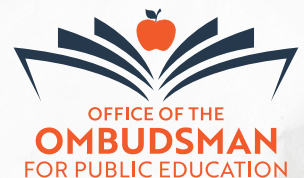




20
24

ANNUAL
REPORT





OFFICE OF THE
OMBUDSMAN
FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Celebrating a Decade of Re-dedicated Service to the DC Schools Community

This year of 2024, the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education celebrates a decade since its reopening in 2014. This anniversary reflects our ongoing dedication to supporting the DC school community. The consistent need for our services underscores our vital role in providing families, students, and staff with a reliable resource for resolving school-related issues. Over the past ten years, we've expanded our services, including specialized support through the DC Special Education Hub and enhanced case management to better meet community needs.

Successes of the 2023-2024 School Year

This past school year has marked significant progress for our organization and the institutions we serve. Our focus on enhancing our outreach efforts enabled us to assist more families. Our mediation services, a key part of our conflict resolution work, grew substantially, handling over 40 cases involving safety, communication, and disciplinary issues. We expect even more growth in the year ahead. Additionally, our Special Education Hub doubled its training programs and partnerships, helping over 2,000 families navigate the complexities of special education with greater confidence.

Overview of Complaints During SY 2023-24

During SY 2023-24, the highest volume of cases centered around three major issues: student safety, communication and engagement, and special education. Safety concerns, including bullying, physical altercations, and unsafe learning environments, were prominent in our caseload. Families often mentioned communication problems between schools and guardians, particularly inadequate responses from schools or miscommunication about students' academic progress. Special education cases continued to be among the highest number of cases, reflecting ongoing challenges related to individualized education programs (IEPs), appropriate accommodations, and academic progress. Our efforts to address these concerns facilitated dialogue that helped strengthen relationships between schools and families, resulting in better outcomes for students.

Recommendations for the School Community

As we plan for the future, we recommend enhancing safety policies and improving communication between schools and families, especially in special education. Strengthening partnerships and offering additional training opportunities will also promote the growth and effectiveness of our services, helping us meet the evolving needs of our school community.

Recommendation 1: Improve the Assignment Process for Location of Services (LOS)

LEAs should adjust the timeline for notifying families of changes to special education students' Location of Services (LOS). LEAs should also create an annual LOS assignment toolkit to support families' understanding of the LOS assignment process.

Recommendation 2: Improve Safety Communications and Expand the Victim Transfer Process

LEAs should revise parent/student handbooks, including discipline policies, to update procedures for voluntary student transfers due to bullying or violence..

Recommendation 3: Ensure Access to Safety Transfers for Public Charter Students

Charter school LEAs should also collaborate to establish a streamlined procedure that enables victims of bullying, harassment, or violence to transfer to another charter school, even if they attend a single-campus LEA.

LETTER FROM THE OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

October 1, 2024

To: The District of Columbia State Board of Education

There are two words that come to mind in my short time here—adaptable and resilient. Much like the families and students we serve, the office has shown great pride and possibility while navigating many changes. The office ended the last school year with the departure of the prior appointee, served diligently under an Interim Ombudsman, and welcomed formal new leadership when I started on April 22, 2024.

It is an honor to lead this dynamic team and serve each of you at this time of recalibration and celebration of a decade since our re-establishment. The past ten years were marked by lessons learned, pivots and expansion. Early on, from 2014-2017, the office gradually grew the team to meet increased demand and updated governance structures to bolster autonomous operations. Next, came new opportunities to connect in the community, weigh in on legislation, and then the office ushered in transitional leadership in 2019. In 2020, facing one of the toughest times in recent history, the office supported students and families through the Covid-19 pandemic, navigating virtual learning, and supporting students and their families through food scarcity and housing instability.

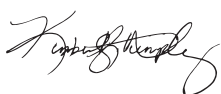
Now, several years after the formal end of the pandemic, recovery remains part of the new reality. Our school community and entire city continues to adjust to the post-pandemic environment, retooling for the evolved professional world and adapting standards to meet the socio-emotional needs of students and staff.

Throughout this past year, both safety and special education have emerged as prevalent issues among families and students. Concerns about unsafe school environments have been at the forefront of our casework and city conversations, alongside challenges faced providing appropriate special education services. This is why we are prioritizing our recommendations in both areas. A secure and inclusive learning environment is essential for the well-being and academic success of all students, especially those with special needs, and our office is committed to seeing improvements.

To remain a valuable resource, we will continue to expand community engagement. We are committed to upholding our core principles of independence, informality, impartiality, and confidentiality. We have also established shared values that guide our daily work both internally and externally. More on our values is provided below.


We proudly present this report on another year of connecting resources and supporting families. I am grateful for the warm welcome and partnership of each member of the State Board of Education. I look forward to your ongoing support as champions of this office's crucial role ensuring equal educational access.

Warmly,



Kimberly R. Humphrey, Esq.





Celebrating a Decade of Re-dedicated Service to the DC Schools Community

OFFICE OVERVIEW

Our Team

Kimberly R. Humphrey, Esq.
Ombudsman for Public Education

Hannah Blumenfeld-Love
DC Special Education Hub Program Manager

Da'Shae Willis
Program Associate

Whitney Jones
Program Support Specialist

Stephanie Arias
Assistant Ombudsman

Brianne Sullivan
Assistant Ombudsman

Jenifer Souza Dodds
Assistant Ombudsman for Special Education

Whitney Jones
Program Support Specialist

Trianna Downing
*DC Special Education Hub Communications and
Community Engagement Coordinator*

Jasmine Lopez
DC Special Education Hub Program Support Specialist

Diana Sanchez
DC Special Education Hub Program Support Specialist

Definition of Ombudsman

The word “ombudsman” is derived from a Swedish word meaning “entrusted person” or “grievance representative.” The word has come to denote a trusted agent who looks after the interests of a group. In the United States, numerous public ombudsman offices have been created — through legislative, executive, or judicial authorization — as independent, neutral agencies that monitor and work to improve the delivery of services for specific populations.

Our Role in the DC Educational Landscape

The Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education is an independent, impartial office that helps students, guardians and public education staff resolve school complaints individually and collectively, transforming problems into solutions that compel systemic progress for all public education in DC. As established by law, the Ombudsman’s mission is to be a “single office” that coordinates “transparency and accountability” by helping DC families navigate the five education agencies that govern and operate the public schools in DC.

**There are seven responsibilities described in our authorizing statute.
The office must:**

1. Participate in outreach for the purpose of connecting with caregivers and families to inform them about our services
2. Serve as a vehicle for communication between schools and families
3. Receive, evaluate, and respond to education-related concerns and complaints
4. Track data about the concerns and complaints that are brought
5. Use the amalgamated data to identifying systemic concerns (or trends)
6. Make recommendations based on observed trends
7. Issue annual reports.

Our Process

Once a stakeholder contacts the Office, the following steps occur:

1. **Screening** – Verify that the complaint is within the Office's jurisdiction. There are some cases that our office is not permitted to address, including: taking personnel action against school staff, providing legal advice, and intervening when the matter has already escalated to legal or administrative proceedings.
2. **Intake** – Ask the stakeholders a series of questions that are recorded in our database.
3. **Investigation/Examination** – Contact the other stakeholders (i.e., school or Local Education Agency (LEA) to acquire supplemental information.
4. **Research** – When the Office does not already have an answer to a question, conduct research.
5. **Conflict Resolution and Solutions** – The Office might offer the stakeholder(s) any of the options that follow: information (including referrals), coaching, shuttle diplomacy, attending or facilitating a meeting, mediation.
6. **Close Case** – After achieving resolution, the case is closed. A resolution can be reached at any point throughout the process.

Our Values

Five core values are essential to how the Office of the Ombudsman operates. We honor these values in everything we do:

1. **Accountability** – When we commit to something, we see it through. We support stakeholders in doing the same.
2. **Collaboration** – Working together is vital. We always work to foster collaboration both within our office and across the DC community.
3. **Integrity** – We say what we mean and mean what we say. We live our values every day.
4. **Open Communication** – Transparent communication is vital to everything we do. We champion clear, accessible information for everyone in the DC education landscape.
5. **Respect** – We honor the dignity and unique perspective of every member of our community.



OUTREACH IN SCHOOL YEAR 2023 - 2024

Community Engagement

The Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education’s community engagement efforts are key to our strategy for supporting families and schools across the District of Columbia. By actively participating in the community, we raise awareness of our services and build meaningful relationships with families and educational institutions. This engagement helps prevent misunderstandings and conflicts, fostering a more collaborative educational environment. Our proactive approach demonstrates our commitment to addressing community needs effectively and ensures that our Office remains a valuable resource.

This year, our Office strategically participated in over 45 outreach events, focusing on the wards and grade levels with the highest family engagement. By concentrating our efforts on Wards 4, 5, 7, and 8—where we received the most contact—we successfully connected with the communities most in need of our services. This targeted approach ensured our outreach was effective and tailored to the specific needs of the families and schools we serve.

Most Attended Trainings

- Terminology 101: The Who, What, and How of Special Education
- Parent Rights and Procedural Safeguards
- Preparing for an IEP Meeting
- All about IEP Goals: Appropriate, Ambitious and Attainable
- IEP v. 504 Plan: Which is Right for my Child?



Workshops & Trainings

This year, the DC Special Education Hub (SpEd Hub) conducted 57 training programs for nearly 2,000 parents, caregivers, and other education stakeholders. Our goal is to empower and educate attendees to prevent conflicts that might otherwise escalate into cases. By informing participants about students’ rights, available resources—including those provided by the Hub—and effective communication strategies, we aim to equip families with the knowledge needed to address and resolve issues before they arise.



These workshops covered essential topics such as understanding IEPs and 504 plans, transition planning, and the special education eligibility process. This training provided families with the tools to advocate effectively for their children. The SpEd Hub's comprehensive training series also addressed setting IEP goals, handling bullying and safety issues, and preparing for IEP meetings, ensuring families receive thorough support in guiding their students' educational journeys.

The SpEd Hub's training initiatives extended beyond parents and caregivers to include a wide range of community partners. We engaged with government agencies, DC Public Schools, DC Public Charter Schools, and various educational professionals such as teachers, teacher assistants, principals, and vice principals.

Outreach also included, therapists, psychologists, dedicated aides, social workers, healthcare organizations, Early Childhood HeadStart Programs, nonprofits, and other community organizations.

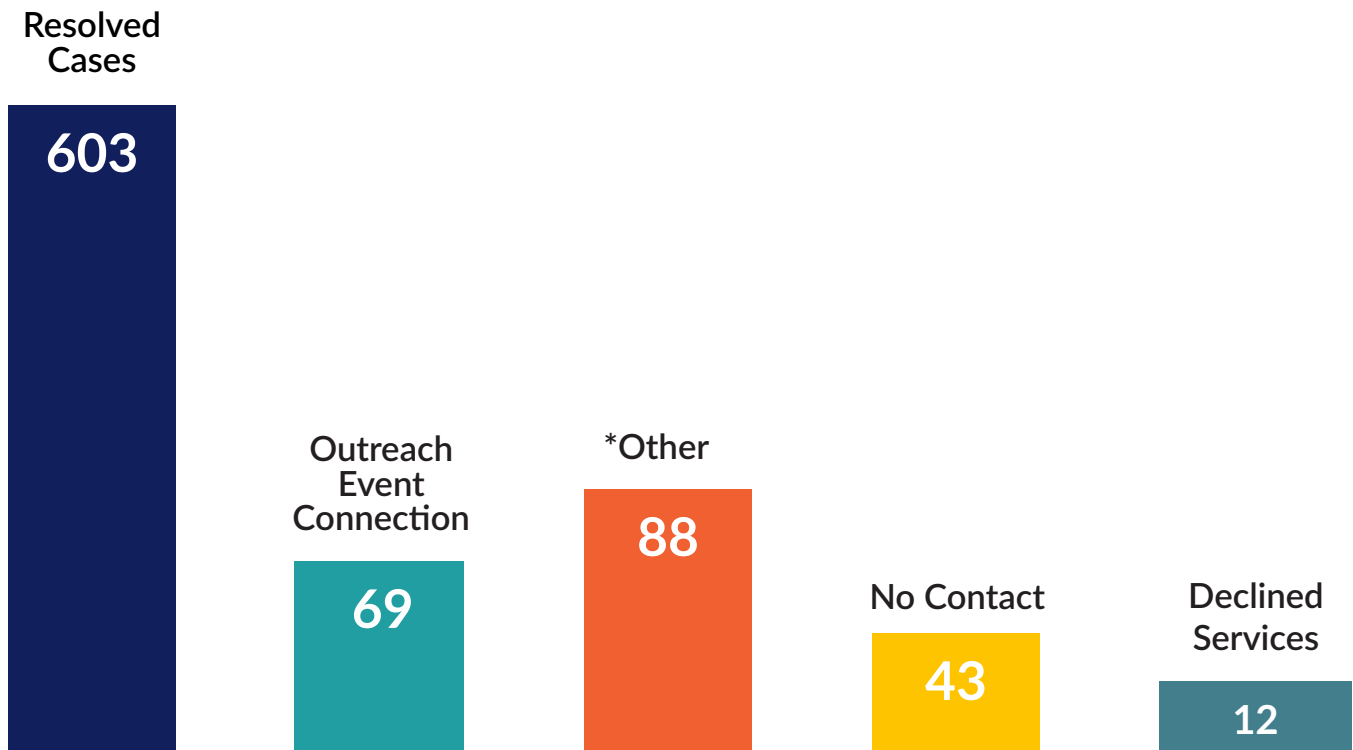
This broad approach ensured that all key stakeholders involved in a child's education were supported.

Data Overview SY 23-24

Over the past decade, the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education has supported more than 6,000 families and schools with conflict resolution strategies and provided essential tools and resources to guide students' education. As a key resource for families and schools, we work to ensure equitable access to high quality educational service and environments for all students. Our efforts have played a significant role in influencing policy and legislative changes in the District of Columbia, particularly in special education, absenteeism, student discipline, safety, and transparency. This commitment has been further strengthened by our expanded staff and the ongoing success of the DC Special Education Hub. By analyzing trends in our casework, we can also offer policy recommendations to improve educational outcomes.

During the School Year 2023-2024, the Office engaged an increasing number of families and experienced a notable reduction in complaints escalating to formal legal actions. This shift facilitated more constructive dialogue between families and schools, focusing on the best interests of students. We received 815 contacts and managed 603 cases during this school year. For issues that did not require formal intake, the Office provided tailored resources or referrals to appropriate programs and organizations. This approach ensured that even when concerns fell outside our scope—such as issues resolvable quickly or not pertaining to our core functions—families still received valuable support.

Total Engagement SY 23-24

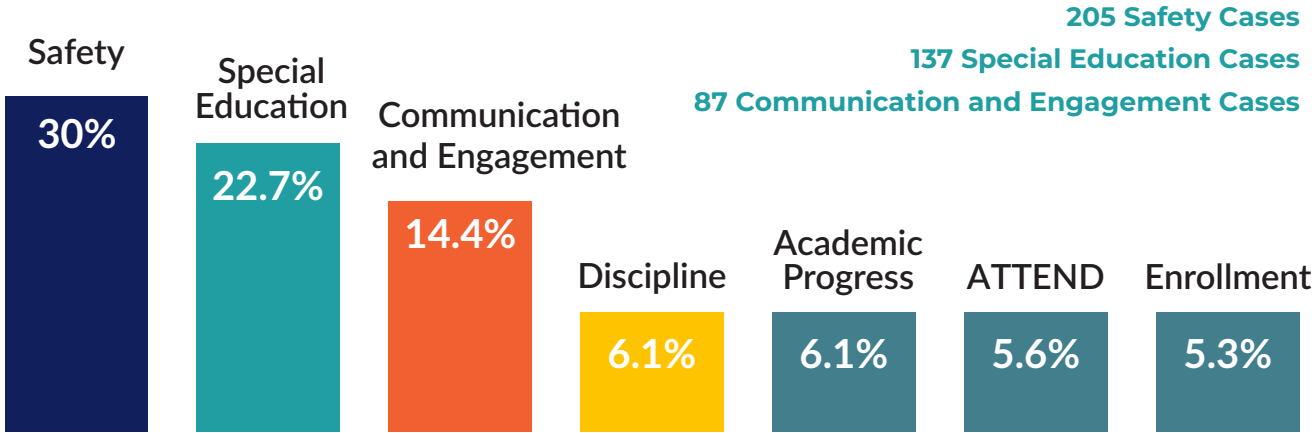


The Office’s caseload breakdown provides a comprehensive view of the concerns addressed throughout the year. Safety-related issues were the most prevalent, accounting for 205 cases and reflecting the priority given to ensuring a secure environment for students. Special Education followed as the second most frequent concern, with 137 cases, underscoring the ongoing need for tailored support and services for students with disabilities. Communication & Engagement (C&E) was next with 87 cases, highlighting the critical role of effective dialogue between families and schools.

Discipline and Academic Progress each represented 37 cases, indicating significant concerns regarding student behavior and academic performance. Attendance-related issues were categorized separately, with general attendance concerns at 32 cases and truancy-specific issues at 6 cases. Enrollment challenges comprised 24 cases, while resource needs, such as access to materials and support services, totaled 24 cases. Although less common, discrimination was reported in 4 cases, signifying that it remains an area addressed by the Office.

The data presented is measured in percentages, with cases having the fewest reports not prominently highlighted in the main charts. Specifically, Attendance/Truancy represents 1.05% of the cases, and Discrimination accounts for 0.70%. While these smaller categories are less frequent, they remain significant and are part of the overall case breakdown.

Case Overview SY 23-24

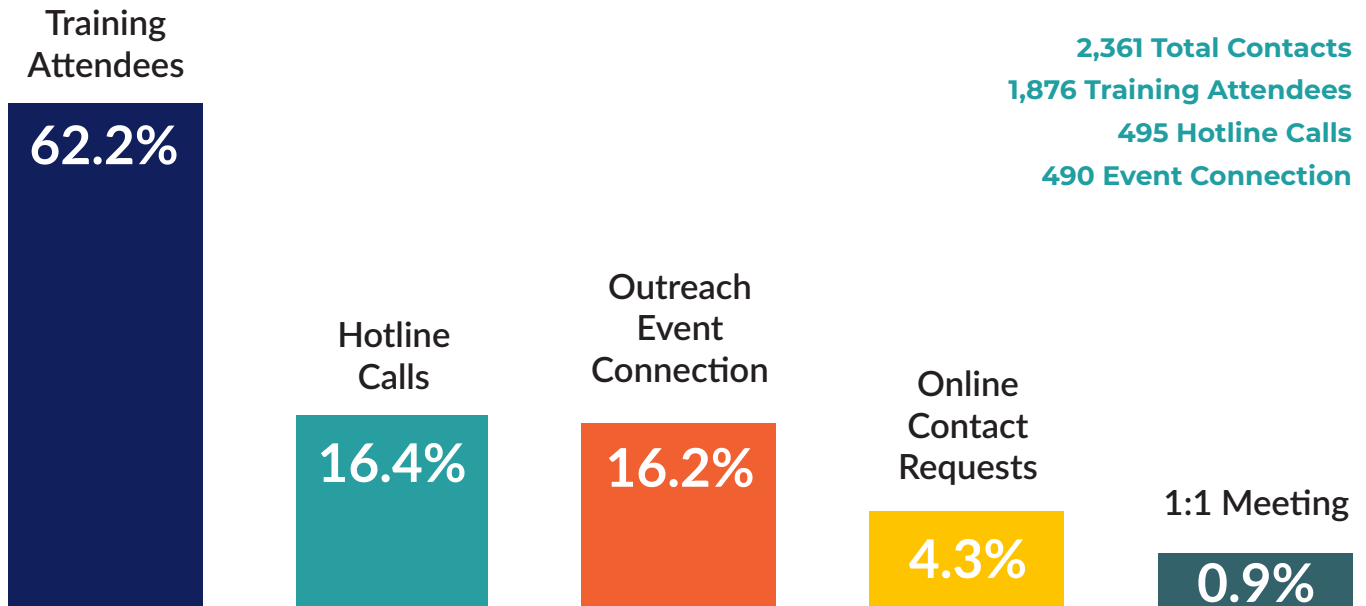


The report will provide a further analysis of the top two categories: Safety and Special Education. These categories make up the largest portions of the Office’s caseload and are critical areas of focus. The analysis will delve into each category, exploring the specific types of issues, identifying patterns observed throughout the year, and outlining the steps recommended to address these concerns. This detailed examination aims to offer a clearer understanding of the challenges faced by families and the interventions provided by the Office. Furthermore, our enhanced outreach continues to promote healthy relationships between families, community, and schools. By focusing on communication, safety, and attendance, the Office has fostered a more supportive educational environment for students by resolving conflict effectively and preventing the escalation of issues to legal action.

The DC Special Education Hub

The DC Special Education Hub (SpEd Hub), an initiative of our office, is dedicated to empowering families in the District of Columbia with the knowledge and resources needed to navigate special education effectively. This year, the SpEd Hub handled 215 cases and engaged with over 2,000 families and stakeholders through training participation, resource requests, and referrals. We offer resources in 11 different languages through our literature request form, ensuring accessibility for our diverse community. The SpEd Hub's work directly supports our office in addressing the growing special education concerns families raise and helps facilitate smoother case progression.

Total Engagement SY 23-24



95% of caregivers who used the DC Special Education Hub's services would recommend us to their family and friends. This strong endorsement reflects the trust and confidence that families place in our support. Parents consistently share positive feedback about their experiences.

Caregiver Satisfaction

95%

of caregivers would recommend the DC Special Education Hub to their families and friends.

Monthly Data

The Office's caseload data reveals significant insights, with the highest number of cases recorded in March 2024, peaking at 90, and the lowest in August 2024, with just 8 cases. August 2023 also saw a low caseload of 13 cases, which is noteworthy as it marks the beginning of data collection on August 15, 2023, and its conclusion on August 14, 2024. December typically observes fewer cases (27), a pattern often influenced by the winter break. Throughout the year, the cumulative caseload reached 603 cases, reflecting the diverse and demanding circumstances managed by our team.

Monthly Cases SY 23-24



Notable figures include October and May, with 81 and 68 cases, respectively. October is significant as it represents the early phase of the school year when concerns or complaints often arise as parents, caregivers, and schools adjust to new routines. In May, the increase corresponds with the transitional period of graduation, grade completion, and retention—a time when guidance and support are frequently sought.

Our ongoing analysis of these trends reveals that the Office's proactive community outreach and collaboration with educational institutions have fostered more constructive dialogue, ensuring families and schools work together in the best interests of the students.

Cases by Category

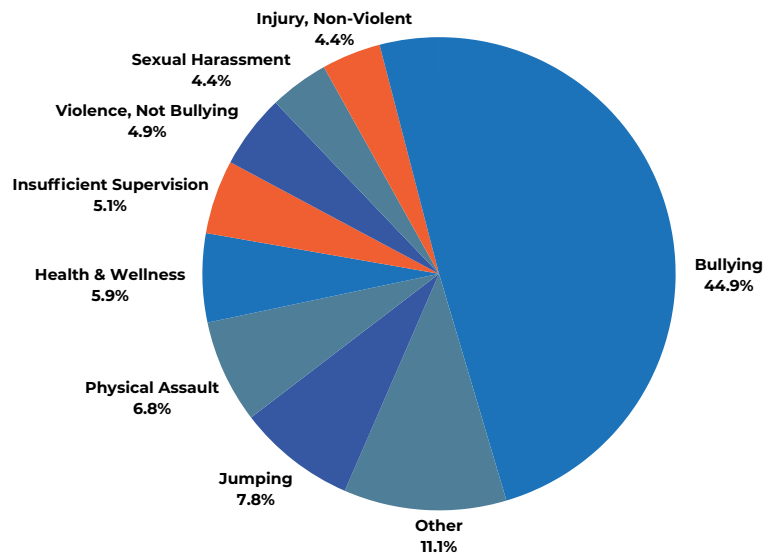
In reviewing the 2023-2024 school year, we observed a wide range of concerns brought to our office, each reflecting the unique challenges families face in navigating the educational system.

Each case falls into one of several main categories — safety, communication and engagement, discipline, academic progress, attendance and truancy, and special education—while subtopics (bullying, retention, IEP planning) within these categories help to further specify the nature of the concern. This distinction allows us to identify and address both broad trends and more specific challenges that arise for families.

Safety Cases

The breakdown of safety cases handled by the Office reveals a diverse range of concerns. Bullying, including both physical and non-physical incidents, was the most prevalent issue, with 92 cases reported. This highlights the ongoing challenge of maintaining a safe and supportive school environment for all students.

Safety Cases Categorized by Subtopic



Other important safety issues include physical assault between students and teachers, which involved 14 cases, and incidents of jumping, which were reported 16 times. Insufficient supervision was noted in 11 cases, underscoring the need for increased supervision within schools.

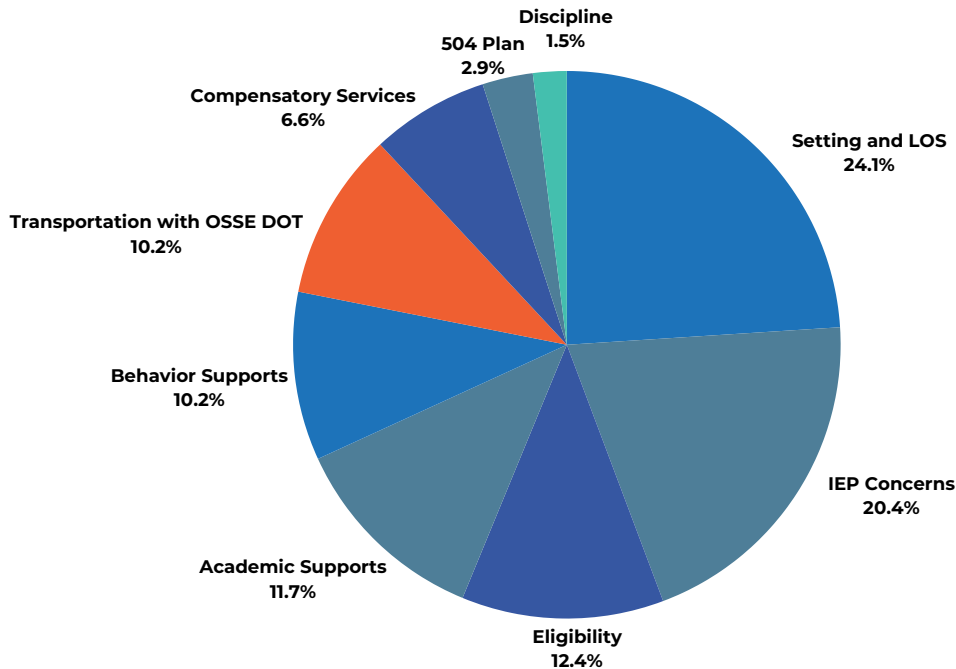
Concerns related to medical health and wellness were raised in 12 cases, indicating the importance of addressing students' physical and mental health while at school. Additionally, violence not classified as bullying was reported in 10 cases, and issues related to safe passage and sexual harassment were each noted in 9 cases. Non-violent injuries were recorded in 9 cases as well. The "Other" category, with 23 cases, includes various safety concerns that did not fit into the specific categories listed.

Together, these figures illustrate the broad spectrum of safety-related issues the Office addresses, reflecting its commitment to protecting and supporting student well-being.

Special Education Cases

Since its inception, the Office has acknowledged the crucial need for support for students with disabilities.

Special Education Cases Categorized by Subtopic



The breakdown of Special Education cases reveals a wide range of issues addressed by the Office. The most frequent concern was related to the school setting or location of services, with 33 cases reported, highlighting families' concerns about the Location of Services (LOS) assignment process and program quality overall. IEP (Individualized Education Program) concerns were the second largest category, with 28 cases, reflecting ongoing challenges with the development and implementation of these crucial plans.

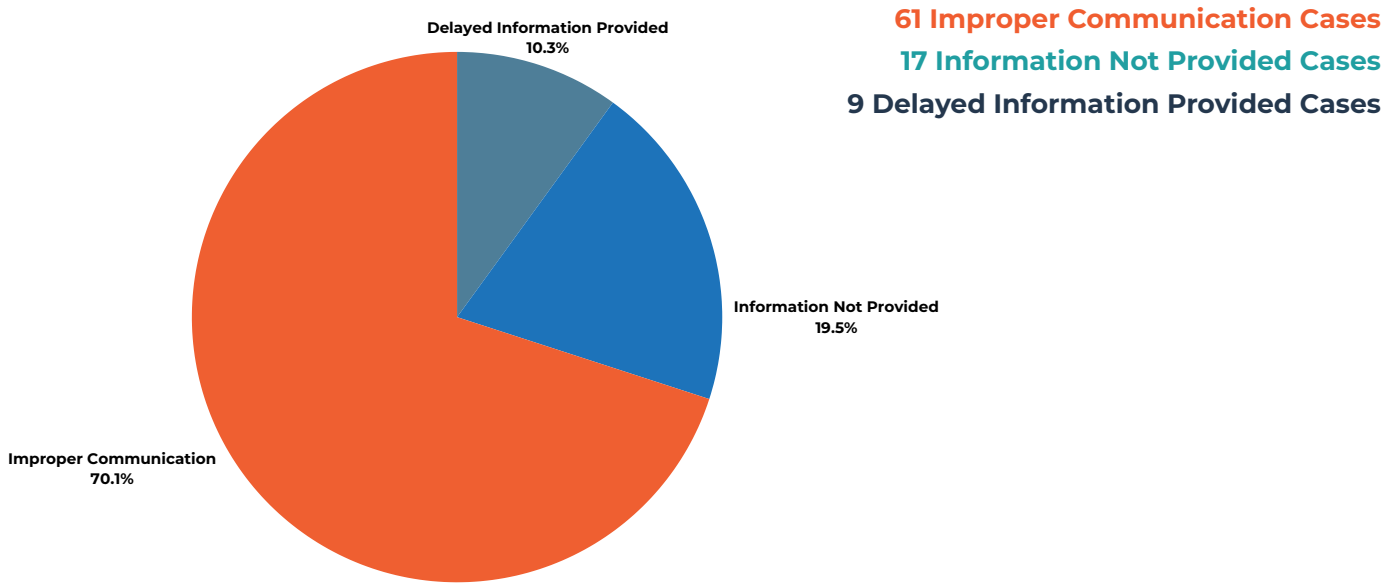
Eligibility issues, which determine whether students qualify for special education services, were noted in 17 cases. Academic support, with 16 cases, and behavior support, with 14 cases, also emerged as significant areas, underscoring the need for tailored interventions to support student success. Transportation issues with OSSE's Department of Transportation and compensatory services were each reported in 14 and 9 cases, respectively. Concerns related to 504 Plans and discipline were less common, with 4 and 2 cases, respectively. These figures illustrate the diverse and critical nature of the Special Education issues addressed by the Office, demonstrating the broad scope of support provided to students and families.

Additionally, around 30 special education cases were referred by the Special Education Hub. The SpEd Hub directs cases for Ombudsman services when families needs extend beyond information and resources but require further assistance or conflict resolution support.

Communication and Engagement Cases

Communication and Engagement highlights important aspects of interactions with families and schools. The most frequent issue within this category was inadequate communication, reported in 61 cases. This indicates that there were significant challenges in ensuring clear and effective communication between families, and educational institutions.

Communication & Engagement Cases Categorized by Subtopic



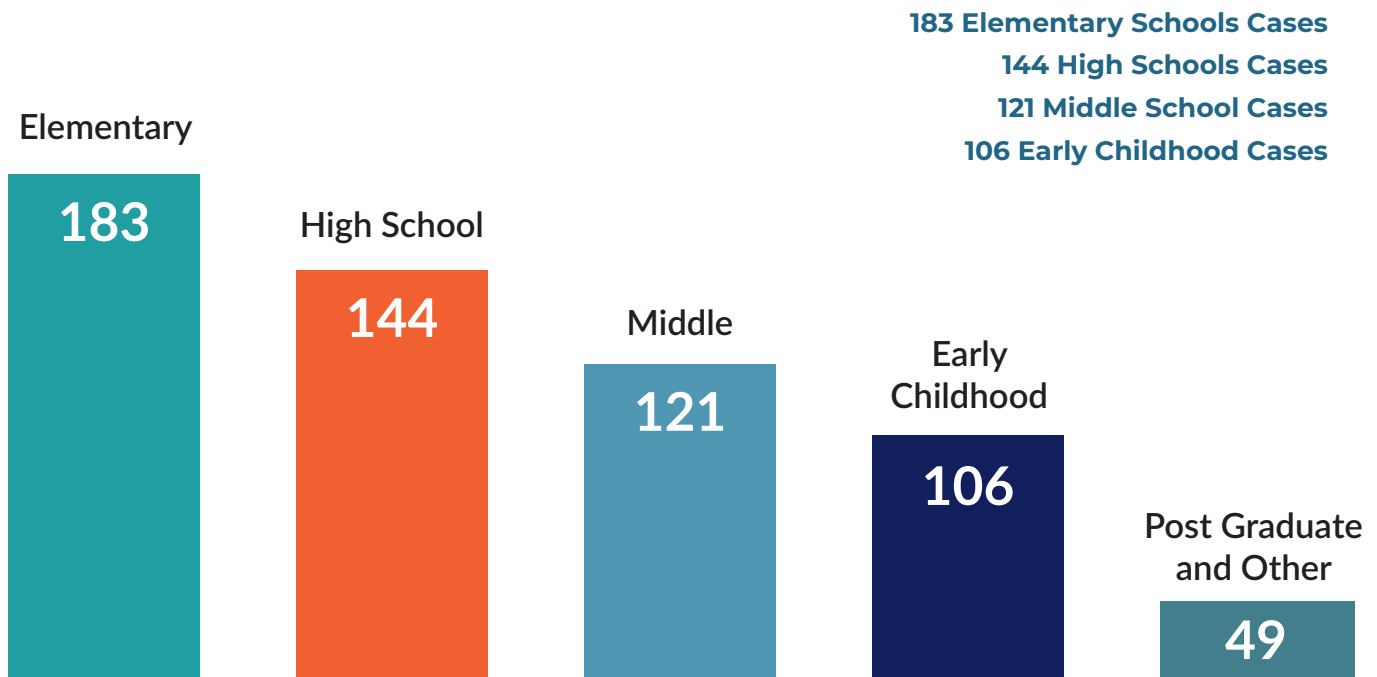
Issues related to the timeliness of information were reported in 9 cases, reflecting concerns about delays in providing necessary information. Additionally, there were 17 cases where no information was provided at all, underscoring gaps in communication that need to be addressed.

These numbers highlight critical areas for improvement in how schools engage families and ensure that timely and accurate information is shared. Addressing these issues is essential for fostering stronger connections and enhancing the overall effectiveness of communication.

Discipline Cases

Discipline cases refer to situations where students face actions such as suspensions, expulsions, or other disciplinary measures that may be seen as unfair or excessive. Concerns primarily focusing on issues related to suspension or expulsion, accounted for 37 cases, and inappropriate consequences or exclusions, which involved 11 cases. Many of these cases addressed school pushout practices—policies or actions that may indirectly drive students out of the school environment, often impacting marginalized groups disproportionately. The Office’s role in these matters has been crucial in ensuring fair and appropriate disciplinary actions and promoting alternatives that foster positive behavior and enhance student success.

Cases by Education Level



Grade Level

This year, our Office saw the highest case volume from elementary school students, with notable figures in Kindergarten and 3rd grade (44 cases each) and Pre-K4 (32 cases). Middle school students accounted for a significant portion, particularly in 6th grade (50 cases) and 8th grade (35 cases). The primary concerns for middle school students were safety and special education.

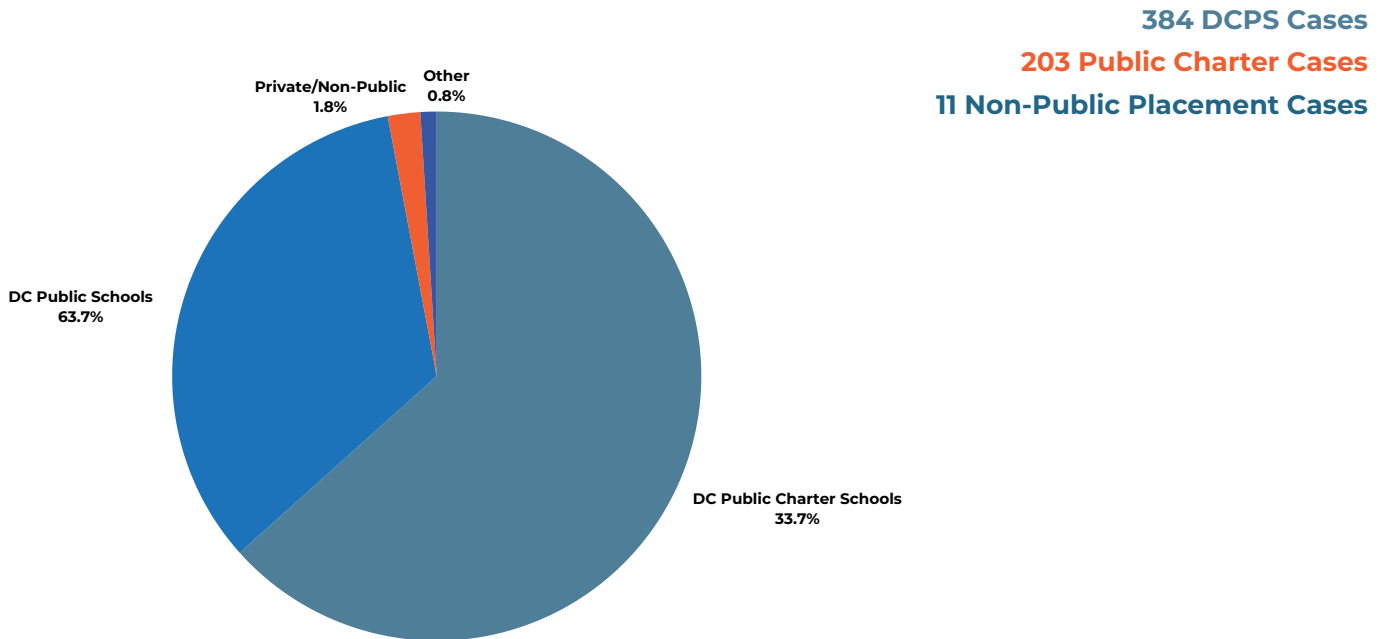
For high school students, 9th grade had the most cases (57), with other grades like 10th (40) and 12th (23) seeing lower yet notable numbers. Common issues in high school included academic progress, attendance, enrollment, and discipline. These trends underscore the diverse needs across grade levels, highlighting the importance of providing targeted support and resources to effectively address the challenges faced by students at each stage of their education.

The higher number of cases in transition grades, such as 6th grade (50 cases) and 9th grade (57 cases), is unsurprising. These grades often mark significant shifts in students' academic journeys, with 6th graders transitioning into middle school and 9th graders entering high school. During these transitions, students and families often need more support as they adapt to new academic, social and emotional challenges. The increase in case volume during these grades reflects the importance of ensuring that students receive adequate guidance and resources to navigate these critical transitions successfully.

School Sectors

In DC, students have the option to enroll at their in-boundary DCPS or apply through the public school lottery process to attend an out-of-boundary DCPS school, an application-based school, or a public charter school. The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) plays a crucial role in supporting students, families, and local education agencies (LEAs) in securing the least restrictive environment (LRE) for students with disabilities.

Cases by School Type



When a student requires placement in a nonpublic special education school, OSSE provides guidance and collaborates closely with LEAs, families, and nonpublic schools to identify the appropriate placement.

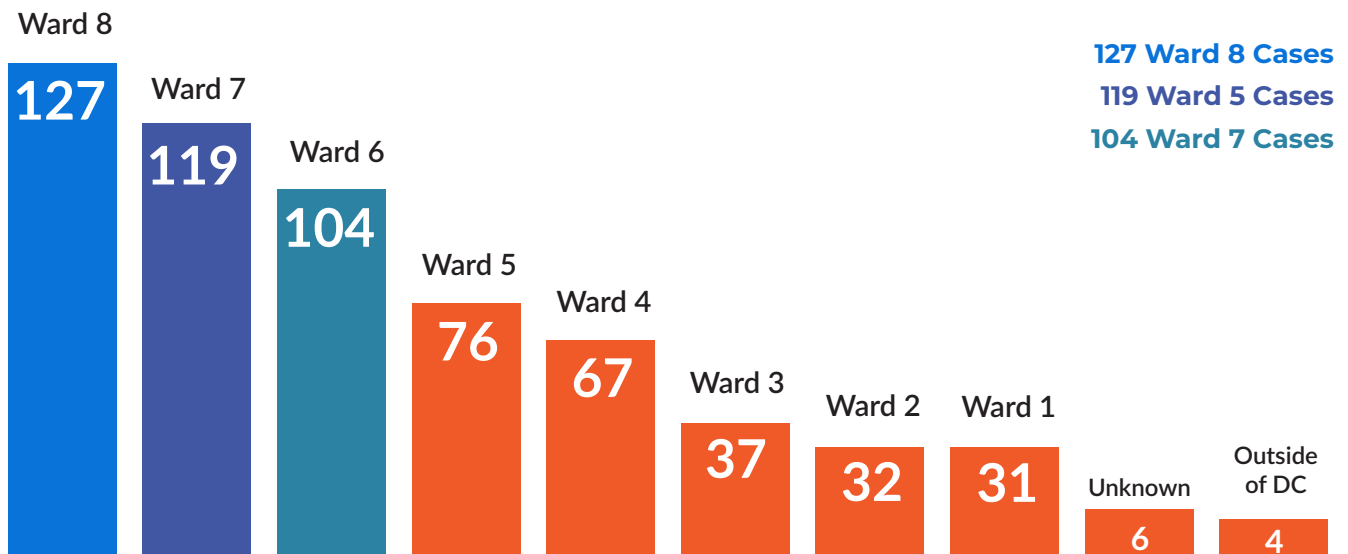
The distribution of cases by school type reveals that the majority of the Office’s caseload involved students in DC Public Schools (DCPS), with 384 cases, reflecting the widespread nature of concerns within the traditional public school system. Public Charter Schools followed with 203 cases, highlighting the growing number of students and unique challenges within these institutions. Non-public schools accounted for 11 cases, often involving specialized placements for students with disabilities.

Finally, the “Other” category, with 5 cases, reflects cases outside traditional educational settings, underscoring the Office’s commitment to supporting students across diverse school environments. This overall distribution highlights the Office’s ongoing efforts to support families across different school sectors and ensure that all students have access to a high-quality education.

School Wards

Overall, the distribution of cases across the Wards shows that Ward 8 had the highest number with 127 cases, followed by Ward 5 with 119 cases, and Ward 7 with 104 cases.

Cases by School Ward

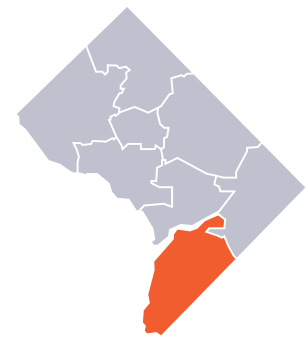


Moreover, the data from Wards 5, 7, and 8 aligns closely with the Office's broader findings, which consistently highlight safety, special education, and communication as the most significant concerns across the city. In these high-priority wards, safety emerged as the predominant issue, with Ward 5 reporting 45 cases, Ward 7 reporting 39, and Ward 8 reporting 38. This mirrors the Office's general caseload, where safety-related incidents have been the most frequent concern, underscoring the urgent need for interventions to safeguard students.

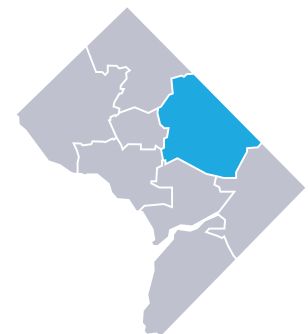
Special education also plays a major role in these wards, with 23 cases in Ward 5, 24 in Ward 7, and 21 in Ward 8, reflecting the high demand for specialized educational services and the complexities that families navigate in obtaining appropriate support for students with disabilities. This trend is consistent with citywide data, which has repeatedly shown special education as a significant area of need.

Cases by School Ward

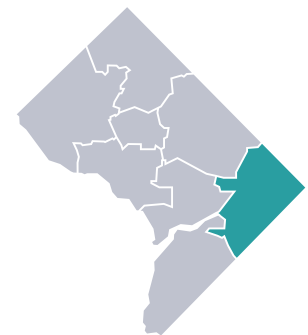
Ward 8



Ward 5



Ward 7



Communication & Engagement concerns, while not as prevalent as safety and special education, remain a crucial issue, with 21 cases in Ward 5, 7 in Ward 7, and 16 in Ward 8. These numbers illustrate ongoing challenges in effective communication between families and schools, underscoring the need for improved strategies to foster better engagement and dialogue .

In contrast, Wards 1, 2, and 3 reported significantly lower case numbers—32, 31, and 37, respectively—which suggests a relatively lower demand for the Office’s services in these areas, and perhaps stronger practices that should be replicated in the other Wards. Safety still emerged as a notable concern, although in smaller numbers, with 9 cases in Ward 1, 10 in Ward 2, and 11 in Ward 3. Special education and communication concerns followed, but the lower volume of cases indicates fewer systemic challenges in these Wards compared to Wards 5, 7, and 8.

This alignment of Ward-specific data with the Office’s overall findings highlights the consistency of these critical issues in high-need areas, while the lower-case volumes in Wards 1, 2, and 3 reflect fewer reported challenges. Together, these insights underscore the need for continued focus on addressing safety, special education, and communication concerns, particularly in communities facing greater socioeconomic challenges.

Mediation

Mediation Overview

Mediation is a vital component of our Office’s work in resolving conflicts and enhancing relationships between families and schools. Through open and constructive dialogue, we aim to address key issues that impact students’ educational experiences. Our mediation services focus on critical areas such as safety, communication, and engagement, all with the goal of creating a more supportive and effective learning environment.

This year, the Office facilitated 12 school-based mediations, addressing concerns related to safety, communication and engagement, and discipline. These sessions were instrumental in resolving conflicts around student safety, improving communication between families and schools, and managing disciplinary challenges. By proactively addressing these concerns, we helped to strengthen relationships and improve the educational environment for students.

ATTEND Mediation Program

During the 2023-24 school year, our Office, in partnership with the Office of the Attorney General (OAG), continued the ATTEND mediation program to address truancy issues, successfully conducting 31 ATTEND mediations. We aimed to identify and address obstacles to regular school attendance, such as transportation problems, sleep schedule inconsistencies, and communication breakdowns. These efforts have been pivotal in connecting families with resources and creating effective plans to enhance student engagement.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Every year the Office of the Ombudsman strives not only to serve as a complaint repository, but also to apply our insights in ways that inform thoughtful policy solutions. After careful analysis of the issues, the following recommendations were developed to address the highest trending areas of Special Education and Safety concerns.



Special Education

In SY23-24, despite significant efforts to standardize placement and feeder patterns,¹ legal guardians continue to express concerns about inconsistent and delayed communication in the Location of Services (LOS) process. These communication challenges have caused significant confusion and stress, particularly when LOS decisions resulted in multiple reassignments, limited school choices, or placements far from home, disrupting students' educational continuity.

These communication issues are particularly onerous for families navigating self-contained program enrollment within DC Public Schools (DCPS). While the DCPS has made considerable efforts to improve communication, there is a continued need to reduce confusion and provide clearer, more timely communication. Improved communication both within DCPS and also across public charter school local education agencies (LEAs) will ensure that families receive understandable updates and explanations of the LOS process that will help reduce frustrations about undesirable LOS decisions.

District and Federal Policies:

Location of Services (LOS) refers to the school or facility where a student with disabilities receives special education and related services based on their Individualized Education Program (IEP)² (5-A DCMR Chapter 30). In DCPS, when the IEP team, including the parent, determines a student requires a self-contained program, the Division of Specialized Instruction (DSI)³ within the DCPS Central Office assigns the student to a DCPS school that can meet the student's IEP placement needs. This assignment considers the availability of specialized programs and aims to place students as close to home as possible through programmatic feeder patterns.⁴ However, due to limited seats, students may sometimes be assigned to schools farther away, even when they were previously placed at a closer school that met all their needs.

¹ DC Public Schools, "Special Education Services," DC Public Schools Special Education Website, [SY24-25 Self-Contained Feeder Pattern | DC Public Schools](#), Accessed on 10/03/2024.

² District of Columbia Municipal Regulations, [Title 5-A DCMR Chapter 30: Special Education](#), Published July 1, 2022, Accessed on 10/03/2024.

³ DC Public Schools, "Special Education Services," DC Public Schools Special Education Website, [Home | Special Education DCPS \(dcpsspecial.ed.wixsite.com\)](#), Accessed on 10/03/2024.

⁴ District of Columbia Public Schools, [SY24-25 DCPS Enrollment and Lottery Handbook](#), Published December 2023, Accessed on 10/03/2024.

Both charter LEAs and DCPS enroll students matched through the District-wide My School DC lottery,⁵ regardless of special education status. If a student is matched with a school unable to implement their IEP (i.e. the appropriate self-contained program is unavailable or is full), LEAs reassign students to campuses within their networks that offer the necessary services.⁶ Parents are notified of such reassignments via a Location of Services (LOS) letter from DSI for DCPS⁷ schools or through existing communication methods used by charter LEAs. In such cases, the LOS assignment (or charter school equivalent) overrides the lottery match to ensure the student receives necessary services.⁸

In an effort to help parents with the above issues, DCPS has attempted to clarify the LOS process by posting information and resources on the DCPS Special Education website.⁹

The LOS assignment process for students in self-contained special education programs has revealed systemic concerns, particularly related to inconsistent and delayed communication. In SY23-24, some families received last-minute notifications about their child's reassignment, leading to considerable stress and difficulty adjusting to changes.

Case Example 1: A guardian's child attended the same school for four years but was unexpectedly reassigned to another school offering the same program without a clear explanation, leaving the family feeling unsupported.

Case Example 2: A family who had a positive experience at their older child's school received a LOS letter from DCPS Central Office stating that their younger child would be placed at a school 45 minutes away despite assurances that the current school could meet the IEP needs and had room for the younger sibling. This decision prevented the siblings from attending the same school.

Case Example 3: The legal guardian shared that her Pre-K4 student was evaluated at and attended a charter LEA. The student was later matched with a DCPS school through the My School DC application, and the guardian was initially satisfied with the placement. However, she was later informed that her daughter could not enroll at the matched school and would need to go through the DCPS Location of Services (LOS) assignment process. This left the guardian frustrated with the My School DC lottery application process, which she was using for the first time.

These cases illustrate systemic issues that remain with the current LOS assignment process, which makes it problematic for students requiring self-contained special education programs to enter the lottery (due to probable reassignments from lottery matches) and limits their access to school choice. In our 2021 Annual Report, we recommended that DCPS's self-contained classroom realignment strategy should allow families to participate in the lottery equitably.¹⁰ However, the process should not get in the way of what is practical and/or workable for students and families that are already facing a number of challenges.

⁵ My School DC, "About My School DC," My School DC Website, <https://www.myschooldc.org/about/about-my-school-dc>, Accessed on 10/03/2024.

⁶ My School DC, "Students with Disabilities and the Public School Lottery," My School DC Website, <https://www.myschooldc.org/how-apply/students-with-disabilities>, Accessed on 10/03/2024.

⁷ District of Columbia Public Schools, *SY24-25 DCPS Enrollment and Lottery Handbook*, Published December 2023, Accessed on 10/03/2024.

⁸ District of Columbia Public Schools, *SY24-25 DCPS Enrollment and Lottery Handbook*, Published December 2023, and My School DC, "Students with Disabilities and the Public School Lottery," My School DC Website, <https://www.myschooldc.org/how-apply/students-with-disabilities>, Accessed on 10/03/2024.

⁹ DC Public Schools, "Special Education Services," DC Public Schools Special Education Website, [Home | Special Education DCPS \(dcpsspecial.ed.wixsite.com\)](https://www.dcpsspecial.ed.wixsite.com), Accessed on 10/03/2024.

¹⁰ DC Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education, *2021 Annual Report*, Published October 2021, Accessed on 10/03/2024.

Recommendation:

Communication Timeline and Toolkit: We recommend a collaborative approach to ensure these practices are consistently applied and understood across all DCPS schools and charter LEAs. This includes clearly defining communication timelines in the enrollment guidelines. For example, after a parent formally submits their student's IEP, schools should notify families within five business days if the matched school through the My School DC lottery cannot accommodate the IEP. This notification requirement should be included in enrollment handbooks at all LEAs, thus giving families time to explore other options and avoid last-minute surprises. Additionally, LEAs should create and update an annual toolkit titled 'Location of Services: How Are Students Assigned to a School?' This toolkit, provided during training sessions, will outline the assignment process and emphasize clear communication during IEP meetings, especially concerning feeder pattern policies.

Conclusion:

Communication between families of students with disabilities and individual LEAs is essential to families' understanding of specific special education procedures and ensures they are fully informed about self-contained classroom assignments and enrollment options for students with disabilities. Despite commendable progress by DCPS in developing information and resources about the LOS process,¹¹ improved communication by both DCPS and charter schools is still needed. Feedback from families highlights ongoing confusion and inconsistent information, indicating opportunities to strengthen existing communication strategies to support families effectively and minimize disruptions to students' education. Implementing enhanced communication strategies will enable DCPS and charter LEAs to provide families with consistent, timely, and clear information, thereby improving transparency and building trust in the LOS process.



¹¹ DC Public Schools, "Special Education Services", DC Public Schools Special Education Website, [Home | Special Education DCPS \(dcpsspecial.ed.wixsite.com\)](https://www.dcpsspecial.ed.wixsite.com), Accessed on 10/03/2024.



Student Safety

Families in DC frequently have concerns about their children's safety, both at school and during their commutes. Youth in DC are twice as likely to witness or be victims of crime compared to the national average (Brann, 2023). The Panorama survey, given to DC students showed that students as well as parents have serious concerns related to school safety, as 24 percent of students reported not feeling safe at school, both physically and psychologically (Coffin & Mason, 2023).

During the 2023-2024 school year, common concerns included bullying, physical altercations, and overall student safety, reflecting broader issues regarding student security and well-being. In many instances, parents reached out to our office with urgent requests for their child to be transferred to a different school following serious incidents of violence or bullying. DC students frequently encounter violence both in school and while commuting to and from school. We have documented numerous cases where students have been victims of serious offenses on the campuses of DCPS or DC Public Charter Schools, with incidents reported to local authorities either by the school or family members.

Many of these incidents stem from school-based conflicts between students that have led to families requesting student transfers. Increased physical altercations between students have been reported, often stemming from unresolved conflicts or bullying. Some incidents have escalated to the point where law enforcement intervention was required, causing significant concern among parents about their children's safety and the learning environment.

Families often expressed frustration with the response, communication, and delays caused by the lack of coordination between local education agencies (LEAs) and law enforcement. Additionally, the perceived inadequate response or lack of action by LEAs and MPD has led many students and families to feel compelled to "take matters into their own hands," distrusting schools and local authorities to ensure student safety in dangerous situations. In some instances, individuals have reported directly confronting other children or families, resulting in verbal or physical altercations, and occasionally arrests. These actions not only endanger the broader school community but can also exacerbate overall community violence.

District and Federal Policies:

The regulation DCMR 5-E3809 - Individual Student Victim Transfer Option was officially adopted by the District of Columbia State Board of Education on March 12, 2004 (Updated September 13, 2017).¹²

This regulation asserts the right for a student to transfer schools within their LEA if they have been the victim of violence, bullying, or other serious safety concerns. It specifies the conditions under which a victim can request a transfer, and the steps required to facilitate this process. The regulation has been part of the broader efforts by the DC State Board of Education to address student safety and set a standard for appropriate responses to incidents of violence and bullying.¹³

DCPS student discipline policy makes no mention of law enforcement or when they should become involved in matters related to protecting student safety, law enforcement is only mentioned in DC Code 3826 - "Part C – Student Discipline in terms of "referral to law enforcement" and "school-based arrests," though there are not specific parameters given for this action.¹⁴ The policy simply states, "school personnel shall consider whether student behavior can be safely and appropriately handled through other disciplinary action before making referrals to law enforcement or seeking school-related arrest," leaving the interpretation and implementation of this policy up to the LEA (D.C. Code § 38-2202, n.d.).¹⁵

The following are just a few examples of incidents that led parents to request transfers or that demonstrate gaps in communications that did not support student safety.

Case Example 1: The parent of a non-speaking high schooler urgently requested a transfer due to severe concerns about staff misconduct. This incident resulted in MPD and CFSA involvement.

Case Example 2: A parent reported an incident where their son was violently attacked by four older students without any apparent provocation. This was not the student's first experience with being attacked at school, and this incident occurred despite the school's earlier implementation of a safety plan. Communications were unclear between the school and authorities and the child was out for several months as a result of the entire incident.

Case Example 3: Another parent recounted an event in which her son was brutally ambushed by a group of male students. The assault involved severe physical violence, including being beaten and body slammed onto the ground.

¹² District of Columbia Municipal Regulations, 5-E3809: Individual Student Victim Transfer Option, in 5-E38: State Education Agency Functions of the Board of Education (Chapter 5 Education), <https://www.dcregs.dc.gov/Common/DCMR/RuleDetail.aspx?RuleId=R0025098>, Accessed on 10/03/2024.

¹³ Brann, J. (2023). "Community Violence Exposure," DC Policy Center Website, <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/community-violence-exposure>, Accessed on 1-0/03/2024.

¹⁴ District of Columbia Municipal Regulations, DC Code § 38-236.03: Establishment of School Discipline Policies, In Part C - Student Discipline, <https://code.dccouncil.gov/us/dc/council/code/sections/38-236.03>, Accessed on 10/03/2024

¹⁵ Chelsea Coffin and Hannah Mason, "State of DC Schools 2022-23", DC Policy Center Website, <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/state-of-dc-schools-2022-23>, Accessed on 10/03/2024.

Recommendation:

Update Parent/Student Handbooks: We recommend that schools revise their parent/student handbooks, including discipline policies, to include updated policies and procedures for requesting a transfer, particularly for victims of bullying or violence. This should include clear information on how to request such transfers and available options. Note that current DCPS policies focus on involuntary transfers without addressing victim-specific transfers, and charter schools lack related policies.

Guidance should allow parents to be involved in the Safety Transfer process by considering the following:

- Assess whether the new school choice presents any transportation or safety barriers.
- Provide parents with multiple school options to determine the best fit for their family and students.

Develop Victim Transfer Process for Charter Schools: To address the safety concerns of students and parents in smaller or single-campus LEAs (charter schools), we propose a Safety Partnership Plan managed by the DC Public Charter School Board. This plan will group all DC Public Charter Schools into sectors based on their locations, with schools agreeing to accept each other's students in the event of a serious safety issue.

Conclusion:

To ensure the safety of DC students, it is necessary to continue to critically examine the current systems of inter-agency collaboration in the event of major safety threats. The vagueness of current policy, combined with the lack of integration of the relevant part of DC code¹⁵ into school discipline procedures, has led to an inconsistent approach to safety threats across DC schools. As a result, school leadership is often left to determine on a case-by-case basis when to involve law enforcement or other authorities. While most parents support the phasing out of police in schools, they continue to demand that more be done to keep their children safe at school, especially in neighborhoods which experience greater community violence.

Implementing a detailed and transparent process for parents to request a transfer for their child who has been a victim of bullying or violence is crucial to enhance student safety and support the well-being of affected students. This recommendation aims to ensure that all transfer requests are handled fairly, sensitively, and efficiently, thereby contributing to a safer and more supportive educational environment.

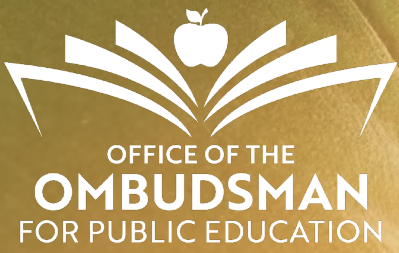
LOOKING AHEAD

Continuing Our Impact

Over the past several years, we have witnessed enormous changes within the DC education landscape. From remote learning due to the pandemic to increased safety concerns to changes in special education policy, the Office of the Ombudsman has been on the forefront of supporting families, students, and schools as our community adjusts to the ever-evolving state of public education.

As our office looks forward, we will remain thoughtful and collaborative to meet students, families, and schools where they are and to build meaningful connections across our community. In the coming year, we will focus our continued work on four key priorities:

1. **Family Engagement:** Families are the core of our work. We look forward to continuing to strengthen relationships between families, schools, and community partners.
2. **Bullying & Safety:** We will continue tirelessly supporting our community as we help to ensure every student feels safe, secure, and loved throughout their entire school day and beyond.
3. **Special Education:** We are committed to continuing our work in serving students with disabilities and their families through the DC Special Education Hub and the work of our Ombudsman.
4. **Community Schools:** A school is far more than just a building; it is the heart of its community. We are dedicated to supporting schools in becoming centers for learning, fellowship, and the essential resources that meet the needs of their unique communities.



Appendix I

Work Summary for SY2023-24

842

Contracts
Received

603

Cases
Examined
and Resolved

45

Community
Outreach Events
Attended

57

Trainings
Provided by
the DC Special
Education Hub

1876

Individuals Trained
by the DC Special
Education Hub

Appendix II

Definition of Topics

ACADEMIC PROGRESS

Matters involving student grades, credits, transcripts, and curriculum that impact learning and/or appropriate matriculation.

ATTENDANCE

Matters related to a student's regular and timely presence in school that impact learning, appropriate matriculation, and/or student welfare.

COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Matters preventing a student from accessing their education due to real or perceived breakdowns in the ability of parties to share information appropriately. Concerns about staff and staff behavior fall into this category.

DISABILITY/SPECIAL EDUCATION

Matters preventing a student from accessing their education due to a student's diagnosed or suspected disability.

DISCIPLINE

Matters regarding a student who has been temporarily or permanently placed out of school due to a behavior or disciplinary infraction, including but not limited to formal suspensions and expulsions.

ENROLLMENT

Matters preventing students from properly registering for school.

RESOURCE NEED

Matters related to a lack of goods, services, or information that impacts student learning or ability to attend school regularly.

SAFETY

Matters concerning the physical and emotional well-being of students on campus, during school events, and as they travel to and from school. Here are all the subtopics within the safety category:

BULLYING

Matters involving a student that feels harassed or targeted by another member of the school community. Additionally, the contact states that the harassment happened over time.

IMPROPER COMMUNICATION

Improper communication between parties can be yelling, using inappropriate language, or overall lack of communication or disconnection. Lack of communication between parties includes a parent/caregiver not being notified about their child's education or not being aware of a particular incident involving their child.

INCIDENTS INVOLVING TEACHERS AND OR STAFF MEMBERS

Matters alleging improper behavior, including inappropriate language and physical assault by school staff or administrator directed towards a student.

INJURY OR HARM UNRELATED TO VIOLENCE

Matters where student(s) were physically harmed or injured for reasons unrelated to school violence, e.g., insufficient adult supervision. However, these incidents are the most typical concerns of families of students with disabilities.

JUMPING

Matters where students were engaged in a fight, including fights where one group of students targeted a much smaller group of students (also known as "jumping").

MEDICAL / HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Matters impacting learning or attendance for students with physical or mental welfare concerns, not caused by a disability.

SAFE PASSAGE

Matters involving safety concerns that arise as students travel to and from school.

SCHOOL-WIDE FIGHTS

Matters regarding excessive fighting at school overall.

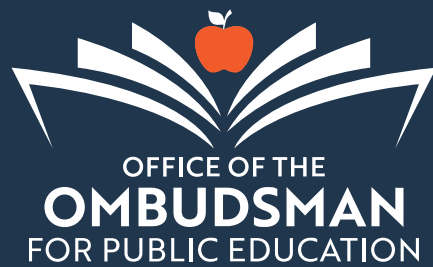
SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Matters involving unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that a reasonable person determines to be so severe, pervasive, and offensive that it effectively denies a person equal access to the education program or activity.

SINGLE INCIDENT OF VIOLENCE

Matters where there was no representation that the threat of physical violence or the threat of physical violence is ongoing.





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