



February 2009 Report

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Notes from the Ombudsman

The Ombudsman is a neutral, informal, and independent resource for parents, teachers, and all 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 vehicle for citizens to express their complaints and concerns, the Ombudsman is also charged with encouraging communication between residents and the Mayor regarding all levels of public education.

February Issues Received

The Office of the Ombudsman responded to 45 individuals regarding public education issues in February, and has responded to 450 issues during the 2008-2009 school year. The box to the right contains an analysis of the issues received by the Ombudsman during the month of February. Continuing the trend of earlier months, the highest percentage of issues received came from DCPS. Twenty percent of issues involved public charter schools, with the remaining issues involving the University of the District of Columbia or other educational entities.

Beginning in February, the Ombudsman will include in monthly analysis reports the percentage of issues received by school grade level (when a grade level is applicable to the issue received). This will allow for more detailed analysis of trends. For instance, analyzing issues by grade level will allow the Ombudsman to determine whether the issues received at the high school level differ from the issues received at the middle school level, particularly when aggregating monthly issues for the end of school year report. In February, forty percent of issues received came from the high school level, with a similar percentage coming from the combined, pre-school, pre-kindergarten, and elementary grades. Middle schools only produced ten percent of issues received by the Ombudsman.

Seventy-six percent of the February cases were closed by the Ombudsman within fifteen days of receipt. The two most common issues types received were *Failed Communication* and *School Safety/Abuse/Bullying*, each contributing eighteen percent of all issues received. The following chart lists all issues received by the Ombudsman in February by issue type (Figure 1).

February Issue Breakdown

Number of issues received: 45
 Average days to close: 11

By source:

DCPS	– 60%
PCS	– 20%
UDC	– 11%
OTH	– 9%

By grade level (if applicable):

Pre-S/Pre-K	– 3%
Elementary (K-5)	– 35%
Middle School (6-8)	– 10%
High School (9-12)	– 40%
Post-Secondary	– 13%

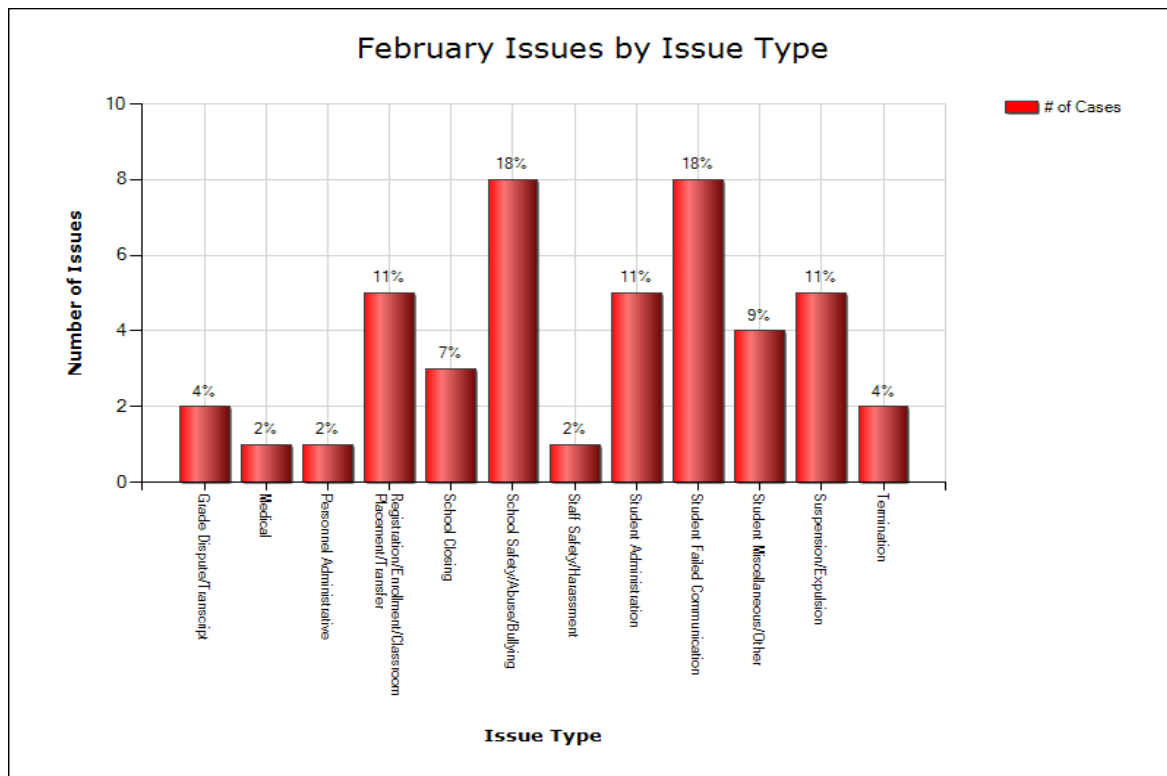
Most common issues:

Failed Communication	– 18%
School Safety/Abuse/ Bullying	– 18%

Closed within 15 days:

YES	– 76%
NO	– 24%

Figure 1



Issue Highlight: *Student Safety/Abuse/Bullying*

With sixty-three issues, *Student Safety/Abuse/Bullying* has been the second most common issue directed to the Office of the Ombudsman during the 2008-2009 school year. The Ombudsman defines a student safety case as one that “involves a threat to the physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of a student(s)...typically as a result of an interpersonal conflict with another student(s), faculty, or staff.” This issue type does not encompass all of the incidences of fighting, suspensions, altercations, or other interpersonal conflict received by the Ombudsman, as often the concern of parents/guardians in these issues primarily involves a resulting suspension or resulting concern with school administration. Rather, the *Student Safety/Abuse/Bullying* issue type is reserved for issues which the primary concern of the citizen contacting the Ombudsman is the threat of well-being to student(s).

Examples of *Student Safety/Abuse/Bullying* issues coming to the Ombudsman in February were allegations of violence against students by other students and teachers, allegations of harassment by students and teachers, and a safety concern from a parent resulting from a student’s crew/gang affiliation. In all student safety-related issues, the Ombudsman works to gain a full understanding of the complainant’s safety concerns for the student(s), provide information regarding any applicable policies, regulations, or procedures, help the complainant coordinate communication with the appropriate school official(s), and provide any informal mediation, investigation, or other appropriate services to result in a mutually agreeable and satisfactory resolution of issues. When that is not possible, a complainant is made aware of any available appeal procedures, and the complainant’s concerns are considered by the Ombudsman for future procedural recommendations.

The following two examples are student safety issues received by the Ombudsman during the month of February. They highlight both the serious nature of the school safety concerns, especially at the middle and high school level, as well as the complexity and interconnectedness of these issues which involve students, parents, schools, communities, law enforcement, and other government agencies and community organizations. The need for collaboration and student-centered decision-making by all parties is vital to ensuring safety concerns are met with swift and comprehensive support. In the end of school year report, the Ombudsman will undergo a trend analysis of student safety issues received at each grade level to determine both the quantity of issues received as well as the swiftness and effectiveness of support provided to citizens who bring the concerns.

Case Study 1: School and community safety concerns

A public charter high school contacted the Ombudsman's office because students had been attacked on multiple occasions by young adults in the neighborhood surrounding the school. The school believed that their students were targeted because most of them were not from the neighborhood and the school was perceived as being an outside entity. Although the school had taken some steps to keep students safe, such as creating a safe passage route to public transportation, chaperoning, and hiring off duty police, the incidents continued to occur.

The Ombudsman's office coordinated with the school to begin development of a school-driven public safety initiative. Multiple community stakeholders from the public, non-profit, and law enforcement sectors were contacted and invited to a preliminary meeting to discuss the problem and what could be done to solve it. A meeting took place where the group sketched out a work plan for how to move forward to ensure the safe passage of students to and from school and ideas to better integrate the school with the surrounding community.

Case Study 2: Student crew/ gang-related safety concerns

The mother of a DCPS high school student was referred to the Ombudsman by a community-based organization because her son, who had not been suspended or expelled, was told not to come back to school. The school made this decision, in conjunction with the instructional superintendent's office, after determining that the student was a member of a crew/gang whose presence based on earlier violence in the community posed a threat to both the individual student as well as the larger school community. The school wished to facilitate an involuntary transfer to a different school site where the existing threats and issues would not be present. Unable to immediately facilitate the transfer, the school had sent the student away from school, leaving the student out of school for the time being.

The Ombudsman's office coordinated and participated in a conference at the school, including the parent, school, and the community-based organization. After information presented from school and police officials supported the safety concerns for the student and school community, the school and parent discussed other placement options for the student. A tentative placement was agreed upon and the Ombudsman and parent scheduled a school visit. The mother later changed her mind and insisted that he be allowed to remain at the original school. The mother was directed to the school system's formal hearing procedure before an impartial hearing officer. The hearing upheld the involuntary transfer to the other school.