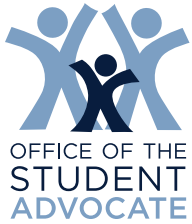




OFFICE OF THE
STUDENT
ADVOCATE

**OFFICE OF THE STUDENT ADVOCATE
2022 ANNUAL REPORT**



School Year (SY) 2021-2022

The Office of the Student Advocate leaned into our commitment to push student and family voices to the decision making table; we provided support and training to students and families so they can be their own best advocates; and we leveraged our roles as connectors to amplify their voices to school leaders and policy makers. As a result, we were able to accomplish the following tasks during SY 2021-2022.

- Received over 650 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.
- Engaged directly with over 2,000 education stakeholders through our direct outreach methods beyond our RFA line. We focused our outreach towards students, families, service providers, and government agencies. We participated in over 75 events citywide.
- Our indirect outreach methods allowed us to engage with more than 3,200 students, families, and stakeholders virtually.
- Developed social media-based resources like our interactive “Need Help” informational series and “15 with the Team” videos/Instagram reels/Tik Tok series. Both resources were dedicated to topics ranging from mental health to student safety.
- Launched the Navigating Behavioral Health in DC Schools Workshop Series with our partners from PAVE and DBH. These workshops stem from our efforts to demystify and destigmatize the process of accessing school based behavioral health supports.
- Hosted the first annual DC Youth Advocacy Summit for Student Leaders co-facilitated by DC SBOE Student Representatives. The Youth Summit created space for DC youth leaders to engage in conversations about effective leadership; equipping them with the tools needed to advance advocacy efforts.
- Facilitated empowerment workshops for families to better understand the governance of public education in DC and budget cycles of their schools. We also held workshops with various stakeholders on ways to increase parent engagement within the decision making process at their schools.
- Continued to capture the experiences of students traveling to and from school by speaking with more than 700 students and family members, . We collaborated with the Urban Institute to gain the perspectives of more than 430 students to start SY 2021-22.
- In collaboration with youth lead organizations, we closed the year by speaking directly with more than 220 additional students, family members, school climate and culture.
- Expanded the services and support for students who receive English Language services, and their families. With the guidance of CBOs and government agencies that work directly with EL students and families, our office created an EL Services Inventory to centralize information on our website that EL Families need such as school enrollment, EL programs, and resources on our website. We are grateful for the opportunity to continue serving families in the District, and we thank you for your partnership in making it all possible.

As a result, we were able to accomplish the following tasks during SY 2021-2022.

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LETTER FROM THE CHIEF STUDENT ADVOCATE

It is with joy that I present to you our Annual Report for the Office of the Student Advocate for School Year 2021-22.

This past school year most of our students and families returned to in-person learning. Some things were familiar like classrooms and playgrounds, other things were new like exposure protocols and “test to stay” policies. The District made investments this past school year to prepare schools for students who spent the past two years at home. In some areas those efforts were adequate and in other areas the needs from students and families were overwhelming. Since its launch in 2015, our office has operated as a tool for students and families who need assistance navigating the public education landscape for a solution to their students’ needs. This past year we supported more students and families than we ever had before.

Every day, we provide guidance and resource support to families to assist them in navigating public education in the District of Columbia. Our goal is to ensure that students and families are informed, connected, and equipped to be their own best advocates. In school year 2021-22, we focused some of our work on elevating the voices of students as a crucial dynamic in the efforts to obtain educational equity. This focus is evident through:

- Our increased outreach and strategic engagement efforts with students;
- The creation of more online and social media ready resource and training supports for students, families, schools, and community-based organizations and;
- Our commitment to being engaged in relevant policy discussions and processes in order to remove systemic barriers for students and families while offering recommendations to improve the quality of public education for all students in the District.

The cornerstone of any public education system is the faith that students and families’ needs/voices come first, and that power is shared with school leaders and policymakers. Our partnerships with students and families about public education cannot end at school selection; students and families must be true learning partners as the stakes are higher than ever since returning to classrooms. The new normal for public education cannot resemble the decision-making process that was in place pre-pandemic.

We will continue to bring awareness to the value of meaningful parent and student engagement and the vital role it plays in designing a system committed to the success of all students in the District. We look forward to working closely with the Board to best support students and families in the coming school year.

Dan Davis
Chief Student Advocate



OFFICE OF THE
STUDENT
ADVOCATE



LANDSCAPE AND OUR ROLE

WHAT WE DO:

The educational landscape in the District continues to grow with over 220 schools and 60 plus local education agencies serving over 90,000 students. Figuring out the correct path for families requires knowledge, access and guidance. Our office partners with families to keep them informed, connected, and supported in their pursuit of a high quality education for their students.

The Office of the Student Advocate is an independent office, housed in the District of Columbia State Board of Education (SBOE). We provide guidance and resource support 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

Student Advocate

Valeria Popolizio Torres

Program Associate

Kerrie Singleton

Fellow

Deaven Rector

Fellow

Misha Bedminster

Mikva Summer Fellow

Gavin Neubauer

Mikva Summer Fellow

Giana Estep

Mikva Summer Fellow



CORE PRINCIPLES

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

Equity can only be achieved when barriers to fair treatment, access, and opportunities are identified and removed. As a city, we have taken steps towards creating more equitable access for families to a quality public education. Despite the District's steps toward creating equitable access for families to a quality education, our city still falls short of ensuring that every student is given the necessary resources to thrive.

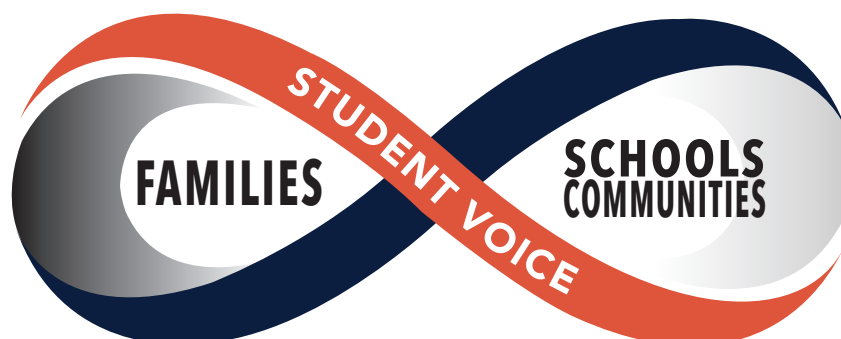
Our office works to ensure that all families receive equitable educational opportunities by committing to support meaningful student and family engagement. Our focus on family engagement is rooted in the belief that families, students, and community members are powerful. The conditions necessary for positive change, growth, and success among students increase substantially when students and families partner with teachers, school leaders, and other decision-makers.

When student voices are centered within a school's community, there is often improved student engagement¹. When student voice is centered within a school building, students reportedly feel more "respected and engaged in the classroom."² When students feel respected in school, they are more likely to participate within their classes and build more meaningful relationships with their teachers³. By creating environments that nurture and amplify student voices, teachers and students build relationships that allow them to learn from one another. When student voice transcends classroom curriculum into matters of school climate and policies, they gain critical consciousness and positive social emotional and academic outcomes⁴.

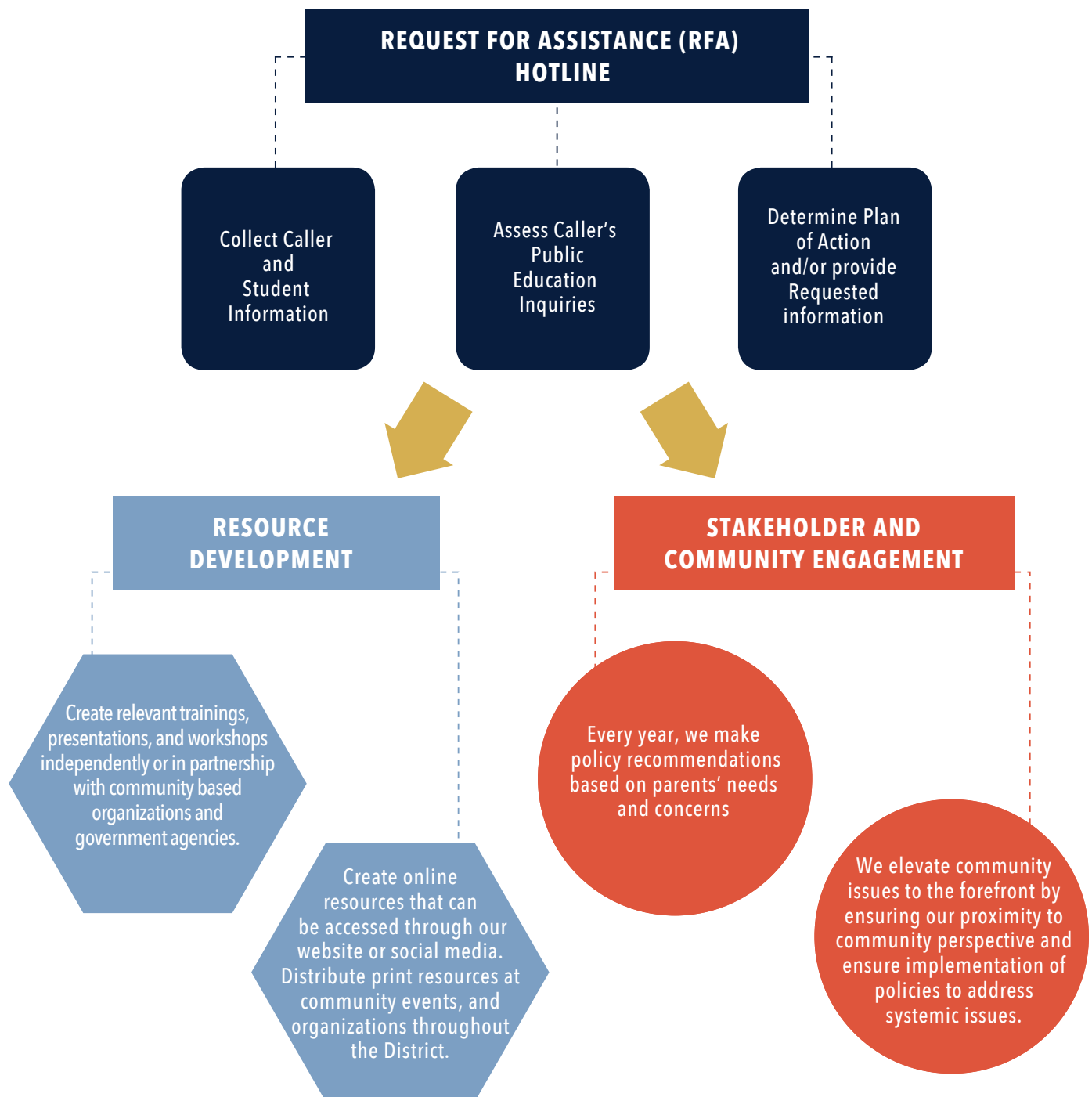
Families are more likely to engage in their school communities when their students are leading

organizations, supports, and events⁵. By increasing their own capacity, students are also increasing the capacity of adults (families, educators, administrators) to be engaged. All students and families in the District should 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.

Student voice has the power of improving school culture, family engagement, and reform efforts. In our work, we observed that when students have an authentic opportunity to participate in the policy making process, their engagement continues to increase. Mitra (2018) warns practitioners from tokenizing and co-opting student voices. We have also observed that active students become disengaged, they endured a repetitive cycle of discussions with key stakeholders with minimal outcomes⁶. We believe that the sharing of power between students, families, schools, and communities must be relational. The framework that our office embraces recognizes the importance of students and families in relation to their schools and communities. Now, more than ever, it is imperative that families and schools are able to effectively communicate and co-design educational spaces with each other to ensure equity.



HOW OUR OFFICE SERVES FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES



Providing 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.



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 & 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
- Building a Safe Learning Pod
- Bullying Resource

- Dyslexia Guidebook for Parents
- DC Public Education Governance Structure
- Effective Communication Toolkit
- Enrollment Resources
- Graduation Requirements
- Homeless Children and Youth Resources
- Parent Leadership Toolkit: Parent Organization Resources
- Right to Know Ask Sheets
- Safe Passage
- Special Education & School Supports
- Student Discipline
- Student Leadership
- Testing & Assessments
- Virtual Learning Support Guide

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:

- Behavioral Health in the DC Education System
- Student Support Mental Health Series
- Know Your Rights: Special Education Series
- Safe Passage Community Building Workshops
- No Shots, No Schools
- Parent Empowerment Workshop Series: Understanding Education Governance & School Budgets

SECTION IV

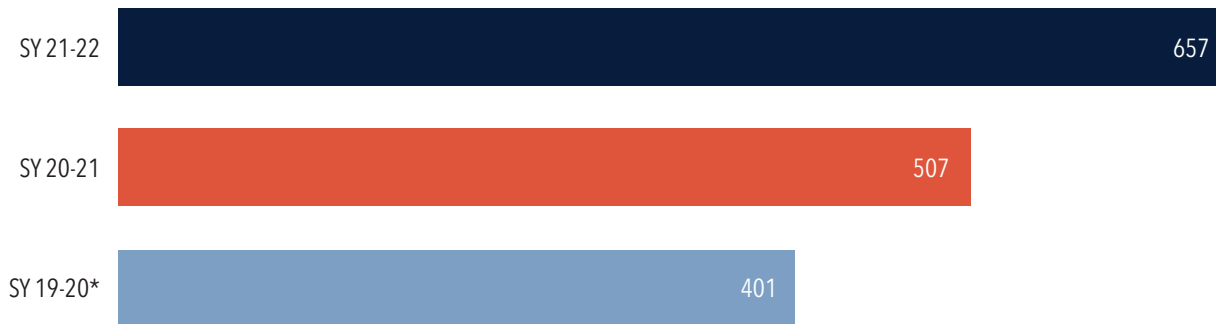
REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE

Overview:

REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE: PRE AND POST VIRTUAL INSTRUCTION

Data collection is a critical piece of our work. Our Request for Assistance (RFA) hotline is not only a resource for families, but it is also a great tool for assessing the needs of families served by traditional public and charter schools in the District. We collect and house information from the hotline across 13 broad educational (primary) topic areas and 39 specific educational concerns (secondary) subtopic areas. We can correlate this information with the demographic information provided about students and their families (e.g. race, ethnicity, grade, residency, ward and school type). This information informs the way our office pursues educational equity.

**FIGURE 1: REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE (RFA)
A THREE YEAR COMPARISON**



**SY2019-20 marked the start of the current COVID-19 pandemic, where 333 RFAs were recorded prior to in-person school closings, and only 68 RFAs flowing.*

Our RFA hotline has seen consistent growth since school closures due to the COVID-19 health crisis in SY 2019-20. Most recently, our office has seen the highest volume of requests in our seven year history. In SY 2021-22, we recorded more than 650 unduplicated requests for assistance. This growth can be attributed to the development of more pathways for families to access our support. We expanded how we promote our RFA process on social media in addition to developing a web portal for students and families to submit requests online seamlessly.

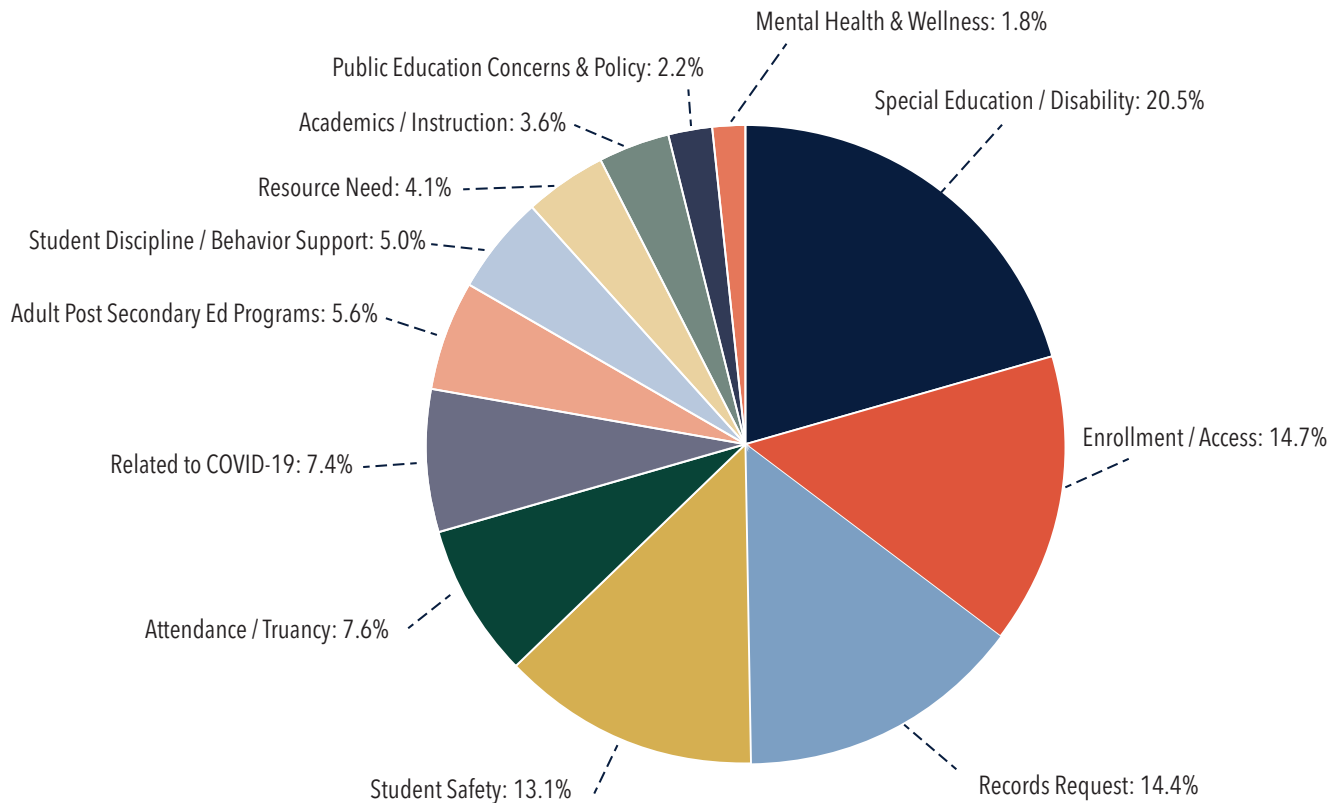
With a higher volume of calls, families sought solutions to concerns that were common before the pandemic (e.g. bullying) as well as concerns that emerged through the pandemic (e.g. behavioral health concerns).

RFA Analysis and Breakdown

SY 2021 - 22 BY RFA TOPIC

Requests for assistance related to **Special Education** and **Enrollment / Access** remained as the top two areas of concern for families in SY 2021-22. These two topic areas have consistently trended high since our office opened in 2015. Families who requested assistance related to **Special Education / Disability** were looking for special education support as it related to IEPs, 504 plans, initiating the evaluation process, and change of school placement. **Enrollment / Access** captures questions and concerns ranging from school choice, the lottery process, enrollment, withdrawals, and age limit cut offs.

FIGURE 2: PRIMARY TOPIC AREAS



Family members and former public school students continued to reach out to our office for support when making **Records Requests** from their previous schools. Many of these requests were made from former students seeking documentation to obtain vital records, provide proof of academic completion for employment, and/or seeking admissions to higher educational institutions. Often residents inquiring about assistance with getting access to their records reached our office after multiple attempts were unsuccessful. A significant portion of those calls came from former students of closed schools.

Calls related to **Student Safety** surged in SY 2021 - 22 compared to the previous school year. There has been a higher demand for safety related support since students were welcomed back physically into school buildings this past school year. Parents frequently sought assistance for solutions to incidences of bullying, harassment as well as peer/ community violence.

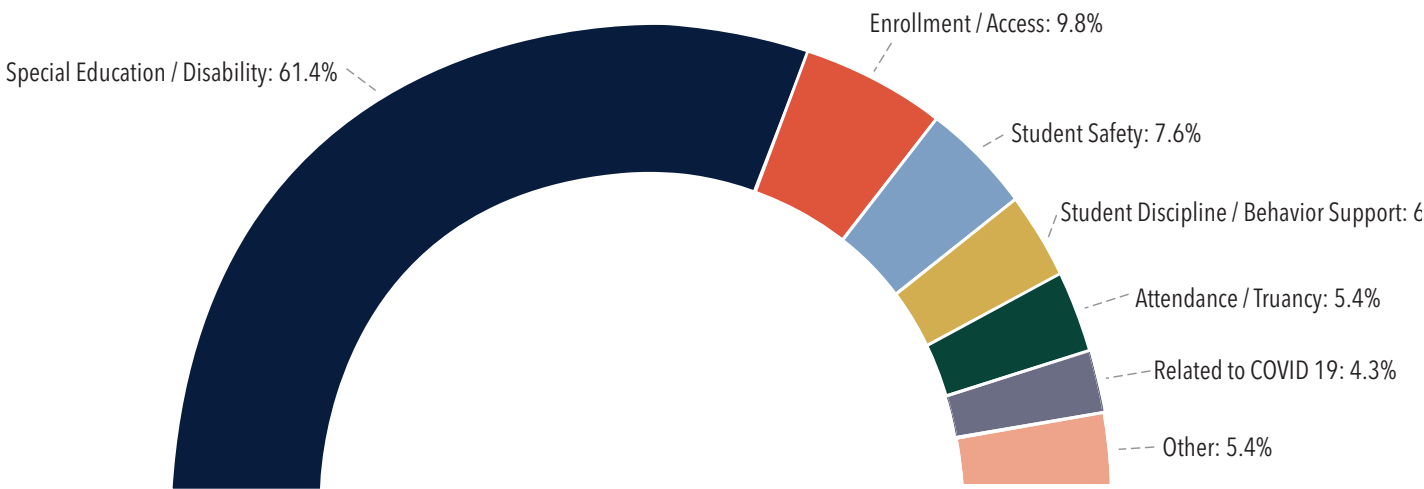
We also noticed a higher volume of calls related to **Attendance / Truancy** this school year as well. More families requested assistance related to attendance due to their hesitancy of sending their children in-person to school without obtainable virtual options. Many of the calls related to truancy notification letters to parents, over absences related to exposure protocols as well as partial day absences for students receiving an unexcused absence if they miss 20 percent of the school day.

SY 2021 - 22 DATA TRENDS

Supporting Families of Students with Disabilities

Families continue to request assistance related to Special Education at the highest rate. While 21 percent of our RFAs were related to Special Education, 28 percent of families seeking support from our office have a child with one or more disabilities. The families of 184 total students with or suspected of having a disability reached out to our office for support. Figure 3 below shows the primary topic areas these families sought assistance for:

FIGURE 3: PRIMARY TOPIC AREAS - SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES



WHAT WE HEARD

A parent called regarding a change in the location of services their child would receive. Their student was moved to their in-boundary school based on their needs. The parent was concerned that the school did not have the resources to support their child.

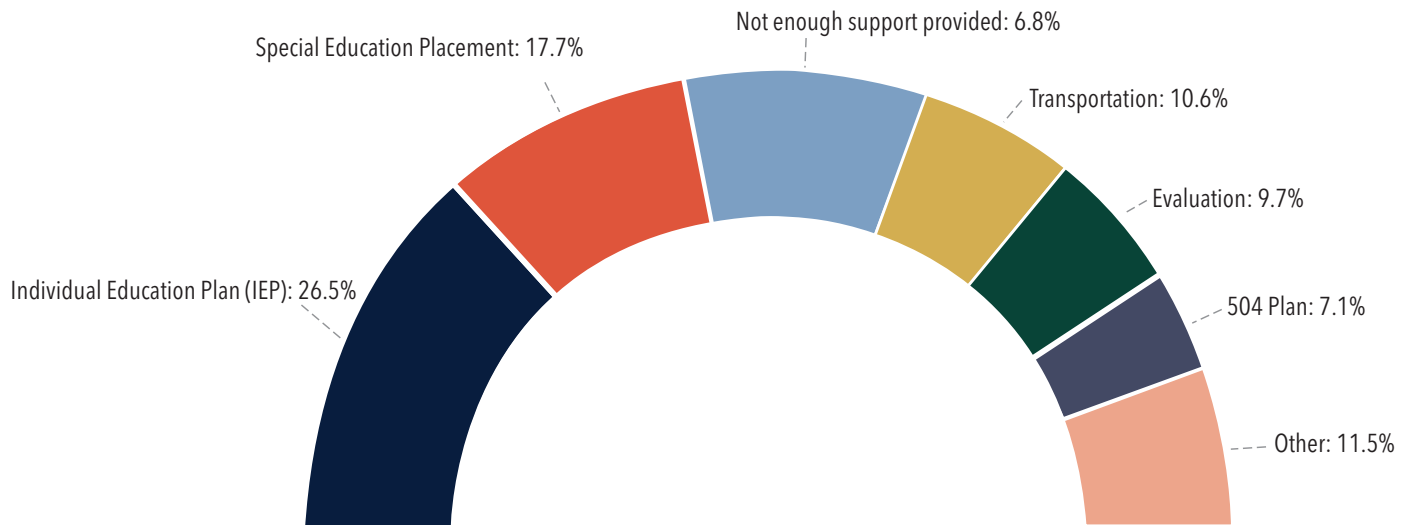
HOW WE HELPED

We explained to the family how DCPS is shifting their SPED resources back to support the in-boundary schools of students. We then worked with DCPS central office to connect this family to the special education coordinator at their newly assigned school. They felt much more comfortable after speaking with their SPED team and were offered a tour of the classroom settings.

More than 60 percent of these families called specifically for Special Education related services and support. Nearly 10 percent of them called with questions related to Enrollment / Access. About 8 percent of the families called with issues related to Student Safety.

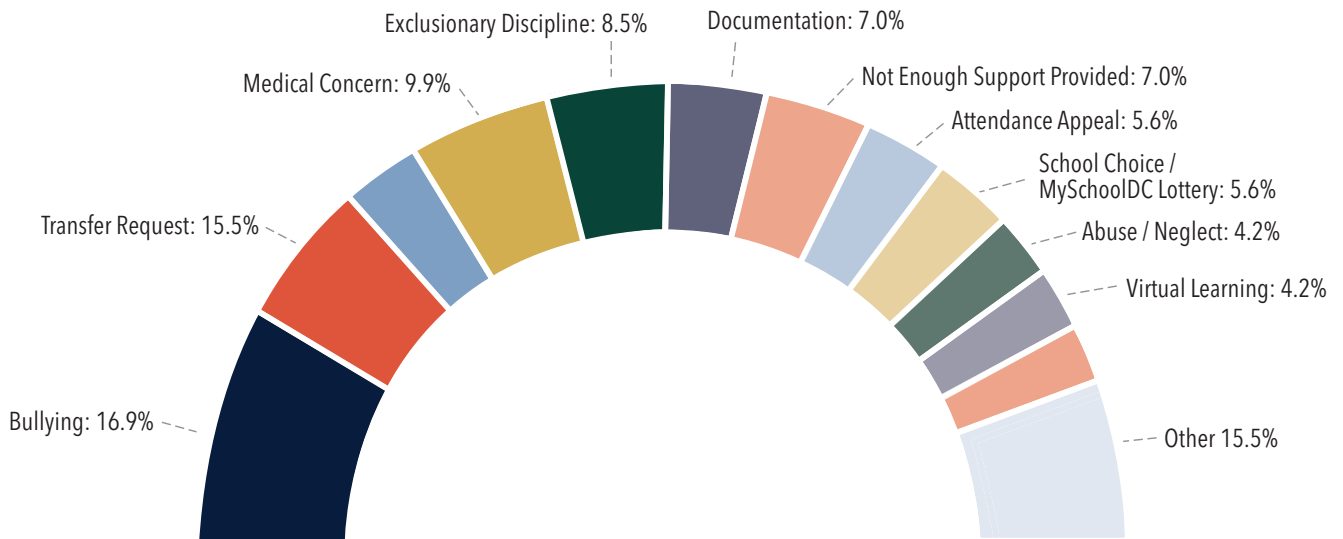
The top-5 areas of concerns for families seeking assistance for special education (SPED) related services were: IEPs / 504 Plans, the evaluation process, school placement, not receiving enough support, and transportation services (Figure 4). The top-5 areas of concern for families seeking assistance not specific to SPED services were: bullying, transfer requests, medical concerns, exclusionary discipline, and documentation (Figure 5).

FIGURE 4: SPED SPECIFIC - SECONDARY TOPIC AREAS RELATED TO SPECIAL EDUCATION
SUPPORTING FAMILIES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES



More than 30 percent of families whose child has a disability called regarding an IEP or 504 plan that is currently in place. About 18 percent had concerns related to school placement at DCPS. Almost 10 percent related to the evaluation process.

FIGURE 5: SECONDARY TOPIC AREAS NOT RELATED TO SPECIAL EDUCATION
SUPPORTING FAMILIES OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

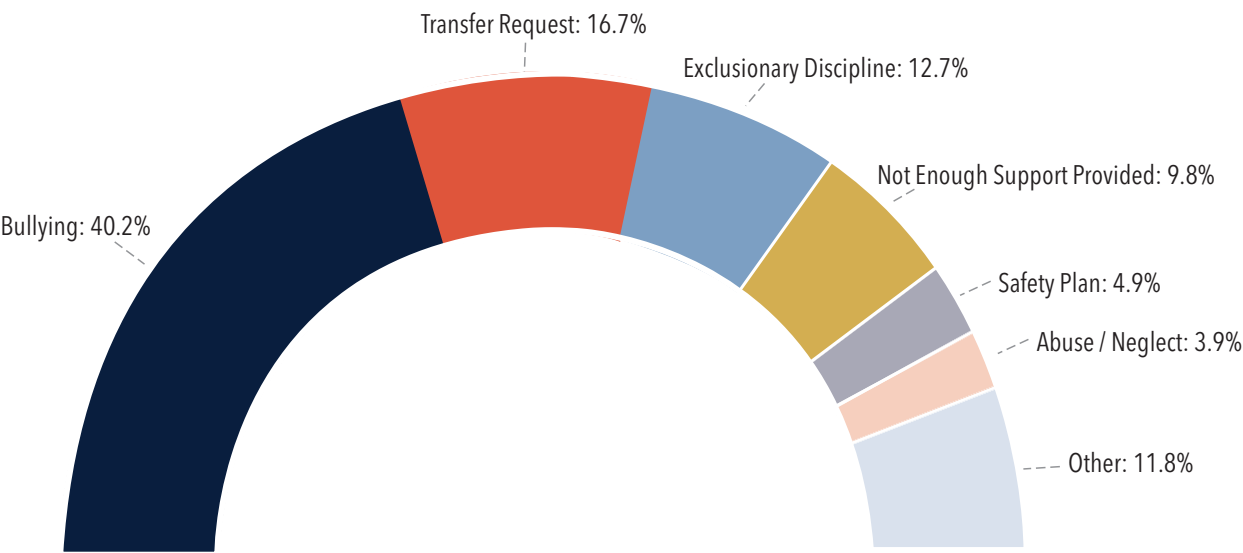


Nearly 17 percent of calls not related to SPED services related to bullying. Almost 16 percent of those calls were related to transfer requests. About 9 percent was related to exclusionary discipline, or the suspension of students with a disability.

School Climate and Culture:

The climate and culture of a school can often be reflected by issues related to safety or discipline. Therefore, we categorized the concerns of families related to **Student Safety** and **Student Discipline / Behavior Support** as “School Climate and Culture.” Figure 6 below shows the subtopic trends related to this categorization:

FIGURE 6: SUBTOPIC AREAS - SCHOOL CLIMATE & CULTURE



WHAT WE HEARD

A parent called regarding her child who was being bullied by the same student. The aggressor started verbally fighting with their child and eventually physically harmed the student. The child was emotionally affected by this.

HOW WE HELPED

We coordinated with the school’s leadership team to work with the parent about setting up a safety plan going forward.

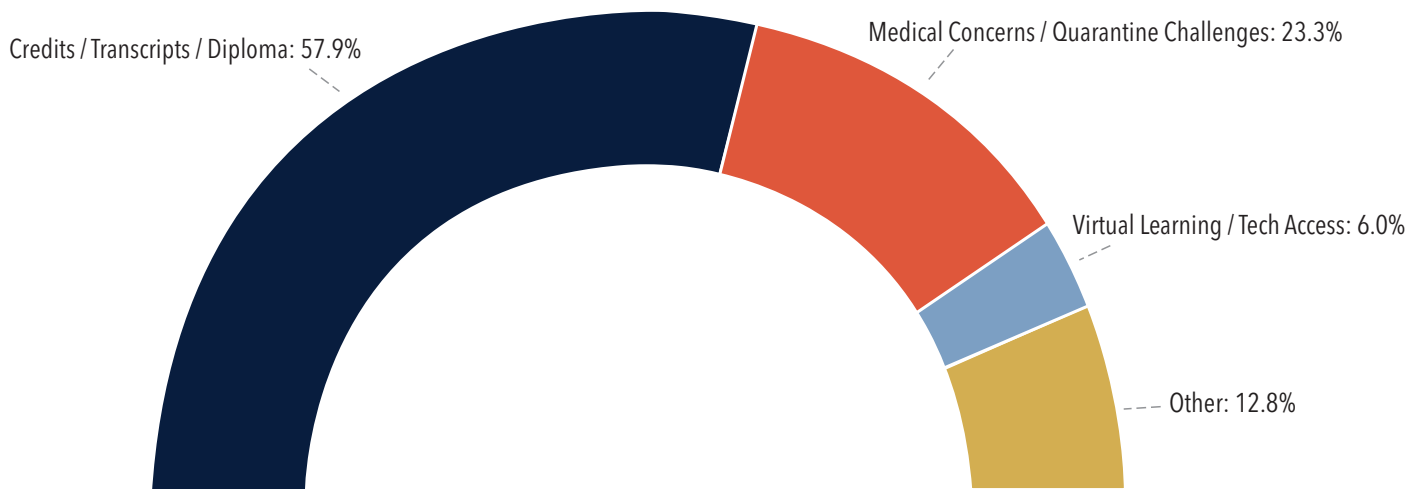
More than 60 percent of all calls related to “School Climate and Culture” involved bullying, developing a safety plan, or requesting a school transfer. A significant number of calls related to transfer requests were directly related to bullying and incidents of violence. Due to this high need of support related to bullying, our office is working to promote bullying support resources and launching a parent facing training.

About 13 percent of “School Climate and Culture” calls were related to exclusionary discipline practices including both in-school and out-of-school suspensions. Even though the Student Fair Access to School Amendment Act (SFASAA) of 2018 reformed the disciplinary practices of schools in DC, many families are unfamiliar with their children’s rights related to disciplinary practices ⁷. Too often families described school efforts that appeared to be supportive steps to manage disruptive behavior but were in effect a practice of excluding that student from the classroom/ learning environment. Our office is collaborating with the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education and the Children’s Law Center to develop more family friendly resources related to supporting students and families to avoid exclusionary discipline practices.

Public Policy & Educational Concerns:

Many areas families needed assistance fell within the scope of recent public knowledge, and where in areas we could directly support or inform them. Many families sought assistance on policy related issues that are more fixed. Typically, these topic areas do not have a solution separate from policy change. This section combines primary topics related to **COVID-19**, **Records Request**, and **Public Education Concerns & Policy**. Figure 7 shown below highlights the subtopic areas related to Public Policy & Educational Concerns:

FIGURE 7: PRIMARY TOPIC AREAS - PUBLIC POLICY & EDUCATION CONCERNS



RECORDS REQUEST

WHAT WE HEARD

A graduate called requesting their transcripts from a closed school that they needed for employment purposes. They also wanted to request a duplicate diploma because their original was destroyed.

HOW WE HELPED

We were able to determine that the closed school had a name change. We reached out to the new school and were able to get a digital copy of their transcripts. The graduate was also able to request a duplicate diploma directly with the school.

We have consistently received more calls each year related to records requests. These requests come from former DCPS and charter school students. Current practice dictates that if a student attended the school within 20 years, they can get their records within a 45 day period. Unfortunately, former students who attended the school more than 20 years ago, are met with consistent issues when requesting their records. They are more likely to experience longer wait times, or are notified that their records cannot be located. These issues are often exacerbated if the former student attended a now-closed school. These circumstances often create barriers for former students which can prevent them from obtaining a new job, updating necessary documentation, or applying for higher education programs.

RELATED TO COVID-19

WHAT WE HEARD

A teacher from a school called regarding the “collective outrage” of families with the lack of virtual options to start SY 2021 - 22. They wanted to know how to best direct families regarding these policy decisions.

HOW WE HELPED

We coordinated with the school staff to speak with a group of parents regarding the policy decisions related to virtual learning city wide. We then provided details for families to testify to the DC State Board of Education and Council regarding their concerns.

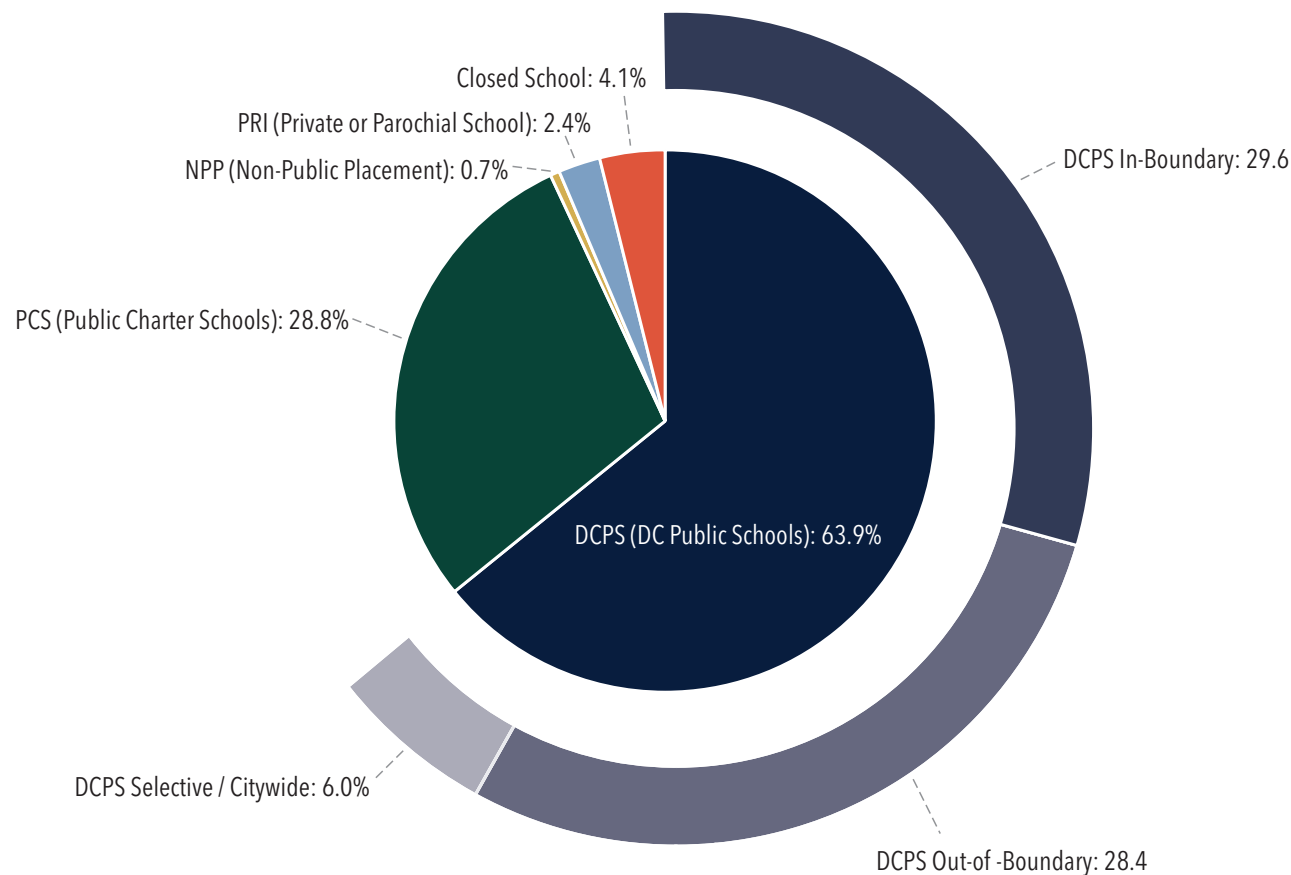
Many families were hesitant about sending their children for in-person instruction at the start of the school year. We received a significant amount of calls related to medical concerns stemming from COVID-19 and various requests for virtual options. Families sought waivers and were looking for exceptions to the eligibility standards produced by OSSE. Unfortunately, we could not provide solutions to many of those concerns because they were the direct results of policy decisions. Instead, we often had to explain the landscape behind those policy decisions and how they can best advocate for the support they were in need of. We continue to capture the perspectives of those families and deliver them to key policy stakeholders.



SY 2021 - 22 RFAs By Sector

About 64 percent of our RFAs came from students and families being served by DC Public Schools (DCPS). About 30 percent of our RFAs were from students who attend their in-boundary schools within DCPS and about 28 percent came from out-of-boundary DCPS schools. About six percent of all calls came from DCPS selective / citywide schools. Slightly under 30 percent of our RFAs came from students and families served by one of the District’s 60+ charter LEAs.

FIGURE 8: REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE - BY SCHOOL SECTOR



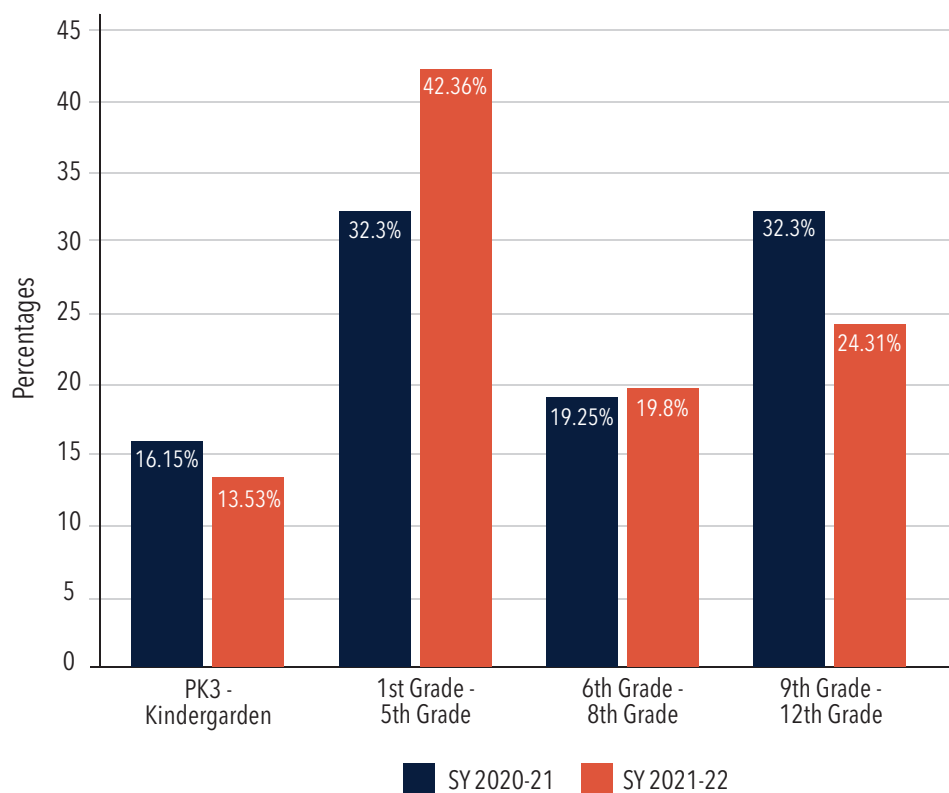
Last year, we saw a higher rate of families calling our hotline from their assigned DCPS in-boundary school. This year, we have received a more balanced number of requests from families either assigned to their in-boundary school or who exercised their school choice options. Additionally, we saw nearly a third of all calls coming from DCPS in-boundary schools, another a third coming from DCPS out-of-boundary or selective schools, and nearly a third coming from public charter schools..

Our Request for Assistance (RFA) hotline is not only a resource for families, but it is also a great tool for assessing the needs of families served by traditional public and charter schools in the District.



SY 2021 - 22 RFAs by Grade Band

FIGURE 9: RFAS BY GRADE BAND



In SY 2020 - 21, about 28 percent of calls came from the families of high school students and 28 percent came from the families of children enrolled between first through fifth grade. Since then, we have seen an increased rate of calls from families with children enrolled in first through fifth grade. In SY21-22, more than 37% of callers had children enrolled in grades first through fifth. This aligns with the proportion of first through fifth grade students enrolled in DCPS⁸ and charter schools in the district⁹.

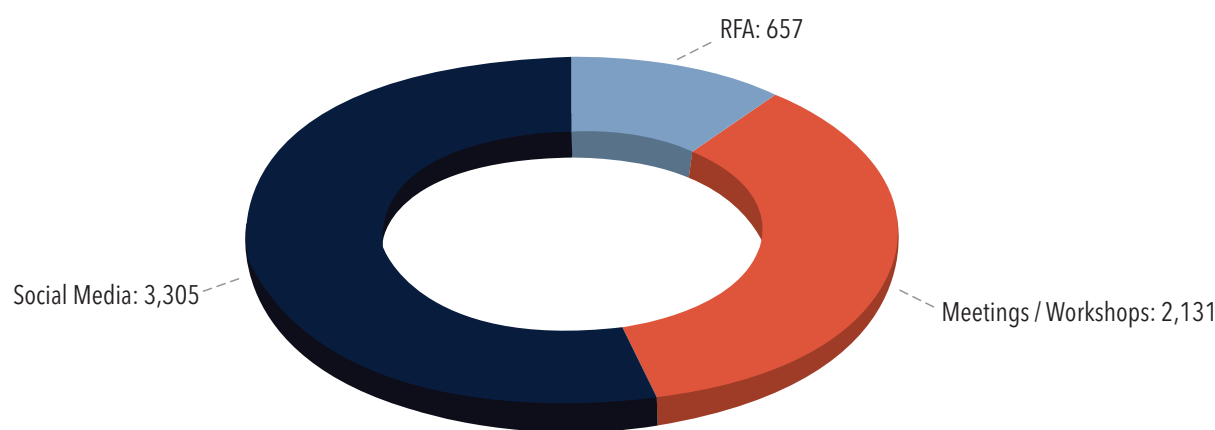
About 21 percent of callers had children enrolled in high school. The volume of calls we receive from parents of high schoolers likely stems from our outreach efforts to discuss safety and transportation concerns with their high school students over the past several years. Nearly 18 percent of calls came from middle school families. Almost 12 percent of callers had children enrolled in early childhood education.

EVIDENCE OF OUR WORK

I. Outreach and Engagement

As schools welcomed students physically back into their buildings, our office was able to restart our in-person workshops, focus groups, and meetings, restoring back to our pre-pandemic engagement. We met directly with more than 2,000 students, families, and educational stakeholders. As we continue to engage with the families of DC public and charter schools, we are intentional to provide support to historically neglected communities. By collaborating with CBOs and government agencies, we have been able to expand our outreach to families where language barriers exist or who are enduring housing insecurity.

FIGURE 10: OUTREACH & ENGAGEMENT



As we adapted to the needs within our communities, our office utilized virtual platforms to enhance our engagement strategy. We created and adapted materials across various modes of communication online to engage with students and their families. We adapted most of our physical resources to family friendly guides meant for social media distribution. We developed informational videos covering a range of educational topic areas. We created informational campaigns for families to break down complicated educational policies. As a result, we have been able to engage with more than 3,000 unique users through various social media campaigns.

II. Behavioral Health

NAVIGATING BEHAVIORAL HEALTH IN DC SCHOOLS WORKSHOP SERIES

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, oftentimes 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 not. 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. As a result, our office crafted a family facing workshop- Navigating Behavioral Health in DC Schools. Representatives from the Department of Behavioral Health assisted in facilitating topic-specific breakout rooms for participants based on level of experience with the school based behavioral health system. Participants learned about accessing the schools based behavioral health system, ways to advocate for their students, and gained resources for parents and caregivers.

COORDINATING COUNCIL ON SCHOOL BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

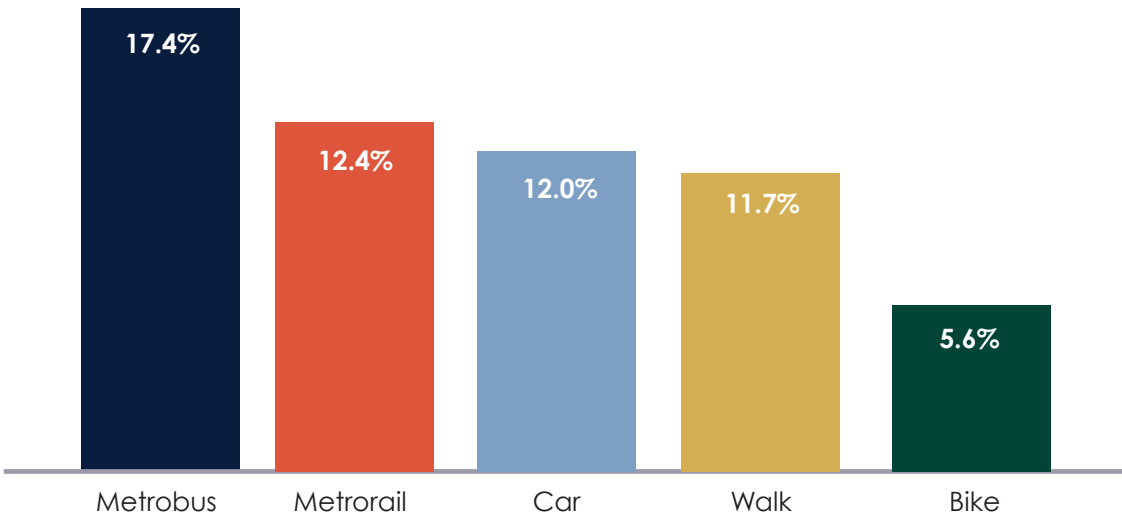
Coordinating Council on School Behavioral Health - Family and Youth Committee: Our office has continued to collaborate with the DC Department of Behavioral Health and OSSE to elevate student and family voice in the expansion process of student behavioral health services in schools. In doing this we joined 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.

III. Student Safety: Safe Passage

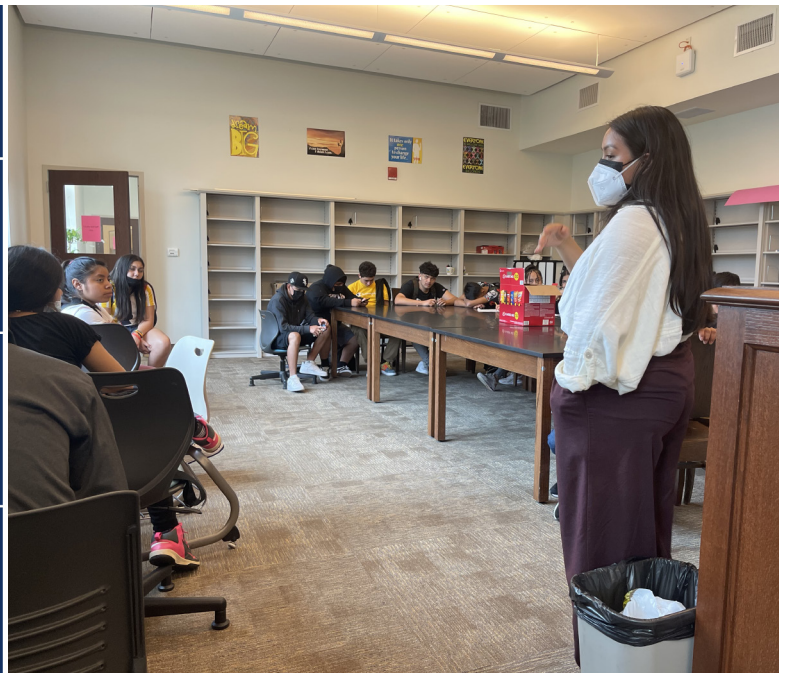
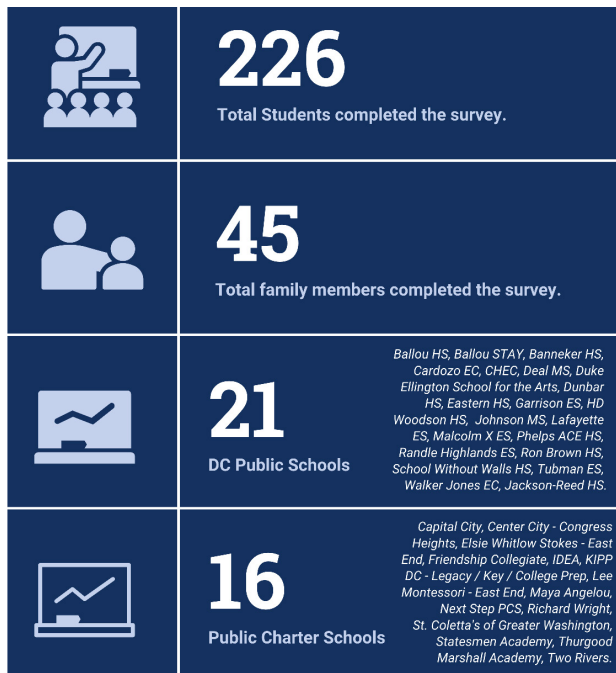
The safety of our children should always come first. Unfortunately, we know that instances of harassment and violence persist which jeopardizes the safety of our children. In response to the volume of requests for assistance related to student safety, our office has worked with numerous schools, government agencies, and community based organizations to ensure that each student and their families are safe while traveling to and from school. In 2017, we started facilitating community centered discussions addressing concerns regarding student and family safety while traveling to and from school. From those conversations came community driven approaches to protect our students and their families mirroring successful efforts from other school districts ¹⁰.

Current and future programs related to student safety while traveling to and from school are referred to as "Safe Passage." In 2019, our office collaborated with the Deputy Mayor for Education's (DME) office to recruit nearly 40 community based businesses and organizations in Wards 7 and 8 to provide safe spaces for students in need of help. Our offices are continuing to expand this program city-wide. While schools and government agencies continue to create new 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.

FIGURE 11: SHARE OF STUDENTS WHO REPORTED FEELING UNSAFE BY MODE OF TRANSPORTATION



Our office anticipated a surge in incidents related to student safety since students would be welcomed back into school buildings in more than a year. Due to this concern, we collaborated with the Urban Institute to survey more than 430 students to start the school year about their safety concerns. We were able to learn more about how students felt while traveling to and from school using various forms of transportation ¹¹. As the school year progressed, we did see a spike in concerns related to student safety emerge.

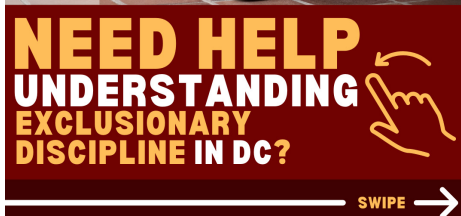
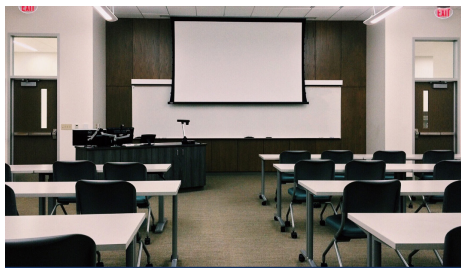


In response to these growing concerns, our office restarted our in-person focus group discussions from previous years. We expanded these discussions to include middle school students, the families of elementary aged children, and English language learning students and families. We continued to work with youth leadership organizations like Pathways 2 Power and Mikva DC, while expanding our partnerships with community based organizations like Collaborative Solutions for Communities. In addition to learning more about their experiences traveling to and from school, we used these discussions to learn how students and families feel about current Safe Passage programming. We were able to speak with an additional 226 students and 45 family members representing 21 DCPS and 16 charter school communities to close SY 2021 - 22¹². Due to public health concerns, we limited each focus group session to include less than 20 students or family members when in person. Our office has been able to provide weekly updates from these conversations to help guide Safe Passage discussions among partnering agencies and organizations. As we prepare for SY 2022 - 23, we are actively seeking opportunities to speak with students and their families related to their safety and Safe Passage.

IV. Student Voice

DC STUDENT LEADERS SUMMIT

On April 14, 2022, the Office of the Student Advocate held our first annual DC Youth Advocacy Summit ("Youth Summit"). The goal of the Youth Summit was to create a space for DC youth leaders to engage in conversations about effective leadership, and to empower DC youth leaders by giving them tools needed to enhance their advocacy efforts. Four important topics were discussed at the Youth Summit: (1) "Who Am I? Identity & Self Exploration;" (2) "Keeping the Fire: Burn Out Prevention;" (3) "Creating Change through Organizing & Advocacy;" and (4) "Confronting Conflict: De-escalation and Accountability Strategies." To help facilitate these conversations, the Office of the Student Advocate partnered with local organizations and youth representatives from the DC State Board of Education—Juliana Lopez, Nevaeh Bright, Skye-Ali Johnson, and Liv Birstad. Speakers at the Youth Summit included Deanna Pruitt (Program Director at Sasha Bruce Youthwork), Simone Sawyer (Graduate Research Assistant at George Washington Center for Health and Healthcare in Schools), Dan Davis (Chief Student Advocate at the Office of the Student Advocate), A'Kira Diggs (Student Leader at Pathways 2 Power), and Lakecia Richardson (Student Leader at Pathways 2 Power). Additionally, a panel was held at the Youth Summit: panelists included Alex O'Sullivan (former DC State Board of Education Student Representative) Jamal Holtz (51 for 51) and Ashley Kearny (teacher at Ron Brown High School). Thirty student leaders from both DCPS and PCS joined us during their spring break. These students were connected to the summit via a staff member at their school, a classmate, or became informed via Social Media



for the virtual Youth Summit. Overall, positive feedback was received from this Youth Summit. Some of the lessons learned from this Youth Summit that were cited by participants were “there are many different ways to be a changemaker,” “students’ voices are important,” and “how to recognize and manage burnout.” The Office of the Student Advocate looks forward to building upon the first summit, and having the 2023 Youth Advocacy Summit becoming more youth-led.

V. Family Supports and Resources

15 WITH THE TEAM

The needs and concerns of families drives the creation of our resources and events. Throughout our 6 years of operation, we have noticed predictable trends in information that families are seeking based on the time of year when significant school related events occur. As a result, we created an online recurring live series called “15 with the Team”. Members of our team discuss popular education topics and give answers to frequently asked questions in DC education. The goal is for parents and community members to use this information to become well informed and be the best advocates for their child and family.

NEED HELP?

As we continue to connect with families through traditional means, we continue to maximize social media as a tool to provide families with necessary information. In addition to “15 with the Team,” we created the “Need Help?” informational series on Instagram (@dc.advocate). Topic areas for “Need Help?” were chosen based on the volume of calls received from our RFA hotline. Attendance, Enrollment, and Student Safety were all among the top-5 topic areas of concern for families that reached out to our office. Based on the specific needs expressed by those families, we broke down many of the policies related to attendance, school choice, and student safety / Safe Passage.

Based on the favorable feedback of various audiences, we are working to produce similar informational guides in collaboration with partner agencies and organizations. For SY 2022-23, we are working to develop guides based on topics related to exclusionary discipline, bullying, and special education.

STUDENT & FAMILY VOICE, ACCESS, AND ADVOCACY WORKSHOPS

Families possess the ultimate source of knowledge regarding the needs of their children. This is why we work diligently to empower families to be leaders within their own school communities. Their voices should be central in the decision making process of policymakers. Our office continued to develop and facilitate workshops for families to help them advocate more effectively for their children. In SY 2021 - 22, we ran workshops to help our communities understand more about the governance of public education in DC. We ran workshops meant to help our communities understand the budget cycles of their schools. We even ran workshops with various education stakeholders on ways to increase parent engagement within the decision making process at their schools.

DYSLEXIA GUIDEBOOK

As a resource for struggling readers and spellers in DC, the Office of the Student Advocate maintains a Dyslexia Guidebook. During the summer of 2022, the Office of the Student Advocate partnered with Decoding Dyslexia to update the Dyslexia Guidebook. Prior to its update, the Dyslexia Guidebook contained the definition of dyslexia, important information about Dyslexia, myths and facts about dyslexia, signs and symptoms of dyslexia, terms to know, questions to ask about dyslexia, and dyslexia resources. As a result of conversations with Decoding Dyslexia and research, the following information was added to the Dyslexia Guidebook: timeline of implementation of the Addressing Dyslexia & Other Difficulties Amendment Act of 2020; science of reading; decoding; understanding assessments; components of effective reading instruction; and effective reading instruction resources. The Office of the Student Advocate is hopeful that the Dyslexia Guidebook will be an invaluable resource for struggling readers and spellers in DC.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND NEWCOMER STUDENTS & FAMILIES.

EL Resource Center: With the help of CBOs and LEA partners who support EL students and families, we inventoried services and resources for EL students and families across the District. In the coming school year our office will premiere a dedicated section of our website to house resources and information for EL families and students. The online center will include the following topics:

- Data on English Learners in the District
- Rights of Families
- Enrollment Process
- Assessments for EL students
- Local Resources

NATIVE AMERICAN AND INDIGENOUS HERITAGE MONTH

To recognize and celebrate Native American and Indigenous Heritage in the District we used our social media platforms to share information about the history and impact of Native American and Indigenous cultures in DC both past and present. We shared information about the ancestral land DC sits on and the native tribes of the area. In addition, we provided resources for parents and educators to educate children and students about indigenous history. This included highlighting the initiative of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, NK360° which aims to improve how indigenous perspectives and voices are taught in schools.

HISPANIC HERITAGE

Our Hispanic/Latiné community is a vibrant and growing population within the District, representing the wide diversity of families and students who attend our schools. We celebrated the history and cultures of Hispanic pioneers who have left their mark on education, the District, and beyond through a social media awareness campaign. We chronicled the history of Hispanic Heritage Month in the US, highlighted prominent Hispanic activists and changemakers in DC and beyond, and showcased historical pieces of art and murals.

UPDATED COMMUNITY RESOURCE GUIDE

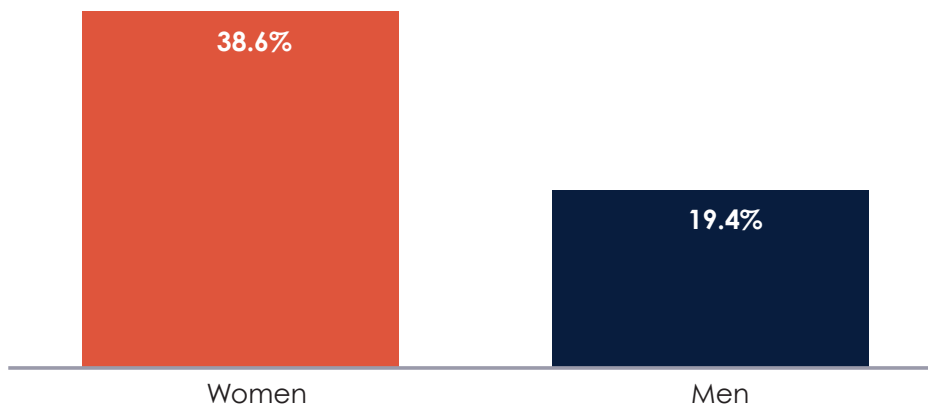
Our Education and Community Resource Guide during our inaugural school year to fill the void of centralized public education information and resources. The online Education & Community Resource Guide was the first publicly available citywide initiative of its kind and included more than 400 resource listings organized into 33 category areas. The 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. This guide was developed to highlight organizations and government agencies in the sphere of public education that provide critical services to residents across DC. We have since updated and improved the guide to include new resources and supports for families based on services currently available in our city.

OBSERVATIONS AND SCHOOL YEAR 2021-22 ANNUAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Student Safety & Safe Passage

While most students were learning virtually in SY 2020 - 21, requests related to student safety made up about one percent of all RFAs received for the year. Before the pandemic, about 13 percent of all RFAs were related to student safety SY 2019-20. As a result, we pivoted our efforts to address the most pressing needs of families due to COVID-19. We paused a significant portion of our work related to student safety and Safe Passage as a result. As students returned to school buildings last school year, we anticipated a spike in RFA related to student safety.

FIGURE 11: WOMEN ARE TWICE AS LIKELY AS MEN TO REPORT UNWANTED ATTENTION



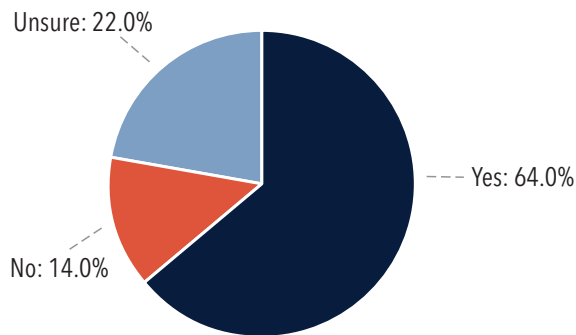
In collaboration with the Urban Institute, our office surveyed 437 high school students returning to school. From those responses, more than 40 percent of students used multiple modes of transportation when traveling to and from school, with students using the bus, being dropped off by a car, or train at the highest rates. More than 25 percent of those student respondents reported feeling unwanted attention or interactions during their commutes. Students identifying as a woman were twice as likely to have experienced unwanted attention as students identifying as men¹³. While conversations regarding student safety often revolve around acts of violence, an alarming amount of students continue to 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.

Since returning to school buildings in-person for SY 2021 - 22, the rate of RFAs related to student safety returned to pre-pandemic levels with 13 percent of RFAs being related to student safety (Figure 2, p. 11). It is worth noting that even though the rates returned to pre-pandemic levels, we have seen a much higher volume of calls this year related to student safety due to the highest amount of requests our office has ever received. Topics related to student safety involved incidents occurring inside and outside of the school buildings. In response to these growing concerns, we restarted our previous efforts collaborating with our agency and CBO partners. We continued to collaborate with the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) on Safe Passage initiatives and we continued to connect with CBO providers who work directly with students traveling to and from school.

To ensure that these programs benefited all students, we expanded our in-person focus group discussions from just high school students to include middle school students and the families of elementary aged children. We were able to speak with 226 students and 45 family members representing 21 DCPS and 16 charter school communities to close SY 2021 - 22. Due to public health concerns, we limited each focus group session to include less than 20 students or family members when in-person. We spoke with students and families in communities within the eight Safe Passage priority areas designated by the DME's office and we were intentional to speak with students and families who are not native English speakers.

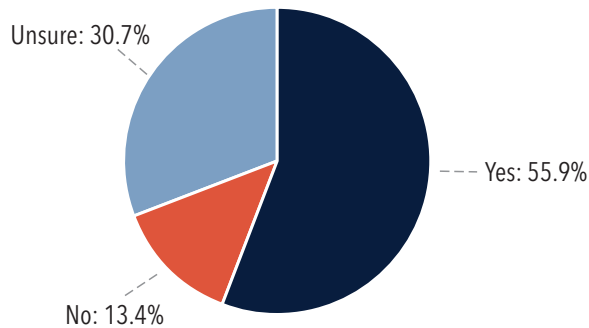
We learned through these discussions that students and families too often were not familiar with these programs. When they learned more about them, a significant number of respondents expressed that those programs would help them feel safer traveling to and from school. Our office has been able to provide weekly updates from these conversations to help guide Safe Passage discussions among partnering agencies and organizations.

FIGURE 13: WOULD / DOES THE PRESENCE OF SAFE PASSAGE WORKERS ALONG YOUR PATH TO SCHOOL MAKE YOU FEEL SAFER?



Safe Spots is an initiative where local businesses and organizations agreed to provide safe space for students whenever they feel uncomfortable or in danger traveling to and from school. Safe Spots were developed in 2019 before the pandemic, and currently are operational in wards 7 and 8. When students and families were asked about this program, more than half of all student and family respondents felt Safe Spots would make them feel safer.

FIGURE 14: WOULD / DOES THE PRESENCE OF SAFE PASSAGE WORKERS ALONG YOUR PATH TO SCHOOL MAKE YOU FEEL SAFER?



Safe Blocks is an initiative where CBOs hired more than 200 Safe Passage workers to walk with students along their paths to and from school. Safe Blocks launched in 2022 and were operated by six CBO partners. More than two-thirds of students and families expressed that Safe Passage workers would make them feel safer. Efforts to expand Safe Blocks to cover more schools are currently taking place.

As we prepare for SY 2022 - 23, we are actively seeking opportunities to speak with more students and their families related to their safety and Safe Passage. Continued efforts to expand Safe Passage programming are actively taking place. Below are recommendations that can best support existing programming and support student safety.

*... less incidents
occured in
locations where
Safe Passage
workers were
consistently
present.*



Recommendations:

INCREASED FUNDING FOR SAFE BLOCKS INITIATIVE:

It was announced in 2021 that six community based organizations would be awarded \$4.3 million from the Office of Out of School Time Grants and Youth Outcomes for Fiscal Year 2022 as a part of the Safe Blocks Initiative. As a result, 215 Safe Passage workers were strategically placed at schools across seven priority areas ¹⁴. In addition to the majority of students and families who supported Safe Blocks that we spoke with, many representatives from multiple schools mentioned in Safe Passage meetings that less incidents occurred in locations where Safe Passage workers were consistently present.

In a climate where communities express a higher need for community based solutions to ensure the safety of our children, it is important that we continue to strengthen programming that is centered around the input from those communities. D.C. Council voted earlier this year to reduce the number of school resource officers (SRO) in public and charter schools. The number of available SROs in the District has been reduced to 60 personnel in 2022. That number will decrease to 40 personnel in 2023, then to 20 personnel in 2024, and will fully dissolve by 2025 ¹⁵. Though Safe Passage workers should not be expected to serve as a replacement for SROs, more Safe Passage workers should be available to serve our students.

As our students continue to endure instances of violence and harassment, funding for the Safe Passage Safe Blocks initiative should be increased to ensure the following:

- Increase the number of personnel available for every school that requests for Safe Passage support;
- Increase the pay of Safe Passage workers to ensure the most qualified applicants are being selected;
- Develop and facilitate professional development opportunities for Safe Passage workers.

TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS (SRO) TO SAFETY ADVOCATES:

Many students, families, and education stakeholders have expressed that the current system is not working to ensure the safety of our students. The DC Police Reform Commission was established by the DC Council in 2021 and highlighted that “Racial disparities in school-based policing are pervasive and the harmful effects of police contact for school-age children are significant” ¹⁶. Advocates, since then, have worked to limit the number of police within school buildings. As a result, the availability of SROs will continue to decrease until it is fully dissolved in 2025. Many students, families, and education stakeholders have also expressed concern around what resources are available to fill the potential gaps in coverage that this reduction may cause. Many members of school leadership expressed to our office that coordinating with SROs have been very important when assessing threats to student safety either within or around a school building.

To satisfy the concerns expressed by various stakeholders, we recommend transitioning SROs to mirror the “Safety Advocate” program adopted by the Boulder Police Department (BPD) in Colorado. The school board in Boulder Valley, Colorado voted to end its SRO program similarly to DC ¹⁷. They then consulted with eight stakeholder groups to ultimately adopt the “Safety Advocate” model. Safety Advocates were still a part of the BPD, but their specific purpose would be to partner with school counselors and other mental health professionals, and CBOs to connect students with the support structures that they needed. Safety Advocates are non-uniformed officers who do not carry guns. They have also been expected to “assist in conducting investigations, including threat assessments, and serve as a liaison with police during emergencies and other events” ¹⁸. Safety Advocates all receive anti-bias training and work through an equity lens to support restorative justice practices within school buildings.

By adopting Safety Advocates, MPD would still be able to assist school leadership when assessing threats to student safety, while also being able to support restorative practices within school to reduce exclusionary disciplinary practices. Not being in a traditional uniform and not carrying a gun can help repair trust, which could also reduce the number of youth introduced to the criminal justice system, while allowing MPD to provide additional support for school staff. These Safety Advocates would also be expected to coordinate with MPD, MTPD, and Safe Blocks CBO providers. This coordination can reduce the number of incidents that started in the school building from spilling into the community and incidents from the community from spilling into the school building.

Benefits of Safety Advocates:

- Remains an MPD funded program;
- Removes arresting / ticketing powers from Safety Advocates;
- Removes Guns from Safety Advocates (MPD Personnel);
- Supports restorative justice practices;
- Provides professional development opportunities for school staff;
- Builds trust between students, police, and schools;
- Increases coordination between schools, MPD, MTPD, and CBOs.

Bullying & In School Harassment

Discussions around student safety often revolve around community instances of violence or traffic safety, but not as much focus has been given to bullying that exists within our school buildings. Bullying is defined as “severe, pervasive, or persistent act or conduct, whether physical, electronic, or verbal”¹⁹. It can cause harm to the extent where a child cannot “participate or get the benefits of a program they’re enrolled in” (reference). Bullying is an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) that can have negative and long lasting effects on an individual or group of people²⁰.

In SY2020 - 21, requests for assistance (RFA) related to bullying, safety transfers, and developing safety plans made up less than one percent of all requests received. While most students participated in virtual learning, bullying was not as prevalent within schools. Since students returned back to in-person learning, issues related to bullying and harassment have increased significantly. In SY 2021 - 22, Nearly 10 percent of all RFAs received this school year were related to bullying, safety transfers, or safety plans (Figure 6).

Restorative Justice is a term often referred to in schools as a common response to instances of bullying. Restorative practice is a framework designed to bring all stakeholders (teachers, students, parents, etc.) together, and to create a space for stakeholders to listen to each other²¹. It removes hierarchical power dynamics and embraces collaboration amongst all stakeholders. Restorative practices “involve changing relationships by engaging people: doing things WITH them, rather than TO them or FOR them, providing both high control and high support at the same time”²². It uses the psychology of affect theory by maximizing positive affect, minimizing negative affect, and encouraging free expression of emotion²³. Similar to the benefits of amplifying authentic student voice, researchers have found that restorative practices may improve overall school climate, increase self-esteem and feelings of school connectedness among students, increase parent and community involvement, and improve problem-solving skills in students²⁴.

Restorative practice is most effective when done in spaces with flat power dynamics that center authentic student voice and family engagement. The framework we embrace recognizes the roles of students, families, schools, communities, and other stakeholders. We believe that the sharing of power between students, families, schools,

*Disrespectful,
offensive, or
threatening
statements, gestures,
or other conduct
directed at an
individual in a
high-risk area
without the
individual's
consent.*



and communities must be relational. Now, more than ever, it is imperative that families and schools are able to effectively communicate and co-design educational spaces with each other to ensure equity.

Even though local and federal legislation has been put in place to stop bullying, it still persists. Below are recommendations that should be adopted to increase the resources available for schools to prevent bullying and for students to help resolve issues caused by previous incidents.

Recommendations:

PROVIDE FUNDING FOR A RESTORATIVE JUSTICE COORDINATOR IN EVERY DCPS AND CHARTER SCHOOL:

Restorative Justice Coordinators in DC are responsible for “developing and implementing proactive and responsive restorative practices in order to foster a safe, supportive, and positive school culture”²⁵. Even though the city has taken meaningful steps towards hiring more behavioral health clinicians in DCPS and charter schools, more Restorative Justice Coordinators must be hired to balance the needs of 240+ schools in the District. According to DCPS’ submitted budgets for FY 2023, only 23 Restorative Justice Coordinators have been budgeted out of 118 total schools²⁶. It is unrealistic to expect 23 staffed positions to meet the needs of more than 49,000 students within DCPS²⁷. Information regarding restorative justice personnel at DC public charter schools collectively are not available.

If we are serious about reducing the rates of exclusionary discipline in DC schools, we must ensure that every school has a restorative justice specialist in addition to existing counselors, social workers, or school psychologists. Not only would opening more positions help with the social emotional development of students by resolving conflicts authentically within school buildings, it could also build stronger relationships between students, teachers, and staff within school buildings. Inconsistencies with the implementation of restorative practices have been reported by students. To ensure all students receive the same level of care, LEAs should also work together to coordinate Restorative Justice best practices.

Students consistently express concern related to the inconsistency of Restorative approaches, particularly forcing victims to participate in non-productive discussions with the perpetrators of bullying or harassment. Therefore, more resources should be put into place to address those situations when Restorative practices can be harmful to those who have been wronged.

ADAPT EXISTING STREET HARASSMENT TRAININGS FOR DC STUDENTS BETWEEN GRADES 6 - 12:

Based on our student safety based focus group discussions in the spring of 2022, nearly 40 percent of respondents reported some form of harassment as a condition that makes them feel unsafe. About 27 percent reported community based harassment as a concern, and an additional 12 percent of respondents reported school based harassment as an area of concern (Reference OSA Student Safety Survey Results). The Street Harassment Prevention Act (SHPA) of 2018 defined “Street Harassment” as²⁸:

“Disrespectful, offensive, or threatening statements, gestures, or other conduct directed at an individual in a high-risk area without the individual’s consent and based on the individual’s actual or perceived ethnicity or housing status, or a protected trait identified in the Human Rights Act of 1977.”

A “high-risk area” includes all public spaces and entities outside of a private residence, including schools, libraries, or other buildings primarily used for the instruction of students²⁹. The DC Office of Human Rights (OHR) surveyed more than 1,621 District residents in 2019 and released their findings in the “The State of Street Harassment in DC” report³⁰. About 69 percent of those individuals surveyed experienced verbal street harassment in DC within the last six months, and about 40 percent experienced physical street harassment³¹. Approximately 12 percent of respondents reported dealing with daily verbal street harassment daily within school buildings, with 16 percent of respondents reporting daily physical street harassment within schools or libraries³². About 13 percent of respondents reported that they changed schools or dropped a course, or dropped out of school altogether due to the harassment³³.

Even though DC has taken historic steps in passing legislation addressing both bullying³⁴, street harassment³⁵, and sexual assault within school buildings³⁶, many of the solutions proposed are reactive. We must continue to build more preventative measures to reduce the rates of harassment and bullying our children are enduring. Trainings related to street harassment are readily available for trusted adults in public facing roles, but less opportunities exist

for our youth. Students across every school that we have spoken with have expressed a strong desire to be a part of creating meaningful solutions, so we must consider more ways to empower them to be a part of the process.

To help give our students the tools to address street harassment directly or indirectly, current street harassment training should be adapted for 6 - 8 and 9 - 12 grade bands. Introducing these skills early can help change mindset and culture that perpetuates harassment in any form. We recommend working with OHR and their current street harassment training service providers to adapt training and school curriculums to empower youth within their school buildings.

English Language/Multilingual Learners in DC

Students between the ages of 3-21 who were not born in the U.S., whose first language was not English, and/or whose English proficiency challenges their ability to meet state academic standards and ability to participate in both the classroom and society are considered English Learners ³⁷.

In 2020, there were an estimated 4.9 million children enrolled in K-12 EL programs across public schools in the United States ³⁸. The population of ELs throughout the U.S. has steadily grown in the past few decades ³⁹. The majority of EL students in DC enter the school system either in the early grades or as newcomers in the eighth and ninth grades ⁴⁰. During the 2020-21 school year, EL students made up about 12 percent of all DC students, with the highest concentration of students living and attending schools in wards 1 and 4 ⁴¹. Approximately 70 percent of EL students attend a DCPS school, while 30 percent attend a charter school ⁴².

There are 117 languages spoken by students in the District ⁴⁴. Besides English, the top five most spoken languages in DC are Spanish, Amharic, French, Chinese, and Russian ⁴⁵.

OSSE SY 2018-19 data illustrates a correlation between a student's academic performance, the duration of English learner services, and whether or not they have exited by the five year benchmark. Students who exit out of English Learner services are likely to succeed on ACCESS & PARCC math and ELA tests ⁴⁶. Despite improvements since SY 2016-17, there is still a gap in EL student PARCC ELA and Math scores when compared to all students (specifically seen in middle and high school grades). High school EL students also tend to have lower SAT scores and college enrollment rates compared to their non-EL counterparts. These trends should serve as indicators to the District that systemic barriers must be addressed and additional support is needed for EL students to be successful in the classroom.

We must be cognizant of how COVID-19 has exacerbated the challenges that many EL students and families face in accessing quality education. During remote learning, many students did not have reliable internet access, difficulty with accessing remote learning for numerous reasons, and were met with teachers who lacked training to support EL students, among other social and emotional challenges ⁴⁷.

*Schools must
promote a
welcoming
and inclusive
environment to
encourage
authentic parent
engagement*



Our office continues to partner with community organizations, agencies, and school administrators to better understand how our office and city-wide stakeholders can improve access to information and resources for EL students and families. This work is ongoing; we hope to continue to learn from EL students and families about their experiences and the ways in which we can create an equitable education system.

Recommendations:

INCREASING AVENUES FOR FAMILY VOICE

In order to ensure we are hearing from multiple voices, schools and LEAs must consider the current barriers that families of EL students may be facing. Barriers include: unfamiliarity with the DC school system, intimidation, and previous negative experiences in school ⁴⁸.

There is no one-size fits all approach to providing opportunities for EL family engagement. Creating avenues for family voice requires a multifaceted approach. Schools and LEAs must identify the assets and resources that EL families already have by tapping into their “funds of knowledge... [and] finding what they can contribute culturally to the classroom” ⁴⁹. This may look different from school to school. However, it is critical that at the core, family engagement considers the ways in which EL families can authentically participate in their student’s school community.

The District must build on the work that is already being done by community organizations and school support teams; such as that by Mary’s Center and LAYC Career Academy. Mary’s Center school based staff at Columbia Heights Education Campus hosts weekly bilingual parent groups to build community and provide necessary information and resources; thus, supporting families on a social and emotional level. LAYC Career Academy addresses their EL family and students’ needs through the creation of a food/hygiene pantry, and winter clothing closet. When we use a holistic approach to meet families’ basic needs, we are breaking down barriers to engage with schools and creating avenues to build relational trust with school and District leaders.

As we expand supports for EL and newcomer families, we must look to the existing work that is being done by schools and CBOs as a foundational model for creating District-wide systems that increase family capacity for school engagement.

Schools must promote a welcoming and inclusive environment to encourage authentic parent engagement. This can be cultivated not only through intentional event planning, but also through offering resources that make information accessible for all parents. Currently, most schools in the District distribute report cards in English only. Based on schools’ current capacity, it is typically left to English Language teachers or multilingual teachers to translate the materials. Washington Yu Ying Public Charter School addresses this barrier by providing parents with a third-party platform to automatically translate report cards to their desired language.

In order to increase capacity and accessibility, LEAs must invest in creating portals for report cards, progress reports, and family facing materials to be translated in multiple languages. Additionally, schools can offer informational sessions to walk through the report cards/progress reports with families who are familiarizing themselves with the US education system.

Schools/LEAs must also provide different platforms for families to have the opportunity to share their experiences and be a part of decision making processes. Opportunities can range from direct conversations between educators and families, creating paper/online surveys, to organizing advisory committees for EL families. For example, DCPS established the El Comité de Familias Latinas/Latino Families Committee, in order to “elevate the voices and perspectives of Latino families, give families the opportunity to meet and develop relationships with other parents as well as build stronger relationships with DCPS staff” ⁵⁰. School leaders should consider partnering with already existing organizations, agencies, and committees, such as El Comité, that have created empowering spaces for family voice. These partnerships can help not only grow existing spaces, but also build the foundation for additional avenues for family voice.

Ultimately, in order to increase avenues for family voice, schools and communities must address the existing barriers that EL families face in regards to school engagement and create ongoing feedback loops between themselves and families. We must move past “inauthentic opportunities for participation” ⁵¹ and tap into the EL family wealth of knowledge to shape the decision making process. Family engagement should be viewed in a broader sense, past the school level, and embraced as a larger community effort ⁵².

STAKEHOLDERS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Advocates for Justice and Education (AJE)	El Comite De Familias Latinas de DCPS
Black Swan Academy	Family Voices of Washington DC
Boys and Girls Club of Greater Washington	Fairfax County Government
Center City Public Charter School	Far Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative
Child Family Service Administration	Flamboyant Foundation
Children's National Hospital	Friendship Public Charter School
Children's Law Center	Georgetown University
Collaborative Solutions for Communities	George Washington University Center for Health & Healthcare in Schools
Community Enrichment Project	Georgia Ave Family Support Collaborative
Community of Hope	Howard University School of Education (SOE)
Council for Court Excellence (CCE)	Howard University School of Law Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL)
Council of the District of Columbia	KIPP DC, Public Charter School
Cure the Streets (Alliance of Concerned Men)	Leadership for Educational Equity
DC Action for Children	Marion Barry Youth Leadership Institute
DC Alliance for Youth Advocates (DCAYA)	Mary's Center
DC Department of Behavioral Health	Mayor's Office of Community Relations & Services
DC Department of Parks & Recreation	Mayor's Office on African Affairs
DC Fiscal Policy Institute	Mayor's Office on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs
DC Public Charter School Board	Medstar Georgetown
DC Public Library	Metropolitan Police Department (MPD)
DC Public Schools	Metro Transit Police Department
DCPS Language Acquisition Division	Mikva Challenge DC
DCPS Welcome Center	Momma's Safe Haven
DCPS Communications and Engagement Office	My School DC
DC State Board of Education	Office of Attorney General
Decode Dyslexia DC	Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education
District of Columbia Special Education Cooperative	Office of the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice
East of the River Family Strengthening Collaborative	Office of Human Rights
Edgewood Brookland Family Support Collaborative	

*Thank you
for all that
you do every
day in
contributing
positively
to the children
of children in
this community!*

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
Teaching 4 Change
Urban Institute
Ward 1 Education Council
Ward 2 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 Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA)
Young Women's Project
YOUR Community Center



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