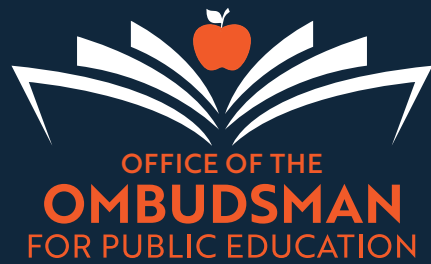




2023



OFFICE OF THE  
**OMBUDSMAN**  
FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

# ANNUAL REPORT

# DCO / '23

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As we reflect over the past nine years leading up to the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education's 10-year anniversary, the Office highlights its continued growth as an office and in the community. The Office has positively impacted thousands of families and schools, coaching them on conflict resolution strategies and providing family-friendly resources to parents. The Office has also influenced significant policy and legislative changes in the District of Columbia around virtual learning, special education, student discipline, safety, and strategies to improve transparency.

In School Year (SY) 2022-23, the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education experienced myriad student violence concerns, and trickling effects from the pandemic-era including teacher and school staff turnover impacting students' ability to receive equitable access to education, communication breakdowns, and higher levels of trauma and anxiety from students, caregivers, teachers, and staff, which led to more conflicts and less restraint. The Office also again worked on increasing its visibility in the community attending 36 outreach events across the district and connecting with hundreds of families.

In total during SY 2022-23, the Office received 1,364 contacts and managed 790 cases. Compared to SY 2021-22, the Office's cases increased by approximately 26% and contacts increased by 64%. The largest percentage of cases in SY 2022-23 involved Student Safety/Bullying making up 31% of our cases. Special Education concerns was a close second comprising about 24% while the third largest category was Communication and Engagement at 14%.

Additionally, this year, the Office received the most calls from families enrolled in schools in Wards 4, 5, 7, and 8 for all categorized concerns except discrimination, which was mostly reported in Wards 3 and 6.

**Policy Recommendations** SY 2022-23 policy recommendations address concerns identified in the data section of this report. In brief, the Office recommends the following:

**Trend:** DC Public Schools encountered difficulties when implementing the District-Wide Bullying Prevention Policy.

**Recommendation:** The Office's policy recommendation is to establish district-wide guidelines for using restorative practices/mediation when a student has been bullied or alleges bullying.

**Trend:** Families of students with disabilities utilizing OSSE DOT services experienced communication challenges regarding pick-up and drop-off. Insufficient communication resulted in attendance/truancy issues.

**Recommendation:** OSSE should develop an advanced real-time tracking application that enables families and school attendance counselors to monitor students' expected arrival times, drop-off schedules, bus delays, and route updates.

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2023

## LETTER FROM THE OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

November 1, 2023

To: District of Columbia State Board of Education

By now, you may have received the news regarding Serena Hayes's departure. After dedicating four and a half years to the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education, Serena announced her resignation on June 23, 2023. We extend our deepest gratitude to Serena for her invaluable contributions to the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education, District families, and our school communities.

In November 2021, I had the privilege of joining the team as an Assistant Ombudsman for Public Education. During my tenure, I spearheaded the development of the Student-to-Student Conflict Resolution Pilot Program. I provided guidance to over 75 school leaders on effective conflict resolution strategies, collaborated as a mediator with the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) to address truancy issues among younger children through parent engagement and mediation, and facilitated resolution meetings for more than 300 families throughout the District, addressing various school community issues.

On July 19, 2023, I assumed the role of Interim Ombudsman, as recommended by Serena and approved by the State Board of Education, serving until January 24, 2024. It is an immense honor to continue the Office's legacy and uphold the crucial work initiated by Serena and her predecessors.

Despite the recent transitions and the addition of new team members, our commitment to serving families and stakeholders remains unwavering, steadfastly positioned at the forefront of our mission. We are continuously strengthening our ability to foster collaborative solutions between families and schools, and I take great pride in our accomplishments during the 2022-23 school year. With optimism and determination, we look forward to the meaningful work we will undertake in the future, while always moving the Office "Forward with Fortitude."

Yours in Education,

*Toni R. Criner*

Toni R. Criner



# DCO / '23

## THE OFFICE OF THE OMBUDSMAN FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

### OUR TEAM



#### Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education

**Toni Criner**, Interim Ombudsman for Public Education

**Serena Hayes**, Ombudsman (through June 2023)

**Jhoselin Beltran Contreras**, Special Education Assistant Ombudsman

**Brianne Sullivan**, Assistant Ombudsman

**Stephanie Arias**, Assistant Ombudsman

**Dierra Dupree**, Program Associate (through September 2023)

**Whitney Jones**, Program Support Specialist

**Crystal Williams**, Assistant Ombudsman (through May 2023)



#### DC Special Education Hub

**Hannah Blumenfeld-Love**, Program Manager

**Trianna Downing**, Communications and Community Engagement Coordinator

**Jenifer Souza-Dodds**, Program Support Specialist

**Jasmine Lopez**, Program Support Specialist

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### WHAT IS AN 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 agencies that monitor 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 parents and students 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; and
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), involved 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, shuttled 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 VISION

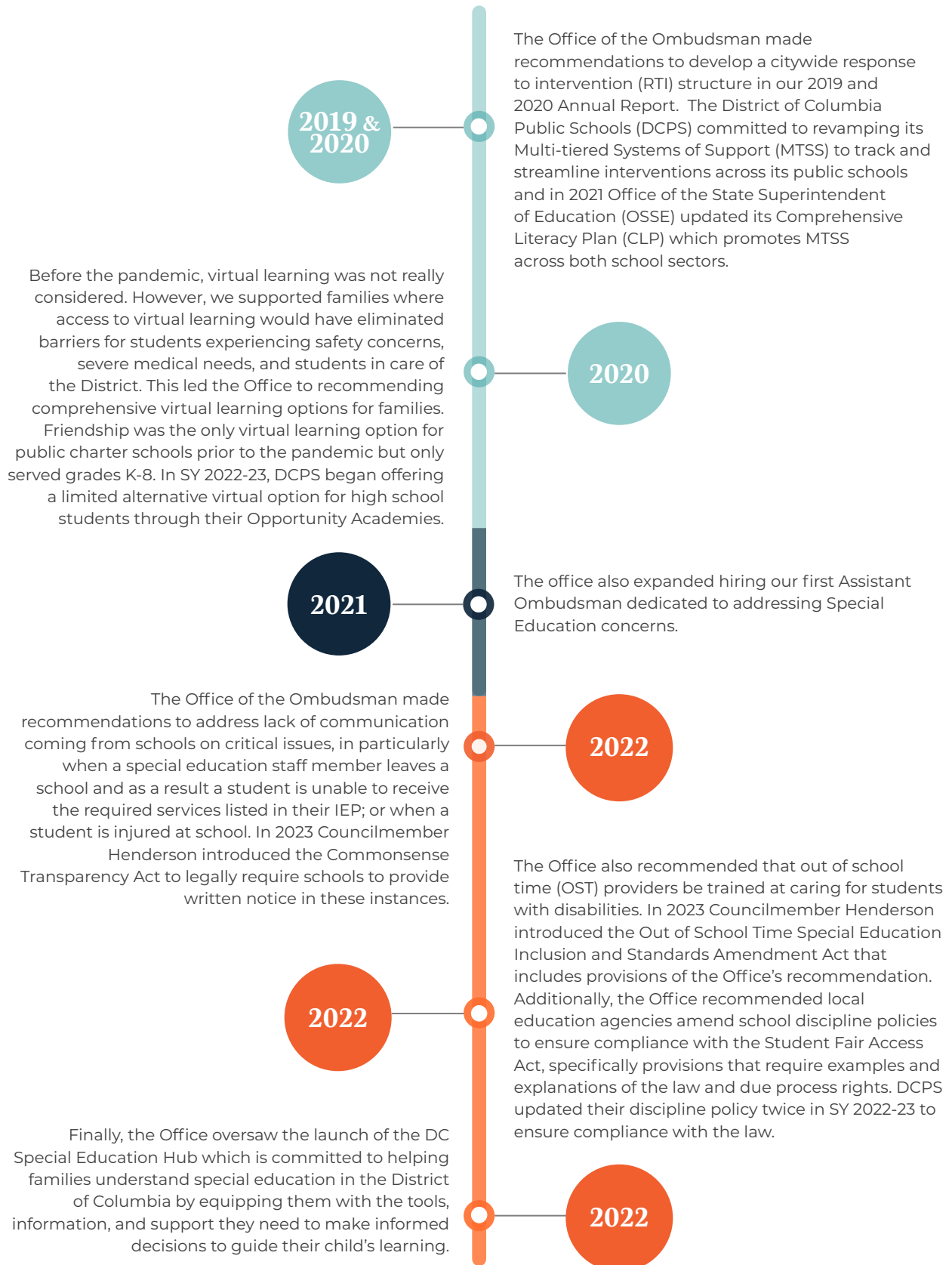
The vision of the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education is to provide quality conflict resolution and mediation services to families eligible to attend public schools in the District of Columbia and reduce barriers to accessing public education. The vision is to eliminate barriers to accessing public education for every eligible student in DC. We envision a DC where everyone has access to quality public education.

## OUR GOALS

Our goals are to respond to concerns in a timely, caring, and productive manner; encourage effective communication between caregivers and schools; act as a source of early detection for emerging school system-wide issues; contribute to creative policy solutions by identifying and sharing trends we observe; prevent recurring problems and improve existing processes by contributing suggestions for systemic change; and reducing the need for administrative hearings and litigation by facilitating the informal resolution of education-related conflicts.



# Timeline of Our Work



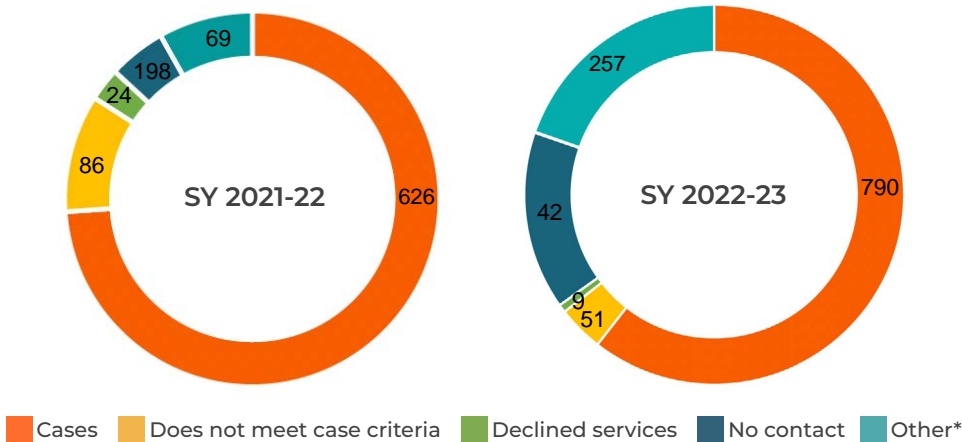
# DCO / '23

## THE DATA

### YEARLY COMPARISON

Over the last nine years, the Office has coached more than 6,000 families and schools on conflict resolution strategies and equipped families with the tools and resources to advocate for their student’s best interest. The Office has influenced policy and legislative change in the District of Columbia around virtual learning, special education, student discipline, safety, and strategies to improve transparency. Additionally, we expanded our staff and oversaw the launch of the DC Special Education Hub.

The Office continues to attract more and more families to utilizing our services and decreasing the amount complaints that result in a formal legal action, refocusing conversations between families and schools back to how to move forward in the student’s best interest. In SY 2022-23, we received 1,364 contacts, and managed 790 cases. Compared to SY 2021-22, the Office’s case volume increased by approximately 26%. Most of our cases came from lead-generating campaigns (20%) and support from our education agency partners, Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) (11%) and the DC State Board of Education (SBOE) (11%). We also had families that had worked with the Office in previous years (12%) return to the Office to help resolve new issues in a different school year. Further, we saw a five percent increase in schools as a referral source for families in SY 2022-23. This was for two main reasons: (1) the Office was intentional about messaging to schools, letting them know the Office is not only a resource for families but also schools, and (2) the Office prioritized student and family outreach initiatives in SY 2022-23 at parent/teacher meetings held at the school.





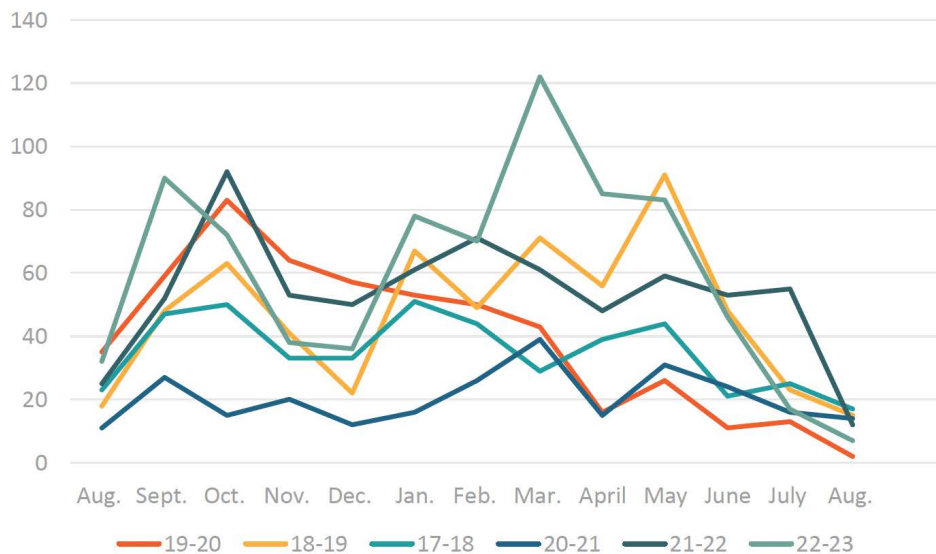
## MONTH TO MONTH DATA

The month-to-month patterns for the Office are consistent with previous years' data. However, the Office received more contacts in September and March than any other month. March had the highest month-to-month trends due to the Office of Ombudsman attending five outreach events during the month. As the Office continued to look at the data and trends, Ward 5 had the highest cases with a virtually even split coming from DC Public Schools (DCPS) and charter schools (PCS in March.

Decreased engagements this school year were tracked during the months of April, May, and June. There was a 67% decrease in cases from March to April. The sharp decrease in case work was due to Spring Break closures and the Office's decreased community outreach.

Looking at September's data, the Office had some of the highest contacts and case volume all year. The top categories were safety which made up 33% of the casework and special education which made up 34% of the casework. The Office participated in three widescale outreach events in September 2022, alongside some of our education partners including DCPS, Help Me Grow, and SBOE.

**Total Cases**



## CASES BY TOPIC

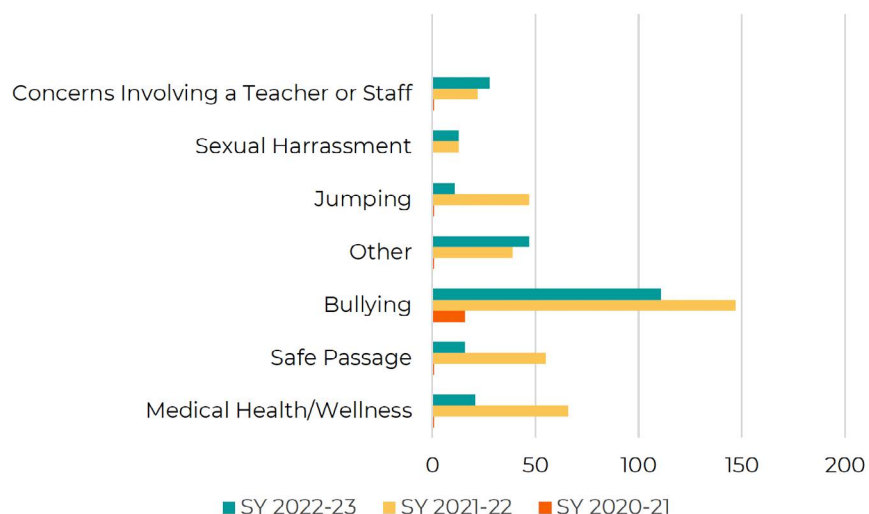
As we managed cases this year, we placed each families' concerns into a primary category based on the issues the families' identified. The largest percentage of cases in SY 2022-23 involved Student Safety/Bullying making up 31% of our cases. Special Education concerns was a close second comprising about 24% while the third largest category was Communication and Engagement at 14%.



## STUDENT SAFETY CASES

Out of the 247 student safety concerns, bullying and physical assaults between staff and students were the largest areas of concerns. Concerns about safe passage, sexual harassment, medical health and wellness, and other nonviolent safety concerns fall under this category.

Sixty-four percent (64%) of the student safety cases involved student violence which meant 64% of cases involved students that were harassed, assaulted, or attacked on at least one occasion in SY 2022-23.



## SPECIAL EDUCATION CASES

Since the Office's inception, the Office's data has shown that students with disabilities are a key demographic. Out of the 186 cases where special education concerns were the primary concern, the top area of concerns for caretakers were transportation services, school placement, and academic support.

Nearly 13% of caretakers reported an issue with OSSE transportation. Most of the OSSE transportation concerns were from parents wanting better communication about pick-up and drop-off delays. Concerns with school placement made up about 22% of special education cases. In these cases, parents expressed frustration with the lack of school choice for their students with disabilities. 11% of parents expressed frustration that their students with IEPs and 504 Plan needs were not being met or addressed because of staffing issues or because the parent felt the staff were not listening to what they believed their child needed.

However, out of 772 cases despite the primary concern raised by families, nearly half of the families contacting our office had a student with disabilities.

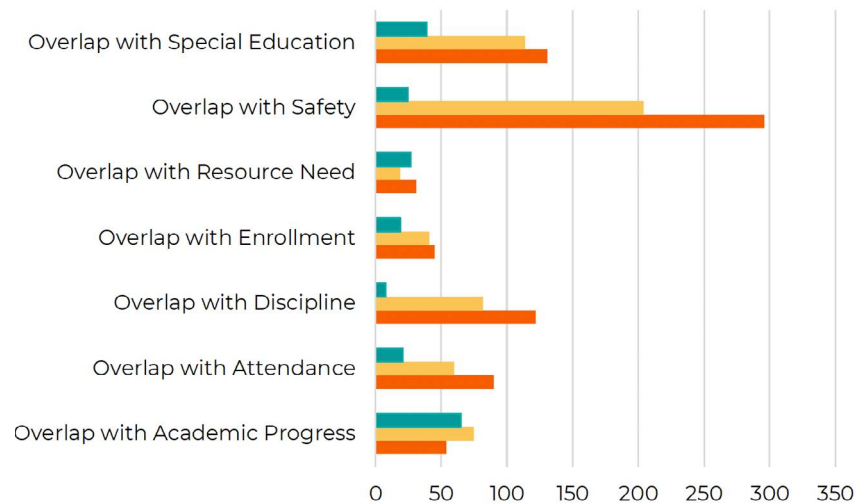


## COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT CASES

Communication and Engagement concerns were identified in more than 50% of cases and often overlapped with another concern. Forty-three percent of communication cases involved safety incidents.

During the intake process and casework, as in previous years, we noticed parents were still frustrated with schools not providing incident reports and making contact in a timely manner when their student was injured at school.

Only 34 cases noted Communication and Engagement as the only issue. An example of Communication and Engagement as the only issue is when a parent reported that the student's teacher did not acknowledge the student at drop off in the morning.



## STUDENT DISCIPLINE CASES

In SY 2022-23, discipline concerns represented about 10% of our casework. The most common discipline concerns were around school push out practices and inappropriate consequences. For example, parents contacted our office concerned that their student would not be able to participate in a field trip, prom, or other school sponsored activities because of behavioral issues.



## SCHOOL SECTORS

In DC, students can enroll for free in their DCPS in-boundary school or participate in the public-school lottery process to register to attend a DCPS out of boundary or application-based schools or a public charter school. Just over half of public-school students enrolled in a DCPS school in SY 2022-23 (52%) and just under half (48%) enrolled in a public charter school. Despite district-wide enrollment data, DCPS made up 60% the Office's case work, while charter schools made up almost 40 percent of our case work.



### DC School Concerns: By Sector

The office managed cases at DCPS, Public Charter Schools, and Nonpublic Placements.

DCPS represented 60% of our case work.



### DC School Concerns: By the Numbers

This years' school sector data was mostly consistent with previous years. Charter schools were often underrepresented.

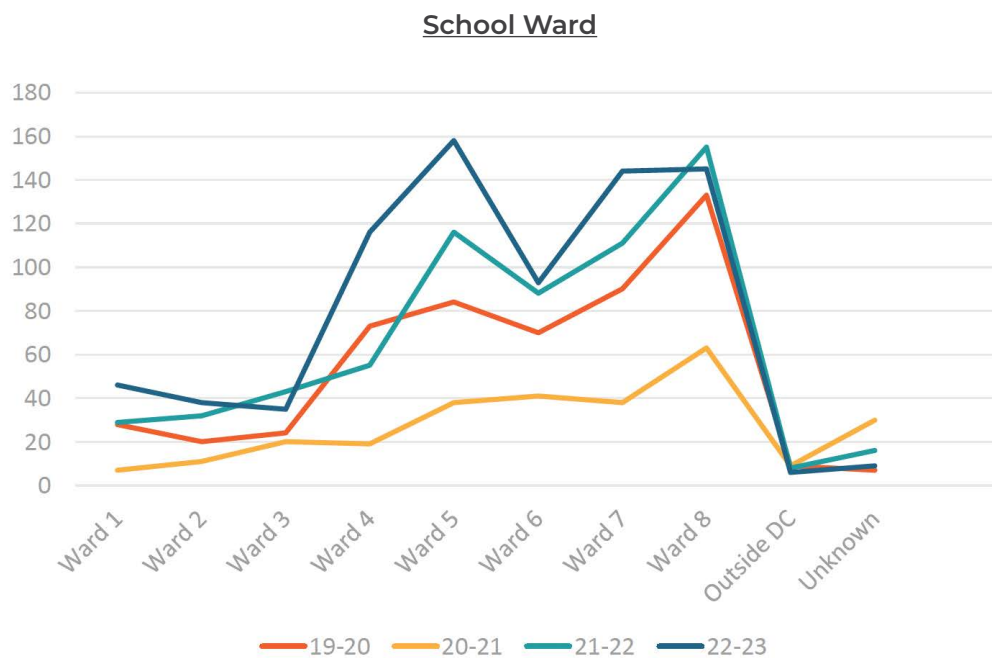
Charter Schools represented roughly 40% of our case work.

DCPS has 115 schools across the District<sup>1</sup>. There are 135 charter schools<sup>2</sup>. Out of 115 DCPS schools our office was contacted by 104 DCPS schools. Out of 135 charter schools our office was contacted by 95 schools.

## SCHOOL WARDS

This year our team received the most calls from our families enrolled in schools in Wards 4, 5, 7, and 8. Ward 5 schools had the most safety and communication concerns. Ward 4 had the most special education and academic progress concerns. Ward 8 had the most attendance and enrollment concerns. Ward 7 had the most discipline concerns. Wards 3 and 6 had the most discrimination concerns. Resource needs were mostly identified in Wards 4, 5, and 8.

Wards 4, 5, and 8 had the highest concerns for multiple topics because total enrollment in public schools is greatest in Ward 4, 5, and 8, By sector, enrollment in DCPS schools is greatest in Ward 4. Enrollment in public charter schools is greatest in Wards 5 and 8. There are no public charter schools in Ward 3. Ward 2 has the lowest public-school enrollment, in total as well as for each sector<sup>3</sup>.



Ward 1	- 2019-20 (28)	2020-21 (7)	2021-22 (29)	2022-23 (46)
Ward 2	- 2019-20 (20)	2020-21 (11)	2021-22 (32)	2022-23 (38)
Ward 3	- 2019-20 (24)	2020-21 (20)	2021-22 (43)	2022-23 (43)
Ward 4	- 2019-20 (73)	2020-21 (19)	2021-22 (55)	2022-23 (116)
Ward 5	- 2019-20 (84)	2020-21 (38)	2021-22 (116)	2022-23 (158)
Ward 6	- 2019-20 (70)	2020-21 (41)	2021-22 (88)	2022-23 (93)
Ward 7	- 2019-20 (90)	2020-21 (38)	2021-22 (111)	2022-23 (144)
Ward 8	- 2019-20 (133)	2020-21 (63)	2021-22 (155)	2022-23 (145)

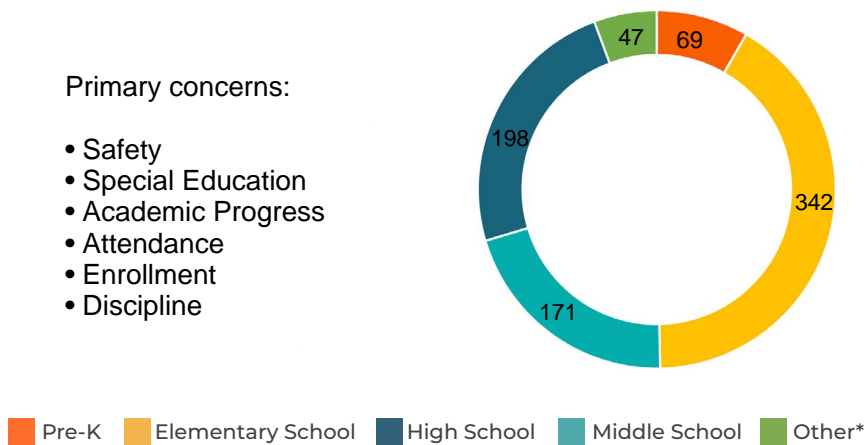
## CASES BY GRADE LEVEL

According to the Deputy Mayor for Public Education (DME), the largest enrollment growth in the last 14 years was in the early childhood grades (PK3 and PK4) and elementary grades (KG-5th).

Like, DME's data, our elementary school case volume over the last few years has been highest. However, we saw a significant increase in cases from families of high school students.

The primary concern for elementary students were safety and special education. The primary concern for high school students were academic progress, attendance, enrollment, and discipline concerns.

**OMB Cases by Grade Level Data**



*\*Includes students who are in alternative or adult education programs or no longer students but calling requesting help accessing transcripts.*

source: <https://edscape.dc.gov/page/pop-and-students-public-school-enrollment-by-grade-level>

# DCO / '23

## OUTREACH IN SY 2022-23

Outreach for the Office was essential and rewarding because the Office had the opportunity to teach families and schools how to address issues they can take on themselves. For example, we coached families on handling a bullying concern during one of our engagements. One of the school staff members in attendance shared that she was unaware of all the support available for families. Our Office showed her how to connect with the Department of Behavioral Health to find Community-Based Mental Health Clinicians and expanded her knowledge of what could be added to a safety plan.

The Office saw how outreach efforts impacted casework. Historically Wards 5, 7, and 8 were the school wards the Office often heard complaints from, but over the last school year, the Office intentionally engaged in more community events in Wards 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6, and began seeing case numbers more consistent with district wide student enrollment data. In SY 2022-23, the Office attended 33 community events with primary focuses around youth safety, special education, enrollment, and general education-related resource fairs.

Counting in-person outreach only, the Office connected with about 5,000 families and staff members and stayed connected with more than 200 families either through casework or through our monthly newsletters.





# DCO / '23

## ADDRESSING TRUANCY THROUGH ENGAGEMENT AND NEGOTIATED DIALOGUE

### (ATTEND) MEDIATION PROGRAM

The Office continued its partnership with the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) for the third year in the row to provide mediation services as an intervention for families of students experiencing challenges attending school regularly.

The goal of these mediations is to get to the root cause of what is preventing students from consistently attending school, connecting families with resources that could help them solve their specific barriers, and developing plans for students to engage with their peers inside an academic setting. In SY 2022-23, we conducted 26 ATTEND mediations. We had an even split in mediations at elementary and middle schools.

During mediation, families frequently explained that transportation, student sleep schedules, death of family members, other mental health issues, and student sicknesses were barriers to school attendance. We also conducted mediations where families shared how communication breakdowns (either with co-parents or the school) resulted in children being marked absent. In one mediation, a parent thought their co-parent was taking the student to school, but they were not. In another mediation a parent attempted to submit excuse notes through the school's online learning management system, but the school stated they had not received them.

Ward 8 represented 100% of our ATTEND mediations. Ward 8 also is the ward that has some of the highest cases of violence and sickness. According to data, violent crime has increased by approximately 33% in the ward and more than 100 lives have been taken. Our neighbors in Ward 8 also are more likely to be affected by chronic diseases like asthma and cancer and have been reported to be four times more likely to have diabetes compared to families living in other wards in the District. The disparaging inequities in the ward have certainly impacted attendance.

As we review the amalgamated data each year, we search for the story held within the datasets.



#### ATTEND Mediations

We conducted 26 ATTEND mediations. We had an even split in mediations at elementary and middle schools.

About 35% of the families identified student's physical health as a critical barrier to attendance.



#### ATTEND Barriers

The top 3 barriers to attendance in SY 2022-23 were deaths of family members, other mental health issues, and student sicknesses.

Ward 8 represented roughly 100% of our ATTEND Mediations.

# DCO / '23

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Understanding that each case, while important to us, also becomes one part of the story, it is important that we allow the collective stories to guide us to the issues at the forefront of the minds of students and families. In SY 2022-23, the start of the school year told the story of families worried about sending their students to school due to increased violence in the District amongst teenagers. Even families of students with disabilities expressed their concerns and attendance challenges due to the lack of communication between school attendance counselors and OSSE DOT. The policy recommendations that we offer below connect directly to the data trends that we examined over the course of the school year.

What our office observed as we supported students and families through their educational concerns were families wanting their students to learn in a safe and welcoming environment. The more the office digs into its casework, the more we see connections between various topics and sub-topics that we track. Often when families express concerns about safety, they often overlap with bullying concerns, and school communication and engagement.

### SAFETY/BULLYING:

Former Mayor Vincent Gray signed the Youth Bullying Prevention Act into law eleven years ago. This act required all youth-serving agencies to develop a bullying prevention policy that would (1) address bullying citywide, acknowledge bullying happens beyond the schools and occurs in libraries, recreation centers, the transit system, and other public spaces; (2) use a public health framework to target prevention efforts and interventions effectively; and (3) provide evidence-based research and best practices for District youth.

Since the act's implementation and reestablishment of the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education, the Office has received almost 1,000 complaints of bullying. The prevention efforts of local education agencies (LEAs) often relied on safety plans to address bullying, but the Office has seen many cases where safety plans could have worked better. LEAs also could utilize restorative justice practices to address bullying. Restorative justice practices have been gaining popularity throughout the country over the last twenty years. The purpose of these practices is to help the harmed and the accused parties restore relationships and provide all parties with an understanding of the harm done and

the factors that might have contributed to the situation. This process requires a trained and informal facilitator that helps students understand, discuss, and resolve their issues.

The approach when employed by LEAs, at least in our casework had some inconsistencies. We noticed that LEAs across the District did not have consistent policies/requirements for using restorative justice practices, and they do not consistently have training requirements for staff or the staff capacity to facilitate the discussions.

District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) is the largest LEA in the District. Their Restorative Practice Guidance explains to school leaders in theory "how to most effectively utilize restorative practices as an alternative to punishment that focuses on getting to the root cause of the problem and providing the opportunity to repair the relationship and harm caused by the misbehavior." But, its only guidance as it relates to bullying situations is "creating individual circles of support for the student engaged in the bullying behavior and the target of their aggressions." Their guidance is vague and does not explain what this should look like or who should be involved.

As a disciplinary response, the DCPS Safe and Positive Schools Policy categorizes bullying as a Tier III offense.

According to the policy, disciplinary responses for Tier III behaviors do not clearly include student to student mediations or any other restorative justice practices. However, their policy requires all DCPS schools to identify a school-based culture team of three (3) or more staff to be trained in implementing whole child restorative practices; verbal de-escalation; social-emotional learning (SEL); and bullying prevention. The Dean of Culture, Restorative Practices Coordinator, Suspension Coordinator, or Behavior Technician must be on the school-based culture team if schools have those positions. The DCPS Central Services Student Behavior and School Culture and Climate Team will offer trainings, targeted to the appropriate audience, including school-based culture teams, school-based staff, bullying prevention points of contact (POCs), in-school suspension coordinators, and contract security. The two other large LEAs, KIPP DC and Friendship Schools' policies do not clearly share restorative strategy options or require or share information on how staff can be trained. Restorative practices/circles are only available for certain level offenses which means depending on the severity of the bullying restorative practices are only then an option to be used.

Trainings for LEAs exist. Currently, OSSE partners with Restorative DC, a program of SchoolTalk Inc., to offer virtual training on restorative justice practices to DCPS and charter schools but it is unclear if all LEAs are taking advantage of the trainings, how often, and understanding why they are not being utilized more.

In many cases, parents have come to the Office flustered about their scholars' unpleasant experiences. Families have reported feeling that if their child's bullying did not stop, their students would fall victim to gun violence and sometimes comparing the trauma their child is going through similar to when a family member or close friend was shot. On several

occasions, parents said that other students antagonized their students and put them in situations where their students had to fight for their life in school and on their journey home. In one case, a student called his mom and said another student tried to fight him in the school and had possession of a weapon. The school did not find a gun, but the parent later shared that the other student's friend had a weapon (unknown if it had made it to the school's campus). The parent asked for mediation, but the school did not grant one. In this case, the parent was highly anxious because the school had a back door that students use to let their friends in the school.

In another case, a parent contacted our Office hysterical because another student sent her child Instagram messages saying she wanted to fight and said her family had guns and she would kill her and stab her." When the parent got involved, the alleged aggressor told the mother that her and her child could meet her at a train station to fight. This parent's anxiety around her student being physically harmed caused her to keep her student home from school until she felt her daughter was safe again. The Office collaborated to develop safety plans to keep the student as safe as possible within the school building and while the student traveled to and from school, but ultimately, the parent did not feel the issue resolved until after mediation.

Given the clear need for students across all 8 wards to develop conflict resolution strategies and the increasing youth violence we see in our casework and citywide, the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education has begun to develop a Student-to-Student Mediation Pilot Program, including two middle schools and two high schools. The Office will choose schools based on the volume of safety cases the Office sees at each school in the casework data. Within the program, the Office will develop protocols and supports for schools to address challenging behavior, utilize conflict resolution strategies, and improve social and emotional skills using restorative practices. After receiving a referral from one of the four schools under

the pilot program, the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education will invite the parents or guardians of each student involved in the bullying to a meeting, either in person at the school or virtually, to discuss the specific supports or interventions that apply to all students involved.

## OUR RECOMMENDATION:

Ensuring students can exhaust all interventions available to help them resolve conflicts is essential. As a city, we need to invest more in restorative justice practices not only as a disciplinary response but to address bullying from the victim's side.

The Office's policy recommendation is to establish district-wide guidelines for using restorative practices/mediation when a student has been bullied or alleges bullying. The guidelines should provide a point of contact, create criteria for restorative practices, define what those restorative practice options are, and suggest follow-up actions. Teachers, administrators, and other staff should also receive ongoing training conducted by School Talk (which OSSE currently partners with) and include the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education as a resource for student-to-student mediation.

Finally, the Office of the Ombudsman supports the "Conflict Resolution Education Amendment Act of 2023" that would require the Office of the State Superintendent (OSSE) to develop and implement a model curriculum schools could use to develop students' conflict resolution skills in accordance with health education standards.



## SPECIAL EDUCATION:

Another issue that arose in our cases last school year was special education transportation. Families continue to feel frustrated with OSSE DOT transportation. They are generally satisfied with drivers and attendants but give frequent feedback that they want more/better communication and more timely and consistent routes. Another major pain point this year has been the enforcement of a single address for pick up and drop off. This simply does not work for many of our students and families.

Transportation for our city's students with disabilities has enlightened multiple systemic concerns. Currently, an issue we saw rise in SY 22-23 was a decrease in student attendance due to inconsistencies in OSSE's pick-up system. For example, a student's pick-up time would be 7:45 AM and drop-off would be 8:25 AM. Due to several reasons, students would be late to school and thus late to class. In some cases, students would lose time in their service hours. In other cases, parents had to use their own method of transportation and take the students to school tardy. In some cases, the bus did not come at all, and in those cases where some parents could not find transportation, the

students missed school. This is a challenge not only for OSSE DOT in recruiting and retaining drivers but also for students and families as they miss school time.

In one case, a mother stated she was on the OSSE DOT hotline for an hour. The bus showed up an hour early, no communication was provided to the parent which resulted in her scholar being two hours late getting home. The following day the bus came an hour late and the scholar did not get home until 3:00 pm which was a half-day for the scholar. The parent had to cancel his in-person therapy session.

Another case we worked on was in partnership with the Office of Attorney General's ATTEND Program. A parent was referred to the program due to truancy caused by OSSE DOT challenges. The parent explained to an Assistant Ombudsman (mediator) that the school did not receive notice from OSSE that her scholar would be late and not to mark the student tardy. The parent expressed concern throughout the school year with no resolution from OSSE but did receive a 90 Day truancy plan from the Office of Attorney General ATTEND Program.

**OUR RECOMMENDATION:** OSSE should develop an advanced real-time tracking application that enables families and school attendance counselors to monitor students' expected arrival times, drop-off schedules, bus delays, and route updates. Presently, OSSE's Daily DOT Updates offer limited information, including the route number, on-time status, and the timestamp of the most recent update. Our proposed enhancement seeks to provide families and school staff with more comprehensive and precise information, including specific quantitative arrival and drop-off times.

Our policy recommendation advocates for OSSE to take swift action in notifying caregivers when their children will be late to school, experience delayed drop-offs, or encounter other bus-related delays. In addition, OSSE should furnish schools with attendance notices, offering transparent and accountable documentation. These reports should include designated points of contact and suggested follow-up procedures for school attendance counselors, teachers, and administrators.

To ensure the successful implementation of this recommendation, it is imperative that attendance counselors, teachers, administrators, nurses, and other relevant school staff receive thorough training. This training should encompass reporting tardies for students utilizing OSSE DOT, establishing timelines for parental notifications regarding potential truancy concerns, and introducing standardized incident report forms and subsequent procedures.

The execution of this recommendation necessitates staff training, the development of a new process or system, and communication with OSSE DOT students' families to acquaint them with the incident reporting guidelines. Oversight and compliance monitoring should be jointly administered by school administrators and OSSE DOT.

# DCO / '23

## DC SPECIAL EDUCATION HUB

### WHO WE ARE

The DC Special Education Hub helps families understand special education in the District of Columbia. Our knowledgeable team connects families with tools, information, and 1:1 support so families can make informed decisions to guide their child's learning.

\*The DC Special Education Hub is an initiative of the DC Ombudsman for Public Education and OSSE.

### WHAT WE DO

We assist the DC community through...

- 1:1 support through our hotline, online contact form, and community-based office hours
- Virtual and in-person trainings and peer-to-peer groups for families, schools, and LEAs
- Comprehensive and accessible online resources to support families through their special education journeys

### OUR IMPACT

Since our launch in August 2022, the DC Special Education Hub has...

- Assisted DCPS and DC public charter school families in all eight wards and in every grade, Pre-K3 through 12
- Hosted 50+ trainings, events, and community-based office hours sessions
- Published a variety of digital and hard copy resources in eleven different languages

## SY 2022-23 BY THE NUMBERS



781 families supported



31 trainings delivered



14,223 website visitors



97% of families would recommend the DC Special Education Hub to other families.

### What are Families Saying?

"As a parent, sometimes it feels like you're tripping over information. I appreciate the DC Special Education Hub so much for **providing resources that are clear, thorough, and easy to understand.**" – Ward 4 Parent

"English is not my first language and I appreciate how the DC Special Education Hub **works hard to make their resources accessible for all.**" – Ward 1 Parent

# DCO / '23

## LOOKING AHEAD - FORWARD WITH FORTITUDE

Since 2019, the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education has experienced significant growth and evolution. Our team has expanded, we successfully launched the DC Special Education Hub, and our annual caseload has surged by an impressive 300%. Since our Office's re-establishment, our yearly contacts have surged from a mere 150 to approximately 1,000 interactions annually.

Central to our mission has been the steadfast commitment to assisting families in resolving issues at the school level. Over time, as we've honed our practices, we've gained a deeper understanding of the pivotal role our Office plays in shaping policies and practices that impact families' access to quality public education while striving to eliminate barriers to educational attainment.

As we progress, we recognize the importance of enhancing our conflict resolution services, elevating our visibility within the community, and fostering more meaningful interactions with schools, Local Education Agencies (LEAs), and families. These efforts afford us valuable opportunities for relationship building and professional development.

So, what does this mean for the upcoming school year, SY 2023-24? We're excited to embark on the following explorations and initiatives:

- ➔ Strengthening Relationships with Families and LEA's to Provide a Wider Impact to Families and Students
- ➔ Increasing community engagement across all 8 Wards
- ➔ Partnering with four DC Public Schools to provide Student-to-Student Conflict Resolution Services
- ➔ Convening Stakeholders To Discuss Ways to Address Persistent Achievement and Opportunity Gaps Through Coordination, Collaboration, and/or Policy and Procedural Changes to Impact the Educational Outcomes of DC students



# APPENDIX I

As explained in this report, the statutory requirements of the Office of the Ombudsman include analyzing and reporting amalgamated data to (1) identify systemic concerns (or trends), (2) make policy recommendations based on the systemic concerns identified, and (3) produce an annual report. To meet this statutory requirement, we have provided the amalgamated data and highlighted the systemic trends below.

## Work Summary for SY2022-23

In School Year 2022-23 (SY 2022-23) the Office continued to help families and schools work through issues and challenges in the District of Columbia's Public Education System.

The Office received **1364** contacts in SY 2022-23.

The Office helped **790** families come to resolution with schools.

The Office guided **208** schools (including nonpublic placements) with coming to resolution with families.

The Office connected with and stayed in contact with more than **200** families that were met in the community.

The Office facilitated **26** ATTEND Mediations in partnership with the Office of the Attorney General (OAG).

**90%** of the students the Office supported in SY 2022-23 were African American.

**47%** of the students the Office supported in SY 2022-23 were students with disabilities.





# 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.

### **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.

#### **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 not involving their student(s).

**SEXUAL HARASSMENT**

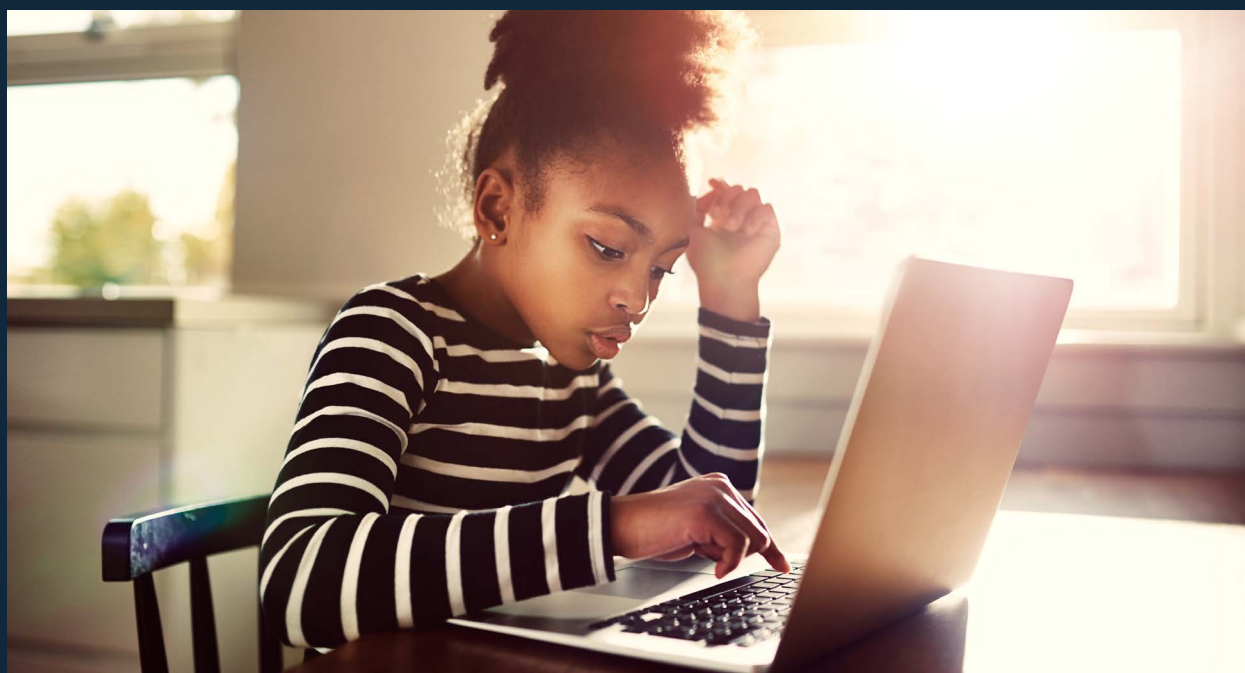
Matters involving unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature that a reasonable person determines to be so severe, pervasive, and offensive that it effectively denies a person equal access to the education program or activity.

**SINGLE INCIDENT OF VIOLENCE**

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

**DISABILITY**

Matters concerning Special Education: Issues preventing a student from accessing their education due to a student’s diagnosed or suspected disability.



# ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>[§ 38–355. Limitations; protections. | DC Law Library \(dccouncil.gov\)](#)

<sup>2</sup>[DCPS Restorative Practice Guidance](#) (last updated SY 2020-21)

<sup>3</sup>OSSE promotes upcoming trainings on [Restorative DC Events](#) to LEAs on their website.

[Friendship Discipline Policy](#) (begins on page 29)

[DCPS Safe and Positive Schools Policy \(this policy merges chapter 25 and student fair access\)](#)

<https://www.pacer.org/bullying/info/students-with-disabilities/>

[Attendance Policy \(DC Gov\): Important to note as these policies typically provide umbrella guidance.](#)

[Annual Attendance Report: Important to consider that special education student referrals \(to court systems or CFSA\) are not included in this report.](#)

Attendance Policies. (2023). <https://attendance.dc.gov/page/attendance-policies>

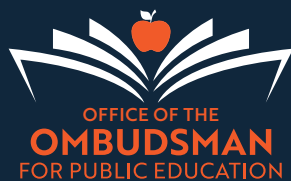
August 2022 annual attendance report - DCPS. (2023). [https://dcps.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dcps/publication/attachments/Annual%20Attendance%20Report%20final\\_1.pdf](https://dcps.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dcps/publication/attachments/Annual%20Attendance%20Report%20final_1.pdf)

[OMBUDSMAN ANNUAL REPORT 2018 HIGH RESOLUTION PDF 10.12.18\\_0.pdf \(dc.gov\)](#)

[Student Transportation | osse \(dc.gov\)](#)

[Daily DOT Updates | osse \(dc.gov\)](#)

[DCO 2022 Annual Report \(2\).pdf](#)



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