

Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Hearing

Council of the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Education
Chairman David Grosso

Tuesday, April 12, 2016

Official Testimony of
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Office of the Student Advocate
District of Columbia State Board of Education

Good Morning, Chairman Grosso, and to all of the members of the Committee on Education.

My name is Faith Gibson Hubbard and I am honored to serve in the role of the Chief Student Advocate for the District of Columbia. Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

The Office of the Student Advocate was created to be “...an essential resource for those seeking to navigate the complexities of the public school system” in the District of Columbia. The mission of our office is to support and empower DC residents to achieve equal access to public education as an informational resource that supports students and parents through outreach and advocacy. In our work, we provide step-by-step assistance for students, parents, families, and community members to ***Be Informed, Be Connected, and Be Empowered***. Thus, this work requires a multipronged approach to ensure that student and parent voices are heard throughout the District. This work takes form in five ways – in our individual coaching; leadership training and workshops for students and families; resource development; coalition building with government, community, and organization stakeholders; and policy-level advocacy through coalitions and taskforces.

Services currently offered by our office includes:

- The operation of our public education information hotline which accepts “Requests for Assistance’ from students, parents, families, and community members to answer questions and provide information about public education and to refer individuals who contact our office to the appropriate agencies, offices, and organizations within the District that can meet their specific needs. Requests for Assistance can also be submitted online via our webpage.

- The creation and operation of our online Education and Community Resource Guide, which offers access to more than 400 resources in 30 various category areas of resources, agencies, and organizations that are focused on, and impact, education and educational attainment.
- We provide one-on-one generalized coaching to students, parents, and families on a variety of public education issues.
- We have and will continue to partner with relevant DC government offices and community based organizations to assist families on questions regarding the school enrollment process, provide targeted trainings and information sessions, and offer a host of online resources that equip families with advocacy tools and strategies for parent empowerment to improve educational access and outcomes for all students. Some of the trainings and information sessions include: panel discussions and know your rights workshops on special education; parent organization development and advocacy training (which will be piloted in Ward 7 and Ward 5).

For Fiscal Year 17, our office is looking to continue to engage in the aforementioned programmatic initiatives while adding others as well. For the purpose of this testimony I would like to highlight a few vital programmatic initiatives that our office wants to further engage in that are vital for serving parents and students but will find very challenging to do so in FY 17 with our current budget appropriation:

The first initiative would be to build and implement a secure and functional database to track office activities and questions and concerns presented to the office. To transition our current database (Google Drive) over to a secure system that can appropriately track

questions/concerns presented to our office in addition to office activities in the community while most importantly allowing our office to provide a greater level of confidentiality to families and guarantee that the questions raised and information shared with our office, is truly secure. An appropriate database will give our office the ability to better understand trends and correlations that the office is seeing and will give our office the ability to be appropriately responsive to those findings with a more tailored approach to supporting students and families in their advocacy.

The second initiative is focused on parent and student empowerment and advocacy. The goal of this initiative is to improve the capacity of parents, families, and prospective parents to navigate the education landscape and educational processes so that they become better informed of options that allow them to become better self-advocates. This would be realized through the creation of additional informational resources, focused on creating brochures and informational materials for parents in the areas of special education, student discipline, student enrollment and school selection, and effective communication tools.

Our office must focus on strategies to improve its website presence and make appropriate adjustments to ensure that it is user-friendly and interactive for students and families. This is particularly important for our online Education and Community Resource Guide. Currently the guide has a host of resources but is limited in its reach and usability.

Language access is a barrier to our engagement with non-English, or limited-English speaking, communities. It is vital for our office to increase, and improve, access to families of non-English speaking populations; thus offering materials online, and in printed form, in translated languages outlining the services of our office. The translation of materials is only one step in

the right direction; our office provides direct services to the community in a way that the language line cannot always appropriately assist. Many of our interactions with parents are within schools, community places, or in workshops or trainings that we facilitate. Lacking the ability to provide interpretation services in those settings blocks access to families that so desperately need the information that is being shared.

Finally, staffing needs remain a challenge. There is so much work to be done but with limited staffing comes a limited capacity to reach larger numbers of students and families that we desire to serve and that we know could benefit from the service that our office provides.

I would be remiss if I did not share our office contact information. If we can be of assistance regarding any questions or public education resources, our office can be reached at (202) 741-4692, by emailing us at student.advocate@dc.gov, or visiting the State Board of Education website located at sboe.dc.gov.

Again, thank you this opportunity to testify and I welcome any questions that you might have.