



OFFICE OF THE STUDENT ADVOCATE
2021 ANNUAL REPORT



School Year (SY) 2020-2021 reflected our commitment to provide resources and support to all public education stakeholders across the District. We leveraged our roles as connectors and collaborators to amplify the voices of students and families from their school communities to where policies and laws are made. As a result, we were able to accomplish the following tasks during SY 2020-21:

- Received 507 unduplicated requests for assistance, via our live answered hotline addressing education-related questions and providing resources, referrals, and one-on-one coaching on all public education issues.
 - Distributed more than 500 backpacks and resources in English, Spanish, and Amharic across every ward in the District.
 - Engaged directly with over 1,500 education stakeholders through our outreach methods beyond our RFA line. Focusing on students, families, service providers, and government agencies, and participated in over 65 virtual gatherings and events citywide.
 - Virtually engaged with more than 3,200 students, families, and stakeholders utilizing various virtual methods.
 - Developed a social media based resource dedicated to discussing topics related mental health and student success. Hosted live sessions on our social media pages and viewed by over 1,200 listeners to date.
 - Continued our **Special Education Support Series** for the fourth consecutive year.
 - Supported the inclusion of Student Voice in the School Based Behavioral Health Expansion by recruiting students and filling the vacant Student Co-Chair position for the Coordinating Council on School Behavioral Health .
 - Produced and published, **Navigating Behavioral Health in DC Schools**, a cross sector guidebook for families accessing school based behavioral health services.
 - Led the working group on Youth Recruitment for the Family and Youth Subcommittee of the **Coordinating Council on School Behavioral Health** to identify and onboard a Youth Co-chair.
 - Debuted a week long initiative for **International Transgender Day of Visibility** and organized a 3-day campaign for **World Mental Health Day** to encourage school communities to promote mental wellbeing and implement best practices for all students.
 - Launched toolkits for families and educators to support creating productive virtual learning environments at home including guidance on “Podding.”
 - Collaborated with DCPS and PCS teachers and administrators to launched a Virtual Learning Support workbook and workshop to provide strategies that families can use to maximize learning from home.
 - Produced and released our office’s first Safe Passage: A Student’s Perspective report. This report highlighted the lived experiences of more than 400 DCPS and PCS students across DC.
 - Continued to capture the experiences of students traveling to and from school for a second consecutive year. In collaboration with the Urban Institute, we have been able to survey more than 500 students to start SY 2021-22.
- We are grateful for the opportunity to continue serving families, and we welcome your partnership in making it all possible.

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LETTER FROM THE CHIEF STUDENT ADVOCATE

District of Columbia State Board of Education,

I am excited to share with you the Office of the Student Advocate's Annual Report for the School Year 2020-2021.

Our community for the past 18 months demonstrated resilience and grace in the midst of this ongoing pandemic, our students, families, teachers and school leaders displayed grit as they committed to teaching and learning despite of COVID-19.

As we return to school buildings, let's hold on strong to the lessons learned on how some students and families found success while learning from home. We encourage school leaders to incorporate those virtual learning support strategies into their school operations moving forward. Let us also note the challenges students and families faced who were not able to find solutions to their virtual learning roadblocks. Many families were experienced being overwhelmed by the frustrating circumstances and policies that decreased the quality of their children's education. The voices of those students and families need to be at the table as we return to the classrooms; we cannot build solutions for what comes next if communication with families and communities is one sided. Our office is committed to ensuring that an open dialogue remains present between families and school leaders to guarantee that their community's invaluable lived experiences are present when policy decisions are made.

Our annual report will show how we are working toward our convictions that successful students get equitable support from families, schools, and communities. Our work continues to focus on students and families whose voices have yet to be heard and supported.

I am pleased to present our data and recommendations in the following pages. As we set off for the 2021-2022 school year, we look forward to improving our partnership with the District of Columbia State Board of Education, and our students and families.

Dan Davis
Chief Student Advocate



LANDSCAPE AND OUR ROLE

WHAT WE DO:

With more than 225 schools supported by more than 65 local education agencies (LEAs), and with a handful of Offices, Agencies, Boards and Council providing governance and oversight to our dual sector system of public education: families need advocates¹. Since our office was created, we have strived to overcome those barriers by partnering with families to keep them informed, connected, and supported in their pursuit of a high quality education for their student. The Office of the Student Advocate is an independent office, housed in the District of Columbia State Board of Education (SBOE), that provides guidance and resource supports to assist families in navigating the complex public education system in the District of Columbia.

The work of our office focuses on strengthening student, family and 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 the 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**, by recommending policy changes, staff trainings, and strategies to improve the efficient and equitable delivery of public education services.

STAFF:

Dan Davis
Chief Student Advocate

Phillip Copeland
Student Advocate

Renatta Landrau
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FELLOWS:

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Legislative Policy Fellow

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Duane Hunter
Summer Mikva Fellow

Alexa Iraheta
Student Volunteer



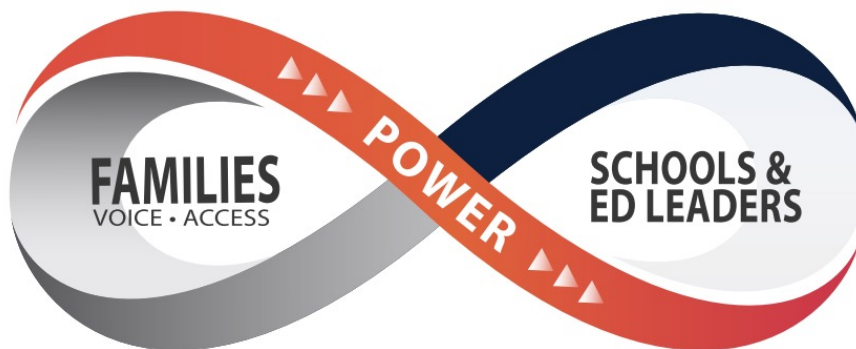
SECTION II

CORE PRINCIPLES

ACHIEVING EQUITY THROUGH FAMILY ENGAGEMENT & PARTNERSHIP: VOICE, ACCESS, POWER

Equity can be achieved when any family is able to receive fair treatment, fair access to resources and services, and fair opportunities to advance in society. Equity can only be achieved when barriers to fair treatment, access, and opportunities are identified and corrected. As a city, we have taken steps towards building equity systemically in public education, but our good intentions still fall short of ensuring that every student is able to thrive. Our office works to ensure that all families receive equitable educational opportunities by committing to support meaningful student & family engagement. Our focus on family engagement is rooted in the belief that families, students, and community members are powerful. The stoppage of in-person instruction and the challenges/successes of distant learning families managed to adapt to demonstrated that innate power our children and families possess. The conditions necessary for positive change, growth, and success among students increase substantially when students and families partner with teachers, school leaders and other decision-makers.

All students and families in the District must be embraced as learning partners by their school's teachers and leadership teams. The family is the ultimate source of knowledge regarding the needs of their children regardless of their housing status, community, citizenship, language, or income. We know that when families are empowered as leaders, they play a significant role in shaping policy. Their lived experiences and commitment to the success of their children, other children, and their community are irreplaceable and essential to build solutions for our shared challenges.



The sharing of power between schools, families, and communities must be relational². The framework we embrace recognizes the roles of families, schools, communities, and other stakeholders. We believe that now more than ever, it is imperative that families and schools are able to effectively communicate with each other in order to ensure equity.

HOW OUR OFFICE SERVES FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE

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 a.m. until 5 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.

ONLINE EDUCATION AND 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 multiple ward based 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 more than 400 resource listings, organized into more than 20 categories. This resource guide provides students, parents, families, and communities across all eight wards with a roadmap to getting started in navigating the public education landscape in DC. This guide aims to highlight 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, this guide serves to acknowledge the work that is already being done by government agencies, offices, and community-based organizations while connecting families to those vital resources in one centralized location.



INFORMATION AND ADVOCACY RESOURCES AND 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 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Our online resources include:

- Advocacy & Lobbying Toolkit
- Attendance & Truancy Resources
- Behavioral & Mental Health Resources
- Bullying Resource
- Effective Communication Toolkit
- Enrollment Resources
- Dyslexia Guidebook for Parents
- High School Graduation Requirements & Information
- Homeless Children and Youth Resources
- Parent Leadership Toolkit: Parent Organization Resources
- Race, Equity, and Inclusion Toolkit
- Right to Know Ask Sheets
- Safe Passage
- Special Education & Other School Supports
- Student Discipline
- Virtual Learning Support and Podding
- Student Leadership Information & Resources
- Teacher Representation
- Testing & Assessments Resources
- DC Public Education Governance Structure

TRAININGS AND 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.

Our trainings include:

- Student Support Mental Health Series
- Know Your Rights: Special Education Series
- Safe Passage Community Building Workshops
- Virtual Learning Support: Building Independent Learners
- Attendance, Engagement & Technology
- Parent Advocacy: Budget & Governance

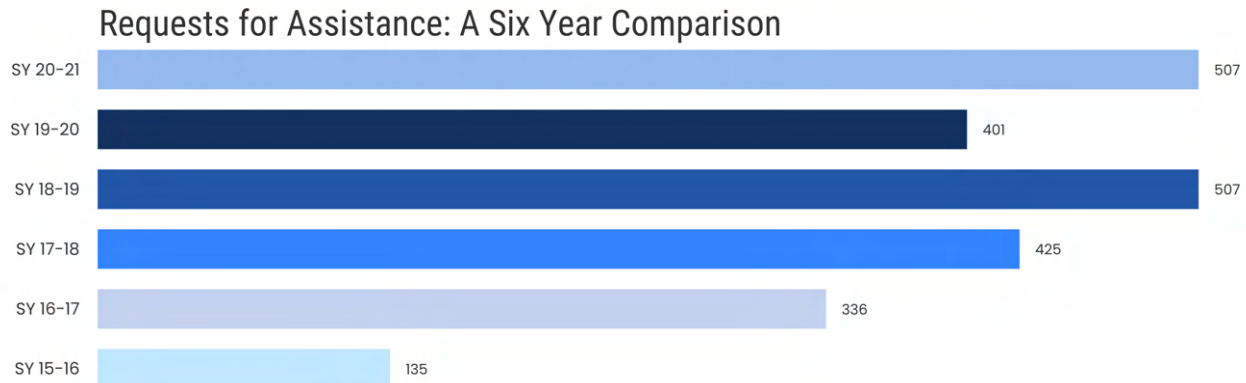


SY 2020–21 DATA, TRENDS, & ANALYSIS - LOOKING INTO AND BEYOND THE NUMBERS OVERVIEW

OVERVIEW:

REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE: A SIX YEAR COMPARISON

Data collection is a critical facet of our work. Our Request for Assistance (RFA) hotline is not only a resource for families, but also a great tool for assessing the needs of families served by schools in the District both charter and traditional. We collect and house information from the hotline across 13 broad educational (primary) topic areas and 19 specific educational concerns (secondary) subtopic areas that we can correlate with demographic information about student and families, e.g. race, ethnicity, grade, residency, ward and school type. This information guides the way our office pursues educational equity.

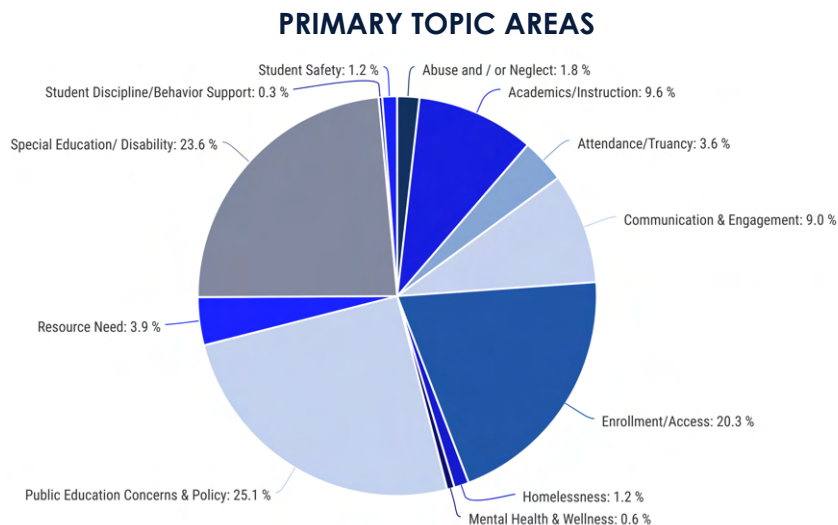


We saw a decline in families reaching out for educational support in SY 2019-20 as families focused on health/basic needs, from getting food to finding childcare. Our office saw an increase of calls for SY 2020-21, which restored us to the volume of calls prior to the pandemic. In the later half of SY 2020-21, as school buildings began to reopen and offer in person learning opportunities, we served families seeking clarity about those options.

RFA ANALYSIS AND BREAKDOWN

SY 2020 – 21 BY RFA TOPIC

The top issues that current/former students and families called in for in SY 2020-21 were related to “Public Education Concerns & Policy.” Though this category covers issues ranging from out-of-school discipline, to not enough support provided in schools, an overwhelming amount of these calls were regarding the impact of District health policies related to COVID and how they affected school building operations from record keeping, transcript requests to cafeteria spacing. The next two highest topic areas were related to “Special Education” and “Enrollment/Access.” These two issues have consistently trended high since our office opened in 2015. “Enrollment/Access” captures questions and concerns ranging from school choice and the lottery process to revoking invitations, enrolling, and age limit cutoffs. We also 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 the quality of services connected to the IEPs, how their students 504 plans accommodations will transition while virtual and when in-person resumes, delays with initiating/completing the evaluation process, and change of placement notifications.

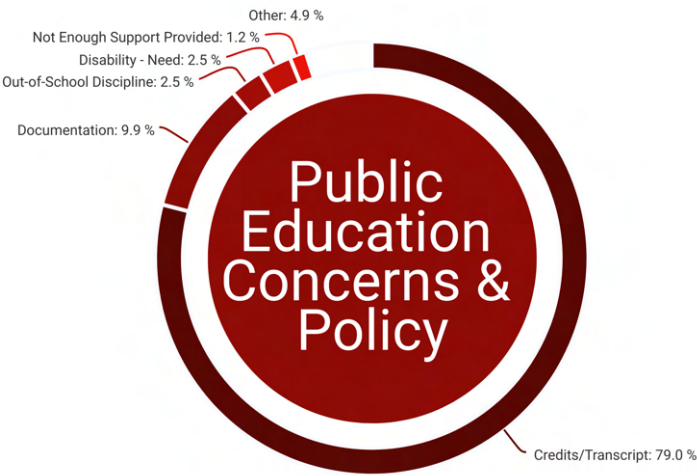


Other RFA topic areas we received a higher volume of calls in SY 2020-21 were Academics/Instruction (9.6 percent of calls) and Communication & Engagement (8 percent of calls). Academics/Instruction refers to in-class or virtual instruction. Our office has been able to connect families with teachers and school leaders to support families resolve or move forward with their student academic progress. The outcomes from these calls range from filing a complaint with the DCPS Cares or DC Public Charter School Board (DCPCSB), to the facilitation of a conversation between a parent and a school administrator. Communication & Engagement refers to issues a school’s ability to communicate affectively with families or community stakeholders. Communication was particularly important during a year where most schooling was completed online. Many families mentioned that expectations related to attendance practices, grading policies, or summer school requirements were not clearly stated. These two particular categories highlighted the challenges many families faced in a virtual setting.

SY 2020-21 SECONDARY TOPIC AREAS

We are able to use secondary topic areas to provide more context when assisting parents and families. Secondary topic areas correlate to our primary topic areas. For example, the primary topic area “Special Education” is related to the following secondary topic areas: IEPs, special education placement, transportation, bullying, and graduation/promotion.

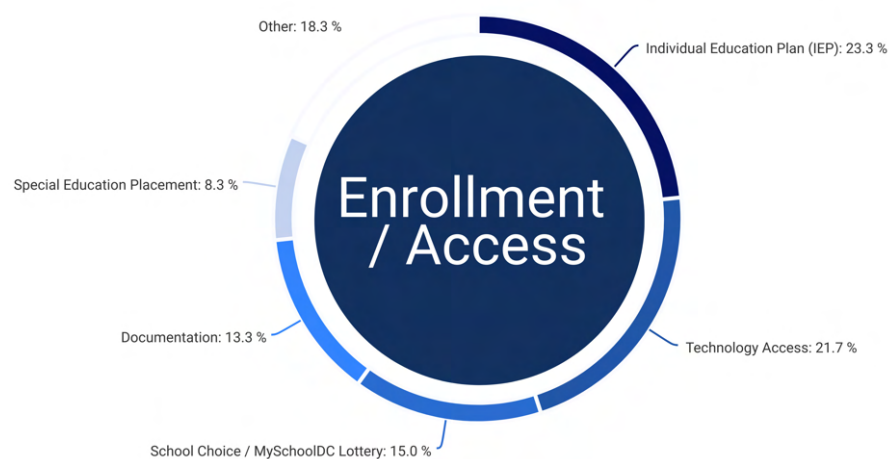
About 25 percent of calls on the RFA line related to “Public Education Concerns & Policy.” An overwhelming amount of those calls were related to Transcript Requests (79 percent and Documentation assistance (10 percent.



Nearly 24% of calls on the RFA line related to “Special Education/Disability.” Of those calls, the top three areas of concern were related to Individual Education Plans (IEPs), Not Enough Support Provided, and Academic Supports.

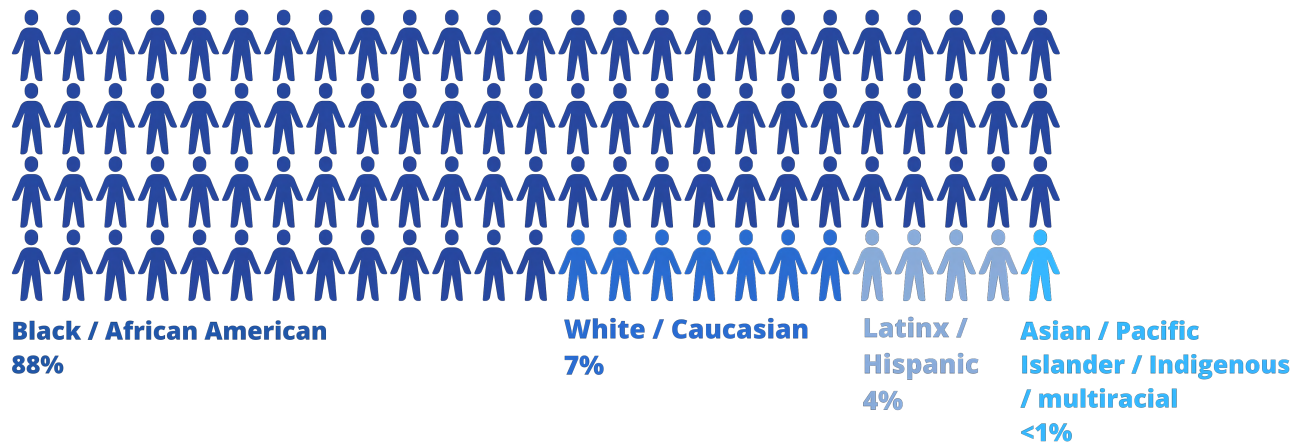


Nearly 20 percent of calls on the RFA line related to “Enrollment/Access.” Of those calls, the top three areas of concern related to Individual Education Plans (IEPs), Technology Access, and the School Choice process.

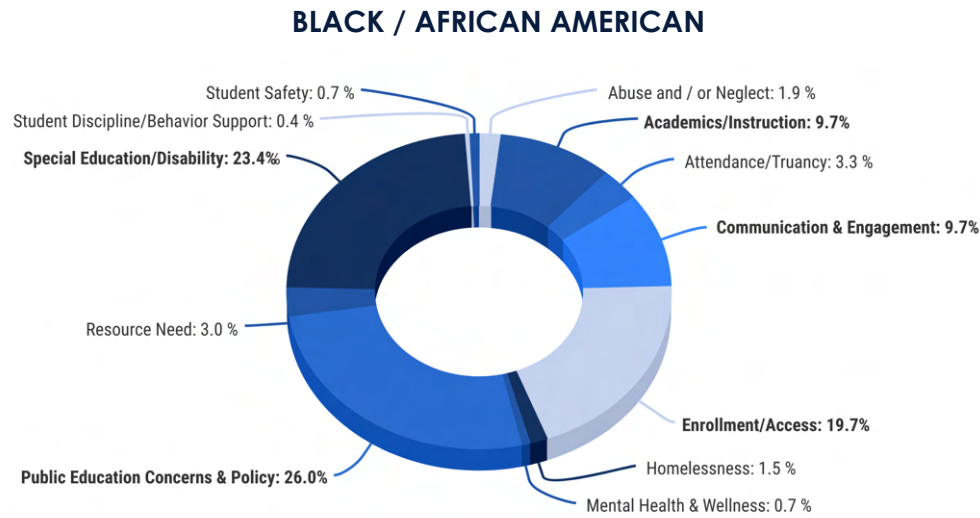


SY 2020-21 RFAS BY RACE / ETHNICITY

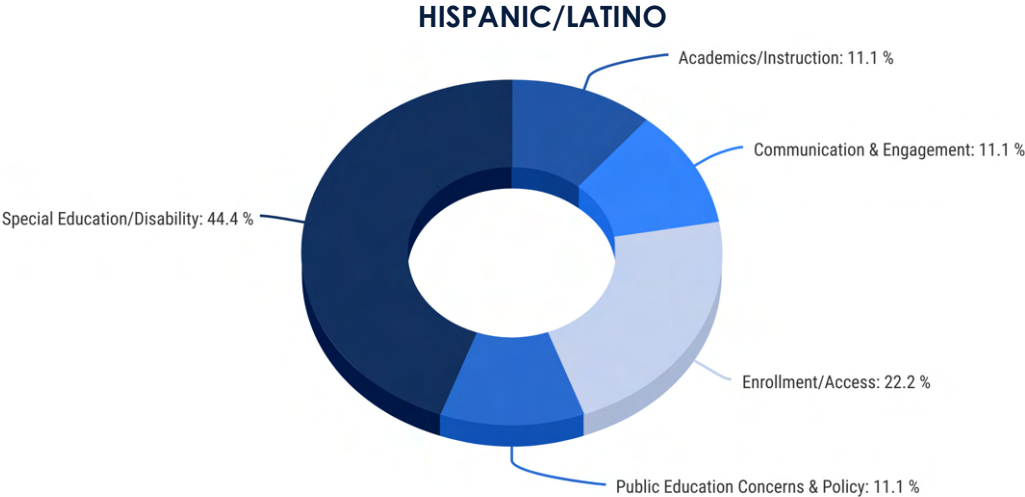
As we work to support equity, we need to assess how race relates to public education issues and concerns. If we are to be honest and transparent about which families in the District need targeted supports and resources regarding public education, we have to consider racial identity when pushing for equitable outcomes for all students.



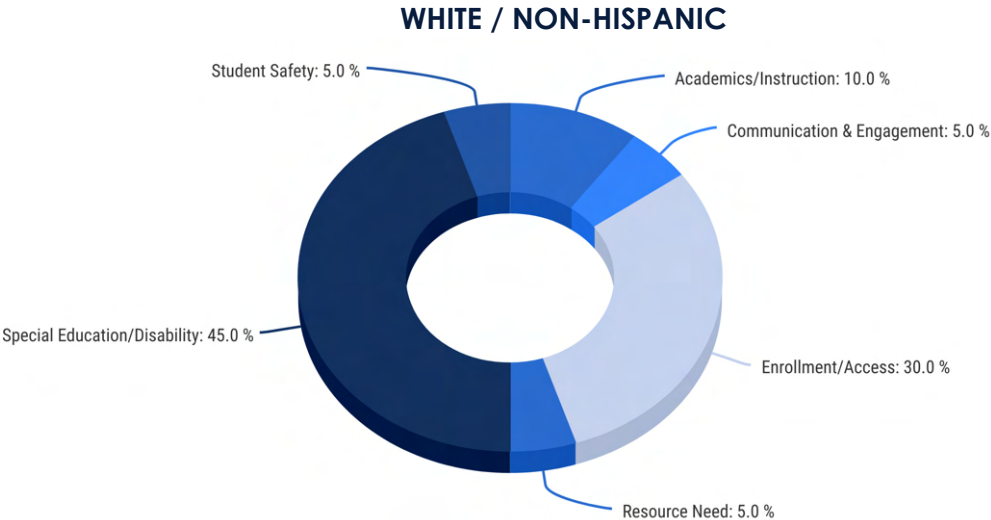
The top five primary concerns we received from families that self identified as Black or African-American were related to Public Education Concerns & Policy, Special Education/Disability, Enrollment/Access, Academics/Instruction, and Communication & Engagement. The top three secondary/detailed concerns were related to Credits/Transcripts (34 percent), IEPs (24 percent), and Technology Access (9%).



The top two primary areas of concern for families that self identified as Latinx or Hispanic were related to Special Education/Disability (44 percent) and Enrollment/Access (22 percent). We received the calls equally regarding Public Education Concerns & Policy, Academics/Instruction, and Communication & Engagement. The top secondary/ detailed concern was related to IEPs (50 percent).

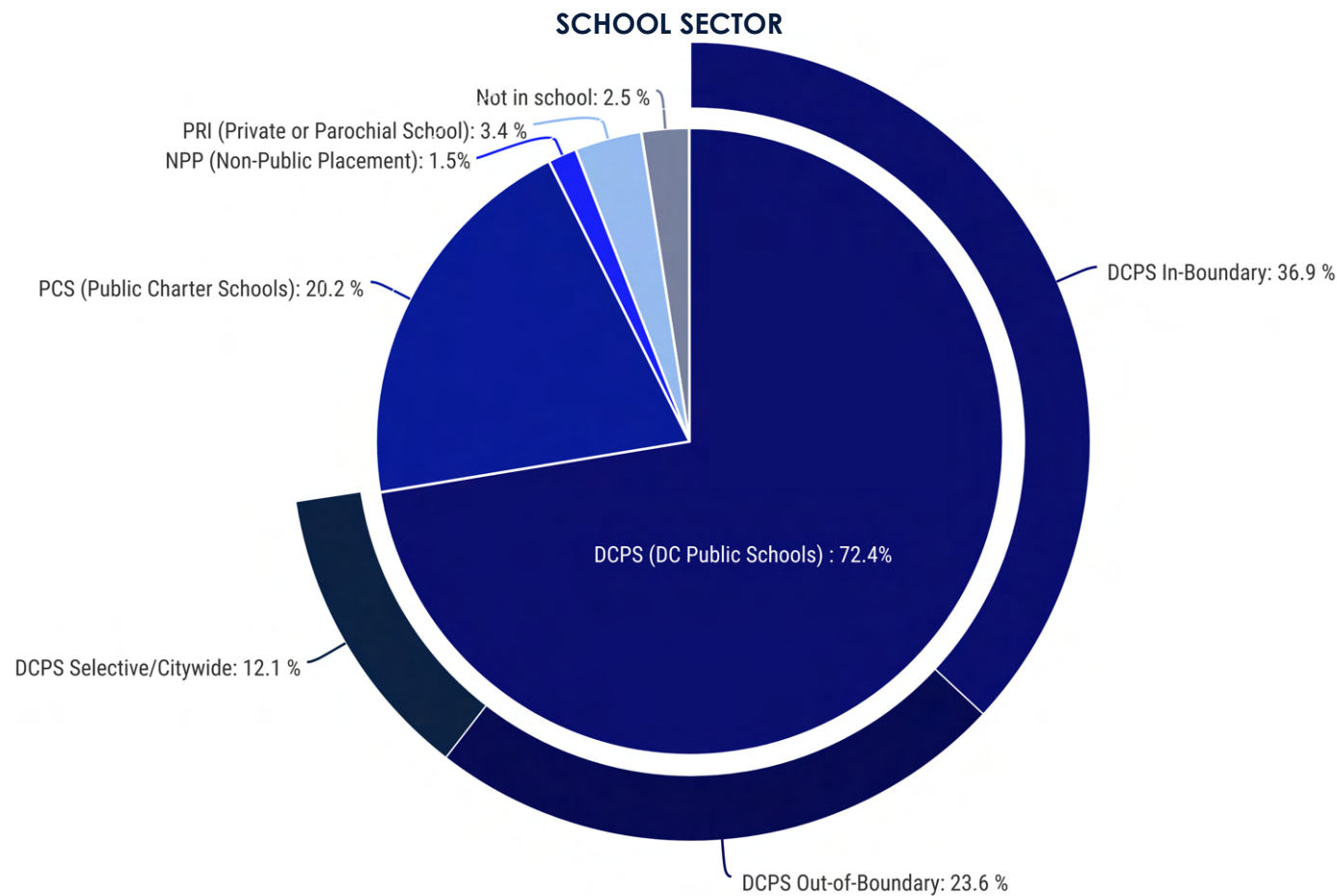


The top two primary areas of concern we received from families that self identified as White or Non-Hispanic were related to Special Education/Disability (45 percent) and Enrollment/Access (30 percent). The top two secondary/ detailed concerns were related to IEPs (45 percent) and School Choice (27 percent).



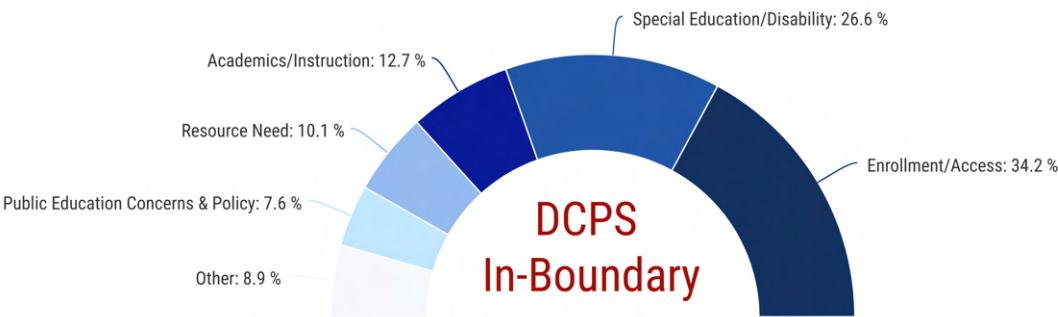
SY 2020-21 RFAS BY SECTOR

More than 70 percent of our RFAs came from students and families being served by DC Public Schools (DCPS). The number of calls from DCPS families can be attributed to DCPS being the largest LEA in the District with more than 110 school locations. About 37 percent of our RFAs were from students who attend their in-boundary schools within DCPS and about 24 percent came from out-of-boundary schools. About 12 percent of RFAs came from DCPS selective/citywide schools. About one-fifth of our RFAs came from students and families served by one of the District's 60+ charter LEAs. We are continuing to identify ways to work more closely with charter schools and the families that they serve.

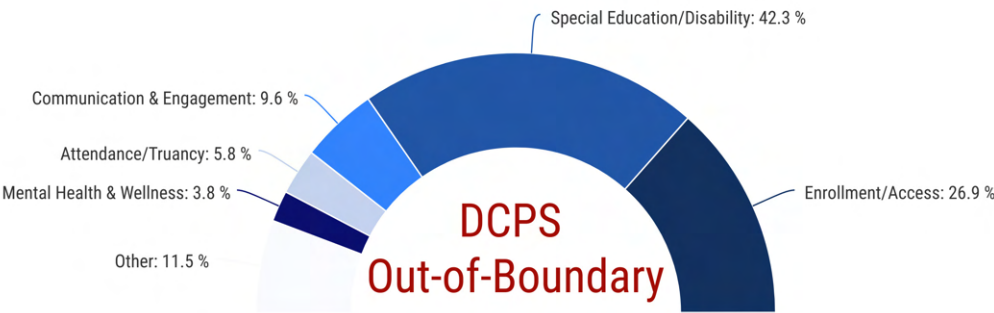


DCPS NEEDS BREAKDOWN: IN-BOUNDARY / OUT-OF-BOUNDARY / SELECTIVE

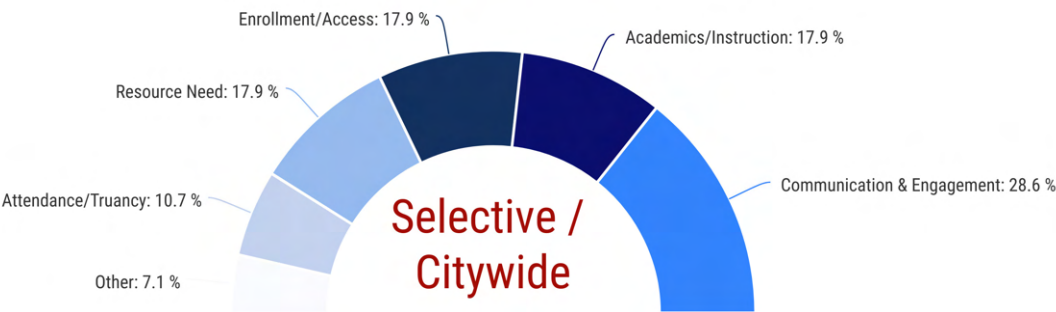
The top areas of need varied depending on the school type. The top area of need for families with students attending their DCPS in-boundary school was related to Enrollment/Access.



The top area of need for families with students attending their DCPS out-of-boundary school was related to Special Education/Disability.

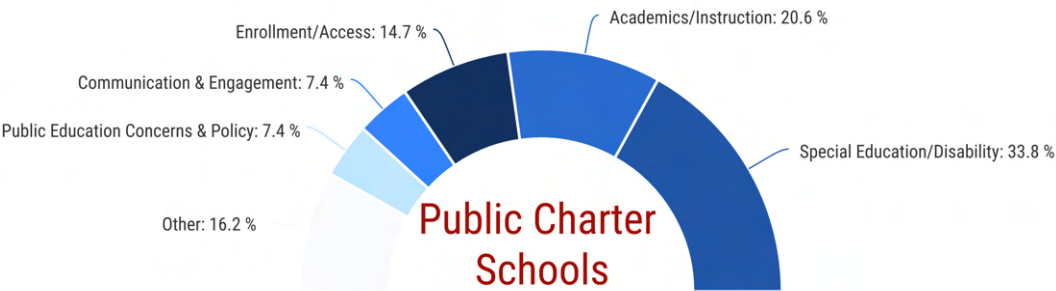


The top area of need for families with students attending DCPS selective/citywide schools was related to a Communication & Engagement.

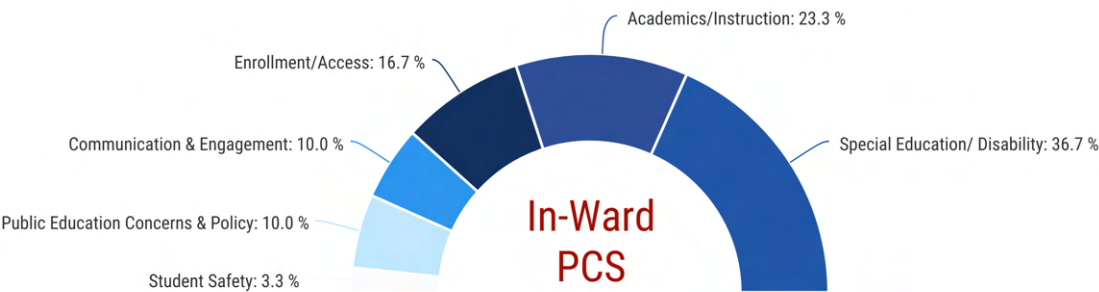


PCS NEEDS BREAKDOWN:

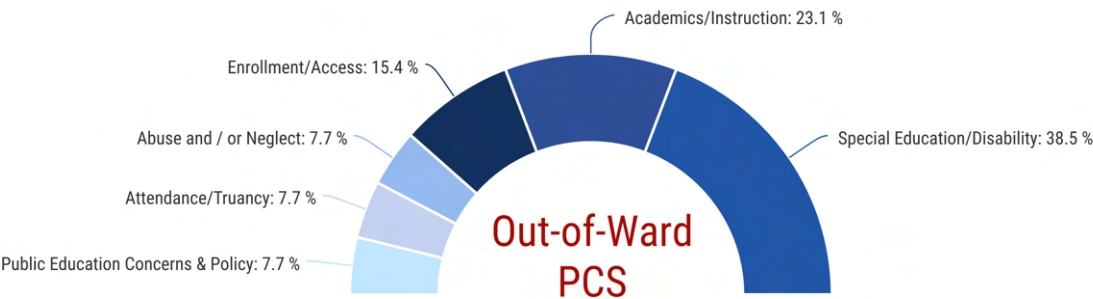
The top three areas of need for families with students attending public charter schools were related to Special Education/Disability, Academics/Instruction, and Enrollment/Access.



The top three areas of need for families with students attending public charter schools within their wards of residency were related to Special Education/Disability, Academics/Instruction, and Enrollment/Access.

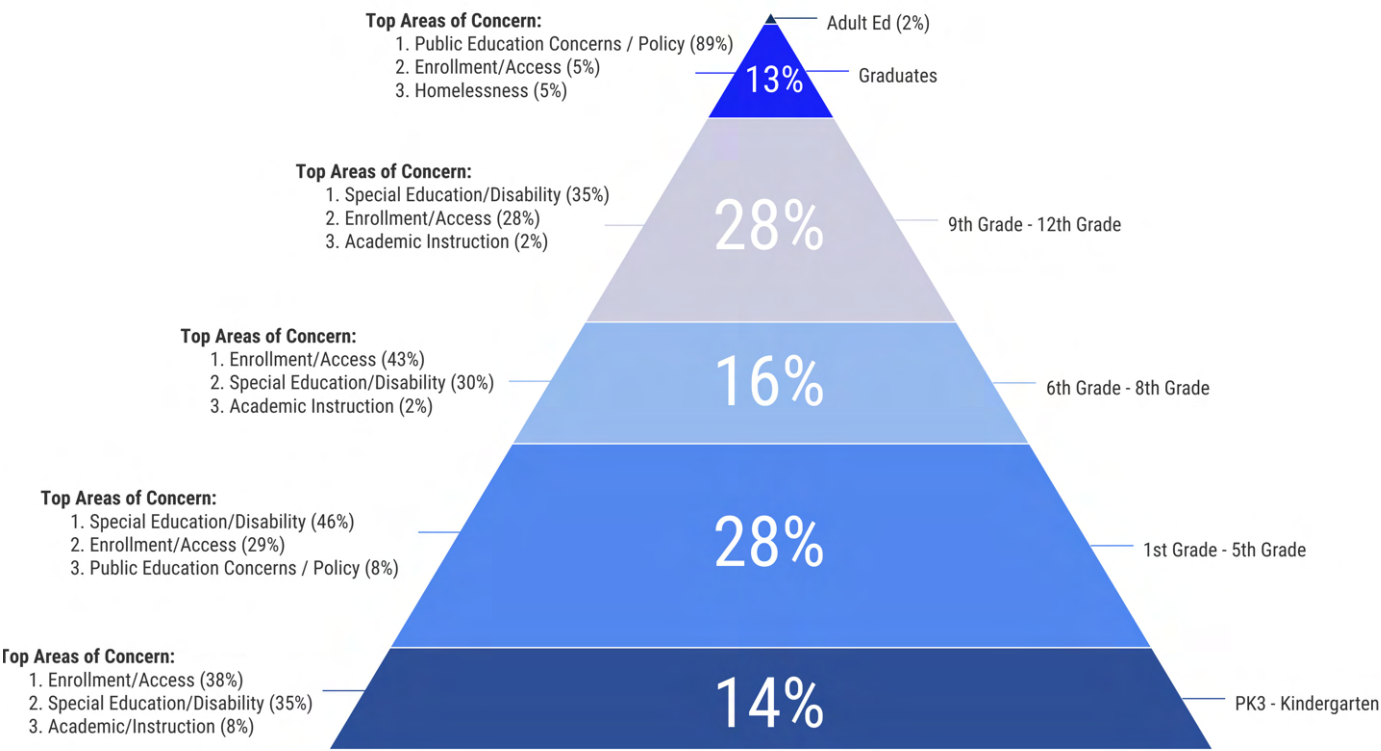


The top three areas of need for families with students attending public charter schools outside of their wards of residency were related to Special Education/Disability, Academics/Instruction, and Enrollment/Access.



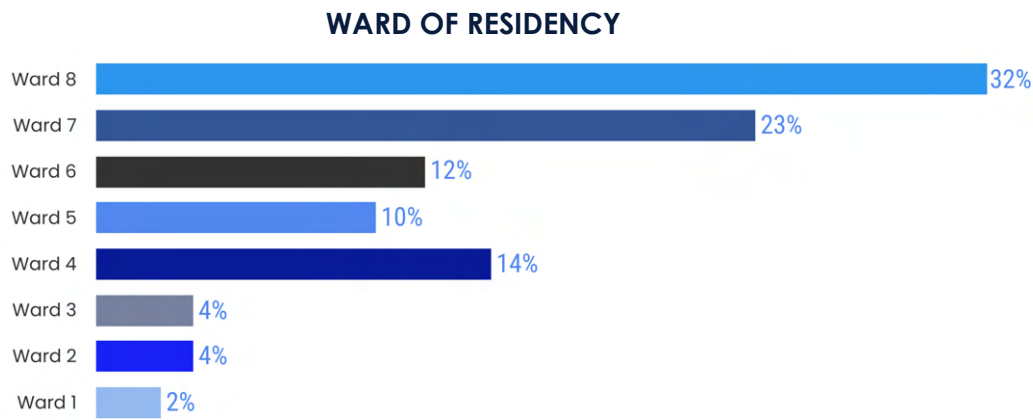
SY 2020-21 RFAS BY GRADE BAND

Most of our RFAs came from families with students enrolled in elementary school and high school. About 28% of our RFAs came from families with students between the first and fifth grade. This aligns with the proportion of first through fifth grade students enrolled in DCPS³ and charter schools in the district⁴. Approximately 28% of our RFAs came from families with students between the ninth and 12th grade. This may be the result of our outreach efforts to high school aged children for discussions regarding their safety and transportation the past several years. We have received a lower rate of calls from families with students enrolled in middle school grades and in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs. This may be connected to declining pre-kindergarten attendance and enrollment during virtual learning (pre-k is not compulsory in DC).



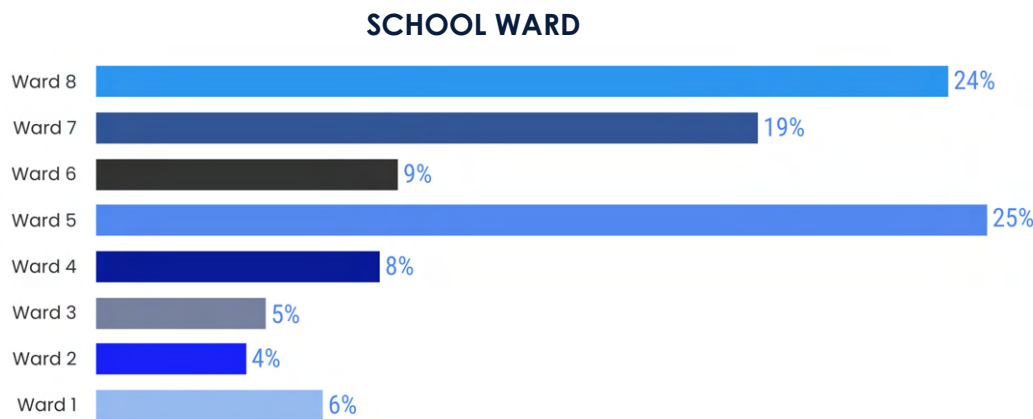
SY 2020-21 RFAS BY WARD OF RESIDENCY

The majority of the RFAs to our office come from the wards with the largest number of school-aged children in the city, wards 7 and 8. Due to targeted outreach efforts to be more representative of the entire city, we saw a higher rate of calls from wards 2, 3, 4 and 6 than SY 2019-20⁵. Though our presence citywide has increased over our years of operation due to our “Know Your Rights” special education workshops (in Wards 1, 5, 7, and 8) and our Safe Passage initiatives and meetings (in Wards 1, 4, 6, 7 and 8), we have been able to expand our efforts by utilizing virtual workshops and trainings.



SY 2020-21 RFAS 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. Families whose students attend schools in Wards 5, 7, and 8 accounted for more than 65% of our calls.



SY 2021-22 WARD SPECIFIC DATA

Using residence data and school location data, we can provide additional context for students and families experiences based on proximity to their school. Specific ward based data related to school sector and primary topic areas can be found using Appendix A.

While comparing data from individual school wards, we noticed that:

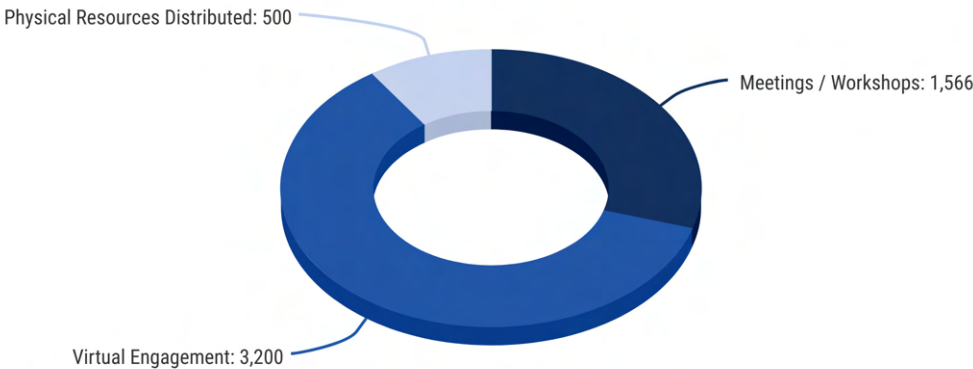
- Majority of RFAs received from families residing in Wards 3, 6, and 7 originated with students attending their in boundary DC Public Schools.
- Majority of RFAs from Wards 2 and 4 families concerned students attending out of boundary DC Public Schools.
- Majority of RFAs from Ward 8 families were connected to students attending public charter schools.
- Majority of RFAs from Ward 1 and 5 families concerned students attending a DCPS Selective/Citywide schools.

Using ward of residence data and primary topic data we were able to notice different areas of concern per ward.

- Special Education/Disability was the top area of concern for families in wards 2, 4, and 8.
- Enrollment/access was the top area of concern for families in wards 6 and 7.
- Public Policy Concerns & Policies was the top area of concern for families in wards 1 and 5.
- Communication and Engagement was the top area of concern for families in ward 3.

OUTREACH

As schools remained virtual through most of the year, our office continued to find new ways to engage with students, families, and education stakeholders across the District. In SY 2020-21, we met directly with more than 1,500 students, families, and educational stakeholders utilizing virtual platforms. Many of the workshops that we facilitated were recorded and distributed online for families who could not directly engage with us. As a result, we saw an additional 3,200 engagements through our virtual platforms. Though we shifted most of our efforts to minimize in-person contact, we still managed to distribute over 500 back packs and activities for students, along with resource guides in English, Spanish, and Amharic for parents.



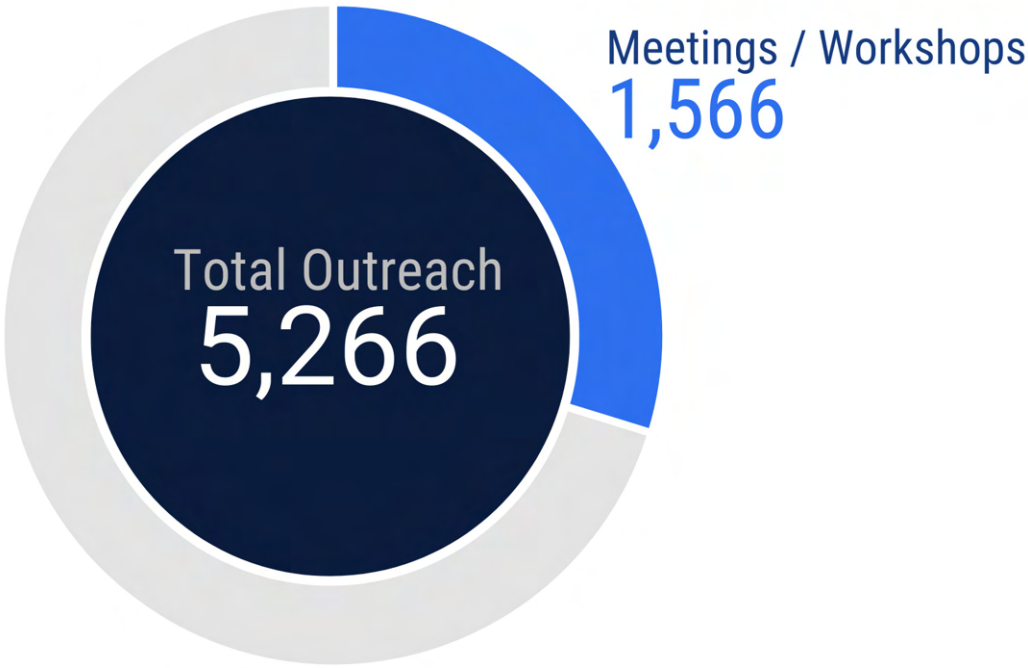
ADAPTING TO COVID-19

Since shifting to remote operations in compliance with social distancing orders, we connected directly with more than 1,500 students, families, and stakeholders on virtual platforms. These stakeholders include students who participated in focus groups, their families, numerous meetings with school leaders, teachers, CBOs, nonprofits, and government agencies. Using the input of these stakeholders and data trends captured from our RFAs, we updated the following resources/workshops:

- Attendance & Parents Workshop
- Special Education: Know Your Rights Workshop
- Student Safety: Safe Passage Focus Groups

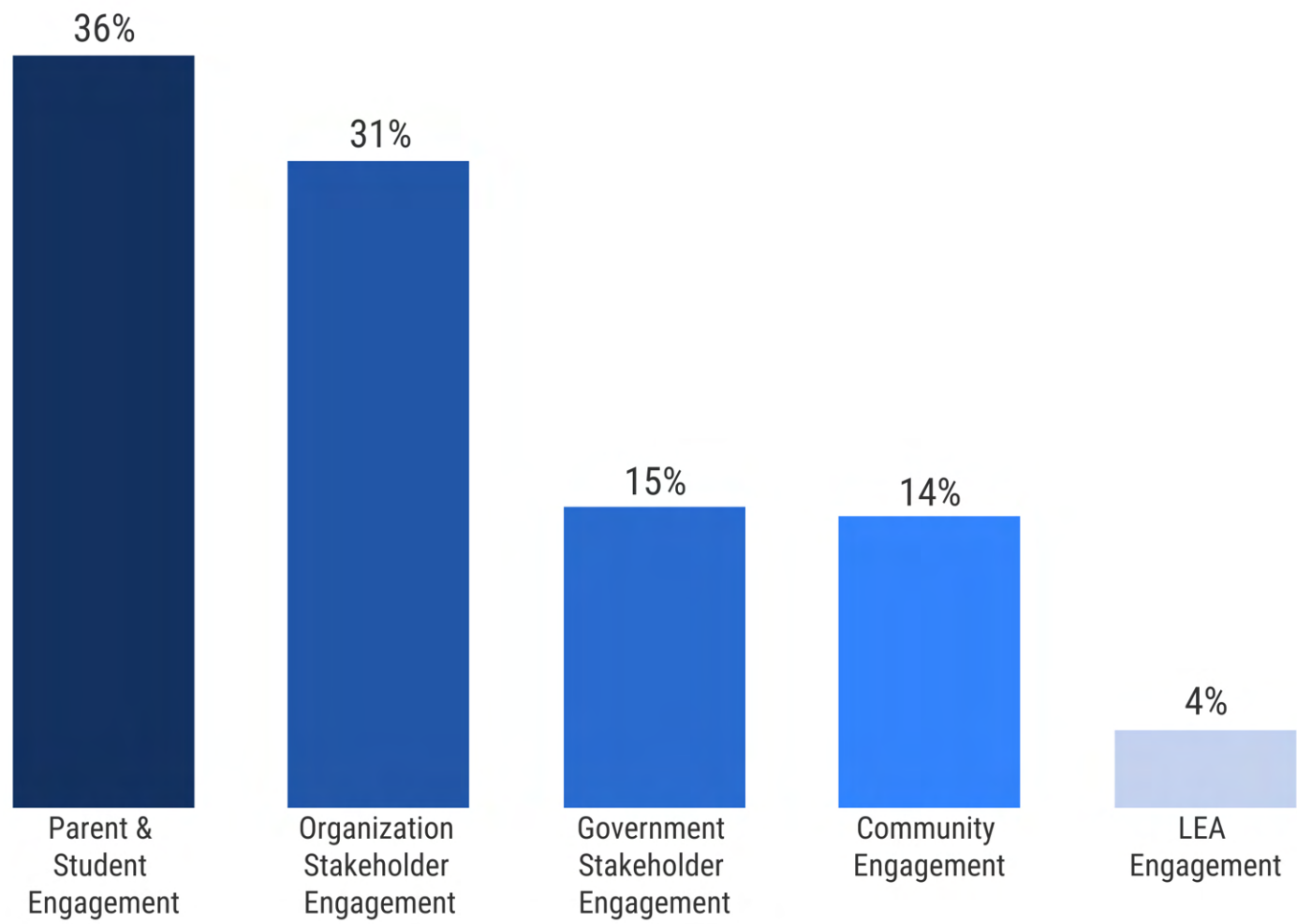
Based on the emerging needs of families that came from virtual learning, our office developed the following resources:

- Behavioral Health Guide
- Podding 101: Building a Safe Learning Pod
- Virtual Learning Support Series & Toolkit



SY 2020-21 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT DATA

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. Half of our outreach efforts focused on the development/ adaptation of resources for our city’s most vulnerable populations. These collaborations helped us create resources related to attendance, special education, behavioral/mental health, student safety, and virtual learning. The other half of our outreach efforts engaged parents, students, and their communities directly. We engaged with students and families by participating in panels, facilitating workshops and focus groups. The balance of our outreach work reinforces our ability to serve as liaisons between all stakeholders, and reach those families in the most need.



EVIDENCE OF OUR WORK

RESPONDING TO COVID-19

Like our students, families, and schools, our office pivoted in response to the pandemic. We understood the needs of families changed since SY 2019-20, and that the challenges many families faced only intensified. We adapted our approach to best support all families.

Our past outreach practice included in-person distribution of physical resources city wide, but we focused our efforts on connecting those physical resources to families in communities known to lack connections to reliable internet. We manage to distribute hundreds of backpacks and resources to families across the district, we developed numerous virtual resources for our families to easily access. In collaboration with additional CBOs, we were able to provide a diverse array of resources utilizing multiple virtual modes of communication.

We expanded our digital footprint by prioritizing virtual engagement with families by growing what is available on our social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. From developing informational graphics on social media, to hosting medical experts on our live streaming podcast, we were able to reach a much larger audience than we were able to utilizing only in-person events. We focused on adapting these resources to be mobile friendly for families with limited technology access and accessible for all families regardless of required accommodations. From adapting our SPED Know Your Rights workshop to a virtual platform, to developing a Virtual Learning Support Guide with companion workshop recordings available anytime online, we continued to expand how we can provide our workshops to more communities in need.

We not only moved those supports to online platforms, but we reinvented how we hosted our trainings and workshops. We actively sought organizations and school leaders to collaborate with. We built an attendance workshop based on the needs highlighted from our partnering CBOs. We cohosted our SPED Know Your Rights workshops with the Ombudsman for Public Education in both Spanish and English for parents. We collaborated with numerous DCPS and PCS school leaders to develop and facilitate a Virtual Learning Support workshop for families. Working in a virtual space allowed us to connect more frequently with DC students and their families.

Historically, our office serves more families residing in wards 7 and 8, so we collaborated with our organizational partners that oversee the Family Success Centers east of the river to help families access our online workshop materials who were not able to attend our live workshop sessions. We reviewed our Safe Passage Report with various student groups across the city, including those students who helped with the report's development. In addition to engaging families through our RFA process, we prioritized engaging with families in virtual, community spaces easily accessible for all. We consistently seek to understand the experiences of families by participating in a larger set of community driven meetings online. We continue to support initiatives that are inclusive of our entire school community, and we continue to celebrate our students, family leaders, school leaders and fellow community members as partners and champions.

SUPPORTING STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Our office has recognized the need for additional conversations, guidance, and awareness on topics regarding the mental and behavioral health of our students. While we believe a focus on mental health is part of regular health care, most often, mental health is discussed in terms of crisis response. While this level of care is important to addressing the needs in our communities, often times we lack focus on the more basic Tier 1 strategies that can be implemented to support students across the board whether they display symptoms or not⁶. In our work with parents and community members, we have found that many families do not always have access to quality mental health care resources or clarity regarding the process of clinical mental health care.

STUDENT & FAMILY VOICE & ACCESS

Coordinating Council on School Behavioral Health - Family and Youth Committee: Our office has continued to collaborate with the DC Department of Behavioral Health and OSSE to elevate student and family voice in the expansion process of student behavioral health services in schools. In doing this we joined the Family and Youth Committee of the Coordinating Council on School Behavioral Health. We spearheaded the effort to identify, recruit, and train a Youth Co-chair to sit on the Family and Youth Subcommittee. By the end of SY 2020-21 we were able to fully onboard a DC student into this position. The addition of a student to the Council underscores the District's commitment to incorporating student voice throughout the process of the expansion and work to bridge the gap between schools and services.

Navigating Behavioral Health Toolkit: Prior to the pandemic, many challenges existed in accessing the available mental health services throughout the District. In talking with families, parents, and students in our work, many of these challenges existed because families were unsure of which services are available and how to access these services both within the school building and outside. Additionally, our partners often shared that families continuously voiced the need for a simple way to know what is available and how to get help before or during a crisis. In response, our team created the Navigating Behavioral Health Toolkit. We worked with the Department of Behavioral Health, The Milken Institute School of Public Health, DC Public Schools, community based organizations, and families to gather input on areas that would be helpful for families and students to break down the system. The purpose of this toolkit is to provide Washington, DC families, teachers, and students with foundational information regarding behavioral health and provide a starting point to use in seeking care and resources in the national capital area. See appendix B



OUTREACH CAMPAIGNS

International Transgender Day of Visibility 2020: In honor of International Transgender Day of Visibility, we joined with the DC State Board of Education and the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education to celebrate the accomplishments of transgender and gender nonconforming students while raising awareness of the work that still needs to be done to achieve trans justice particularly in our school system. Throughout the week OSA launched several efforts to create awareness, initiate conversation, and bring youth and advocate voices to the forefront. We shared resources and information in partnership with local organizations that serve DC's transgender and gender nonconforming youth populations including safe spaces for support and crisis intervention, books and literature, mental health resources, and how to get involved. We will continue the work of providing resources to help make every school space supportive and nurturing to all students.



World Mental Health Day: World Mental Health Day is an international day of awareness for global mental health education and advocacy against social stigma. Our office used this day of awareness to lead a 3 day campaign of initiatives to encourage communities and schools to promote wellness and behavioral health practices both inside and outside of the school building. We created a Mental Health Bingo Game on our social media where participants were encouraged to be their own mental health advocate and engage in small, simple steps to focus on their own mental health. Additionally, our student intern Alexa helped to lead a conversation on our social media platforms with Mikva Challenge DC that discussed the importance of mental health support access for all students and erasing the stigmas in our communities and schools around mental health care. Finally, we released mini videos on our social media networks with tips for students to focus on their mental health during distance learning, and steps for students to take advantage of their school's available mental health resources. These resources can be found on our Instagram and Facebook pages.



SPECIAL EDUCATION

It is clear that many of our students who receive special education services were disproportionately affected by the switch to virtual learning. Some students thrived and others were met with increasing challenges. Either way, families were in the hands of a changing and obscured system. We adapted our existing special education workshop to fit the current climate of virtual learning and the new direction from the US Department of Education around the enforcement of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. We partnered with our sister Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education and engaged with community partners and organizations like PAVE, to ensure as many families as possible had access to this valuable and necessary information by way of virtual workshops. Additionally, we leveraged translation services to have this workshop and presentation available in both Amharic and Spanish. Our office continues to be a willing collaborator across district agencies and community partners. A portion of our resources have been made available using OSSE's Special Education Resources HUB⁷.

SAFE PASSAGE

The safety of our students traveling to and from school is paramount, but we know incidents of community violence surrounding our schools and communities jeopardize the safety of our children. If we expect all of our students to positively engage with their school's community, we must find ways to guarantee their safety. It will take a collaborative effort to ensure that all of our children can safely travel to and from school. While schools and government agencies work diligently to create Safe Passage programming around the District, our work must be guided by the voice and experience of the students who travel to and from school each day. Even as we worked virtually this past year, we continued to work directly with numerous DC communities, schools, and agencies on issues related to student safety and safe passage.

COLLABORATION

Throughout the pandemic we have collaborated with the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education as thought partners regarding Safe Passage. We look forward to continuing our partnership for Safe Spots and expanding the initiative to the other safe passage priority areas. Unfortunately, we learned during the pandemic that several organizations that established great relationships with students had to either close their doors or relocate due to economic hardship. As we continue to recruit more organizations to join this initiative, we are also planning to offer additional trainings and supports to help Safe Spots better engage with the students and other community partners.

As schools remained virtual, our office helped facilitate workshops related to the replication of the Center City Congress Heights safe passage program, a hybrid walking school bus model. We assisted in the gathering of various school leaders, public safety agencies, and transportation



providers to help other school communities coordinate individualized Safe Passage plans. As students return to classrooms, our office is resuming our ward based Student Safety and Safe Passage meetings. These conversations center on students and families expressing what they would need to increase their safety while traveling to and from school. As schools plan for welcoming students back for SY 2021-22, we will continue student centered discussions related to their safety.

STUDENT VOICE

This year, we released the first “Safe Passage: A Student’s Perspective” report. This report detailed the lived experiences of students traveling to and from school. Prior to the pandemic (SY 2019-20), our office facilitated small focus group discussions by partnering with numerous students serving organizations including Global Kids, Black Swan Academy, Young Women’s Project, SBOE Student Advisory Committee and Pathways 2 Power. We were able to meet with more than 430 students from all eight wards attending 15 DCPS and 12 public charter schools as a result. In partnership with the Urban Institute, we have worked to survey students for a second consecutive year. Due to the pandemic, we adapted our outreach methods to virtually distribute the survey amongst all DCPS and Charter High Schools. Regardless of the obstacles of virtually facilitating a survey, we have seen more responses this year than before. In addition to surveying high school students, we are in the process of scaling that effort to capture the concerns of the families of younger students. We hope to release a follow up report in the Spring of 2022 that reflect those experiences and help guide current and future Safe Passage initiatives.



FAMILY SUPPORTS & RESOURCES

The past two years proved that our students and families are committed to being partners in public education. As we return to the classroom, we cannot return to the pre-pandemic norms of students and families being excluded from the decision making process. We must make certain that the framework for returning to school is a shared model between families and school leaders. We must also continue to adapt with the needs of our families as they continue to evolve.

VIRTUAL LEARNING SUPPORT

We heard from families as they searched for resources on how to make learning from home more manageable. We produced a Virtual Learning Support Guide and a companion workshop. These resources highlighted strategies and templates that can be used to make virtual learning more manageable for any family. The workshop and guide covered four main areas for successful virtual learning:

- Creating a consistent schedule;
- Creating clear expectations
- Creating a learning space;
- Communicating with your school.

We also produced an additional distance learning support guide to assist small groups of families or CBOs who were interested in creating safe learning spaces for multiple children referred to as learning pods. We developed the “Podding 101: Building a Safe Learning Pod” to help families understand the value of creating a learning pods while offering strategies following CDC guidance on creating your own learning pod. This resource offers the following guidance:

- How to establish your group;
- Communicating with schools;
- Creating a schedule;
- Creating a learning space;
- Health and safety guidance;
- Available food resources.

The virtual learning and podding 101 resource guides were developed to ensure that all families are able to follow each step without additional expense or space.

REPRESENTATIVE TEACHER PATHWAYS

Many families who completed the RFA intake process noted conflicts with various school staff members based on cultural differences or language barriers. A school's ability to recruit and retain a diverse teaching staff can give families a more accurate depiction of the culture and environment within a school. In SY 2019-20, our office launched the My Teacher DC resource to provide District residents with the information they should consider regarding teachers when choosing a school for their children.

This past school year we sought to connect pathways for students into teaching. We continued our conversations with local universities about expanding their dual-enrollment programs to include teacher preparation courses. Our office remains committed to continue our work with Higher Learning Institutions, LEAs, and agencies to build stronger local teacher recruitment pathways.



EVIDENCE BASED BEST PRACTICES FOR INCREASING STUDENT AND FAMILY VOICE IN BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

DC has taken leaps to enhance school behavioral health supports by supplementing the existing Department of Behavioral Health clinicians with community-based organizations for additional support. Students and families feel disconnected from school and potential behavioral health supports, while some families are confident and comfortable seeking behavioral health supports from schools⁸.

We must improve student and family voice to maximize the return of investment being made to enhance school behavioral health supports. Research on best practices found that having parent peer specialists, youth advisory councils, family liaisons and family-driven trainings would best increase youth and family voice in behavioral health supports.

Considering the District's current state of behavioral health, as well as the best practices described in the concluding section, there are four recommendations that could be made to elevate family and youth voice in behavioral health supports. We recommend instituting parent peer specialists at schools or within community-based organizations; creating a youth advisory council and parent leadership council in collaboration with the Department of Behavioral Health; intentionally hiring school-based liaisons in high-need areas; and facilitating parent-led trainings. These recommendations will create active, dynamic, and equal partnerships with students and families as the behavioral health supports continue to be improved and refined.

1. Institute parent peer specialists at the school level or within community-based organizations already operating within schools⁹:

Having parents step into an expert role by serving as a parent peer specialist is an effective strategy for increasing parent efficacy and empowerment¹⁰. Parent peer specialists ensure that families are kept at the center of supports and benefit both the specialist and the parent-in-need. They are uniquely suited to help other parents navigate these supports as well. The community-based organizations that are already serving schools or the schools themselves are ideal places to foster this partnership, as the parents involved would already have an understanding of the community and accessing services work.

2. Create a youth advisory council in collaboration with the DC Department of Behavioral Health¹¹.

Youth advisory councils ensure student voices are elevated and offer pathways to leadership for the young individuals that participate. In addition to benefiting the youth that participate, councils serve as a way for organizations to get feedback from young people on the effectiveness of certain behavioral health policies and services. When youth advisory councils set clear and measurable goals, they are able to make real and tangible changes¹². If they are more involved in the process as a whole and are given the power to make changes to policies, young people will likely be more invested in and develop a clearer understanding of the behavioral health supports available.

3. Create a parent leadership committee in collaboration with the DC Department of Behavioral Health.

Similar to the youth advisory council, the parent leadership committee would amplify parent voices and provide leadership opportunities. Other parent leadership councils have served as a pipeline to opportunities such as serving on the school board¹³. This committee would allow parents to directly advocate for changes and policies to the DBH. The parent leadership committee could also be linked to the parent peer specialist role, as a way for parent peer specialists to further their leadership capacity.

4. Hire and place school-based liaisons in high-need areas¹⁴.

School-based liaisons can act as a bridge for parents who are still less-confident accessing behavioral health supports¹⁵. By hiring full-time school-based liaisons, specifically in wards where language is likely to be a barrier, parents will have a reliable resource to help increase access to supports. These liaisons would likely be most effective in Wards 1 and 4, which have the highest percentage of students who are English Language Learners (approximately 36% of students in both wards)¹⁶. These families could benefit from literal translation services, as well as general explaining of the behavioral health supports available.

INCREASE FAMILY AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT BY EXPANDING COMMUNITY SCHOOLS.

Our systems, structures, and governance regarding public education in the District are decided by those who hold power. They determine who has access to learning opportunities, the forms and styles of learning provided to children, and how teachers interact with

families. This process disregards the people who matter most: students, parents, families, and the community. It is even more difficult for Black and Brown families with limited access to resources and information. Parents need autonomy and voice at the decision-making table; there is a lack of safe spaces in school communities that amplifies Black and Brown parents' experiences with accessing high quality learning in DC Schools. Collecting those experiences within their appropriate context would unveil why trust continues to be an underlying root cause as to why family engagement continues to be a struggle within education.

We have embraced community school strategies founded upon the principles of John Dewey's Whole Child Approach and Jane Addams' community centered approach that levers community partnership within schools to provide services for families. How do we build out this framework in a manner that allows families especially Black and Brown to partner with schools about the efficacy of their community school strategy. Programs need to create space for regular conversations about the experiences of families, the school staff, and the service providers; then sharing that data from those conversations to all the partners. Too often, decisions made in the best interest of families are based on data that is inaccessible and are the product of analysis conducted by school leadership. Community Schools is a platform that lends itself to leveraging data in a way that centers family voice as a tool for increasing inclusive and anti-racist family engagement practices. If we began to analyze data about family engagement with those families, if we began to develop a plan of action together on how to improve family engagement practices, and if we implement a plan of action using the input of those families, then we should see improved family engagement within our schools.

IMPROVING THE SAFE PASSAGE OF STUDENTS TRAVELING TO AND FROM SCHOOL IN THE DISTRICT

The safe passage of our students traveling to and from school is paramount, but we know various instances of harassment and violence jeopardizes the mental, emotional, and physical safety of our children. The following recommendations should be considered as we address Safe Passage.

1. **Establish a Commission on Safe Passage that includes students and families to ensure that Safe Passage work is driven by their voice.**

As we build out legislation and implement new programming aimed at increasing student safety we must make sure students and families are able to lead with their lived experience and expertise.

A Commission on Safe Passage comprised of students, guardians, education leaders, public safety professionals, and transportation stakeholders should be created to advise the Mayor and Council on issues and needs related to the safe travel of students to and from school in the District and to ensure that safe passage investments are responsive to student and family needs.

2. **Re-define at the State level what safe travel to and from school is, what it looks like, and how students should experience it.**

In our report titled *Safe Passage: A Students Perspective* most students reported feeling safe traveling to and from school, but a significant portion of those same students said that they felt either uncomfortable or concerned while traveling to school. A majority of students disclosed they must always be aware of their surroundings. There needs to be an intentional standardization of what safety means at all DC public and charter schools.

- 3 **Create solutions to address street harassment in schools and our communities.**

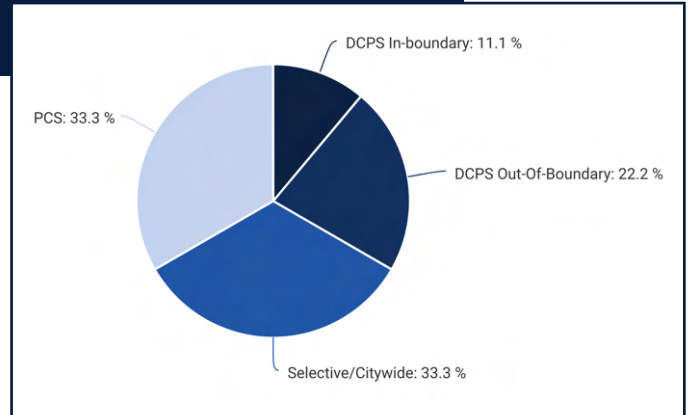
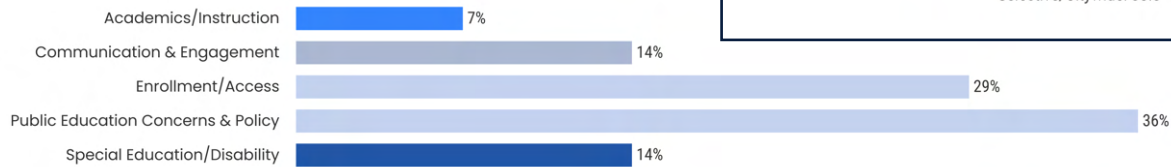
While conversations regarding safe passage revolve around acts of violence, an alarming amount of students experience traumatic instances of street harassment. From adults making inappropriate comments towards students, to instances of sexual harassment and assault, too many students worry about these interactions on a daily basis. The community centered solutions to address street harassment as laid out in the Office of Human Rights' (OHR) *State of Street Harassment in DC* should be coordinated to expand within school buildings across the District¹⁷.

4. **Make behavioral health resources more accessible for students**

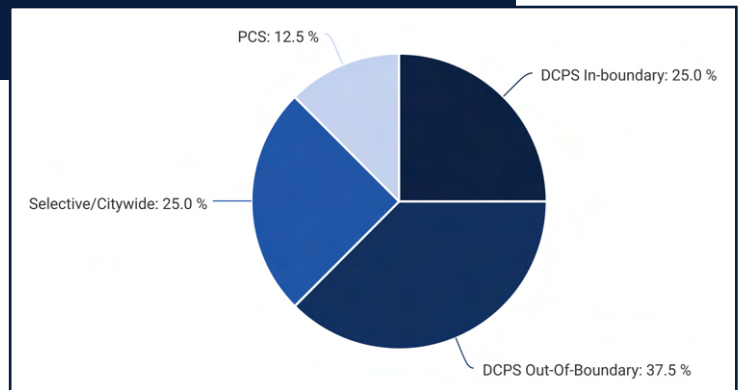
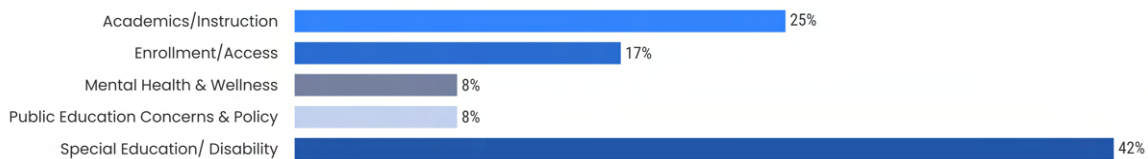
In our report on *Safe Passage: A Students Perspective*, students shared that they have significant experiences as the victim of harassment, assault, or robbery. Unless the trauma of those events are addressed by providing those students with support, they will continue to suffer harm and potentially additional loss. Students must be taught the proper coping mechanism to manage the effects of those traumatic events without causing themselves or others harm. The coordination of accessible student behavioral health supports, integrated with how the city provides student safety, is a necessity for all DC students.

WARD SPECIFIC DATA

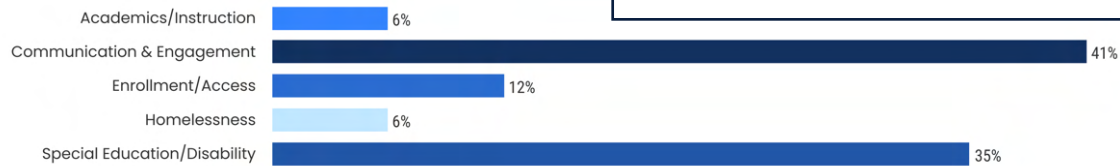
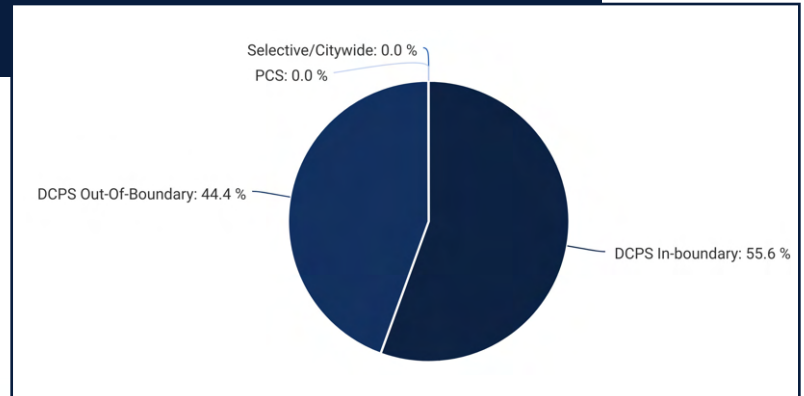
WARD 1



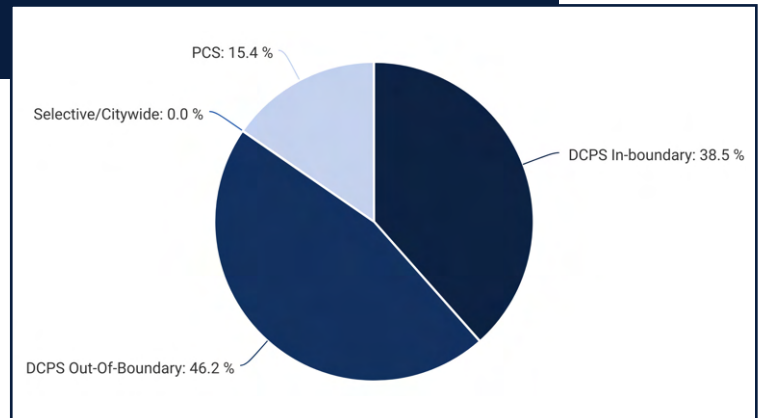
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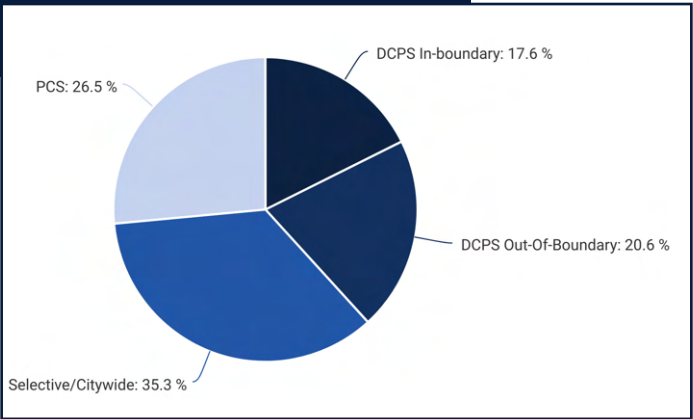
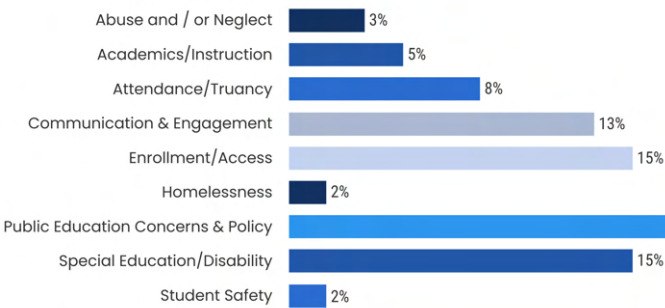
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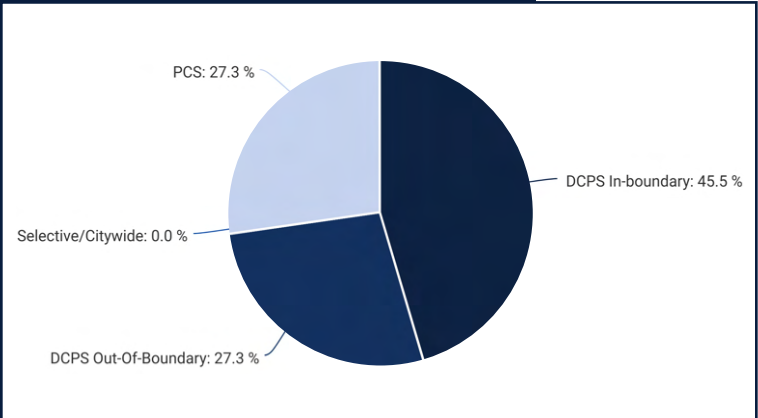
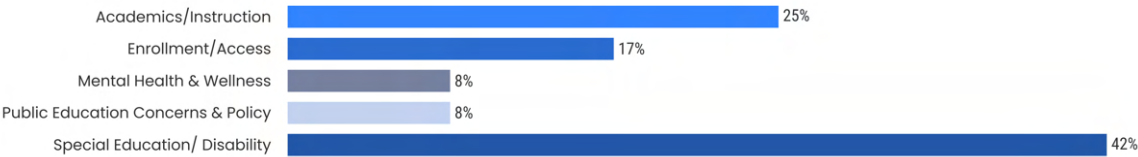
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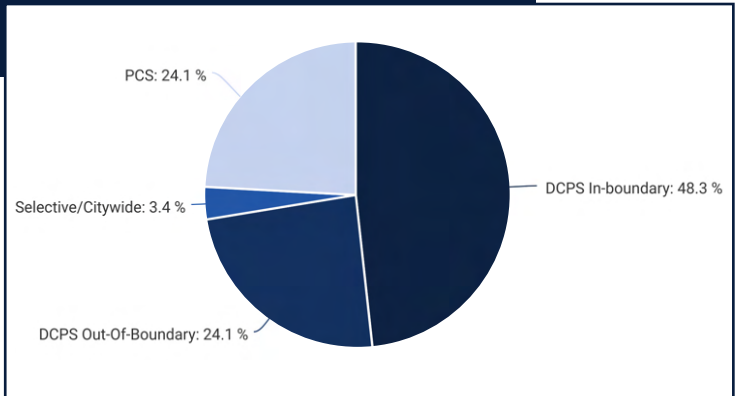
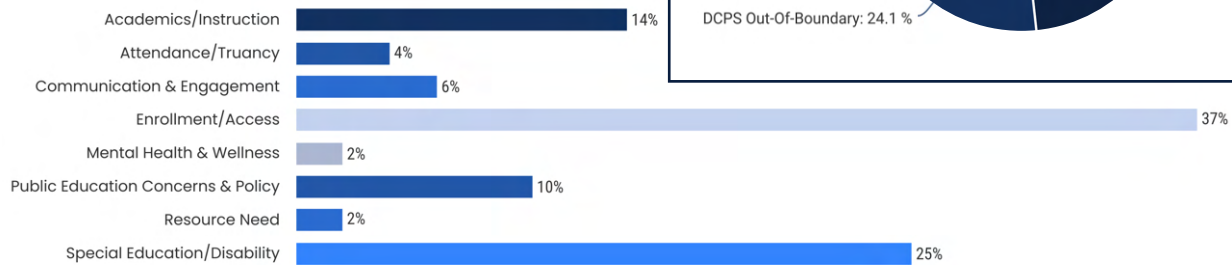
WARD 5



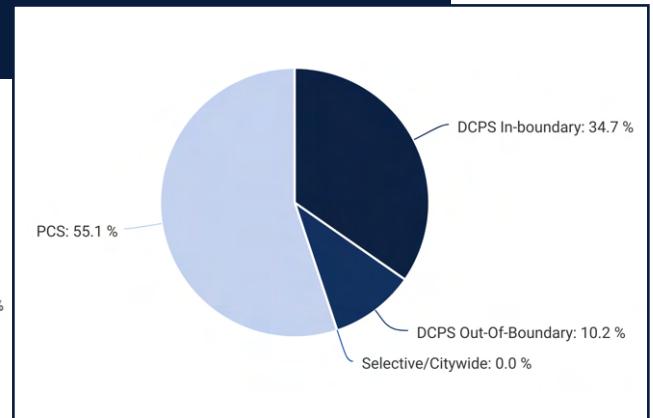
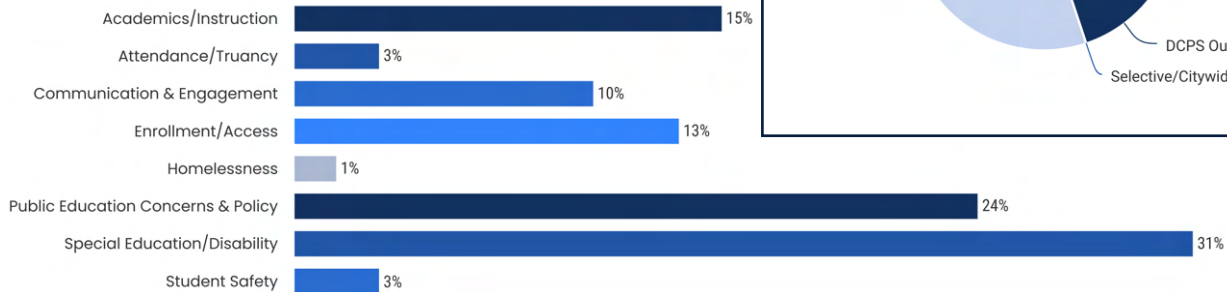
WARD 6



WARD 7



WARD 8



ONLINE RESOURCES & WORKSHOPS

A Guide for Struggling Readers & Spellers

<https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/25dfde1a-ef43-4ee5-a8f1-f8b8e8a82aae.pdf>

Digital Spotlight: Free Online Resource for Virtual Learning

<https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/Digital%20Spotlights%2047%20%28Final%29.pdf>

District of Columbia Student Discipline Guide

https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/page_content/attachments/DC%20Student%20Discipline%20Guide.pdf

Don't Mute Mental Health

<https://www.instagram.com/dc.advocate/channel/>

My Teacher DC: Representation Matters

<https://myteacher.dc.gov/>

Navigating Behavioral Health in DC Schools

<https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/2021%20Navigating%20Behavioral%20Health%20in%20DC%20Schools-%20FINAL.pdf>

Parent & Family Go-To Guide

<https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/Eng%20Parent%20Go%20To%20Guide%202019.pdf>

Podding 101: Building a Safe Learning Pod

<https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/Podding%20101.pdf>

Race, Equity, and Inclusion Toolkit

<https://reitoolkit.dc.gov/>

Safe Passage: A Student's Perspective

<https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/Safe%20Passage%20Report%20SY%202019-20%20Final.pdf>

Special Education: Know Your Rights, Distance Learning Updates

<https://sboe.dc.gov/node/1153932>

Virtual Learning Support Guide:

<https://sites.google.com/view/osavirtuallearning/home>

SECTION VII

STAKEHOLDERS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

21st Century School Fund
American University School of Education
AppleTree Public Charter School
Advocates for Justice and Education (AJE)
Anacostia Business Improvement District
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
Black Swan Academy
Boys and Girls Club FBR Branch Boys and Girls Club of Greater Washington
Center City Public Charter School
Child Family Service Administration
Children's Defense Fund
Children's National Hospital
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)
Court Social Services, DC Courts (CSS)
Cure the Streets (Alliance of Concerned Men)
DC Action for Children
DC Alliance for Youth Advocates (DCAYA)
DC Department of Behavioral Health
DC Department of Parks & Recreation
DC Fiscal Policy Institute

DC Public Charter School Board
DC Public Library
DC Public Schools
DC School Reform Now
DC State Board of Education
Decode Dyslexia DC
District of Columbia Special Education Cooperative
Douglass Knoll Community Center
East of the River Family Strengthening Collaborative
Edgewood Brookland Family Support Collaborative
Family Voices of Washington DC
Far Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative
Flamboyant Foundation
Friendship Public Charter School
Georgetown University
George Washington University Center for Health & Healthcare in Schools
Georgia Ave Family Support Collaborative
Global KIDS
Homeless Children Playtime Project
Howard Middle School Public Charter School
Howard University School of Law Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL)
KIPP DC, Public Charter School
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law
Leadership for Educational Equity
Learning with PRIDE

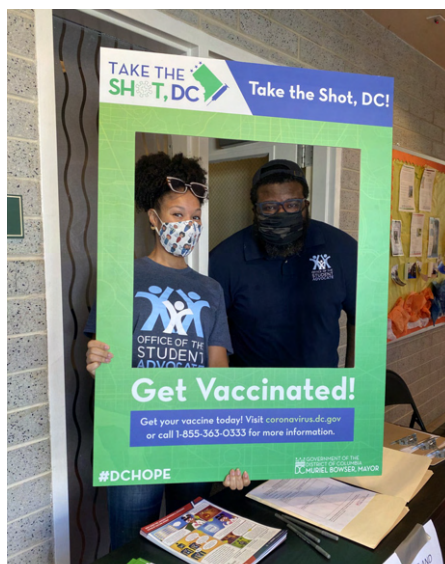
Man the Block, Richard Wright Public Charter Schools
Marion Barry Youth Leadership Institute
Mary's Center
Mayor's Office of Community Relations & Services
Mayor's Office on African Affairs
Mayor's Office on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs
Medstar Georgetown
Metropolitan Police Department (MPD)
Metro Transit Police Department
Mikva Challenge DC
My School DC
Office of Attorney General
Office of Council Chairman Phil Mendelson (At-Large)
Office of Councilmember Brianne Nadeau (Ward 1)
Office of Councilmember Charles Allen (Ward 6)
Office of Councilmember Christina Henderson
(At-Large)
Office of Councilmember Robert White (At-Large)
Office of Councilmember Trayon White (Ward 8)
Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education
Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice
Office of Human Rights
OSSE, Division of Health & Wellness
OSSE, Office of Dispute Resolution
OSSE, Re-Engagement Center

OSSE, State Advisory Panel on Special Education
Pathways 2 Power, Thurgood Marshall Academy PCS
Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE)
Rocketship Public Charter School
Sasha Bruce Youthwork
School Justice Project
Senior High Alliance of Parents Principals and Educators
(S.H.A.P.P.E.)
Teaching 4 Change
Urban Institute
Ward 1 Education Council
Ward 3 Wilson Feeder Educator Network
Ward 4 Education Alliance
Ward 5 Council on Education
Ward 5 Education Equity Committee
Ward 6 Public Schools Parent Organization
Ward 7 Education Council
Ward 8 Council on Education
Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and
Urban Affairs
Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority
(WMATA)
Young Women's Program
YOUR Community Center

SECTION VIII

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