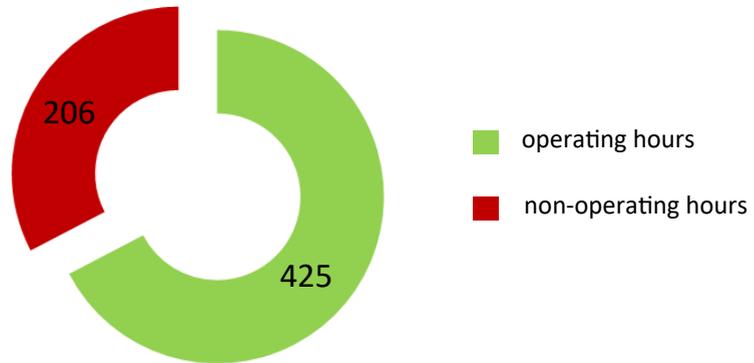
Outreach: A Three Year Comparison



In SY 2017-18, we were able to support over 400 callers through our Request for Assistance (RFA) line. Since our first year of operation in 2015, we have seen a 215% increase in calls. In addition to the increased volume of calls through our RFA line, we significantly increased our interactions and contacts with families beyond the four walls of our office through community outreach. In SY 2017-18, we reached over 3300 individuals through our outreach and community engagement efforts.

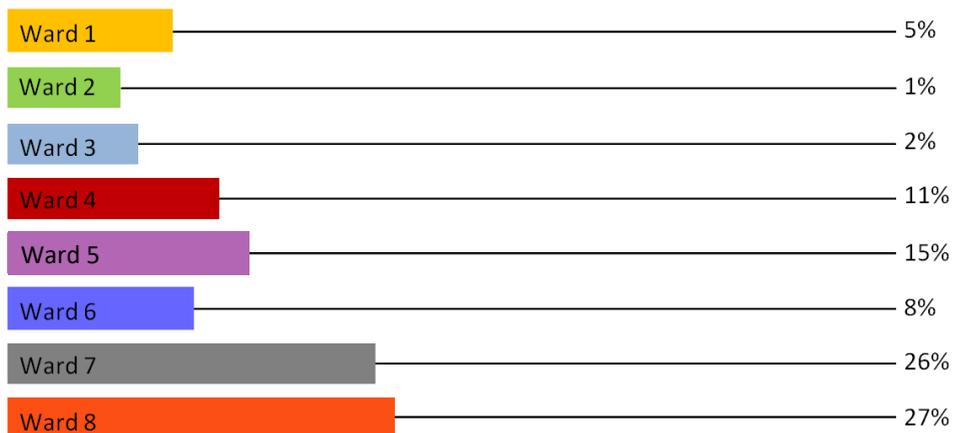
SY 17-18 Universe of Calls

In SY 2017-18, we received 631 calls. During our operating hours, Monday-Friday from 9 am to 5 pm, we answered and addressed the needs of 425 callers through our RFA process. We receive over 200 calls outside of our operating hours. The number of calls made to our RFA line outside of our operating hours shows the great need families have regarding public education. When callers reach our office voicemail during non-operating hours, the voicemail message shares our website resources (accessible 24 hours a day) with the caller, provides the caller with our email address, and directs the caller to relevant resources. The voicemail message for our office is bilingual (in English and Spanish). Additionally, in SY 2017-18 all of our resource and website materials were translated into the six language access required languages in order to meet the needs of any person reaching out to our office.



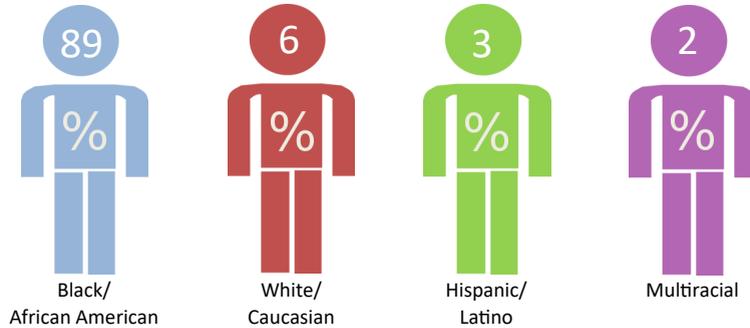
SY 17-18 RFAs by Ward

The majority of the RFAs to our office come from Wards 7 and 8, home to over 100,000 school-aged children in the city.³ Our presence citywide has increased over our years of operation due to our “Know Your Rights” Special Education workshops (in Wards 3, 6, 7, and 8), our Parent Leadership Series (in Wards 7 and 8), and our Citywide Bullying Prevention workshop.



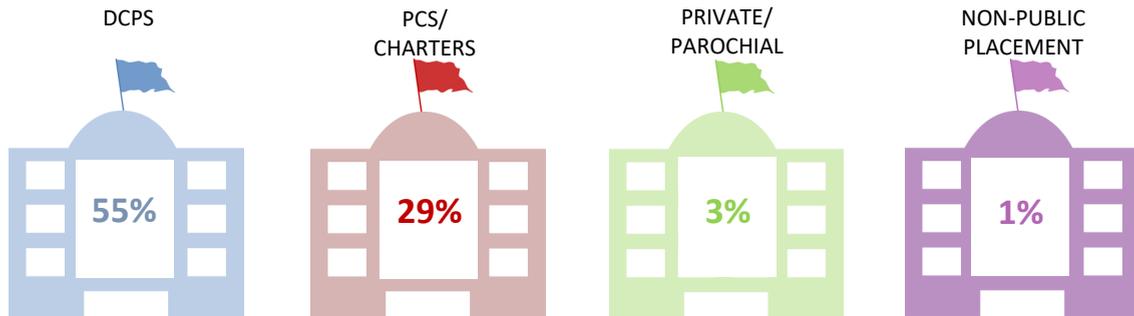
SY 17-18 RFAs by Race

In SY 2017-18, we added a race identity question to our RFA process. This question is optional, and callers are asked to self-identify. Those who declined to identify are not reflected in this data set. As we work to support equity, we need to assess how race affects public education issues and concerns. If we are to be honest and transparent about which families throughout the District need targeted supports and resources regarding public education, we have to consider racial identity when pushing for equitable outcomes for all students.



SY 17-18 RFAs by Sector

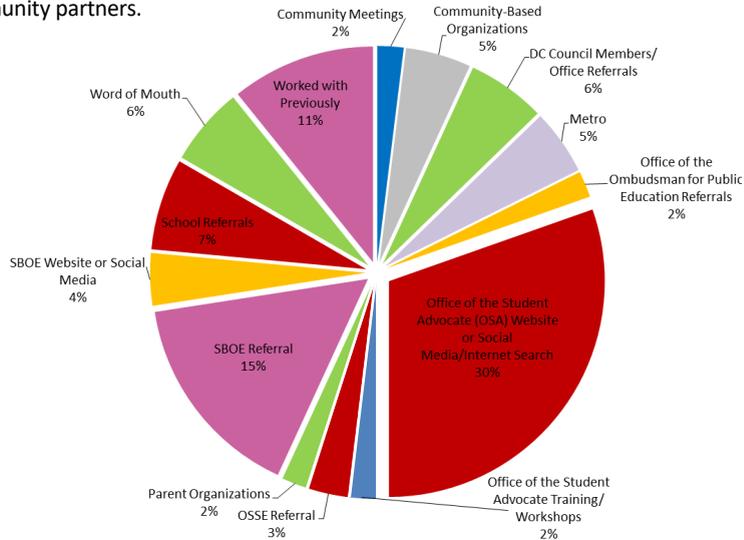
Over half of our RFAs came from students and families being served by DCPS. The number of calls from DCPS families can be attributed to DCPS being the largest LEA in the District with 115 school locations. One-third of our RFAs came from students and families served by one of the District's 60+ charter LEAs. We have increased our outreach efforts to public charter families and school leaders and are continuing to identify ways to work more closely with charter schools and school leaders.



12% of RFAs concerned students unenrolled

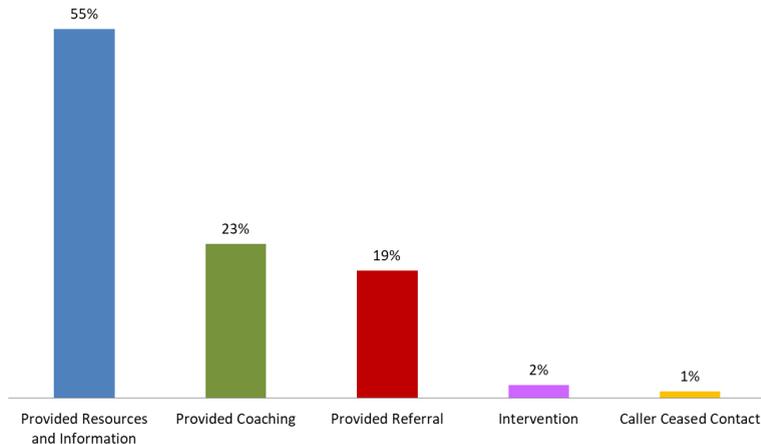
SY 17-18 Referral Sources

In SY 2017-18, our online presence drove the number of referrals to our office with nearly 31% of callers reaching out to our office after finding our website via an Internet search or finding us on social media. Approximately 11% of parents and families served in SY 2017-18 were parents that we worked with in the past two years and/or on more than one issue. Over 40% of our referrals came from organizational or community partners.



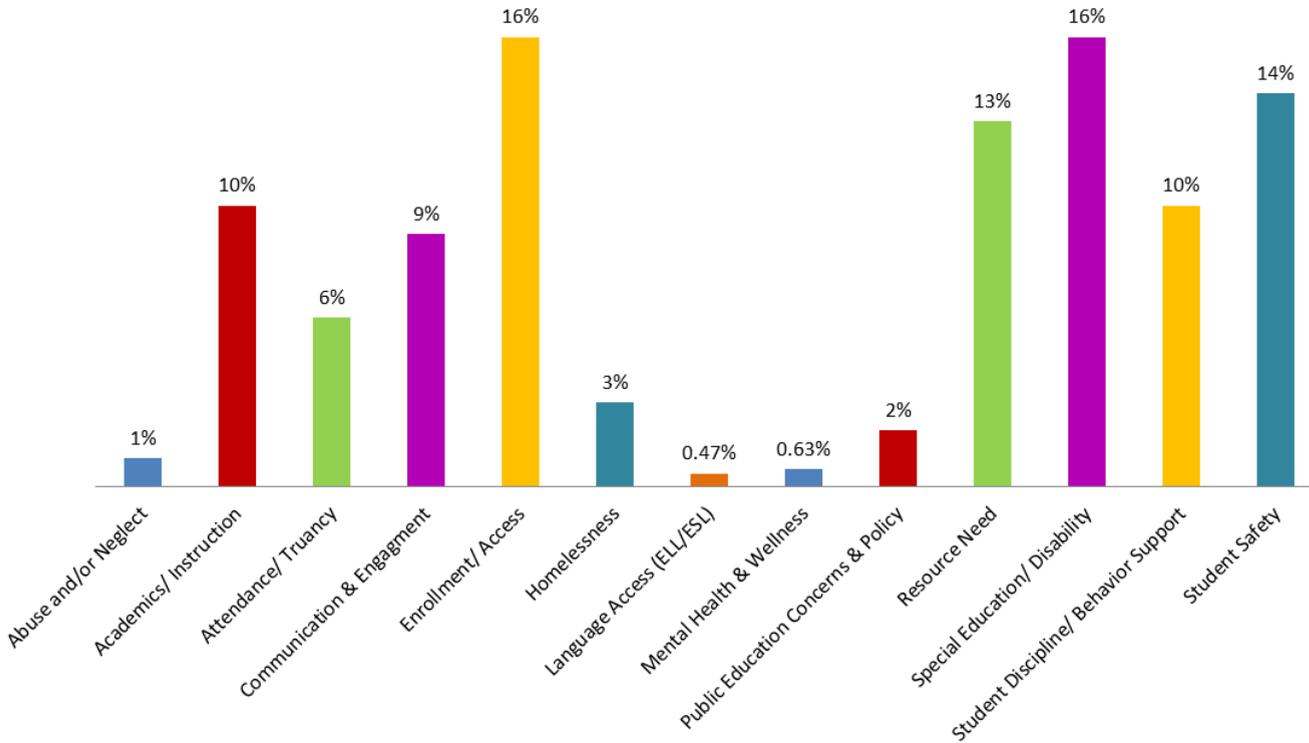
SY 17-18 RFAs by Resolution

The majority of our resolutions involved connecting families to resources (both resources developed in-house and resources from other organizations available on our website) and providing information about their stated issue or need. Along with our resource guide and stakeholder engagement, our ability to provide information to families in real time allowed us to ensure that parents and families were as informed as possible. We also coached families 23% of the time, as they used information and resources provided to navigate the DC education landscape.



SY 17-18 Top RFA Issue Areas

Two of the top issue areas for parents and families in SY 2017-18 were special education and enrollment/access. Since our office opened in 2015, issues of enrollment/access have trended high consistently. Enrollment/access captures questions and concerns ranging from school choice and the lottery process to un-invite notifications from schools not communicated to parents until the next school year. In SY 2017-18, we saw an increase in calls related to special education services. Parents reached out to our office looking for special education support as it related to individual education plans (IEPs), 504 plans, initiating the evaluation process, and available resources. This increase in RFAs could be attributed to our work in the special education space with the re-launch of our “Know Your Rights” special education workshop series.

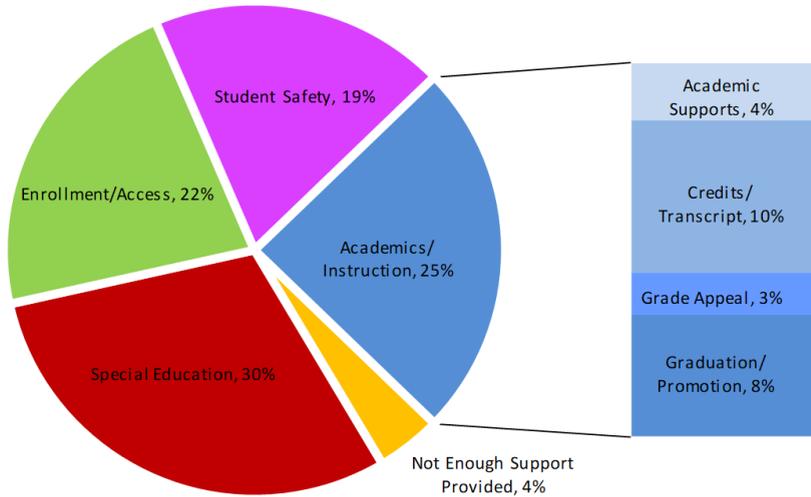


Other RFA topic areas that trended high in SY 2017-18 were student safety and discipline at 24% of total RFAs. Student safety refers to issues and questions around safe passage, assault, and facilities maintenance. Student discipline is directly related to exclusionary discipline practices (suspensions and expulsions). While the two categories denote different areas of need, both categories heavily impact a school’s climate and culture and ultimately student learning outcomes.

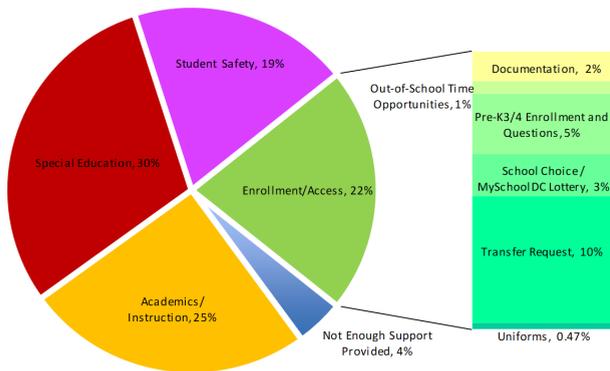
SY 17-18 Secondary Topic Areas

In SY 2017-18, we were able to use secondary topic areas for more specificity when assisting parents and families. Secondary topic areas are correlated to our primary topic areas. For example, the primary topic area “Special Education” is related to the following secondary topic areas: 504 plans and questions, individual education plan, special education placement, disability-need, medical, and transportation. We saw increases in two areas in particular: first, student safety calls related to issues of bullying, and secondly, in the area of academics/instruction with calls related to graduation and promotion.

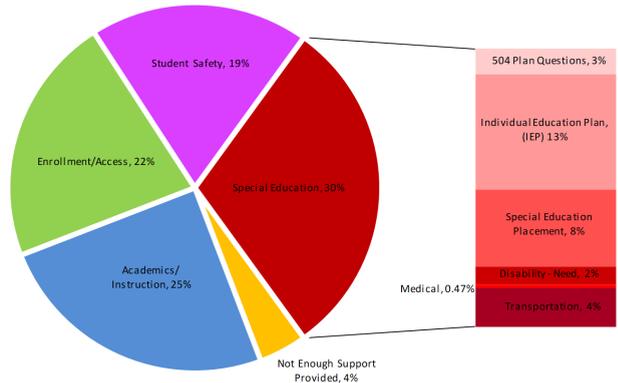
Academics/ Instruction



Enrollment/ Access

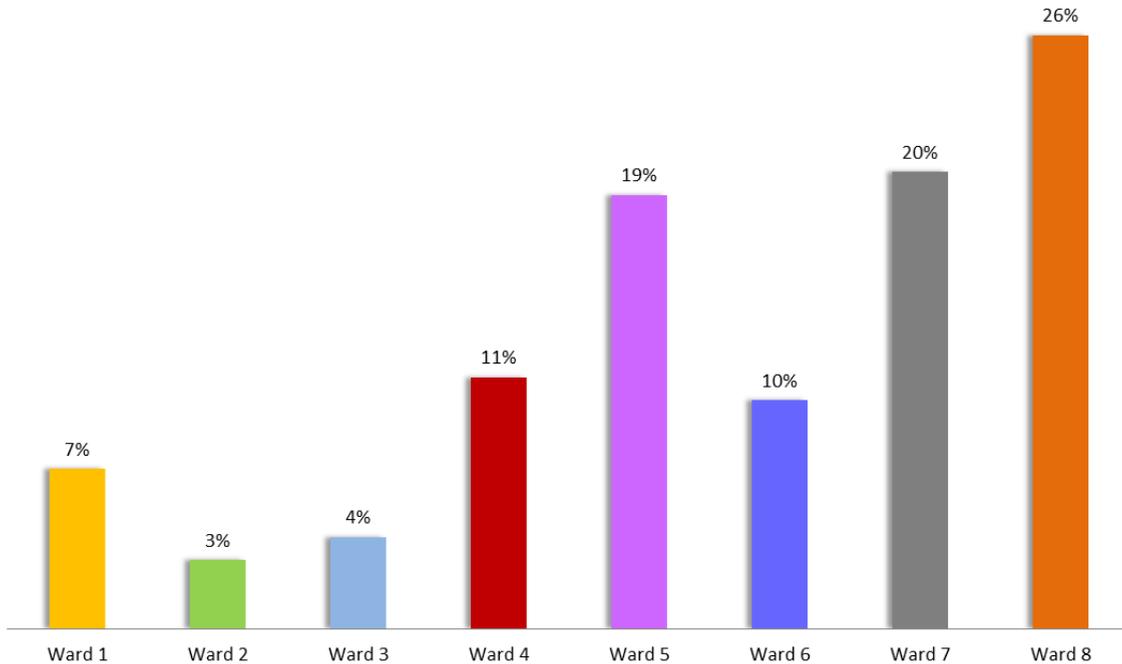


Special Education



SY 17-18 RFA by School Ward

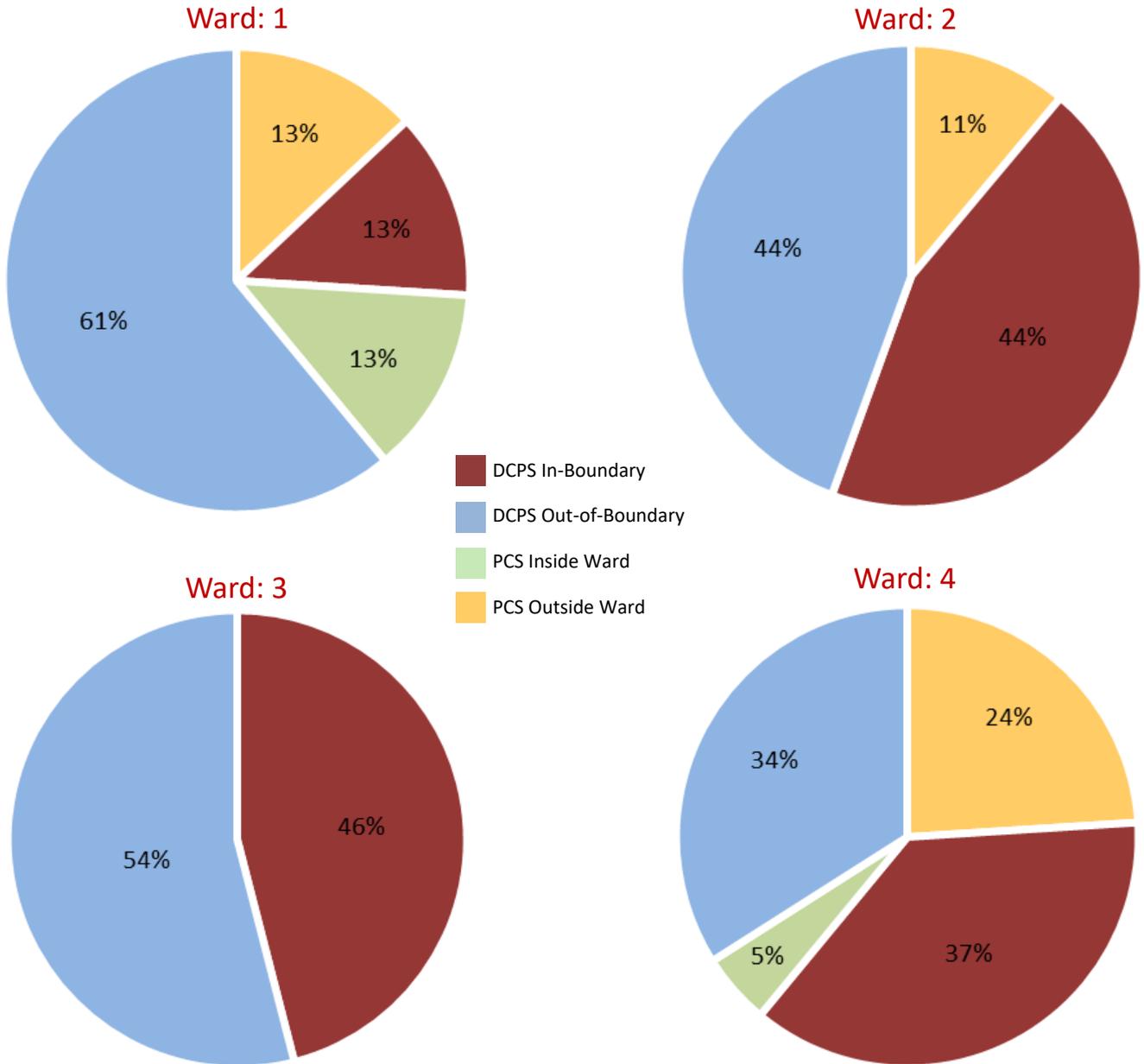
In addition to asking our callers for information about their ward of residence, we started to look at school wards to better track trends. Of our RFAs concerning schools, two thirds of our calls concerned schools in Wards 5, 7, and 8.



Using ward of residence data and school ward data, we were able to provide additional context for issues that students and families experience based on their proximity to their school. While comparing data from individual school wards, we noticed that:

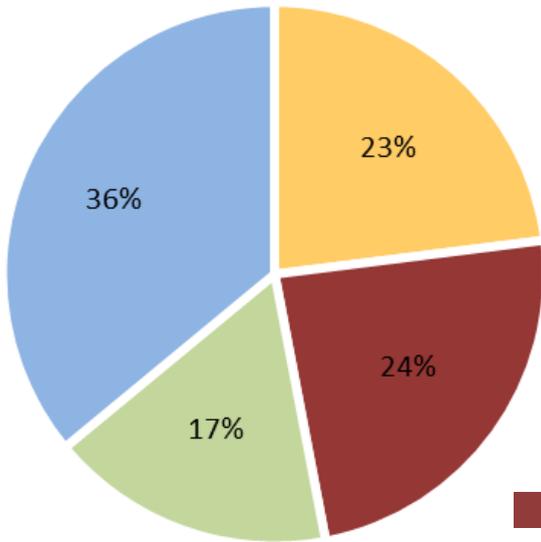
- Majority of RFAs from Wards 1 and 2 concerned students attending DCPS or public charter schools that are not living within the school's boundary or ward.
- Majority of RFAs from Wards 7 and 8 concerned students attending DCPS or public charter schools within their respective wards.
- Parents and families east of the river are concerned with academics/instruction and issues with enrollment and access even though most students are attending schools within their ward (both sectors).
- Schools in wards that are traditionally middle class, struggle to serve homeless students.

SY 17-18 RFA by School Ward

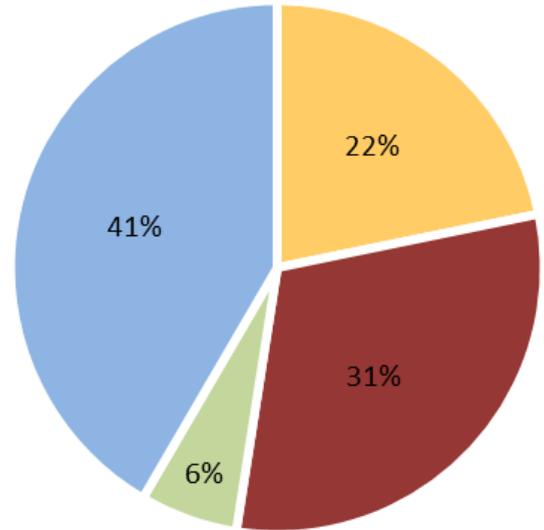


SY 17-18 RFA by School Ward

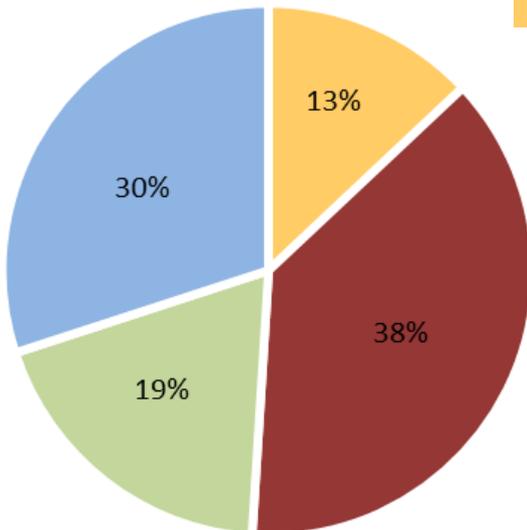
Ward: 5



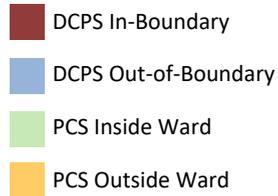
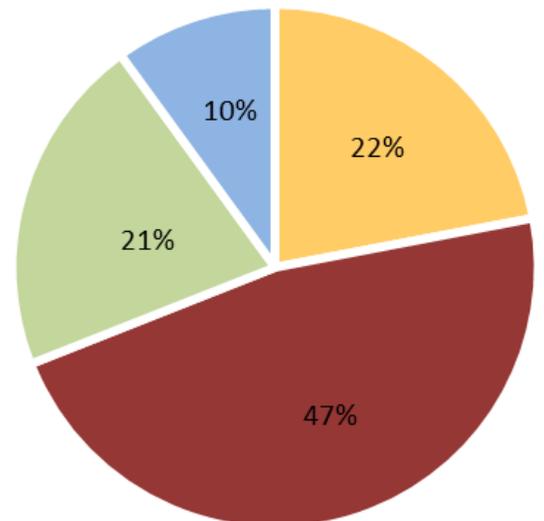
Ward: 6



Ward: 7

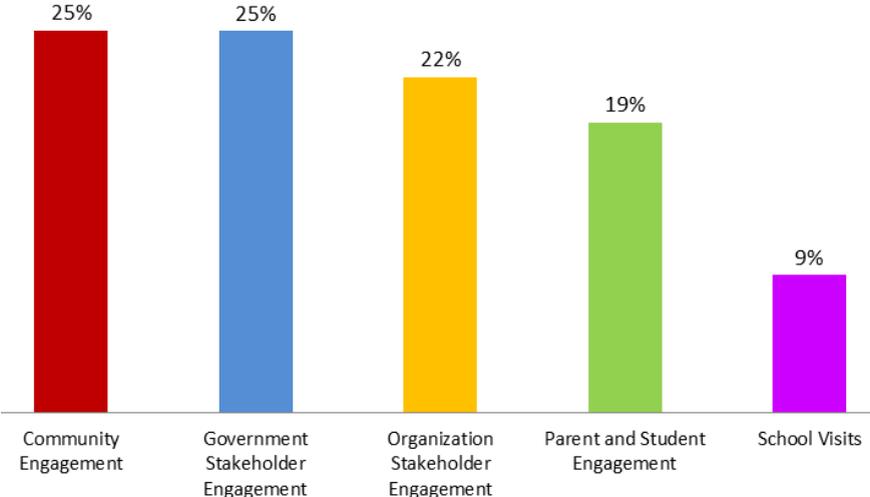


Ward: 8



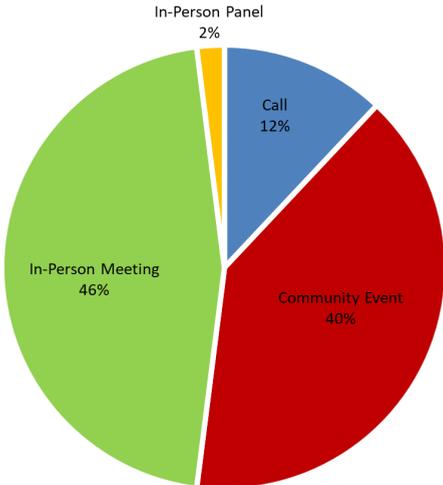
SY 17-18 Public Engagement Data

Our office, via several outreach and engagement modes, touched over 3300 individuals in SY 2017-18. 53% of our outreach efforts involved engaging families, communities, and individual schools. This focus allowed us to tailor our services to the needs of those most impacted by our work. 47% of our outreach centered on government and organizational stakeholders.



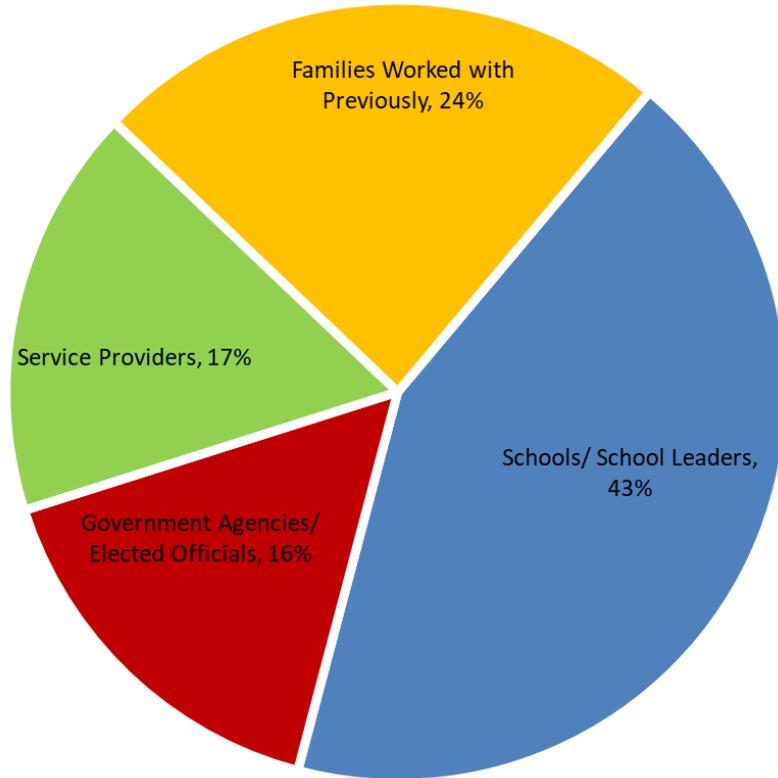
Public Engagement Mode

We strive to create and sustain partnerships with agencies and organizations that allow us to work collaboratively and more effectively as we meet the needs of our families. Along with our position in the education landscape, this balance of our work reinforces our ability to serve as liaisons between all stakeholders.



SY 17-18 Strategic Email Outreach

We connected with over 1050 individuals via email during SY 2017-18. 43% of our emails are sent directly to schools and school leaders (principals, special education coordinators, counselors, etc.) about our services and upcoming events near their school or within ward that may be of interest to them and/or the families they serve.



Nearly a quarter of our emails were sent directly to families we worked with through our RFA process following up about the status of their concern or referral or providing information about our trainings and events that may be of interest to them based on their reason for initially contacting our office. Sending direct communication not only helps remind stakeholders that we are here to support them, but also helps us build our network and increase our reach.



EVIDENCE OF OUR WORK

OUTREACH & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Our relationships with families and community members are at the center of our work. We have continued to strengthen these relationships through our outreach efforts and program development. Each school year we work to deepen our outreach and partnerships to address the specific needs and concerns of parents and community members. In our efforts to accomplish this task we continued to answer our RFA line live Monday through Friday to address the needs of families in real time. We formed partnerships and collaborated with a number of community groups, organizations, and government stakeholders, in addition to our constant collaboration with parents and students.

While our collaboration with families is integral to our work, our partnerships with government stakeholders and education-focused organizations make this collaboration possible. The office engages in other education policy discussions and thought-leadership through membership on the following task forces, advisory committees, working groups, panels, and conference participation:

- 2018 Community Schools National Forum
- Committee on Education Public Hearing: Student Fair Access to School Act of 2017 & DCPS Alternatives to Suspension Amendment Act of 2017
- Committee on Education Public Oversight Roundtable: The Future of School Reform in the District of Columbia
- Committee of the Whole & Committee on Education Public Hearing: District of Columbia Education Research Advisory Board and Collaborative Establishment Amendment Act of 2018
- Committee of the Whole & Committee on Education Public Hearing: Improving School Attendance/ Truancy, Chronic Absenteeism, and the Implementation of Reform Initiatives

- Education Forward DC Public Education Family Engagement Brainstorming Session
- Office of the DC Auditor & State Board of Education Roundtable on Public Education

OUTREACH EVENTS

We also participated in the following outreach events in partnership with government, organizational, and community stakeholders:

- Committee on Education 2018 Education Town Halls
- DC Alliance of Youth Advocates Advocacy for Action Summit
- DC Public Schools (DCPS) Youth & Family High School Resource Fairs
- District of Columbia Association for Special Education's Advocacy Forum
- Department of Human Services Education Explosion
- EDFest 2017
- Education for Liberation Network Free Minds, Free People Conference
- Every Day Counts! Attendance Summit
- Far Southeast Family Support Collaborative "Know Your Rights" Workshop
- Office of the State Superintendent of Education Parent & Engagement Summit
- Parents Amplifying Voices in Education Parent Policy Summit and Resource Fair
- Turning the Page Parent Summit
- Ward 8 Parenting Empowerment Conference

More information on our SY 2017-18 stakeholder and community partnerships can be found at the back of this report in Section VII: Stakeholder & Community Outreach.

BULLYING

In SY 2017-18, our office launched our first bullying prevention workshop, in partnership with DC Office of Human Rights Citywide Bullying Prevention Program (OHR Bullying). This workshop was developed to provide clarity regarding local laws and definitions of bullying, to discuss bullying prevention practices, and to share accessible resources and supports for students and families. This workshop was developed as a forum to facilitate more open conversations about bullying, including what bullying is and what the school's role is in ensuring student safety.



In the development of this workshop we were intentional about partnering with offices and organizations that were able to share practical tools and techniques with parents and other caring adults. This convening exposed families to resources and supports while facilitating conversations with parents about proactive steps they can take at home to reduce incidents of victimization and aggressive behavior. Along with OHR Bullying, we had representation from the following organizations: the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, EL Haynes Public Charter School, the Office of Neighborhood Engagement & Safety, and Latin American Youth Center. By convening this group of experts, we were able to start conversations with parents about what support they should expect from those offices if affected by bullying and what families can do at home to reduce incidents of victimization and aggressive behavior. In Summer 2018, we launched a podcast with those partners who shared information on ways that parents can work in conjunction with their offices and/or neighborhoods to reduce bullying in their communities. This workshop was also our first effort with offering live interpretation services for Spanish and Amharic-speaking families so English mastery would not be a barrier to access.

In SY 2017-18 we rebranded our Parent Leadership Series (formerly named “Parent Empowerment Series”) by continuing to focus our work on family partnership and deepening families’ knowledge of the public education landscape. To further this work we continued our working relationship with SBOE members by partnering with Karen Williams (State Board President and Ward 7 representative) and Markus Batchelor (Ward 8 representative). We expanded this work from Ward 7 to Ward 8 by hosting various conversations on how the public education system works, connecting knowledge to advocacy, DC government budgeting, and understanding how DC budget impacts schools.

For this series we took a more disaggregated approach in an effort to reach more families in the places they already trust and are showing up. Our approach included hosting parent leadership sessions in partnership with a wider array of schools, community-based organizations, and service providers who work specifically in Ward 7 & 8. Our partners included Ron Brown Senior High School (DCPS), OSSE State Advisory Panel On Special Education, Democracy Prep Public Charter School, Turning the Page, Excel Public Charter School, Far Southeast Family Support Collaborative, and Community of Hope.

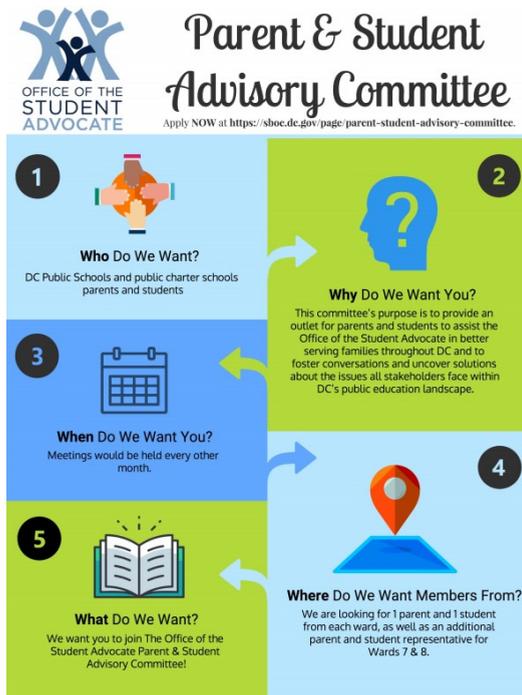


PARENT & STUDENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Parent and student voice is essential. Within our education landscape, we must create more spaces for parents and students to express their thoughts and concerns about a system that relies on their participation. Our Parent & Student Advisory Committee provided an outlet for parents and students to assist the office in better serving families throughout DC. In this space, we were able to have conversations and discuss potential solutions to issues that impact education stakeholders.

The committee was composed of DC Public Schools (DCPS) and public charter school parents and students, with representation from all 8 wards. During our bimonthly meetings, members were able to discuss systemic issues plaguing our education landscape. With feedback collected from their respective communities, committee members were able to have broader conversations about short and long-term goals for public education in the District. We reviewed and discussed the following topics:

Evidence of Our Work



- Councilmember David Grosso's proposed legislation for discipline reform regarding suspensions
- Academic disparities between DCPS, public charters, and early childhood centers
- Cultural competency of educators
- Cultivating healthy relationship between schools and families
- Use of community resources to expose students to various cultures

SPECIAL EDUCATION WORKSHOP SERIES

To support families, we revamped our special education “Know Your Rights” workshop series. This series, launched in our office’s first year of operation, was designed to support the needs of families who have students with special education needs. In SY 2017-18 we hosted our informational sessions on special education in Wards 1, 3, 6, and 8 in partnership with DC State Board of Education Representatives (Laura Wilson Phelan, Ward 1; Ruth Wattenberg, Ward 3; Joe Weedon, Ward 6; and Markus Batchelor, Ward 8), DC Councilmembers (Councilmember Brianne Nadeau, Ward 1; Councilmember Charles Allen, Ward 6), and ward-based education organizations (Ward 3’s Wilson Feeder Education Network and Capitol Hill Public Schools Parent Organization). Navigating and understanding how special education works in the District and within individual LEAs is essential in order for families to advocate on behalf of their student. Our sessions included information about:

- Basic provisions of federal and local special education law
- The differences between 504 plans and IEPs
- Prompting an evaluation
- Determining eligibility for services
- Understanding procedural safeguards (if there has been a denial of FAPE)

Thanks to our government and organizational stakeholders, we changed the format of the session from panel presentations to small group table discussions in which providers had the opportunity to interact with families and respond to questions and concerns specific to their student’s educational needs.

Our SY 2017-18 partners included: Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education, OSSE State Advisory Panel on Special Education, OSSE State Complaints Office, OSSE Strong Start, OSSE Office of Dispute Resolution, DC Special Education Cooperative, DCPS Division of Specialized Instruction, DCPS Section 504 and Accommodations Team, Advocates for Justice and Education, Children’s Law Center, and Disability Rights DC at University Legal Services.

In addition to our workshop series, we have expanded the resources and tools related to special education on our website, including our workshop presentation, as both a printable handout and a webinar; a list of special education acronyms, abbreviations, and definitions; a list of resources and organizational supports; our ask sheets; and our Parent & Family Go-To Guide.

Over the last three years, our office has frequently mentioned the difficulties families experience as they transition from LEA to LEA due to the wide array of student discipline policies from one LEA to the next. This policy diversity has long highlighted a need for streamlined, cross-sector planning regarding student discipline.

For the last three school years our office has undertaken an annual analysis of all LEA student discipline policies in the city. Our annual analysis is conducted for the purposes of surveying overall LEA discipline policies to support in our work with families and to see how the policies used by LEAs do or do not align with best practices. In SY 2017-18, our office in collaboration with Howard University School of Law students in the Fall 2017 School Discipline seminar, as a part of the Education Rights Center (ERC), analyzed discipline policies from 57 LEAs in DC. Using DCPS' Chapter 25, PCSB's Discipline Plans Policy, and "DC Discipline: A Comparison of Discipline Policies in Traditional K-12 Public Schools and Public Charter Schools" as a guide for our analysis rubric, the law students analyzed each handbook based on the following areas:

- Parents' Rights and Responsibilities- includes expectations for parents' engagement with schools
- Clear Statements of Infractions and Penalties- tiered discipline policy systems that list behaviors and corresponding consequences
- Due Process and Appeals- protections for students before they are punished for disciplinary reasons
- Exclusionary Discipline and Its Alternatives- disciplinary actions that remove or exclude a student from his or her educational setting
- Alternate Education Settings - programs outside of a student's current setting or placement that allow for a student to continue to receive educational services

For each areas of analysis the following trends were discovered:

Parents' Rights and Responsibilities

- In general, parent and student rights and responsibilities that are created or imposed by LEAs are not consistently presented in a clear and easily identifiable section. Rather, they are scattered throughout various provisions of handbooks, making them difficult to fully access and comprehend.
- Approximately two-thirds of LEA handbooks contain good or very good descriptions of discipline policies for students with disabilities. However, approximately 20% of the handbooks have little or no mention of such policies.

Clear Statements of Infractions and Penalties

- While more than half of the LEAs have statements of infractions and a tiered consequence system, approximately 20% neither list statements of infractions nor provide students and parents any notice of disciplinary consequences. Even among LEAs that list infractions and consequences, many of the policies are very vague and lack definitions, potentially leading to confusion among students and parents.

Due Process and Appeals

- While roughly two-thirds of LEAs have good statements of basic due process rights for expulsions and suspensions, half have good statements of the appeal process, and only 20% have appellate decision makers who hold a position with some degree of impartiality.

Exclusionary Discipline and Its Alternatives

- Most LEA handbooks indicate some form of exclusionary discipline. Slightly less than half still maintain some form of zero tolerance policy.
- While approximately 20% of handbooks contain good or very good trauma-informed or positive behavioral intervention disciplinary practices, roughly half make little or no mention of either. Restorative justice practices are present in a small sampling of LEAs.

Alternative Education Settings

- Approximately half of all the policies fail to mention anything regarding alternative education for students on suspension or medical leave. Those schools that do provide alternative education have very limiting policies. For the most part, many schools only indicate that students are allowed to receive assignments and make-up any missed exams. However, there are not many schools that focus on students' actual access to learning during suspension.

The development of resource tools based on these findings are in progress and will be released in SY 2018-19. Families need to be supported in making enrollment decisions based on discipline policies before problems arise. In addition to awareness of an LEA's discipline processes and policies, students and families should also be invited for creation and evaluation of discipline policies, allowing the school community to work in conjunction to improve overall school climate.



The Parent & Family Go-To Guide, designed and developed by our office, is a quick, concise, and family-friendly public education resource reference for any stakeholder needing information about the DC education system. This guide is a collection of documents that serve as a reference for parents and families looking for information, policy guidance, and conversation starters on a host of education topics. Similar to our Education & Community Resource Guide, the Go-To Guide has proven to be an effective method of providing relevant resources to families and increasing access throughout the District. The first citywide initiative of its kind, the Go-To Guide includes over 75 questions students and families can use to initiate conversations with schools about:

- Achievement/Testing
- Behavior
- Enrollment
- Response to Intervention
- Special Education

The guide also includes helpful conversation starters for parents offering questions to ask during interactions with teachers and administrators. This guide provides the user with a clearer understanding of the system and tools for greater access to resources, supports, and opportunities for engagement. Furthermore, the guide also defines relevant terms, provides an overview of the educational landscape in the District of Columbia, and explains the laws and processes regarding:

- Attendance
- Bullying
- Excused Absences
- Discipline Policies
- Graduation
- Homelessness
- PARCC Scores
- Pre-K3 and Pre-K4
- Special Education
- Tardies



Our Parent & Family Go-To Guide, a readily available resource that families can use to easily navigate laws and processes relevant to public education, allows parents to access and utilize their power in a fuller capacity. The guide, translated in Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, Amharic, and French, is available both online and in print. Over 1500 printed copies have been distributed to parents, schools, libraries, and other resource centers.



ANNUAL RECOMMENDATIONS

FAMILY PARTNERSHIP & ENGAGEMENT/ PUBLIC EDUCATION ACCESSIBILITY

1. The authentic engagement of families and communities must be a mandatory part of the policy and decision-making processes. We recommend a focus on designing a framework for regular citywide engagement of families and communities on issues of public education and the policy development decision-making processes. As the agency that coordinates and supervises education-related activities, the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) would be the best to set forth such a framework.
2. We regularly see how lack of coordination across education agencies results in a misalignment of policies, confusion regarding resources, and an uneven implementation of practices creates access barriers for students and families. Cross sector collaboration is vital. Under the leadership of the DME, we recommend deepening our cross sector collaboration efforts with a focus eliminating barriers and increasing access for families at all levels of public education. This effort should work to demystify systems and processes; remove barriers of engagement for families; provide greater access to more comprehensive information; develop a more responsive system of public education governance centric to parents and families; and create avenues for education leaders and organizations to be more publicly accessible.

SPECIAL EDUCATION/MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS & RESOURCES

1. School choice, school selection, and enrollment can be a tedious and challenging process for families. This process is even more pronounced for families who have students with specialized instruction and service needs. There is an urgent need for a resource to support parents who have children with disabilities during the school selection and enrollment process. This resource should include details regarding specific programs and supports offered at schools/LEAs as well as points of contact for families as a resource to address questions and concerns throughout the process. Giving families full access to the universe of resources and organizational supports is the first step in true school choice. The new state report card, which will be unveiled by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) later this year, would be the most appropriate place for such a resource. We also recommend this resource be available via the My School DC platform.
2. Afterschool and out of school time providers and programming should also be required to list their capacity to support student with specialized instruction and service needs. This resource should be available on OSSE's website and on the Learn24 platform. Also, LEAs should connect families of students with disabilities to this resource tool through their websites and in their printed materials.
3. We have noticed that Response to Intervention (RTI) processes are not implemented evenly or with fidelity across LEAs. While schools need technical support and guidance for this process, there is no standardized RTI process or guidance for all LEAs. We recommend that OSSE, in partnership with LEAs and other parent organizations, work in coalition to develop a standardize way forward for this practice and offer clear guidance that can be followed by LEAs in their support of student needs and for Child Find purposes.
4. Greater attention needs to be given to the understanding and consistent implementation of the requirements from the Special Education Procedural Protections Expansion Act of 2014. Some elements, such as oral request for evaluation from families, are areas where many LEAs fail to be responsive and miss serving the specialized needs of their students. Schools need additional technical support in order to fully implement the requirements of the law.

5. In the absence of comprehensive mental health supports at the school level, it is essential for LEAs to share citywide behavioral/mental health resources and supports with families. Useful tools, such as the Behavioral Health Resource Directory (located on the Department of Behavioral Health's website)⁴, support families in understanding the myriad of resources and services geared toward fostering self-reliance and recovery for students and their families.

STUDENT DISCIPLINE/ STUDENT SAFETY & SAFE PASSAGE

1. LEAs, and their individual schools, should work to inform families of the recent changes to the student discipline policies with the passage of the Student Fair Access to School Amendment Act of 2018. This process of informing families must be coupled with robust professional development for school level staff to improve their understanding of the law and resulting LEA policy changes.
2. To properly inform families of the student discipline policy changes, schools should establish a process, and regularly schedule convenings, to review and discuss discipline policies and challenges with families. Additionally, LEAs should also provide families with clear information on the details of student due process rights, the appeals process, and student discipline alternatives (i.e. peer mediation and restorative justice) practices undertaken by the LEA.
3. For the third year we continue to recommend, in line with recent statutory requirements, schools should ensure that parents have physical copies of LEA discipline policies. Per the law, these policies should be accessible online. A lack of access to policies is a barrier for students and families.
4. This year we again strongly recommend the development of a state advisory panel focused on the review of student discipline policies and practices. The establishment of such an advisory panel is essential as we continue to work to address the issues students and families face when dealing with challenges regarding discipline and particularly in light of our recent changes to the law with the Student Fair Access Act. We recommend that this advisory panel, to be managed and facilitated by the state education agency, OSSE, should be comprised of parents, students, and school/ LEA leaders and staff and should have the authority to review individual LEA discipline policies to provide policy recommendations, and to recommend necessary implementation supports to OSSE for their consideration. We believe the implementation of such a group at the state level would promote the engagement of parents and students in regular conversations and decision-making processes to monitor student discipline policies and recommend changes or reforms as necessary.
5. The development of an inclusive and ongoing forum for engagement regarding student safety and safe passage. We recommend the expansion of the DME's school safety working group to include the voices and perspectives of families, students, and community stakeholders to support the policy processes regarding issues of student safety and safe passage. This process should look to more community-focused models to support student safety, which include enforcement but are not centered through that lens.
6. The city has committed to reduce and eliminate incidents of bullying to ensure our students and youth are safe in all spaces. We recommend a citywide public information campaign similar to public health efforts around smoking that informs and promotes the benefits of a bully free DC and shares the specifics regarding our laws/procedures that govern issues of bullying. Additionally, school-based and out-of-school time programming staff must be appropriately trained to ensure that all students feel welcomed and to ensure schools are safe spaces.

ATTENDANCE/ TRUANCY

1. LEAs should engage in conversations with families and students regarding attendance and truancy policies regularly. Regular engagement will allow for the discussion of the details of the policies, familiarize families with the consequences associated with policy non-compliance, orient families to common terminology used in the policies, and address any questions or areas of concern families have regarding the policies
2. Resources, at the LEA and citywide levels, regarding attendance and truancy need to be continuously pushed downward to the school level for families to process and understand. (i.e. attendance.dc.gov⁵, OSSE's attendance and truancy resources for parents⁶, and LEA specific attendance/truancy resources). These resources are vital tools for families in understanding the laws and policies governing attendance and truancy.

HOMELESSNESS

In our work we continue to see issues of homelessness increase and persist for families. We continue to encounter families experiencing homelessness who are not fully informed about the legal protections and available resources for their student/families. LEAs should create a process to better assess the needs of student and families experiencing homelessness and create a process to share resources related to homelessness services for families to ensure that all families are aware and have access to these vital resources and contacts if necessary. Resources for families should include:

1. OSSE's "Education of Homeless Children & Youth Program" resources⁷
2. Any LEA/school contact or homeless liaison and resource supports⁸
3. Details regarding the McKinney-Vento Act, legal rights, and protections





CONCLUSION MOVING FORWARD

As we enter SY 2018-19, we look forward to continuing to amplify the voices of our students, families, and communities. Some of our initiatives for the upcoming year include:

- Distributing the new edition of our Parent & Family Go-To Guide,
- Developing a diversity, equity, and inclusion-focused resource for schools to use within their school communities,
- Expanding our Citywide Bullying Workshop Series,
- Retooling our Special Education Series to focus on points of transition within the special education process,
- Working directly with schools and Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education around safe passage efforts,
- Partnering with more community-based organizations and schools for trainings and to expand our reach,
- Packaging our trainings to make them accessible on the web, and
- Ensuring that all of our outreach materials are available in various languages to fully commit to language access.

During our three years of operation we have served nearly 7000 families and stakeholders in navigating the complexities of our education landscape through our RFA process and our office outreach. It has been an honor to do this work in partnership with government and organizational partners, community-based organizations, and the families who make this work possible.



References

- ¹ The Council of the District of Columbia (2007, April 19). DC Act A17-0038: Public Education Reform Amendment Act. Retrieved from: <http://lirms.dccouncil.us/Download/8505/B17-0001-ENROLLMENT.pdf>.
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- ⁵ District of Columbia's Student Attendance Initiative: Every Day Counts! Retrieved from: <https://attendance.dc.gov>.
- ⁶ OSSE's Attendance and Truancy Resources for Parents. Retrieved from: <https://osse.dc.gov/publication/attendance-and-truancy-resources-parents>.
- ⁷ OSSE's Education of Homeless Children & Youth Program. Retrieved from: <https://osse.dc.gov/service/education-homeless-children-and-youth-program>.
- ⁸ Office of the Student Advocate. Homeless Children and Youth Resources. Retrieved from: <https://sboe.dc.gov/node/1285456>.

STAKEHOLDER & COMMUNITY OUTREACH

A snapshot of our SY 2017-18 stakeholder and community engagement includes:

- Advisory Neighborhood Commissions
- Advocates for Justice and Education (AJE)
- Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
- Boys and Girls Club FBR Branch
- Capitol Hill Public School Parent Organization
- Children’s Law Center
- Coalition for DC Public Schools & Communities (C4DC)
- Collaborative Solutions for Communities
- Community of Hope
- Council for Court Excellence (CCE)
- Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA)
- Daybreak Ministries
- DC Alliance for Youth Advocates (DCAYA)
- DC Department of Behavioral Health
- DC Department of Health
- DC Department of Human Service
- DC Department of Housing & Community Development
- DC Department of Parks & Recreation
- DC Fiscal Policy Institute
- DC Public Charter School Board
- DC Public Schools, Division of Specialized Instruction
- DC Public Schools, Office of Family and Public Engagement
- DC Public Schools, Office of Specialized Instruction
- DC Public Schools, Office of Student Wellness
- DC School Reform Now
- DC STEM Network & DC STEM Fair
- District of Columbia Community Schools Advocacy Group
- District of Columbia Housing Authority
- District of Columbia Special Education Cooperative
- Douglass Knoll Community Center
- East of the River Family Strengthening Collaborative
- Edgewood Brookland Family Support Collaborative
- Far Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative
- FOCUS Data Summit
- Georgetown University Institute of College Preparedness
- Howard University School of Law
- Leadership for Educational Equity
- Learning with PRIDE
- Man the Block, Richard Wright Public Charter Schools
- Mayor’s Office of Community Relations & Services
- Mayor’s Office on African Affairs
- Mayor’s Office on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs
- Mayor’s Office on Latino Affairs
- My School DC
- Office of Councilmember Brandon Todd (Ward 4)
- Office of Councilmember Brianne Nadeau (Ward 1)
- Office of Councilmember Charles Allen (Ward 6)
- Office of Councilmember David Grosso (At-Large)
- Office of Councilmember Elissa Silverman (At-Large)
- Office of Councilmember Robert White (At-Large)
- Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education
- Office of the Deputy Mayor for Greater Economic Opportunity
- Office of the Deputy Mayor for Health & Human Services
- Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice
- One City All-Star Extravaganza (OCASE) Foundation
- OSSE, Division of Health & Wellness
- OSSE, Office of Dispute Resolution
- OSSE, Re-Engagement Center
- OSSE, Specialized Instruction State Complaints
- OSSE, State Advisory Panel on Special Education
- OSSE, Strong Start
- Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE)
- Safer Stronger DC Office of Neighborhood Safety & Engagement
- Senior High Alliance of Parents Principals and Educators (S.H.A.P.P.E)
- Teaching 4 Change
- Ward 3 Wilson Feeder Education Network
- Ward 4 Education Alliance
- Ward 7 Education Council
- Ward 8 Council on Education
- Ward Five Council on Education
- Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs



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