



OFFICE OF THE
STUDENT
ADVOCATE

ANNUAL REPORT 2024

The Office of the Student Advocate continued our efforts to bring student and family voices to the forefront as drivers of their education through trainings and workshops. We strengthened our outreach with external partners from government agencies, community-based organizations, and school leaders to ensure families are connected to the resources they need. As a result, we were able to accomplish the following during School Year 2023-24:

- ▶ Received over 740 unduplicated requests for assistance (RFA), 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 4,600 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 120 events citywide.
- ▶ Our indirect outreach methods allowed us to engage with more than 10,000 students, families, and stakeholders virtually via social media or our webpage or through our print resources.
- ▶ Hosted the third annual student leadership summit, Voice to Power: Paving Paths for Community Wellbeing, in partnership with the DC Department of Human Services. This was the first year the summit was held in person. We were able to engage with 120 youth leaders and stakeholders from across the city concerning advocacy and student safety.
- ▶ We continued empowerment workshops for parents and students to better understand the governance of public education in DC and budget cycles of their schools. Additionally, we hosted workshops in partnership with various education stakeholders on increasing parent engagement within the decision making process at their schools.
- ▶ Continued to capture the experiences and perceptions of safety of students traveling to and from school by speaking with more than 900 students, family members, school leaders, and community stakeholders at over 30 events.
- ▶ Updated our Dyslexia Guide in partnership with Decoding Dyslexia, OSSE, and the DC Reading Center, ensuring it was released to all parents whose students were screened in accordance with the DC Dyslexia Law.
- ▶ Continued to increase the visibility of services our office provides to multilingual and newcomer families through intentional outreach, increased investment in resources such as interpretation services, and community partnerships. These efforts have led to an incremental increase in Spanish-speaking families requesting assistance.

We are grateful for the opportunity to continue serving families, and we welcome your partnership in making it all possible.

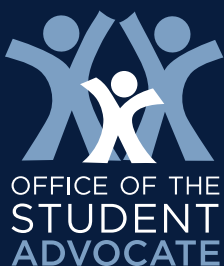


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LETTER FROM THE CHIEF STUDENT ADVOCATE

To: District of Columbia State Board of Education

It is with great pride that I present to you the Office of the Student Advocate's Annual Report for School Year 2023-24.

This past school year, students and families at over 200 PK3-12 grade campuses learned new skills – from using the science of reading, to learning about career education for pathways carved out of student voice, and more. The District's commitment this past school year to prepare scholars for the world of tomorrow is impressive and worthy of note. The challenge for our city continues to be centered around equity, ensuring that all students and families are equipped to access the commitments and investments made towards that preparation. Our office is a tool for equity, supporting students and families who need assistance navigating public education for a solution to their students' needs. This past year, we supported more students and families than we ever had before.

In the past five years, I have been blessed to work every day with students and families to assist them in becoming their own best advocates. In SY 2023-24, we made sure that our work reflected the voices of students and families who are part of communities that are not frequently heard from. This focus is evident through:

- ▶ Our increased outreach and strategic engagement efforts with the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Community, multi-generational families, multilingual learner families, and newcomer students;
- ▶ Ensuring all of our training supports for students, families, schools, and community-based organizations occur on both sides of the Anacostia River and have interpretation available in Spanish, Amharic, and ASL;

As we look to the future of schools in the District, we must continue to build on the expertise that students and families offer from their lived experiences. The solutions to the challenges of public education today are housed within our hardest to reach scholars and families. We must commit to patience, empathy and trusting that all families want their children to achieve success.

We will continue to share our positionality in the public education sector with voices of parents and students so all students in the District can share in nurturing what comes next for schools. 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



SECTION I LANDSCAPE AND OUR ROLE

WHAT WE DO

The educational landscape in the District continues to grow, with over 251 schools and 70 local education agencies serving over 98,000 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), that provides 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 voices 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 (July 2019 - July 2024)*

Renatta Landrau, *Student Advocate*

Natalie Powell, *Student Advocate*

Valeria Popolizio Torres, *Program Associate*

Viridiana Lopez-Lugo, *Graduate Student Fellow*

George Harris, *Graduate Student Fellow*

Gavin Neubauer, *Student Advocate Fellow*

Chamiya C., *High School Fellow (Mikva)*

Charlie D., *High School Fellow (Mikva)*

Avanti B., *High School Fellow (City as a Classroom)*

Sophia B., *High School Fellow (City as a Classroom)*

SECTION II

Core Principles

MOVING TOWARDS EQUITY: EMBRACING STUDENT AND FAMILY VOICE

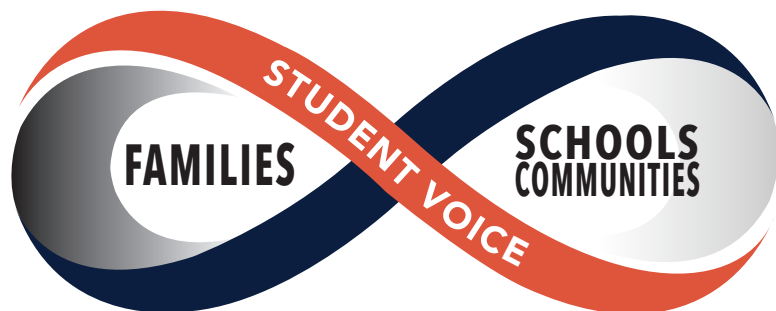
Equity is achieved only when barriers to fair treatment, access, and opportunities are identified and dismantled. As a city, we have made progress toward providing more equitable access to quality public education for families. However, our efforts still fall short of ensuring that every student receives the resources necessary for success.

Our office is dedicated to promoting equitable educational opportunities by fostering meaningful engagement with students and families. Positive change, growth, and success among students are significantly enhanced when they collaborate with teachers, school leaders, and decision-makers.

When schools prioritize student voices, student engagement tends to improve.^[1] By creating environments that elevate student voices, teachers and students build relationships that foster mutual learning.^[2] When student input extends beyond the classroom to influence school climate and policies, students develop critical awareness and experience positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes.^[3]

Families are more likely to become involved in school communities when their children lead initiatives, supports, and events.^[4] As students increase their own capacity, they also enhance the ability of adults—such as families, educators, and administrators—to engage. Every student and family in the District should be recognized as essential learning partners by their schools' teachers and leadership teams. Families—regardless of housing status, community, citizenship, language, or income—hold crucial knowledge about their children's needs. Empowered families play a vital role in shaping policy and addressing our collective challenges through their unique experiences and dedication to their children's success.

Student voices can greatly influence school culture, family engagement, and reform efforts. However, it is crucial to avoid tokenizing student voices or engaging in cycles of discussions with minimal outcomes, which can lead to disengagement.^[5] We believe in a relational approach to sharing power among students, families, schools, and communities. Our office's framework emphasizes the importance of students and families in relation to their schools and communities. It is more important than ever for families and schools to effectively communicate and co-design educational spaces to ensure equity.



SECTION III

How Our Office Serves Families and Communities

The online Education & Community Resource Guide is the first publicly available citywide initiative of its kind

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. Families may also request assistance through our online referral form or by email. 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 the “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

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 was 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. These resources are accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Our online resources include:

- ▶ Advocacy & Lobbying Toolkit
- ▶ Attendance & Truancy Resources
- ▶ Behavioral & Mental Health Resources
- ▶ Bullying Guide for DC Families
- ▶ Career & Technical Education Guide
- ▶ College Course Selection Guide
- ▶ Dyslexia Guidebook
- ▶ DC Public Education Governance Structure
- ▶ Effective Communication Toolkit
- ▶ Enrollment Resources
- ▶ Graduation Requirements



- ▶ Parent Leadership Toolkit: Tools for Effective Advocacy and Organizing
- ▶ Right to Know Ask Sheets
- ▶ Resources for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness
- ▶ Safe Passage Information
- ▶ Special Education Know Your Rights: Understanding the Issues Surrounding Special Education in the District of Columbia
- ▶ Student Discipline Guide
- ▶ Student & Community Advocacy Workbook
- ▶ Testing & Assessments

TRAININGS AND EVENTS

The information gleaned from our RFAs and community outreach allows us to further develop additional resources and training 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. They provide us with an opportunity to share tools and skills for effective advocacy and allow us to bring resources directly to families and communities. Events allow us to foster partnerships and collaborative efforts with schools, District agencies, and community-based organizations that work with families. 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
- ▶ Know Your Rights: Special Education Series
- ▶ Parent Empowerment Workshop Series: Understanding Education Governance & School Budgets
- ▶ Student Safety Focus Group Discussions
- ▶ Student Support Mental Health Series
- ▶ Student Leadership Summit
- ▶ Youth Advocacy Workshop Series: Advocating for Change

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SECTION IV

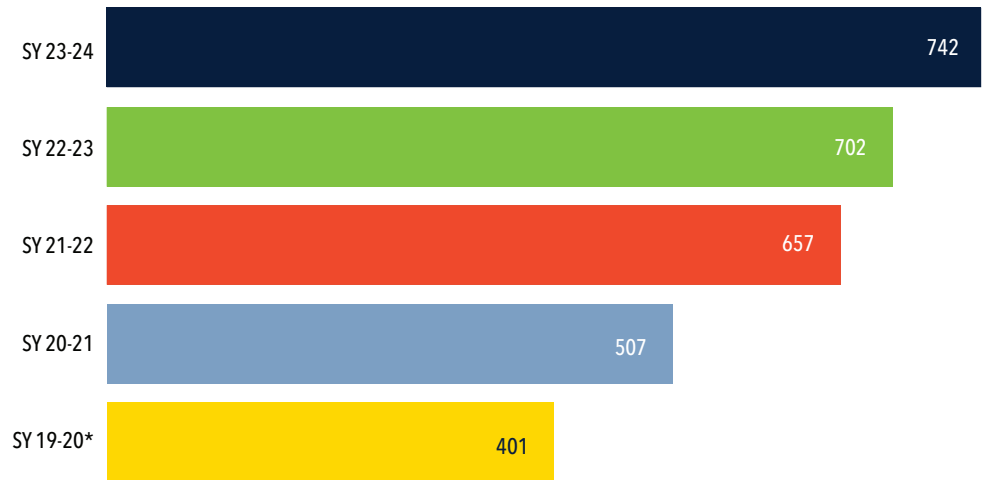
RFAS

OVERVIEW:

REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE (RFA): A FIVE YEAR COMPARISON

Our Request for Assistance (RFA) hotline is the primary resource for families seeking educational assistance. It is also our primary method of data collection that informs what areas of public education to focus staff capacity on to best support the needs of students and parents at DC Public Schools and public charter schools. 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 Five 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 following.

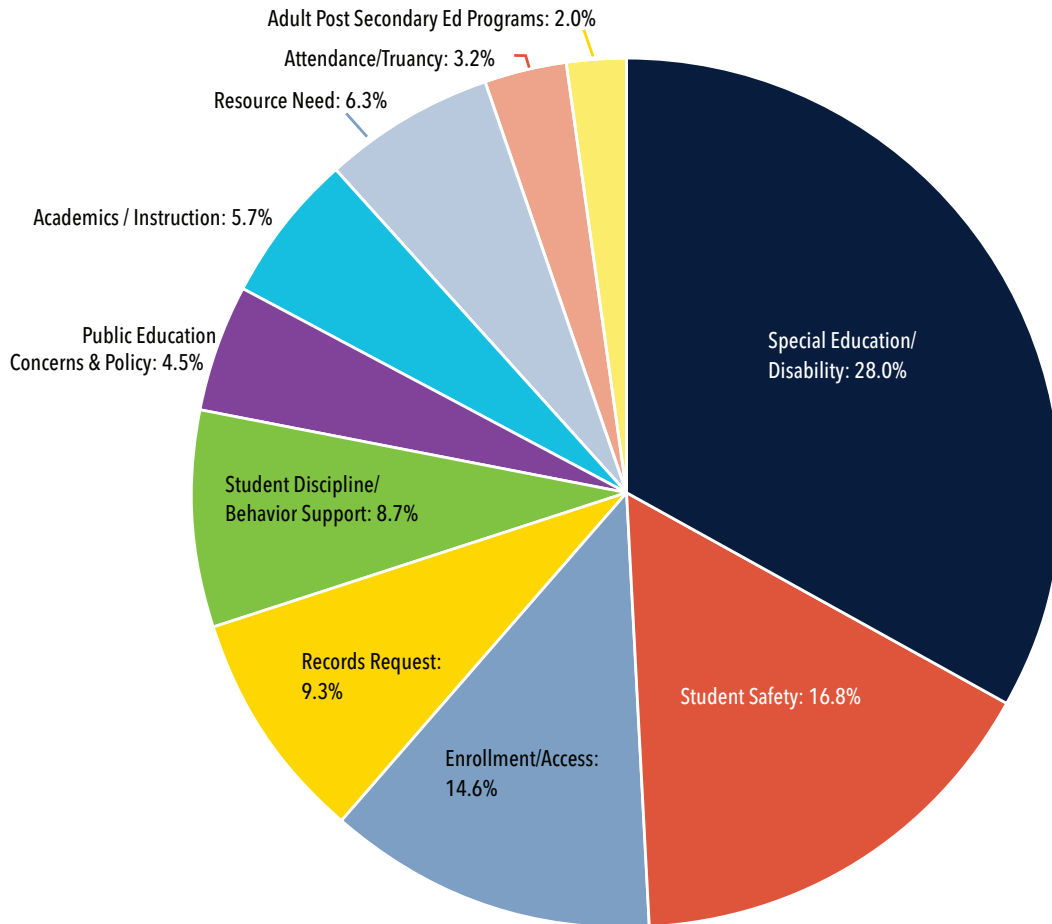
Since SY 19-20, the volume of RFAs has increased by 45%. We experienced our highest number of calls yet during SY 23-24. The 700+ calls covered a wide range of educational concerns, including records requests, bullying support, expulsion, and school transfers. We have been able to maintain consistent growth over the past five years through intentional, direct outreach to underrepresented communities and connecting with stakeholders who send referrals. Families have multiple avenues to reach out for support through the RFA hotline, email submission, online submission, or direct referral from community partners and agencies. We have also been able to connect directly with families through virtual and in-person community events.

RFA ANALYSIS AND BREAKDOWN

SY 2023-24 By RFA Topic

RFAs related to **Special Education** remained the top area of concern for families in SY 2023-24. Families who requested assistance related to Special Education/Disability primarily were looking for support with special education placement (including location of service), Individualized Education Plans/Programs (IEPs), and not receiving enough support through school. **Student Safety** remained the second highest area of concern for families. Most of these calls were related to bullying, abuse/neglect, and safety plans. **Enrollment/Access** remained the third highest topic area of concern. Families with these concerns primarily wanted assistance with school choice/My School DC and documentation.

Figure 2: Primary Topics Areas



Family members and former public school students continued to reach out to our office for support when making **Records Requests** from previous schools, closed secondary institutions and workforce programs that offered a credential. 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 unsuccessful attempts. A significant portion of those RFAs came from former students of closed schools

SY 2023-24 SECONDARY TOPIC AREAS

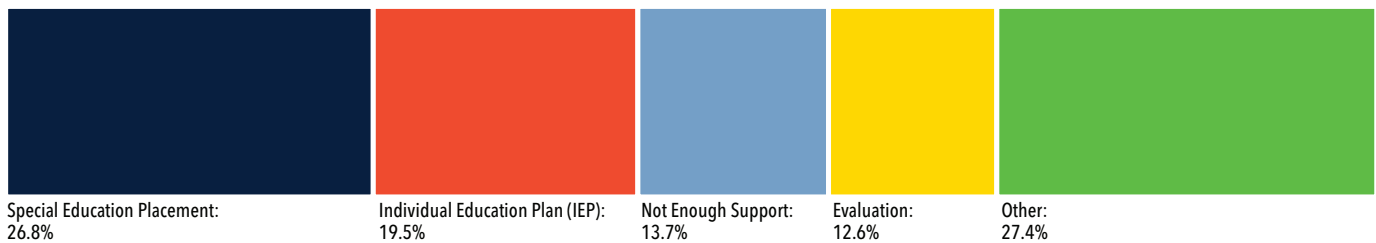
SPECIAL EDUCATION

Requests categorized as **Special Education Placement** refers to families seeking clarity about the physical placement of their children in special education settings be it classroom or school building location. Some requests came from families whose children attend public charter schools and are seeking placement in a setting with more support structures. The increase in requests in this subtopic can be attributed to families attending a school within DC Public Schools (DCPS) struggling with the district-wide location of services policy update.

RFAs categorized as **Individual Education Plan (IEP)** relate to issues with the implementation of the IEP itself at a school. Families categorized under this secondary topic were either confident in the IEP created, but felt the school was not providing those services, or expressed capacity issues preventing those services from being provided with fidelity. Filtering the data for the most prevalent concerns for families of students with disabilities showed that they overwhelmingly sought assistance for special education related issues.

Their next largest areas of concern were **Enrollment** and **Safety**, respectively. RFAs categorized under **Not Enough Support** relate to issues of families feeling the school was either not doing enough to support their student, maintain appropriate or consistent communication, or fulfill service hours. RFAs categorized under **Evaluation** include families requesting support through initial SpEd evaluation processes, requesting Independent Education Evaluations (IEE), or re-evaluating and revising current IEPs or 504 plans.

Figure 3: Special Education: Top 4 Sub-Topics



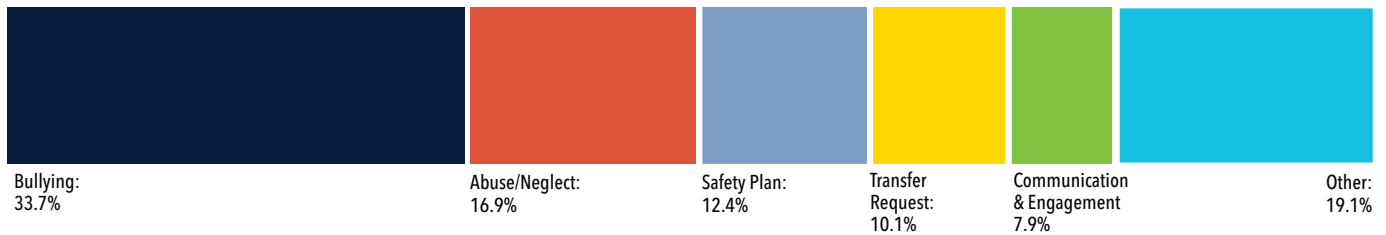
Filtering the data for the most prevalent concerns for families of students with disabilities showed that they overwhelmingly sought assistance for special education related issues. Their next largest areas of concern were **Enrollment** and **Safety**, respectively.

Figure 4: Top 3 Primary Topics Of Students With Disabilities



STUDENT SAFETY

Figure 5: Student Safety Related Calls: Top-5 Sub-Topics



In DC, bullying is defined as when a student experiences severe, pervasive or persistent behavior that impacts their physical or mental health and disrupts their ability to participate in school or youth-facing programs. Bullying can be classified into three separate categories: physical, verbal, and cyber. RFAs categorized as **Bullying** dealt specifically with either of these three classifications of bullying or harassment. These requests related to incidents that either have occurred within the school building, along routes to and from school, or through social media platforms.

Requests labeled under **Safety Plan** highlight an immediate need to create a direct plan of action to ensure the safety of their children. Often, we communicate student and families' wishes and work with school staff to develop a safety plan for these students.

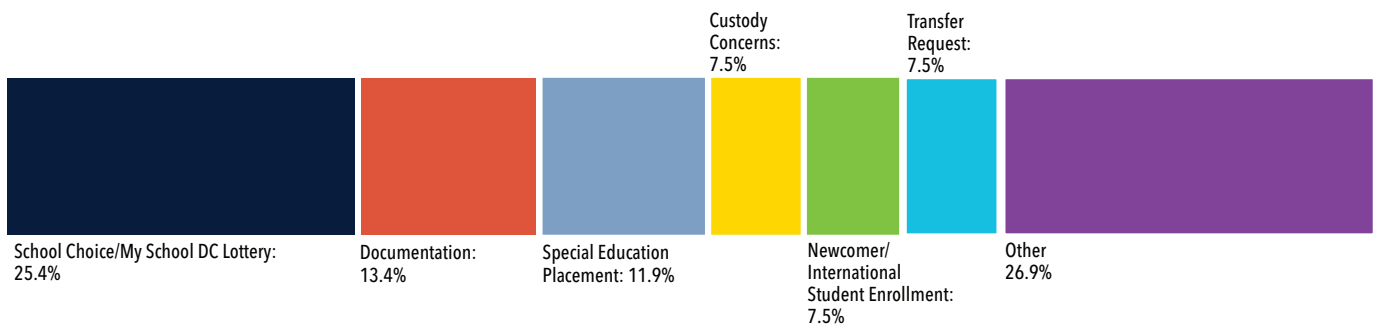
RFAs related to **Transfer Request** under the Student Safety primary topic relate to the request of families to transfer schools based on safety incidents that have occurred. It is important for families to understand that transferring mid-year is not guaranteed and is not a common occurrence. For families with students enrolled in public charter schools or out-of-boundary DCPS schools, we are able to walk them through the enrollment process at their in-boundary DCPS school. For families with issues at their child's in-boundary DCPS school, when possible we guide them through the My School DC post-lottery process, and if necessary, connect them directly with DCPS central for alternative setting solutions. In a few instances, we also work with partner agencies to request a safety transfer.

Requests related to **Abuse/Neglect** deals with incidents where a school staff member or an adult affiliated with a school community has been accused of potential verbal or physical abuse to a student.

RFAs related to **Communication & Engagement** deal with instances where a school did not communicate a safety concern to a family adequately or if proper documentation (e.g. incident report) was not provided to a family of a student involved in an incident.

ENROLLMENT/ACCESS

Figure 6: ENROLLMENT/ACCESS SUBTOPIC AREAS



Requests categorized under the primary topic of **Enrollment/Access** span between how to enroll in a school to understanding the larger school choice education landscape in DC.

School Choice/My School DC Lottery dealt directly with issues related to school choice and understanding the My School DC lottery process, including mid-year enrollment and transferring. RFAs labeled as Documentation included when families needed help understanding what documentation is needed for school enrollment. This includes a range

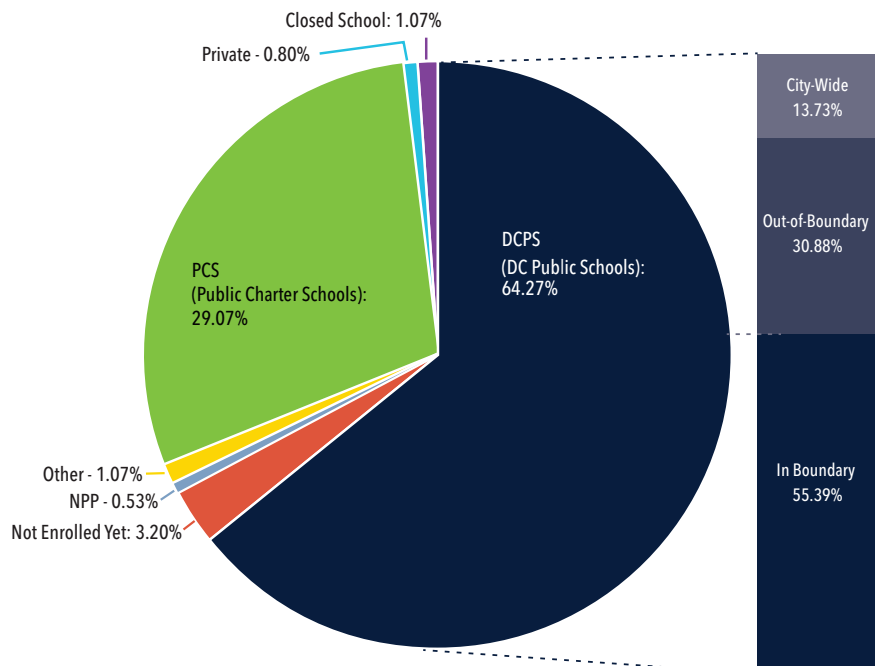
of circumstances, such as families experiencing housing insecurity who are unaware of or need additional information on McKinney-Vento protections and families who are struggling to produce current versions of required documentation.

RFAs categorized under **Special Education Placement** also varied in circumstance. Some families were transferring from outside of DC and wanted to better understand their students with IEP school options. Other RFAs marked in this subcategory had questions about their Early Stages placements. A majority of the RFAs categorized under this section were families who had applied to an out-of-boundary DCPS school through the My School DC Lottery and were accepted but were instructed to complete registration at their in-boundary school based on the DCPS Location of Services policy. While some of those callers were seeking more information about why this happened, others were seeking information on how to navigate charter school options.

RFAs categorized under **Custody Concerns** included family members looking for more information about becoming primary caregivers, guardian ad litem who sought more information about the application and enrollment process, as well as parents experiencing custody issues who sought information about their rights to enroll and/or transfer students from their current school. RFAs categorized under **Newcomer/International Student Enrollment** include families who have recently arrived in DC from another country or are planning to move and seek additional information on documentation requirements or how to transfer foreign credits. RFAs categorized under Transfer Requests include families who are seeking information on school choice options after experiencing unenrollment, involuntary transfers, expulsion, and/or lack of support in their previous school.

SY 2023-24 RFAS BY SECTOR

Nearly two-thirds of our RFAs came from students and families being served by DCPS. About 42% of our RFAs were from students who attend their in-boundary schools within DCPS and about 57.5% came from out-of-boundary DCPS schools. About 13.73% of all calls came from DCPS selective/citywide schools. Nearly 30% of our RFAs came from students and families served by one of the District's 60+ charter LEAs. Less than 5% of calls received related to non-public placement, private, or closed schools.

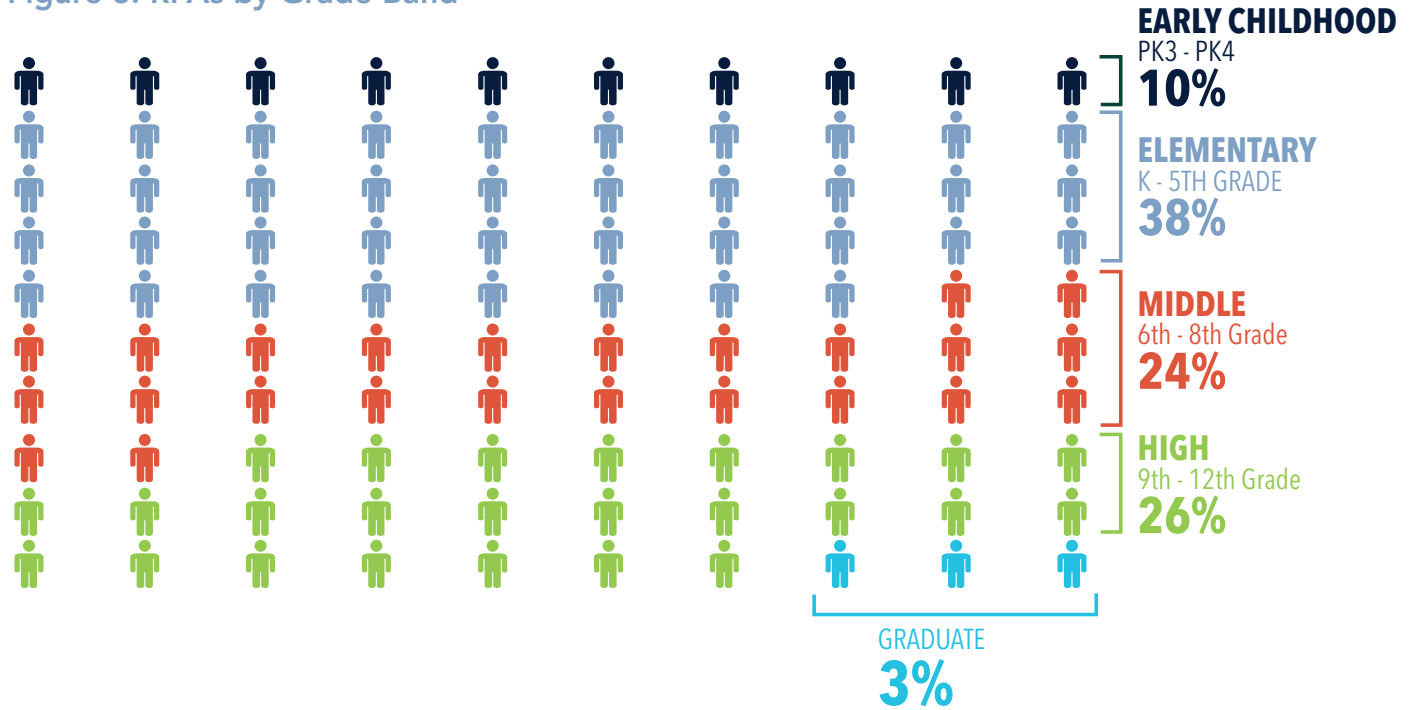


Bullying can be classified into three separate categories: Physical, Verbal, and Cyber.



SY 2023 - 24 RFAS BY GRADE BAND

Figure 8: RFAs by Grade Band



We saw slight differences in RFAs by grade between SY 2023-24 and SY 2022-23. RFAs related to **elementary school students** (kindergarten to 5th grade) account for the largest grade band of requests received. In SY 2023-24, approximately 38% of RFAs were related to students in elementary school. Between SY 2022-23 and SY 2023-24, there was a total 2% drop in RFAs related to students between PK3 to 5th grade. Alternatively, there was a 5% increase of RFAs related to **middle school students** (6th to 8th grade), accounting for approximately 24% of SY 2023-24 RFAs. There was also a 2% decrease in RFAs related to **high school students** between SY 2022-23 and SY 2023-24. RFAs related to high school students accounted for approximately 26% of requests in SY 2023-24. Additionally, this past school year, we began tracking how many **graduates** requested support. Graduates typically request records retrieval assistance. Approximately 3% of RFAs in SY2023-24 were graduates. In comparison to current DC student enrollment populations by grade band, our RFA line has a greater representation of middle and high school students than the enrolled population, with 19.1% of students across DCPS and charter schools enrolled in middle school and 22.3% of cross-sector students enrolled in high school ^[6].

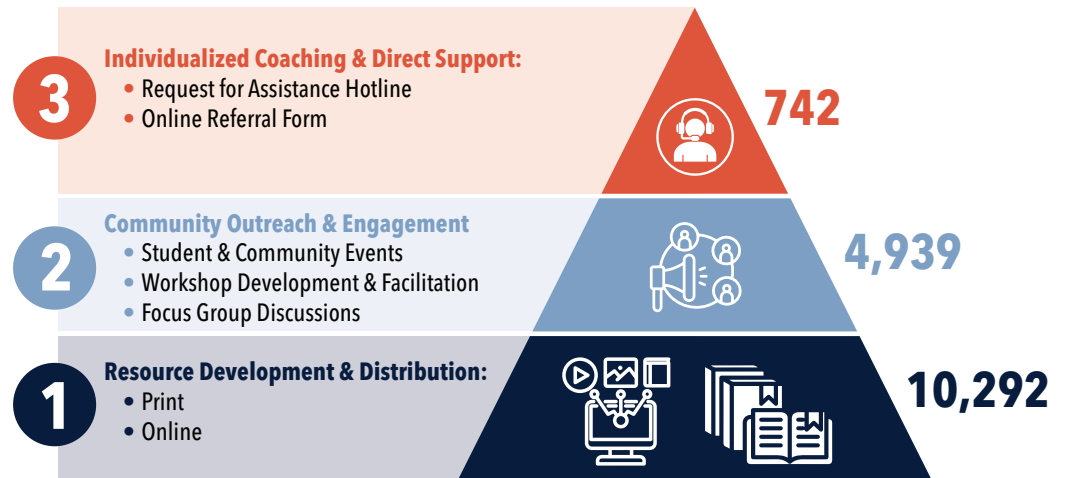
More than two-thirds of our RFAs came from students and families being served by DCPS.



SECTION V

EVIDENCE OF OUR WORK

Figure 9: Differentiated Levels of Support



Our office approaches our work with families, communities, and schools using the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. MTSS tiers help our office to organize levels of supports based on intensity so that families receive necessary assistance and interventions based on need.

TIER 1: RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT & DISTRIBUTION

These supports are citywide and available for access by anyone within the DC education sector. Our office creates relevant trainings, presentations, and workshops independently or in partnership with community based organizations and government agencies. We also create online resources that can be accessed through our website or social media. Throughout the year we distribute print resources at community events, and organizations throughout the District.

TIER 2: COMMUNITY OUTREACH & ENGAGEMENT

These supports and engagement events are concentrated on a specific group of families or students, a designated population, or particular topic areas. We elevate community issues to the forefront by ensuring our proximity to community perspective and ensure implementation of policies to address systemic issues. Every year, we make policy recommendations to government stakeholders based on parents' needs and concerns. This strategic approach to outreach has helped our office expand our reach throughout the city. In recognition of these efforts, the Office of the Student Advocate was honored to accept the DC Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) Policy Partner Award for SY 2023-24. Throughout the school year, we were able to engage directly with **4,939** additional families and community members outside of our direct RFA support.

TIER 3: REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE HOTLINE

Our Request for Assistance (RFA) hotline allows us to connect directly with students and families across the district to provide one-on-one coaching and support. The issues identified through our data collection process informs the creation of resources, meetings we attend, and workshops we host and participate in.

RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT & DISTRIBUTION

ONLINE RESOURCES ACCESSED

BULLYING & HARASSMENT RESOURCE GUIDE

Throughout the school year, we received multiple requests for assistance regarding bullying and harassment concerns. Parents and caregivers were often unsure about who to contact, the investigation process, or who to place complaints to. Our office created an interactive online resource to support parents, caregivers, and community members through the process. This guide provides information and resources from how to take the first steps of communicating with a school, to what to do if interested in the appeals process. Additionally, it covers District wide definitions, policies, and additional community-based resources.

COLLEGE & CAREER READINESS GUIDE (Co-created by Gavin Neubauer)

Navigating high school can be a complicated task. Planning for life after exiting high school can be even more complex. Our office developed two course selection guides for students to explore different academic and career exploration programs in DC.

College Course Selection Guide:

Early in high school, students may not have many options on what classes they can take. As they progress through school, a more expansive amount of courses may become available based on their interests and school. Many courses are available to prepare students for college and can help boost their applications for those higher learning institutions. This guide was created to help students understand those college preparation options, including the available Advance Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB) and Dual Enrollment programs here in DC.

Career & Technical Education Guide:

We recognize that college may not be the best option for all DC students after high school. DCPS and charter high schools have a range of programs designed to give students the skills needed to start their career in one of many highly sought after career fields. Currently, 17 DCPS high schools, two public charter high schools and six adult education public charter schools offer programs meant to explore potential career options. This guide was created to explore the various programs available to high school students and adult learners.

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.

Our office creates relevant trainings, presentations, and workshops independently or in partnership with community based organizations and government agencies.



EL NAVEGADOR

In 2021, we began our EL Services Inventory by connecting with multiple schools and community partners who work directly with EL students and families. Our hope was to gain a deeper understanding of current systems of support and where additional support is needed. These conversations spearheaded the creation of EL Navegador. Launched in the beginning of SY 2022-2023, this online tool is for newcomer and EL families to better understand the DC public education system and services available to them. This online resource center currently includes:

- **Know Your Rights:** Federal and district rights for families with limited English proficiency and regarding English language learner services.
- **How to Enroll:** Information on choosing a DC school, how schools identify English Language students, and community resources to navigate the process.
- **Assessments:** Explanation of state-approved English Language Learner screeners, statewide content assessments, and how to request special education evaluations.
- **Resources:** Local and nationwide resources for students and families, including legal aid, food assistance/distribution, healthcare, and out-of-school time opportunities.

This is a “living” resource, meaning it will be continuously updated based on questions and feedback gathered from community members. The second iteration of EL Navegador will be published in SY 2023-2024.

EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY RESOURCE GUIDE (Updated)

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.

SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

Since the pandemic, our office has continued to adapt resources that our social media followers can use and distribute among their own networks. In addition to providing important updates on key policies or events, the following family friendly information series are available:

15 WITH THE TEAM

Our online library of live series called “15 with the Team” features Members of our team discussing popular topics and giving answers to frequently asked questions related to DC public education. We also adapted this series for Spanish speaking audiences titled “15 con el Equipo” where we discussed popular areas of concern as well.

Episodes covered the following topic areas:

- Becoming Actively Engaged
- Bullying & Harassment
- DC Education Landscape
- DC Governance
- Dyslexia & Recent Legislation
- Early Stages: Identifying & Addressing Developmental
- Delays
- High School Course Selection
- Post Lottery Enrollment
- Special Education
- Student Safety & Safe Passage (3 part special)



NEED HELP?

Our “Need Help?” informational series on Instagram (@dc.advocate) features Topic areas chosen based on the volume of calls received from our RFA hotline. Special Education, Student Safety, and Enrollment/Access were the top-3 topic areas of concern for families that reached out to our office. We produced family friendly resources to distribute on our social media platforms based on the calls we receive from families. The information that is presented follows the steps our office takes to resolve the concerns of families. Based on the favorable feedback of various audiences, we will continue to revise and produce similar informational guides in collaboration with partner agencies and organizations.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH & ENGAGEMENT

WORKSHOP DEVELOPMENT & FACILITATION

COORDINATING COUNCIL ON SCHOOL BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

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. In SY 2020-2021 we spearheaded the effort to identify, recruit, and train a Youth Co-chair to sit on the Family and Youth Subcommittee. Since then we have continued to support and train a Youth Co-chair each school year. 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.

MULTIGENERATIONAL FAMILY ENGAGEMENT: COMMUNITY CONVERSATION & TECHNOLOGY NIGHT

We continued our Multigenerational Family Engagement by hosting a Community Conversation with the families of Plaza West, an apartment community for grandparents raising their grandchildren. Throughout the community conversation series, grandparents, and even some great-grandparents, continued to share a need for more technology supports. In response, we hosted a Technology Night at Plaza West for families to learn all about the various online platforms their students use. They were able to practice signing on and learn where to go for assistance with log in information or if a particular platform was not working. We were joined by DCPS Office of Engagement and Partnerships and Child and Family Services Administration’s Grandparent Caregiver Program.

SPECIAL EDUCATION: KNOW YOUR RIGHTS WORKSHOPS

Since the creation of our office, special education has maintained a top three area of concern from our RFA hotline. To help families learn more about special education and related services in the District, we host recurring Know Your Rights: Special Education workshops. Our “Know Your Rights” special education workshop is in-person, designed for families with students in need of specialized instruction and other support. Community partners across the District join us for a resource fair – where students and families are able to directly connect with representatives from government agencies and community organizations and learn more about numerous services available across the District. Additionally, families hear directly from parent panelists who share their experiences on navigating the special education evaluation process and beyond. This past year we were intentional about connecting with families from our deaf, blind, and hard of hearing communities and co-hosted the Know Your Rights workshops with the Mayor’s Office for Deaf, Deaf Blind, and Heard of Hearing (MODDHH). All of the Know Your Rights sessions are translated into Spanish, Amharic, and American Sign Language.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT & LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

STUDENT LEADERSHIP SUMMIT: VOICE TO POWER 2024

On April 15, 2024, we hosted our third annual student leadership summit, Voice to Power: Paving Paths for Community Wellbeing, in partnership with the DC Department of Human Services (DHS). Whereas in the past, our student leadership summits have been held online due to restrictions and consideration for the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, this year's summit was the first to be held in-person. We hosted the event at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, which is accessible via Metro and Metrobus.

Advertising for the event was done via social media, communications with school staff, as well as in-person announcements during our Student Safety Conversations. We had nearly 70 students participate in the summit from DC Public Schools (DCPS) and public charter schools (PCS). Approximately 18% of student participants were Spanish speakers.

The purpose of the student leadership summit was to provide DC middle and high school students from across the city with an opportunity to engage in conversations about being effective leaders and change agents as students in their school, community and beyond. Our goals of the summit included:

- ▶ Increasing student decision-making and voice
- ▶ For students to leave with tools on how to be effective leaders and change agents

We aimed to do this by:

- ▶ Creating space for student leaders from across the District to connect and establish a network with one another
- ▶ Sparking conversations that empower students to be advocates in their own communities

Based on data gathered from our RFA hotline, student safety conversations, and ongoing discussions across the district, the student summit focused on the overarching theme of community safety. Student leaders and community partners facilitated four separate workshops, which all participants rotated through. Workshops included:

- ▶ **Student Leaders' Role in Addressing Bullying** - Presented by James H. (SBOE Student Advisory Committee) & Darren Fleischer (SBOE Senior Policy Analyst)
- ▶ **Empowered Minds: A Youth-Led Guide to Mental Wellness** - Presented by Ayominde M. & Aliyah I. (Young Women's Project)
- ▶ **Amplify Your Voice: Addressing Community Based Violence** - Presented by Phillip Copeland (Office of the Student Advocate) & Sophia B. (Dunbar High School)
- ▶ **The Continuum of Harm** - Presented by the Men of Strength (MOST) Club & the Women Inspiring Strength and Empowerment (WISE) Club

After workshops, students gathered for community conversations, aimed towards creating a space world-building. Questions prompted participants to discuss solutions-based conversations around what they can do in their schools, neighborhoods, and other community spaces regarding: (1) Out-of-School Community Safety, (2) Mental Health & Emotional Wellbeing, (3) Bullying & Harassment / School Climate, (4) and Gender Based Harassment. Voice to Power 2024 culminated with a resource fair, where students connected with numerous community partners throughout the District who engage in student leadership and development. Partners included: *Black Swan Academy, Critical Exposure, DC Board of Elections, Department of Employment Services (DOES) Office of Youth Programs, Many Languages One Voice (MLOV), Men Can Stop Rape, Mikva Challenge DC, and SMYAL.*

...provide DC middle and high school students from across the city with an opportunity to engage in conversations about being effective leaders and change agents as students in their school, community and beyond.



Overall, participants ranked high satisfaction for all sessions of the day (morning icebreaker, workshops, community conversations, and resource fair). In an exit survey, when asked to rank satisfaction on a scale from 1 (not satisfied) to 5 (extremely satisfied), students ranked all sessions between an average of 4.39 to 4.69. Out of all of the sessions, students were most satisfied by the community conversations session of the summit. Students were eager to share their insights from small group discussions during this time and stated that they would like to have “more time set aside for each table to be heard from during [the large group discussion].”

We are excited about the success from this past year’s summit, and appreciative for the constructive feedback from participants. We hope to continue improving the summit experience this upcoming school year by hosting longer workshops, expanding resources available, building in networking opportunities, and having more student-led conversations.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING INTERNSHIPS

DCPS CITY AS A CLASSROOM INTERNSHIP

In partnership with Dunbar XQ’s City As a Classroom initiative, OSA hosted two Dunbar High School interns throughout the school year. Student interns went through an extended version of our Youth Advocacy Workshop series, where they took a deep dive into the education landscape. During their time with the office, they assisted in facilitating student safety focus groups and conducted a needs assessment amongst their peers to better understand ways Dunbar students want to improve their school community. Using the results from this survey, students met with Councilmember Zachary Parker to discuss Dunbar High School student experience and suggestions to improve safety in and around school.

MIKVA CHALLENGE, DC: SUMMER FELLOWSHIP

SY 2023-24 marks our fifth year in partnership with Mikva Challenge, DC. Throughout the school year, we participate in numerous events hosted by Mikva Challenge, DC such as their Student Safety Conversation, Student Project Presentations, and Citywide Roundtable. In the summer, we host two Mikva Fellows who research and develop a project that is at the intersection of topics our office focuses on and their own personal interests. Resources such as the Don’t Mute Mental Health Podcast and College and Career Course Selection Guides are examples of previous projects co-created by our Mikva Fellows.

In the summer of 2024, OSA Mikva fellows focused on attendance/truancy and students’ experience accessing mental health resources in DC schools. They both thoroughly researched their topics – conducting landscape and policy analyses, surveying students, and leading focus groups. Using the information gathered, they created social media infographics, a parent-facing brochure on attendance, and a two-part 15 with Team series explaining students’ experience accessing mental health resources and how schools can increase accessibility to resources.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

STUDENT SAFETY FOCUS GROUPS

As a result of the volume of RFAs our office receives related to student safety, we began administering surveys and conducting focus groups to better understand student experiences traveling to and from school in 2020. In SY 2021-22, we expanded discussions to include middle school students and multilingual learners. In SY 2023-24, we extended our student outreach by connecting with more schools throughout the district. Our goal of these conversations is to elevate students’ perspectives to key policy stakeholders throughout DC government. Our office has spoken with over 750 students, family members, and school-based staff. The focus groups had several recurring themes regardless of ward, zip, or side of the Anacostia River:

- ▶ Students are not confident in adults’ abilities to maintain safety outside of the school building.
- ▶ Students’ use of social media and telecommunication devices are both drivers of incidents and tools used to avoid incidents/potential harm.
- ▶ More students are describing incidents of gang recruitment, even in communities we have typically described as crew/neighborhood influenced.

A full analysis of the data we captured from students will be part of our updated Student Safety: Perspective report will be released for public view in **January 2025**.

SECTION VI

OBSERVATIONS & ANALYSIS

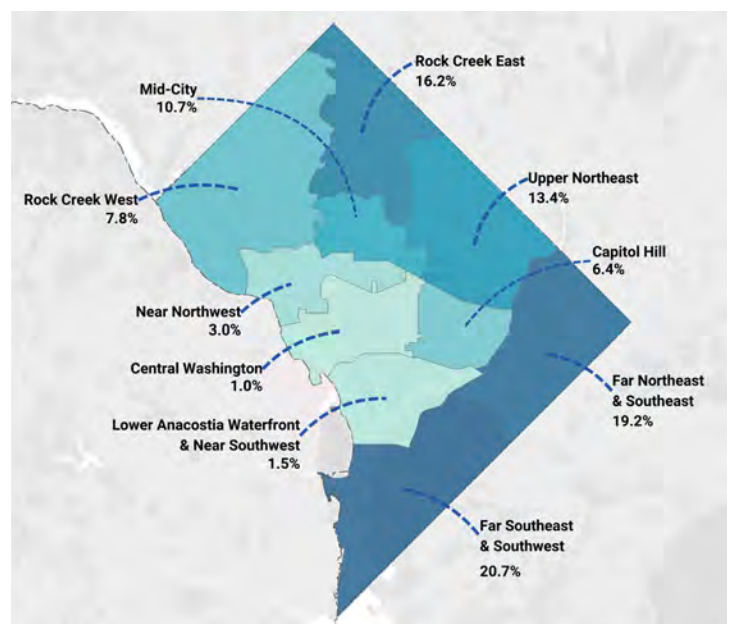
TRANSPORTATION

Across RFA topics, families seek guidance on eliminating barriers for their students to travel to and from school. Currently, the District has limited options that provide direct neighborhood-to-school transportation. In 2013, the “Kids Ride Free” program was introduced, allowing children to ride the Metro Bus for free. The program was expanded in 2015 to include free Metro Rail rides.^[7] This program is meant to remove the financial barrier to accessing transportation for students to get to and from school. Several DCPS schools and a handful of charter schools have implemented transportation services for select neighborhoods, providing more direct commutes to school than taking public. Additionally, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) provides home-to-school transportation services for students who require transportation support to access a Free Appropriate Education (FAPE) (as determined by their IEP teams). Despite the support provided by these programs, they do not fully consider the complexities of a student’s journey to and from school.

Based on SY 2021-22 Kids Ride Free card enrollment rates, approximately 38% of PK-12th grade students used public transportation to travel to and from school.^[8] Throughout our SY2023-24 Student Safety focus groups, we heard from many students that they must use multiple modes of transportation – including bus and rail connections – to get to school. Others opt to walk or bike long distances because of safety concerns or bus and rail delays throughout their commute.

According to the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME), the city median walking distance from a student’s home to their school is 1.5 miles, with “students living in Wards 5, 7, and 8 travel farther than the city median, while students in Wards 1 and 3 travel the shortest median distance.”^[9] To better understand student travel patterns across neighborhoods, we analyzed student residence and school populations by planning areas (Capitol Hill, Central Washington, Far Northeast and Southeast, Far Southeast and Southwest, Lower Anacostia Waterfront and Near Southwest, Mid-City, Near Northwest, Rock Creek East, Rock Creek West, and Upper Northeast).

Figure 10. SY2023-24 Student Population across DC planning areas. Map above, using data gathered from DME Edscape, indicates where DCPS and public charter school PK-12 grade students live across DC.^[10]



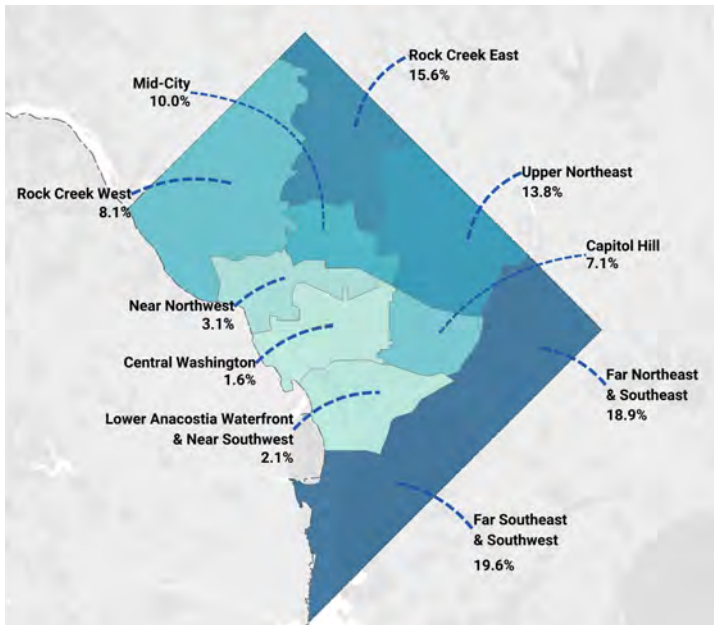


Figure 11. SY2023-24 School Population across DC planning areas. Map above, using data gathered from DME Edscape, indicates where DCPS and public charter school PK-12 grade students attend school across DC. ^[11] Despite planning areas Far Southeast and Southwest and Far Northeast and Southeast being the two most student populated planning areas, the Rock Creek East and Upper Northeast have the two largest percentages of school population.

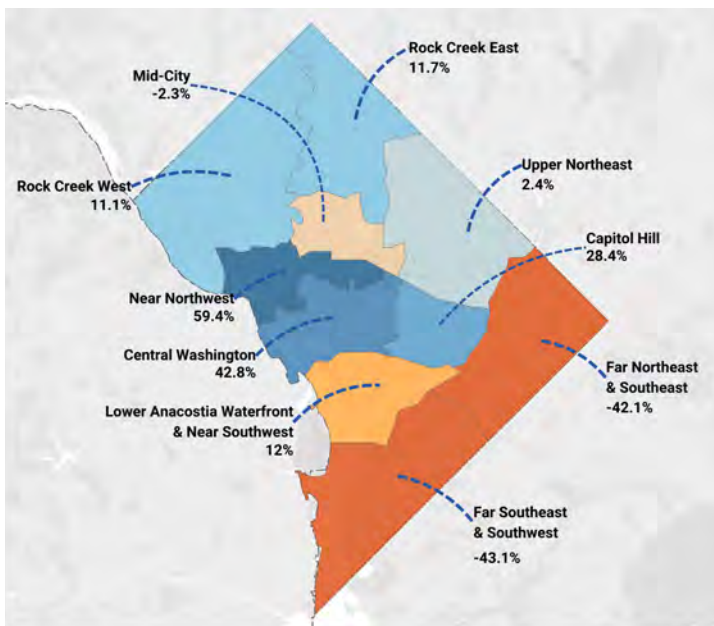


Figure 12. Percentage Change in SY2023-24 Student Population across DC planning areas. Map above, using data gathered from DME Edscape, provides an overview of how students across DC are staying, leaving, and entering different planning areas. ^[12] Planning areas highlighted in orange indicate that more students are leaving than staying/entering, while planning areas highlighted in shades of blue indicate that more students are staying/entering the planning area than leaving. This bird's eye view provides generalized information on migration patterns across the city.

As illustrated in the maps above, students across the District attend schools out-of-boundary; oftentimes, attending schools out of their planning areas. While "cross-area commuting tends to be limited to nearby areas," students in 5 out of 10 planning areas are traveling out of their areas of residence to attend school^[13].

Planning Area of Residence	Percentage of Students Leaving Planning Area	#1 Planning Area of School for Students Leaving (%)	#2 Planning Area of School for Students Leaving (%)	#3 Planning Area of School for Students Leaving (%)
Central Washington	78.3	Near Northeast (32)	Upper Northeast (17)	Mid-City (14)
Lower Anacostia Waterfront and Near Southwest	58	Capitol Hill (25)	Near Northeast (12)	Central Washington (11), Far Northeast and Southeast (11), and Far Southeast and Southwest (11)
Near Northwest	57.6	Mid-City (40)	Rock Creek East (13)	Rock Creek West (9) and Upper Northeast (9)
Mid-City	54.5	Rock Creek East (37)	Near Northwest (18)	Rock Creek West (16)
Far Northeast and Southeast	52.5	Upper Northeast (23)	Capitol Hill (22)	Far Southeast and Southwest (20)

Table 1. Student commute patterns for planning areas with a majority of the student resident population leaving. ^[14]

The table above illustrates that most students who are leaving their planning area of residence are traveling to adjacent planning areas. However, students who reside in Far Southeast and Southwest, Lower Anacostia Waterfront and Near Southwest, and Near Northwest are more likely to attend a school in a non-adjacent planning area; meaning, they are most impacted by long commute patterns. To attend school, they must cross numerous planning areas – which typically means that they require more than one mode of transportation (using either multiple bus, rail routes, or having to walk/bike along their journey) to attend school.

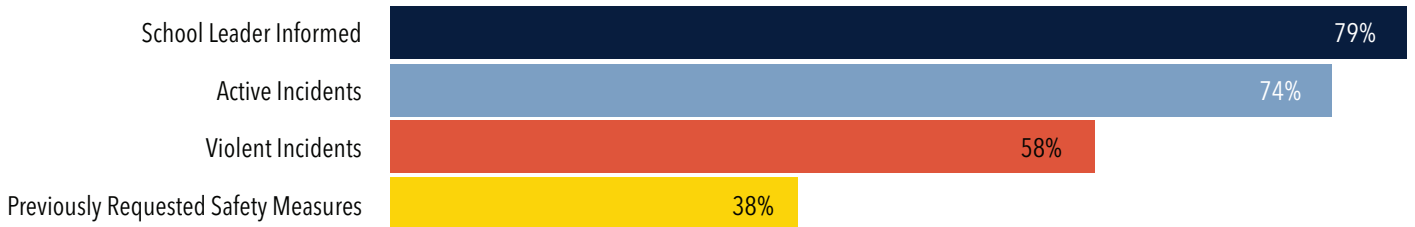
In 2022, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), launched the Better Bus Network Redesign in hopes of creating “a bus network to better match when and where people want to travel, provide fast, frequent and reliable service, and address inequities and increase access to opportunity for disenfranchised communities.” ^[15] The redesign initiative spans across the District and into the greater Washington Region. Throughout the process, WMATA worked with members of their Community Connections Committee, who served as representatives of customers and communities. This committee is primarily made up of representatives from chambers of commerce, community organizations, and government agencies. However, public school students and school communities were not members of this committee. They were not able to directly share their travel experiences and identify areas of improvement for the student experience through the Community Connections Committee. WMATA opened for public comment between May 13 – July 15, 2024 and engaged with community members through surveys, public hearings, pop-up events, an interactive map and more. ^[16] During this phase, they conducted targeted outreach events at high schools to engage with youth directly. ^[17] The Better Bus Network is scheduled to roll out as of Summer 2025.

BULLYING & SAFETY

Bullying in schools remains a significant challenge, affecting students, families, and educators alike. Research consistently demonstrates that bullying can have severe long-term impacts on a student’s mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being. Family involvement promotes better communication and understanding between schools and families, creating a united front that helps address the problem more effectively. When parents are included in the investigation process, it not only increases awareness but also allows for a more comprehensive response that supports the child both at school and at home. ^{[18][19]}

In the 2023-2024 school year, 19% of all requests for assistance (RFAs) involved a safety-related concern, a slight increase from the previous year. This includes RFAs whose Primary or Secondary Topic Area were categorized as “Student Safety.” Of these, 76% originated from or mentioned at least one instance of bullying. When speaking with families, our office noticed key trends: 79% had already notified school leadership about the issue, 58% reported incidents of violence, and 38% had previously requested safety measures including a safety plan or transfer request.

Bullying RFA Trends



While our sample may not fully represent the broader student population, similar patterns were noted across the District during conversations with various stakeholders. Our discussions with the DC Office of Human Rights (OHR) and other sector level stakeholders further highlighted similar concerns. Families expressed frustration over inadequate communication, escalating conflicts, and the growing prevalence of cyberbullying—an issue that is not sufficiently addressed under the current Youth Bullying Prevention Act (YBPA).^[20]

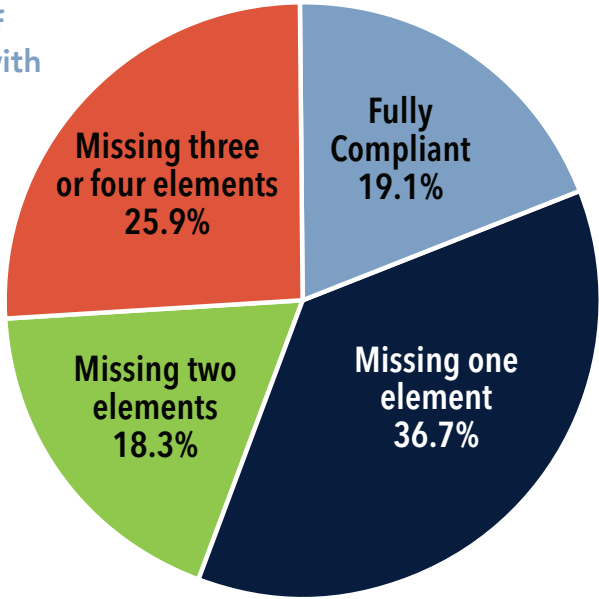
Schools play a critical role in not only addressing bullying incidents but also in collaborating with families to ensure that the response is effective and supportive. However, our recent conversations with stakeholders have revealed significant gaps in how schools communicate and engage with families during these investigations. In many cases, families report feeling left in the dark, receiving little to no information about the steps being taken to address their concerns. This lack of communication can lead to feelings of mistrust and frustration, sometimes driving families or students to take matters into their own hands—a response that can exacerbate the situation and lead to more severe consequences.

THEMES FROM STAKEHOLDER CONVERSATIONS

- 1. Insufficient Proactive Communication:** Families often feel excluded from the investigation process, receiving limited updates or no follow-up on bullying incidents. This lack of transparency can drive students or families to seek their own solutions, which risks escalating the conflict.
- 2. Escalation of Violent Incidents:** Reports of bullying-related violence, including incidents involving weapons, are on the rise. In many cases, these situations had been building for some time without proper intervention.
- 3. Cyberbullying and Social Media:** Conflicts that begin on social media or off-campus often spill over into school settings, but current policies fail to adequately address these types of bullying. The YBPA does not explicitly mention online harassment, leading to inconsistent responses from schools.

Increasing these challenges is a troubling trend in schools’ compliance with the YBPA. Data is required by law to be collected biennially from schools around their responses to bullying incidents. To be fully compliant with the YBPA, schools must (1) have a compliant bullying policy, (2) provide data on bullying annually to OHR, (3) publicize their compliant policy on their website, and (4) provide bullying prevention training during the school year. In the most recent report including school years 2020-2022, *only 19% of schools were fully compliant with the YBPA’s four requirements in SY 21-22*, down from 26% in SY 2019-2020. This decline in compliance is concerning, as it signals a weakening of efforts to ensure that school staff are properly equipped to prevent and respond to bullying incidents. In SY 2021-2022, nearly 26% of schools were missing three or more of four total elements of compliance, a significant increase from 10% in SY 2019-2020. While 92 schools were only missing one element, the number of schools failing to meet multiple compliance standards highlights the need for a more robust and standardized approach. While 92 schools were only missing one element, the number of schools failing to meet multiple compliance standards highlights the need for a more robust and standardized approach.^[21]

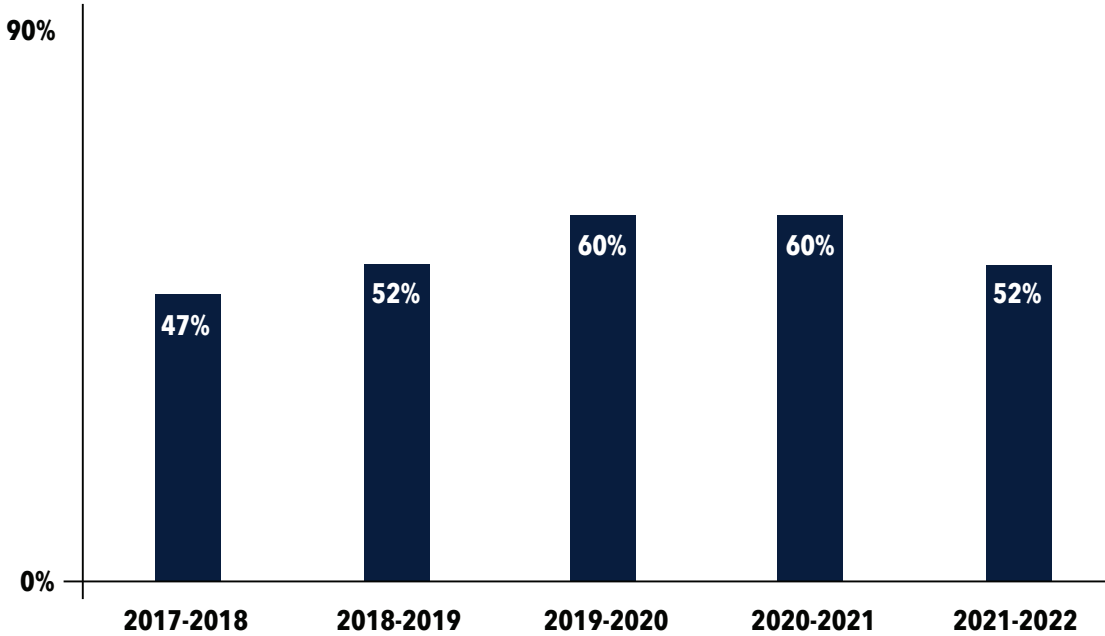
Figure 14: Less than 20% of school are fully compliant with the YBPA



Source: Office of Human Rights, Youth Bullying Prevention Report FY 2023

Staff training on bullying prevention and intervention has similarly declined, with only 52% of schools offering such training in SY 2021-2022, compared to 60% in previous years. This drop in compliance aligns with broader gaps in how schools address bullying, signaling the need for stronger, more consistent policies to protect students. ^[22]

Figure 15: The percentage of school providing staff training on the YBPA decreased in SY 2021-2022



Source: Office of Human Rights, Youth Bullying Prevention Report FY 2023

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES' SCHOOL CHOICE

School choice in DC provides many families the opportunity to choose the school environment that best suits their child’s and family’s needs. Parents feel empowered by this choice because it grants them access to programs and resources they might not have had at their neighborhood school. Some families opt to attend their neighborhood school for the same reason others choose to leave—it works best for their situation. However, the current location of services policy limits this choice for families of students with disabilities with high needs. Over the past few school years, in an effort to be more equitable (particularly to a historically disenfranchised group), DCPS has moved to place/replicate the same quality of specialized services in all of its feeder patterns by allowing students to be placed closer to their by-right neighborhood school. This expansion of services in combination with longstanding IDEA guidance allowing LEAs discretion on where services are offered has resulted with families being assigned to a school rather than choosing for themselves.

Some of these families prefer having their neighborhood school as their school site because it means resources are invested back into the community, creating a more equitable environment for students with disabilities. It also reduces travel time as they don’t need to go across the city to receive services. Since the implementation of this policy, our office has seen a decline in OSSE transportation-related calls, which can be attributed both to OSSE’s improvements in transportation and the decreased need for long-distance travel. During SY 22-23 13.4% of special education related calls were about OSSE transportation issues. That number decreased to 3.2% in SY 23-24.

When the policy was initially implemented, our office received many calls opposing the change. Parents expressed that the policy change was inequitable because it removed their right to choose. They felt singled out for having a student with a disability—a feeling all too familiar to them. Some parents didn’t want their student to attend the neighborhood school, regardless of resources, due to the school’s environment. The perception of community violence plays a crucial role in a family’s school selection process. Families living in areas with high rates of community violence near schools prefer school choice because it gives them control over the school environment while having limited ability to move due to socioeconomic factors. 68% of DCPS and public charter schools are located in neighborhood clusters with medium or high violent crime rates. Since SY 21-22, the number of violent crimes in neighborhoods has increased, with 94% of schools seeing an increase of 150% and 26% of schools experiencing a 300% increase in their neighborhood clusters. ^[23]

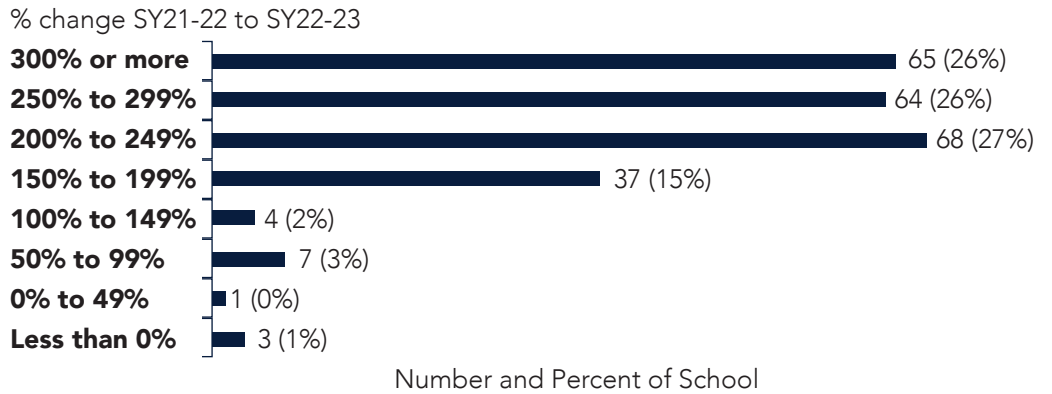
Table 2: Neighborhood Crime Rate & Percent of Schools

Neighborhood Crime Rate & Percent of Schools			
	Low	Medium	High
SY 2020-21	33%	47%	20%
SY 2021-22	32%	41%	27%
SY 2022-23	31%	45%	24%
<i>Source: Metropolitan Police Department Crime Cards</i>			

School choice in DC provides many families the opportunity to choose the school environment that best suits their child's and family's needs.



Figure 16: Neighborhood Violent Crime Rate



Source: Metropolitan Police Department Crime Cards

The policy change also meant siblings previously together at their out-of-boundary school could now be separated. Parents had to make significant adjustments to transportation arrangements and after-care.

While the families of students with disabilities that attend public charters may have more choice in placement as they directly apply to the school through the lottery, many enter school unaware of the quality or extent of special education resources available, especially for students that have a higher number of service hours on their IEP. 31.7% of RFA's from families of students with disabilities attend public charter schools. About one third of those families have concerns about placement or a transfer due to IEP implementation concerns. Families can review school data about their special education population through the school quality report or report card, but there is no standard location to view how a school may support specific disability classifications, if the school has self-contained or inclusion classrooms, or how related services are integrated into the schedule. This is an especially difficult hurdle for students who have high needs as families sometimes have to play a guessing game of what public charter environment would best support their child's unique needs.

SECTION VII

SCHOOL YEAR 2023-24 ANNUAL RECOMMENDATIONS

EXPANDING EFFICIENT STUDENT TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

Safe and efficient transportation services across the District are key parts of addressing student safety and attendance issues. As education stakeholders discuss how to remove barriers to accessing high-quality education, it is important to think about the ways in which the current transportation services offered can be improved and expanded.

BETTER BUS NETWORK CONSIDERATIONS

As stated by the proposed 2025 Better Bus Network, in order to meet the goals of providing fast, frequent, and reliable service, it is important that resources are allocated towards ensuring that there are high frequency stops (20 minutes in between scheduled bus arrivals). Increasing the amount of high frequency stops to the proposed network will most likely roll out in phases as more resources become available. As routes are considered for high frequency allocation, we urge that WMATA consider increasing frequency of proposed routes in *Far Southeast and Southwest*, *Lower Anacostia Waterfront and Near Southwest*, and *Near Northwest* during the windows that students are traveling to and from school.

The recently proposed Better Bus Network may cause complications and inconveniences to the planning areas where many students are traveling to and from school. Considering current student travel patterns, it would create more time efficient journeys for students if there were routes spanning east to west, connecting *Far Southeast and Southwest* to planning areas where many kids are traveling to/from school. For instance, 19% of students who leave *Far Southeast and Southwest* – accounting for over 1,500 students – travel across the Anacostia River and multiple planning areas to attend school in *Capitol Hill*. Similarly, approximately 14% of students who leave *Far Southeast and Southwest* – accounting for over 1,100 students – travel further up north to attend school in *Upper Northeast*.^[24] Currently, the Better Bus Network route C11 stretches from the north border of *Far Southeast and Southwest* through *Capitol Hill* and into *Upper Northeast*. Given the number of students from the planning area traveling, it would be beneficial to connect high frequency bus routes in *Capitol Hill* and *Upper Northeast* that travel east to west in order for students to have more direct paths to school. Ultimately, expanding east to west lines in *Upper Northeast* leads to shorter travel times between connections, and an overall faster travel to school.

Additionally, there are several different smaller neighborhood areas across the District that have been redesigned that may impact students and families traveling to and from school. Below is a list of neighborhoods that stand out as potentially being underserved by the proposed Better Bus Network:

- ▶ **Anacostia and Skyland:** There are three proposed route adjustments, including the elimination of the current 16 St SE bus route. The route that passes through Skyland and Barry Farm will be shifted to adjacent routes. Students and families in these areas who attend Anacostia High School may be impacted and have to adjust their current travel routes.
 - Other schools in the area that are potentially impacted: Moten Elementary School, Ketcham Elementary School, DC Wildflower PCS – Blue Montessori, DC Prep PCS – Anacostia Elementary, KIPP DC – Heights Academy PCS

- ▶ **Brookland:** The current H6 route has left a gap between 13th St NE and 18th St NE. Routes going northeast to northwest would improve student commutes who are traveling from this area and need to travel to Fort Totten Metro Station to access a Metrorail station with transfer options (Green, Yellow, and Red line).
- ▶ **Georgetown:** Current bus routes between P St NW to above M St NW are proposed to be eliminated. Considering that the majority of students attend School Without Walls: Francis-Stevens are out-of-boundary (approximately 65%), route changes in these areas may cause inconvenience to commuting students.
- ▶ **Chevy Chase:** Community members have contested the loss of the current E4 bus route that services a residential part of McKinley St NW. The loss of this service may cause disruptions for students and families commuting eastward, including those who require access to Lafayette Elementary School.
- ▶ **Lamond Riggs, Manor Park, Fort Totten:** Community members have also contested the elimination of the K2 route without a direct replacement or adjacent route adjustment. Community members relied on this route as a point of access to the Ft. Totten Metro Station (Green, Yellow, and Red line). Additionally, this route connected residential areas from Fort Slocum to Eastern Ave NW. This directly impacts students and families traveling to/from Capital City PCS, Sela PCS, Roots PCS, Breakthrough Montessori PCS, Friendship PCS – Ideal Elementary.
- ▶ **Capitol Hill (Lincoln Park):** The elimination of the 96 bus has left a gap on Massachusetts Ave SE without bus service. This route has not been replaced or adjusted. The removal of this route may disrupt transit for students and families traveling to/from Payne Elementary School, Center City PCS – Capitol Hill, Maury Elementary School, and AppleTree Early Learning PCS – Lincoln Park.
- ▶ **Navy Memorial:** Community members have expressed strong opposition to changing the existing D6 service, which leads to a decrease in service on E Street NW. This change directly impacts the BASIS Washington, DC community on 8th St NW.

With extremely limited transportation services for students, as the largest free provider for student transportation in the District, WMATA must reevaluate how current and proposed bus routes impact students and families directly. As the Better Bus Network rolls out, direct outreach to students and families is critical to hear from their travel journeys and understand how to improve the student commute experience. This includes learning about not only how to shorten commute and wait time, but also considering how to improve areas that are safety concerns and deterrents for students so they can feel comfortable and confident accessing the public transportation system.

WMATA should consider:

- ▶ Increasing high frequency routes in Far Southeast and Southwest, Lower Anacostia Waterfront and Near Southwest, and Near Northwest during the windows that students are traveling to and from school.
- ▶ Connecting high frequency bus routes in Capitol Hill and Upper Northeast that travel east to west in order for students to have more direct paths to school.
- ▶ Conducting additional targeted outreach directed towards students, families, and school communities to better understand the student commute experience with the goal of shortening student commute, wait time, and how to address deterrents for students so they can feel safe accessing the public transportation system.

EXPAND DC SCHOOL CONNECT PROGRAM

The DC School Connect Program was created in 2021, as a part of the Safe Passage initiative, to address student safety concerns on the way to and from school.^[25] The program services students from kindergarten to 12th grade in both public and public charter schools. According to the Department of For-Hire Vehicles, with existing resources, they can serve up to 32 schools maximum. As of SY2024-25, the program currently offers dedicated buses through the Department of For-Hire Vehicles to students who attend 28 select schools across Wards 7 and 8. Up to 40 students are eligible for services per participating school.

During our Student Safety Focus Groups, we heard from students across the District who expressed feeling unsafe on their journeys to/from school. In these conversations, students said that they may feel safer during their commute if they had direct transportation service and did not have to take public transportation. The DC School Connect program provides direct solutions to address barriers for student attendance and increasing their feeling of safety. However, due to current resource constraints, there is a limit on how many students can benefit from services.^[26]

With an expansion of resources, the DC School Connect program can increase the number of seats in current participating schools as well as extend its reach across the District. The majority of students living in Wards 7 and 8 are attending schools outside of their ward of residence. These students are traveling distances longer than the median citywide walking distance of 1.5 miles. The DC School Connect program should expand its footprint by providing services to Ward 7 and 8 residents who attend schools across the District. With additional resources, the program should also consider expanding services to support Ward 5 residing students who, along with Ward 7 and 8 residents, travel farther than the city median distance to get to/from school.^[27]

DC School Connect, the Department of For-Hire Vehicles, and respective government agencies should consider:

- ▶ Expanding the DC School Connect program to increase the number of seats available for participating schools.
- ▶ Creating routes that travel across the city for Ward 7 and 8 residents who attend schools across the District.
- ▶ Expanding the DC School Connect program to include students who live in Ward 5, as they also travel farther than the city median distance (1.5 miles) to get to/from school.

BULLYING IN SCHOOLS: STRENGTHENING THE INVESTIGATION PROCESS AND ENHANCING COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES

The main concern we have heard from many families is the lack of meaningful involvement in schools' responses to bullying reports. Too often, families feel sidelined or inadequately informed as schools handle these sensitive incidents, leading to frustration, mistrust, and, in some cases, an escalation of the issue. Exacerbating this issue is the low rate of compliance with the Youth Bullying Prevention Act (YBPA) among schools. With fewer than 20% of schools fully compliant with the YBPA's core requirements and only 52% of schools providing annual training to their staff, the inconsistency in schools' approaches to addressing bullying contributes significantly to families' dissatisfaction and the uneven handling of these issues across the city.^[28]

To address these concerns, we must prioritize placing families at the heart of the response process and ensure that schools are meeting their obligations under the YBPA. The following recommendations aim to strengthen communication between schools and families, ensure transparency throughout bullying investigations, and promote consistency in how schools address these incidents. By focusing on family-centered solutions, improving compliance with existing policies, we can create a more supportive and effective approach to bullying prevention and intervention across our schools.

INCREASE THE FREQUENCY OF DATA REPORTING TO THE OFFICE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Annual reporting to OHR leaves limited time for a thorough analysis of trends and does not allow for timely identification of schools needing intervention. By increasing the frequency of data collection and flagging non-compliant schools earlier, we can more effectively address gaps before they become deep-rooted.

Rather than reporting only once per year, schools should submit data on a more regular basis—ideally biannually. Schools that are non-compliant should be required to develop individualized action plans, with OHR providing more frequent follow-ups to ensure progress. This would allow for earlier intervention and more consistent enforcement of the YBPA's requirements.

Additionally, schools should be incentivized, rather than penalized, for accurate tracking and reporting. To encourage honesty and thoroughness in reporting, schools could receive recognition or additional support for consistently accurate data submissions, rather than facing consequences for higher incident rates. Schools might hesitate to report issues in fear of repercussions, but a system that rewards transparency—such as access to grants for prevention initiatives—could lead to better data integrity and improved outcomes.

This approach shifts the focus from punitive measures to one of support and collaboration. Schools will be motivated to report more accurately, knowing they will receive assistance in addressing challenges, rather than being penalized for doing so. By building a culture of accountability and partnership, schools and agencies can work together to address bullying more effectively.

STANDARDIZE BULLYING INVESTIGATION OUTCOME LETTERS

Clear communication is essential to fostering trust between families and schools, particularly during sensitive investigations. However, the current lack of uniformity in how schools communicate the outcomes of bullying investigations creates confusion and frustration for families.

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LEAs should adopt a standardized format for outcome letters that includes key information such as a summary of the investigation, findings, actions taken, and next steps. Consistent, detailed communication will help ensure families feel informed and supported throughout the process, reducing misunderstandings and increasing confidence in the school's handling of bullying incidents.

By developing a template schools can provide comprehensive updates while also maintaining flexibility for additional context. This will not only build transparency but also encourage a partnership between schools and families, helping to create a safer and more supportive environment for students.

REESTABLISH THE YOUTH BULLYING TASKFORCE

The Youth Bullying Prevention Act has not been updated since 2012 and no longer reflects the realities of the modern climate of bullying, particularly with the rise of cyberbullying and access to social media. A dedicated taskforce is needed to review and update the policy, ensuring it is equipped to address current challenges.

The Youth Bullying Taskforce should be reconvened to propose revisions to the YBPA, focusing on modernizing its provisions to address cyberbullying and other emerging issues. Input from experts in social media, child psychology, and law enforcement should be incorporated to craft a more comprehensive and relevant policy. By doing so, the taskforce will ensure that schools are equipped with the guidance and tools needed to prevent and address bullying in today's context.

This updated policy must then be disseminated widely, with mandatory training for educators, school staff, and other stakeholders to ensure consistent application across all schools. Furthermore, LEAs should prioritize the safety and emotional well-being of students and families, even in cases where an incident does not meet the formal definition of bullying. A proactive, preventative approach will create a more supportive environment for all students, ensuring they feel safe regardless of the classification of their experience.

By implementing these recommendations, we can create a more consistent, transparent, and responsive approach to handling bullying incidents in our schools. Standardizing communication, updating outdated policies, and allowing for quicker intervention will not only improve the safety and well-being of our students but also restore confidence among families that their concerns are being taken seriously.

SUPPORTING PARENTAL CHOICE FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

INSTITUTE AN APPEAL PROCESS FOR FAMILIES SEEKING ALTERNATIVE LOCATION OF SERVICE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

There are many factors families cannot control regarding their student's education. Establishing an appeal process for those dissatisfied with their child's special education placement gives them a sense of control over their child's safety and well-being. Increased peace of mind for parents could lead to stronger partnerships with Local Education Agencies (LEAs), making them more likely to cooperate throughout their student's educational journey. This process also promotes equitable access to learning by considering the nuanced and complex safety concerns throughout the city. Los Angeles Unified School District offers intra-district permits that families can apply for to transfer due to a range of reasons including, child care, safety and protection, continuing enrollment, sibling placement, and specialized programs.^[29] Parents must submit paperwork or a written explanation to support their request. Requests for permits are granted based on seat availability and staffing. Duplicating a similar process in DC should include:

- ▶ A clear and accessible application procedure
- ▶ A timeline for review and decision-making
- ▶ A dedicated committee or official to evaluate the requests
- ▶ Criteria for assessing the safety concerns and the needs of the student

LEA's should consider:

- ▶ **Clear Guidelines:** Develop comprehensive guidelines for assessing safety concerns and determining appropriate placements as a means to manage realistic expectations for families.
- ▶ **Appeals Committee Development & Training:** Train staff and committee members on handling sensitive cases and understanding the impact of community violence on students. This includes a deep understanding of conflicts between neighborhoods.
- ▶ **Timely Communication:** Families should be informed of the appeals process upon receipt of Location of Service letters with information about deadlines and restrictions surrounding filing an appeal.

OFFER SIBLING PREFERENCE FOR STUDENTS IN SPECIALIZED INSTRUCTION CLASSROOMS

Implement a sibling preference policy for students in specialized classrooms with siblings that already attend an out of boundary school. This would prioritize enrollment for siblings to ease the burden of coordination for families with multiple children. It would strengthen school communities by ensuring continuity and connection.

LEA's should consider:

- ▶ **Clear Criteria:** Develop criteria for sibling preference and ensure they are clearly defined and communicated.
- ▶ **Capacity Management:** Monitor specialized program capacities to manage the impact of sibling preferences on enrollment and ensure equitable access for all families.

PROVIDE STANDARDIZED REPORTING FROM PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND OFFERINGS

Public Charter Schools greatly contribute to the diversity of educational options in the District. Families have a range of methods to learn about different school options and their performance, including the DC Report Card and the Public Charter School Board's evaluation system, ASPIRE. However, families do not have easily accessible information about the range of special education programming options at each charter school. This standardized reporting would create greater transparency in school choice options and reduce the number of transfers due to special education concerns as parents are able to make more informed decisions. It would also increase the quality and accountability of special education programming.

LEA's should consider:

- ▶ **Standardization:** standardize the reporting of special education program offerings and incorporate it into current evaluation frameworks.
- ▶ **Oversight and Compliance:** Establish a system for reviewing the reports to ensure compliance with reporting requirements and cross reference discrepancies with parent grievances.

SECTION VIII

STAKEHOLDERS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC) 1A
Advocates for Justice in Education (AJE)
Ballou High School
Bard High School
Black Swan Academy
Cardozo Education Campus
Center City Public Charter School (Brightwood)
Center City Public Charter School (Congress Heights)
Children's Defense Fund
Children's Law Center
College Track
Communities in Schools
Community of Hope
Council of the District of Columbia
Critical Exposure
DC Bilingual Public Charter School
DC Department of Disability Services (DDS)
DC Department of Employment Services (DOES)
DC Department of Human Services (DHS)
DC Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR)
DC Housing Authority (DCHA)
DC Office of Disability Rights (ODR)
DC Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education
DC Policy Center
DC Public Library
DC Public Schools (DCPS)
DC Special Education Cooperative
DC Special Education Hub
DC State Board of Education (SBOE)
DC Superior Court
DCPS Division of Specialized Instruction (DSI)
DCPS Early Stages
DCPS Language Acquisition Division (LAD)
Decoding Dyslexia
Department of Behavioral Health (DBH)
Deputy Mayor for Education (DME)
Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice (DMPSJ)
District Bridges
District Department of Transportation (DDOT)

Dunbar High School
 E.L. Haynes Public Charter School
 East of the River Family Strengthening Collaborative (ERFSC)
 Eastern High School
 EmpowerEd
 EngageDC
 Every Day Counts Task Force
 Far Southeast Family Strengthening Collaborative (FSFSC)
 Georgetown University
 Global Kids
 H.D. Woodson High School
 Howard University
 Ingenuity Prep Public Charter School
 Johnson Middle School
 Kid Power
 KIPP DC Public Charter Schools
 Kramer Middle School
 Latin American Montessori Bilingual Public Charter School (LAMB PCS)
 Latin American Youth Center (LAYC)
 Many Languages One Voice (MLOV)
 Mayfair/Paradise Family Success Center
 Mayor's Office of Deaf, Deafblind, and Hard of Hearing (MODDHH)
 McKinley Technology High School
 McKinley Technology PTO
 Men of Strength (MOST) Club
 Metropolitan Police Department (MPD)
 Mikva Challenge, DC
 My School DC
 National Women's Law Center
 New Bethel Baptist Church
 Office of Human Rights (OHR)
 OSSE Division of Student Transportation (OSSE DOT)
 OSSE Office of Dispute Resolution (ODR)
 OSSE Office of Special Education within the Division of Systems and Supports, K-12
 Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE)
 Phelps High School
 Platform of Hope
 Plaza West
 River Terrace Education Campus
 Savoy Elementary School
 SBOE Student Advisory Committee
 Smart from the Start
 Sojourner Truth Public Charter School
 Strong Start
 The Lab @ DC
 Thurgood Marshall Academy Public Charter School
 Ward 2 Education Council
 Ward 3 Education Network
 Ward 4 Education Alliance
 Ward 5 Education Equity Committee
 Ward 6 Mutual Aid
 Ward 7 Education Council
 Ward 8 Council on Education
 Washington Leadership Academy
 Women Inspiring Strength and Empowerment (WISE) Club
 Woodson High School
 Young Women's Project

SECTION IX

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