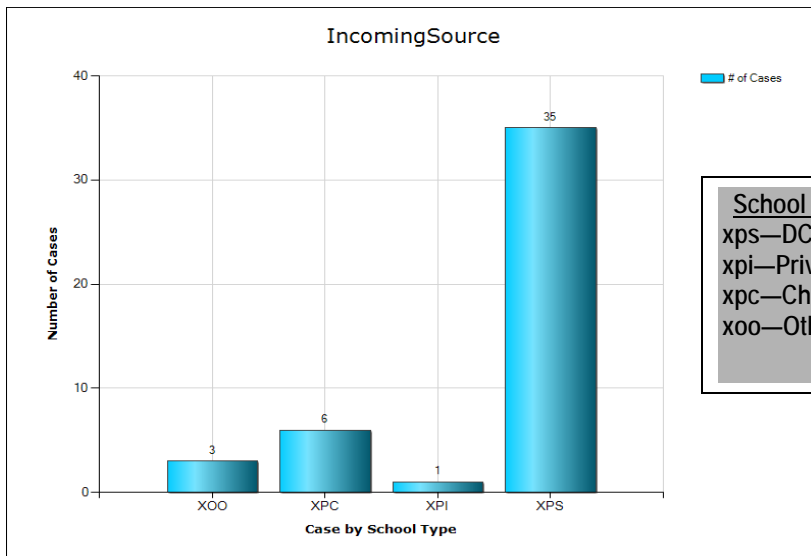


**Monthly Report
December 2008**

Notes from the Ombudsman

In December, the Office of the Ombudsman responded to 45 individuals regarding public education issues, bringing this school year’s case total to 370. The majority of issues were brought to the office before the winter break period started on December 19. Roughly 78% of issues coming to the Office of the Ombudsman in December were DCPS issues. Public charter schools produced only six cases. *Suspension/expulsion* and *failed communication*¹ were the most frequently identified student issue, while *pay/benefits* was the most frequently identified personnel issue.



School Type
 xps—DCPS
 xpi—Private
 xpc—Charter
 xoo—Other

Number of cases
45

Number of cases since beginning of school year
370

Most frequent student issue:
Suspension/Expulsion (8) & Failed Communication (8)

Most frequent personnel issue:
Pay/Benefits (4)

The issue distribution and frequency of this month’s cases are consistent with the cases received since the beginning of the year. Out of 13 total student issue options, *failed communication* has been the third most frequently identified student issue and *suspension/expulsion* the fourth most frequent since August 2008. Out of seven total personnel issue types, *pay/benefits* has consistently been the most common personnel issue to reach the Office of the Ombudsman.

- Top 4 (out of 13) Student Issues Identified Since August 2008**
- 1—Registration/Enrollment/Classroom Placement/Transfer (68)
 - 2—School Safety/Abuse/Bullying (50)
 - 3—Student Failed Communication (37)
 - 4—Suspension/Expulsion (28)
- Top 2 (out of 7) Personnel Issues Identified Since August 2008**
- 1—Pay/Benefits (28)
 - 2—Termination (10)

¹ *Failed Communication*: designated for cases with an issue, complaint, or dispute associated with a lack of, or breakdown in, communication between a student/parent and the school faculty, staff, or administration, i.e. phone calls not returned, inappropriate school staff phone etiquette, vital letters not received by parents, etc.

The consistently high number of *suspensions/expulsions* cases indicates that the district's current focus at the state and local level on reducing suspensions and expulsions through the proposed revisions to Student Discipline, Chapter 25 of Title 5 of the *District of Columbia Municipal Regulations* (DCMR), is a necessary and warranted policy change. More information about the proposed revisions to the student discipline regulations is available at <http://www.k12.dc.us/strategic-documents.htm> and <http://newsroom.dc.gov/show.aspx/agency/seo/section/2/release/16065>.

In addition to the district's welcomed strategy of shifting student discipline from a punitive-based to an instructional-based approach, the Office of the Ombudsman recommends exploration of policies that include problem solving, mediation, and restorative justice approaches that address the deep-rooted issues resulting in the suspensions and expulsions. School-based conflicts are not only a learning opportunity, but an opportunity to directly address the attitudes, emotions, relationships, and unmet needs of those involved in the conflicts.

In a restorative justice response to a school conflict where a student caused harm, for example, the focus is centered on dialogue between the offender(s) and the victim(s), rather than the violation of the disciplinary rules and subsequent consequences. In this approach, the goal is for the individual(s) who caused the harm to take responsibility for their actions and, in many cases, apologize to the person(s) harmed. Through joint problem-solving, undoing the wrong, and repairing relationships, both those who caused the harm and those who were harmed are empowered to experience the necessary reflection and healing that can lead to prevention of future conflict.

This approach is in contrast to suspension or expulsion as a response to a school conflict, which takes students out of school and burdens working parents. In many cases, suspension and expulsion is perceived by the student and/or parent as punishment by the school system where there is little connection to the violation committed or to the person(s) that may have been victimized. Consequently, the suspension or expulsion may lead to the student and/or parent to see the school's response as an act of retribution rather than accountability for wrong actions.

Institutionalizing alternative approaches to the current punitive approach to student discipline could not only lead to a reduction in suspensions and expulsions generally, but also a reduction in the high incidence of the *safety/abuse/bullying*² cases taken by the Office of the Ombudsman.

² *School Safety/Abuse/Bullying*: designated for all cases involving a threat to the physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of a student(s). Typically the threats come as a result of an interpersonal conflict with another student(s), faculty, or staff. In some cases the threat is environmental resulting from a concern with the school's environment or neighborhood, i.e. overcrowded classroom, gang activity in neighborhoods, need for a crossing guard, etc.