



April 2009 Report

Jeff Ross, Interim Ombudsman
Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education
825 North Capitol Street, Suite 5002 | Washington, DC 20002
(202) 741-8777 | ombudsman@dc.gov
<http://ombudsman.dc.gov>

Ombudsman for Public Education

The Office of the Ombudsman is a neutral, informal, and independent resource for District residents to assist with resolution of issues involving the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), Public Charter Schools (PCS) and the University of the District of Columbia. In addition to serving as a resource for citizens to resolve issues, the Ombudsman is charged with encouraging communication between residents and the Mayor regarding all levels of public education. This report is an account and analysis of the issues addressed by the Ombudsman in April 2009.

April Issues Received

The Ombudsman responded to 67 individuals regarding public education issues in April, and has responded to 566 issues during the 2008-2009 school year. Issues were closed in an average of 14 days, and 72% of all issues received were closed within 15 days. Analysis of issues by incoming source, grade level, and closure rate within fifteen days shows that issue trends are similar to data from previous months.

The most frequent issues types reaching the Ombudsman in April were from residents expressing concerns falling into the *School Safety/Abuse/Bullying* and *Administration concerns (Student)* issue types, each accounting for 18% of the total issues received (Figure 1). Both issues types have consistently been two of the most frequent received by the Ombudsman during the current school year.

Grade Dispute/Transcript issues were the third most frequent issues brought to the Ombudsman in April, a marked increase from previous months. This likely reflects the end of the third grading period for most schools, as well as a nearing of end of the school year, a time when grades are more closely scrutinized and transcripts more frequently requested. Issues of this type were split between residents contacting the Ombudsman because of communication difficulties obtaining transcripts, and parents with disputes over recently released grades. All transcript request issues were resolved and quickly resulted in issuances of transcripts through communication with the direct school or the DCPS closed school records department.

April Issue Breakdown

Number of issues received: 67
 Average days to close: 14

By source:

DCPS – 75%
 PCS – 21%
 UDC – 2%
 Other – 3%

By grade level (if applicable):

Pre-S/Pre-K – 7%
 Elementary – 30%
 Middle School – 11%
 High School – 48%
 Post-Secondary – 4%

Most common issues:

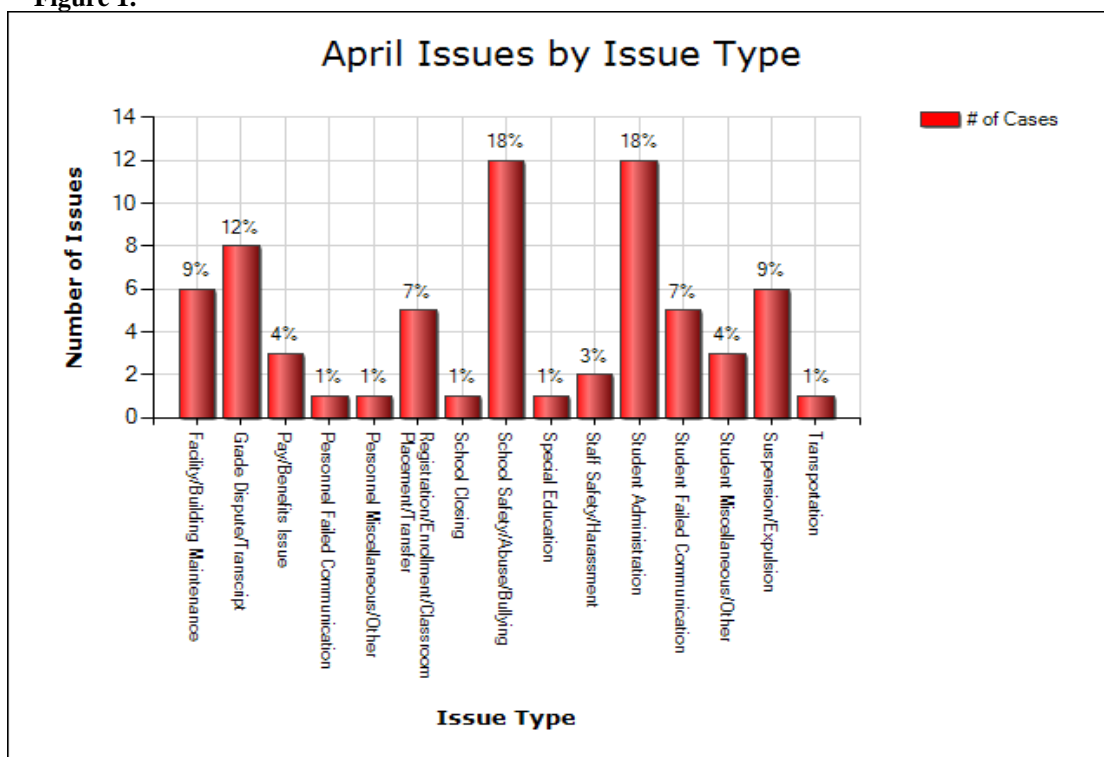
School Safety/Abuse/
 Bullying – 18%
 Administration concerns
 (Student) – 18%
 Grade Dispute/Transcript – 12%

Closed within 15 days:

YES – 72%
 NO – 28%

Grade disputes by nature are more challenging issues because of differing teachers' and students' accounts of effort, attendance, and quality of work. Additionally, parents frequently cite lack of notification, inadequate or incomplete teacher records, or interpersonal conflicts between teachers and students as evidence of an unfair grade. As part of the resolution process for all grade dispute issues received by the Ombudsman, schools held a meeting with the parent, teacher, and administrator present in order to review the parents' concerns and attempt to objectively review them. All meetings held by school officials resulted in either review of the grade in question or the cooperative development of a student-based intervention plan to improve academic skills. However, in one issue at a DCPS high school the parent contacted the Ombudsman weeks later to report that no one from the school had attempted to implement the plan discussed at the meeting, requiring additional follow up from the Ombudsman.

Figure 1.



Issue Highlight: DCPS Parent Communication

A common thread between the issues frequently received by the Ombudsman is a lingering perception of some parents that the DC Public School system demonstrates a lack of regard for the need for parents to be active participants in their children's education. Two very different issues received by the Ombudsman in April highlighted the importance of incorporating parents as partners in students' education. These two issues also demonstrated an improving commitment by DCPS to community and parent engagement, but one with ample room for improvement. The sections that follow provide analyses and recommendations for further improvement in parent communication.

Case Study 1: Parental knowledge of the employee disciplinary process

The parent of a DCPS elementary school student was referred to the Ombudsman after being unsatisfied by the school system response to a situation which she felt put her child at risk. During school hours the student was instructed by a school employee to temporarily leave school grounds unsupervised. Upon learning of the situation from her child, the parent immediately contacted the school principal to express concern. The principal responded promptly, informed the parent that he/she had already met with the employee, and would be following the necessary procedures to appropriately address the situation. Because of regulations governing personnel records and complaints, the principal did not provide the parent any more specific information regarding potential disciplinary action.

The child was not harmed during the unsupervised time, and the principal assured the parent the child would not be placed in a similar situation again. The parent was unsatisfied with the response, in part because she heard from other parents that there have been previous complaints about the employee. The parent felt the employee should be removed from the classroom for an investigation, and contacted multiple officials within DCPS. Despite additional communication with the principal, instruction superintendent, and chancellor, the response remained that personnel regulations precluded the school system from sharing anything more than that they had responded appropriately based on the circumstances of the incident.

Case Study 2: DCPS 2009-2010 school calendar

The proposal and finalization of the 2009-2010 DCPS school calendar, the first created under the current governance structure, demonstrated an example of DCPS's improved efforts to elicit input from community members in a district-wide decision. The process simultaneously demonstrated that some parents continue to believe these efforts remain insufficient.

DCPS posted a draft calendar in April, and held a community meeting at Noyes Elementary School on April 23rd to receive feedback from community members. (Feedback could also be directed to DCPS online or by phone.) While the in-person meeting drew modest attendance, over 200 community members submitted feedback either in-person, online, or by phone.

The most notable change from previous calendars, and one that caused a moderate level of consternation from parents, was the scheduling of ten Wednesdays throughout the school year in which school would be closed to students. Four of the closed school days would be for Parent-Teacher conferences, scheduled on Mondays or Fridays in previous calendars. The other six days were proposed for "job-embedded" professional development days for teachers, taking place one Wednesday a month from September through March (excluding December). This was another change from previous calendars, when teacher professional development days were grouped together during the Winter Break period or at the end of the school year.

In an April press release, DCPS explained the need for professional development to be embedded throughout the school year. "For professional development to be successful, it needs to be embedded in the teachers' work, which means having continuous education and the ability to practice new strategies and approaches directly after the trainings."¹

¹ DCPS press release – "DCPS Seeks Input on Proposed School Calendar"; April 22, 2009;
<http://www.k12.dc.us/media/PressReleases/DCPS-Press-Release-SY-2009-2010-Calendar-4-22-2009.pdf>

Effective professional development for teachers is a worthwhile endeavor widely recognized as a critical component for improved instruction. School officials should be able to use their professional judgment to schedule training in the way determined to be most effective to enriching the development and instructional capabilities of its educators. Further, it's also entirely sensible that professional development learning opportunities for teachers spread consistently throughout the year would be more effective than the 2008-2009 calendar which scheduled professional development days during the Winter Break period and after the school year is out.²

Of the parents who provided feedback directly to DCPS or to the Ombudsman, most did not question the change in professional development structure. Many did, however, question the rationale of consistently closing school on a day in the middle of the week, and the effect of that decision on families' schedules. Parents responded in emails, phone calls, and in person that Wednesdays would be significantly problematic as 'off-school' days. Parents asserted that a day off in the middle of the week effectively splits the week into two, causing a disruption to the flow of the learning week, particularly for elementary school students. Other parents stressed that it was a hardship to arrange for daycare or child support for any day without school, but particularly so on a day in the middle of the week. Still other parents felt that a mid-week day was chosen because of concerns of teacher absences rather than a consideration of parents' and students' best interests.

While the proposal of the mid-week days off of school was by far the most common concern, parents shared other concerns as well. The Ombudsman attended an education forum hosted by the Ward 3 Councilmember one week after the DCPS community forum, where other calendar-related concerns raised by parents were:

- Insufficient notice to parents of school calendar proposal and forum (notice was posted on the website but not sent home to parents);
- The calendar was proposed too late in the year for parents to plan family schedules;
- The earlier start date of August 24, 2009 will affect summer plans;
- Uncertainty regarding the ability of the Department of Parks and Recreation to adequately implement the proposed alternative educational and recreational activities for students during teacher professional development days;
- A feeling that DCPS only requesting feedback for appearances but would not take it into account for final calendar.

Based on the feedback received, DCPS released in May a finalized version of the 2009-2010 calendar which clearly reflected changes based on input received from parents.³ The ten Wednesdays scheduled without school were rescheduled to connect with weekends (Parent-Teacher conferences will be on Mondays; teacher professional development days will be on Fridays). The finalized calendar did not include a single week of school split by a mid-week break, with the lone exception of Veterans Day, a federal holiday.

² 2008-2009 DCPS school calendar; <http://www.k12.dc.us/schools/documents/SchoolCalendarSY2008-2009updated.pdf>

³ 2009-2010 DCPS calendar information can be accessed at <http://www.k12.dc.us/calendar-2009-2010.htm>.

Analysis/Recommendations

The two case studies differ widely in circumstance, but at heart each reflects the need for continued communication, cooperation, and trust in a successful partnership between parents and school officials.

In the first case study, the parent felt the regulations involving employee discipline matters blocked her ability to know that the employee supervising her child was worthy of the trust she implicitly gave. She also saw these restrictions as blocking her ability to hold the principal, school, and school system accountable for taking this responsibility equally seriously. Other parents have contacted the Ombudsman or members of the DC Council in similar situations, demanding to know specific consequences taken against employees based on an incident involving their child. Parents' frustration with the lack of information is perfectly understandable. To sympathize, one needs only to think of their own reaction should their child appear to be placed in an unsafe situation at school.

But as a public employer, the school system is required to balance the public's right to information with the privacy rights of the system's employees. The constraints on DCPS when discussing employee discipline matters come from multiple sources.⁴ These regulations forbid the school system from commenting on specifics of an employee complaint. While it clearly cannot and should not disregard employee privacy regulations in the name of appeasing parents, the current response that the issue is being "handled appropriately" serves to give parents the inaccurate impression that these situations are not treated seriously.

The objective for this and similar issues should be to minimize conflict by providing as much information as possible regarding the employee discipline process. The school system uses a policy of progressive discipline for employees for all manner of necessary consequences, ranging from verbal warnings for small infractions to termination for the most egregious infractions. DCPS does not currently have this policy in a form easily distributed to parents. As a result, many parents are unaware of its existence or enforcement. By providing parents who raise complaints opportunity to talk directly with the principal or appropriate school official as well as a detailed explanation of the employee discipline process, DCPS can mitigate the false impression that there is no standard procedure in place to impose discipline. The Ombudsman recommends that DCPS create distributable information regarding the employee discipline policy, and that DCPS explore other means of providing communication and cooperation to parents who bring complaints regarding employees, while abiding by all personnel laws. Providing this information will not appease parents who continue to insist upon specific consequences of employee information, but DCPS should attempt exhaust all other levels of communicating due to the inherent conflict between employee privacy regulations and parents' legitimate desire for information.

⁴ Restrictions and limitations to employee personnel records - including disciplinary actions – exist in the District of Columbia Official Code, District of Columbia Personnel Manual, and the District of Columbia Municipal Regulations. Additionally, article VII.H.4 of the Washington Teachers' Union contract states that, "All matters relating to a complaint are to be kept confidential."

In the second case study, the effectiveness of the community engagement process for the 2009-2010 school calendar lies in the eye of the beholder. Viewed in the most positive light, DCPS drafted a proposed calendar, provided multiple open avenues to receive community feedback, and used the feedback received to adjust the final calendar to better meet families' needs. Viewed more pessimistically, the calendar was not proposed until later in the school year, was only posted on the website, and input was requested out of formality rather than as part of an ongoing community-engaged process.

The differences in perceptions stem from differing levels of trust between parents and their school officials. One parent at the Ward 3 forum illustrated this notion through her experience providing feedback on the proposed calendar. She recently emailed her input which explained why closing school on Wednesdays would be problematic for her family. She received a response from a DCPS staffer, which acknowledged the feedback but provided additional information and support about why DCPS felt Wednesdays would be the most effective day. In a situation where there is sufficient trust that in the engagement process, the additional information from the staffer may have been perceived as part of an effective dialogue. But to this parent, who lacked faith in DCPS's adherence to the process, it felt she was being told why she was wrong.

DCPS should be applauded for listening and reacting to the concerns of parents with the proposed 2009-2010 calendar. In order to improve parents' perceptions of the engagement process, however, DCPS must accept the criticism levied along with the praise. Specifically, DCPS officials should emphasize efforts to provide timely and open information to parents on key decisions. DCPS must also seriously reflect on their feedback process when parents respond that they feel their input is being ignored or rebuked. Ultimately, the best way to improve parents' perceptions is to show tangible evidence that their input impacted the school system's decision-making process, as it did for the 2009-2010 calendar.