



Council of the District of Columbia
Committee of the Whole
Public Roundtable "Student Literacy in the District"
Thursday, June 14, 2022
Official Written Testimony of Serena M. Hayes, Ombudsman for Public Education
Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education

Chairman Mendelson, and members of the Committee of the Whole, thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am Serena M. Hayes, Ombudsman for Public Education.

The Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education is an independent office housed within the State Board of Education. The purpose of the Office is to serve as a neutral resource for families and schools who need assistance resolving school-based concerns. Through our day-to-day efforts, the Office works to resolve school-based conflicts with the District's public and public charter schools, ensure that students have equitable access to instruction, and identify and offer policy recommendations to improve educational outcomes for all students based on trends we observe in our casework.

According to the Office of the State Superintendent of Education's (OSSE) *School Year 2020-21 Local Assessment Collection Report*, around forty-two percent of students met their Local Education Agencies' (LEAs') established goals in literacy¹. The District defines literacy as "the ability to talk, listen, read, and write, leading to the ability to communicate and learn."² In addition to OSSE's report, EmpowerK12 conducted a study of district students. EmpowerK12 found that the District's at-risk students lost, on average, four months of learning in reading during distance learning³. EmpowerK12's data also showed that reading proficiency was down twelve percent for kindergarten through 2nd-grade students. Additionally, the study found that students who lived east of the river faced the most significant drop in reading skills. Lastly, EmpowerK12 found that at-risk students and students with disabilities were less likely to be tested during distant learning. For instance, only sixteen percent of students with disabilities in K-8 were tested last school year, and forty-three percent of students designated at-risk were tested⁴.

In the school year 2021-2022 (SY 2021-22), the Office of the Ombudsman received 27 literacy cases. In fifty-six percent of our literacy cases, the primary issue was the student's reading ability. Additionally, there was no difference among school sectors, as the data reflected an even split of literacy cases between District of Columbia public schools and public charter schools. Forty-eight percent of our literacy cases were elementary school families, seventy-four percent of students had an Individualized Education Program (IEP), and ninety-six percent received special education services.

¹ School Year 2020-21 OSSE Local Assessment Collection Report, Office of the State Superintendent of Education (Nov. 2021)

https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/2021%20OSSE%20Local%20Assessment%20Collection%20Report_FINAL.pdf

² CPL 2021 Booklet, Office of the State Superintendent of Education (Dec. 2021)

https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/CLP2021_Booklet2021_DecUpdate.pdf

³ EK12 Unfinished Learning Update Brief from Spring 2020-21, EmpowerK12 (Nov. 2021)

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f9857f027d55d2170cd92ac/t/61934ad6d24c803afec13834/1637042905631/EK12+Unfinished+Learning+Update+Brief+from+Spring+2020-21.pdf>

⁴ EK12 Unfinished Learning Update Brief from Spring 2020-21, EmpowerK12 (Nov. 2021)

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f9857f027d55d2170cd92ac/t/61934ad6d24c803afec13834/1637042905631/EK12+Unfinished+Learning+Update+Brief+from+Spring+2020-21.pdf>

Below are some of the experiences that families shared with our Office. Identifiable information about the families has been altered to preserve confidentiality. Please listen:

In one instance, a parent contacted our Office looking for support for his tenth-grade student reading on a 4th-grade level. The student had difficulty comprehending assignments and needed additional help. In another case, a parent was looking to get support for her 12th-grade daughter, who was reading at a 5th-grade level. Both students were receiving special education services.

In another case, a parent contacted our Office stating that her high school student needed support with reading comprehension. After seeking help directly from the school, the student was allowed to stay after school for one-on-one assistance with his teachers. The student received coursework during the suspension but could not complete assignments independently because of reading comprehension challenges. The parent hired a tutor and helped her student herself during the suspension. However, some teachers refused to accept the work submitted, stating that the student had not shown the same type of work in class that he had presented with the help of his mom and tutor. In this case, the student was not receiving any special education services.

Parents contacted the Office with promotion and retention concerns. The parent called the Office, stating that he wanted his daughter to receive reading support over the summer because she was in 6th grade but reading on a second-grade level. In another case, a parent contacted our Office seeking assistance for her 4th-grade student who could not read or write. The student was promoted to the next grade despite reading and writing challenges. In this case, the student was not receiving special education services, but the parent had requested an evaluation. In another case, a parent contacted the Office looking for support for his son, who was in 5th grade but reading on a 3rd-grade level. His student was receiving special education services.

In each of these cases, parents desperately seek resources to improve their students' literacy outcomes. The families who have contacted the Office regarding literacy concerns fear that their students will never catch up to peers and may never receive the literacy support they need. The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) updated its *Comprehensive Literacy Plan* (CLP) to address the disparaging literacy data across the District and align literacy instruction to best practices consistent with the science of reading.

The CLP is a step in the right direction for literacy instruction in the District. In addition to explaining how literacy skills are acquired, the plan proposes a process for developing assessment data consistently throughout the school year. The plan will also help identify students who may need a small group or other targeted interventions and uses the assessments to track student progress, determine what interventions are effective for a student, and when more diagnostic evaluations may be needed. This tiered teaching approach is known as response to intervention (RTI) or multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). The Office of the Ombudsman has recommended developing a citywide RTI structure for years and devoted much of our annual report recommendations in the school year 2018-19 to this effort. Although the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) has committed to revamping its MTSS to track and streamline interventions across its public schools, the CLP is the closest plan we have seen so far to promote MTSS across all schools, despite the limited literacy focus.

While the CLP is helpful, the plan does not go far enough to explicitly address growth expectations for students already significantly behind their peers. To close the literacy opportunity gap, families of students in all grade levels need to know what programs are available to support their student's needs, learn how to identify if their student's school is supporting their needs, and what to do if they believe their student is not making sufficient progress. There is content within the CLP that answers some of these

questions. But the CLP is both long and dense and, therefore, inaccessible to many of the District's families.

Finally, through our casework, the Office of the Ombudsman has experienced that there are insufficient out-of-time programs to meet the demand for literacy support. Parents have contacted our Office seeking connection to tutoring programs or summer school after being told that there was no space at the program that they sought to enroll their child. As a city, we desperately need to invest resources in equipping educators with the appropriate training to teach reading, including out-of-school-time program staff. We also need to ensure that out-of-school-time literacy programs are aligned with the literacy instruction best practices outlined in the CLP. Finally, understanding that ensuring educators are appropriately trained to provide literacy instruction aligned with the science of reading, we need to invest in the people who have the most significant access to students—parents and families. Encouraging LEAs to offer literacy sessions for parents and students that focus on how to continue promoting and supplementing literacy development at home would be helpful.

The harsh reality is that although the District's literacy challenges are severe, they are also consistent with the national literacy crisis. While this does not excuse our responsibility to find resolve, it does warrant that we look to other jurisdictions and explore their successes (and failures) as we continue to work towards improving literacy outcomes in D.C. City leaders must work together to resolve this issue. The CLP is a great start, but financial investments, implementation monitoring, and developing additional strategies to improve literacy outcomes for all students are needed.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have questions.