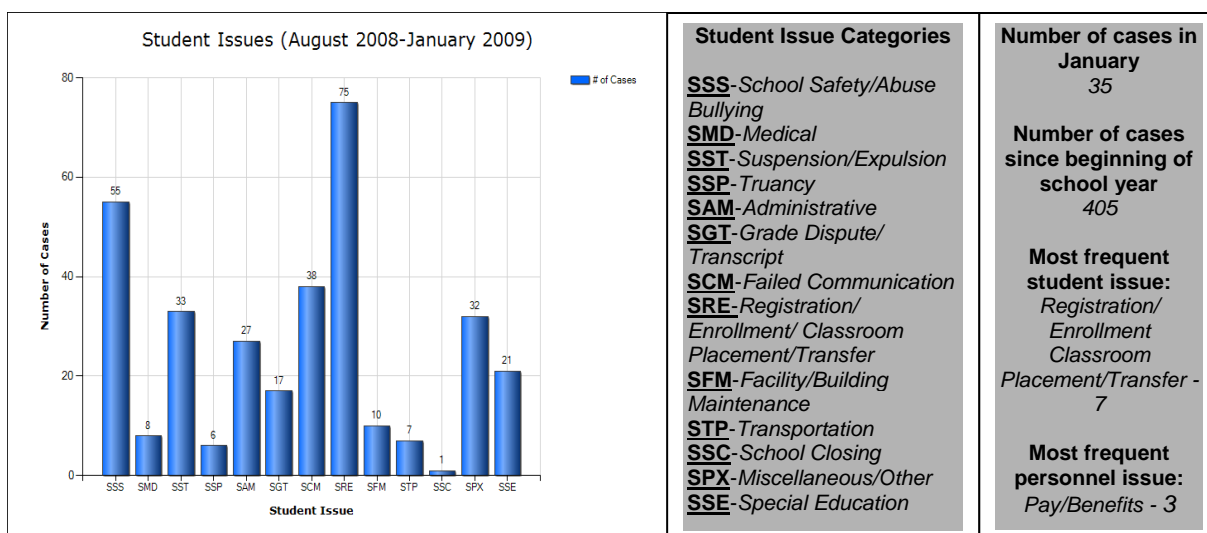


**Monthly Report  
January 2009**

**Notes from the Ombudsman**

In January, the Office of the Ombudsman responded to 35 individuals concerning public education issues, bringing this school year’s case total to 405. Similar to December, the decrease in cases reflects the shorter month caused by the Winter Break period.

Of the thirty-five cases in January, twenty-five involved DCPS. Issues from public charter schools produced eight cases. The most frequent issue type brought to the Ombudsman this month was *Registration/Enrollment/Classroom Placement/Transfer*<sup>1</sup>. The chart below illustrates the frequency of issues brought to the Ombudsman during the 2008-2009 school year.



**Issue Highlight: Registration/Enrollment/Classroom Placement/Transfer**

This month’s report will highlight the issue type most frequently brought to the Office of the Ombudsman during the 2008-2009 school year, issues relating to student enrollment, registration, placement, and transfer. While for many DC parents, registration and enrollment issues are a mere annoyance in August and September, the Ombudsman receives cases each month involving students whose circumstances necessitate a change in setting during the academic year, most often in the secondary grades. The primary reasons for student mid-year transfers are suspensions/expulsions, safety issues, academic concerns, or special education/linguistic needs at the current placement. In other words, these situations most often involve students who, educationally speaking, are already at risk. It is therefore imperative for school staff to follow proper procedures and inform parents of the transition process and of their rights in order to ensure the student’s smooth transfer into the appropriate school setting.

<sup>1</sup>Student issue designation for cases involving an issue, complaint, or dispute associated with the process of a student’s registration, enrollment, and transfer into another school or placement into another classroom.

While this surely happens in many instances, cases that reach the Ombudsman by nature illuminate situations in which a parent feels the appropriate process was not followed or is unfair. When this happens, parents and students can be left without a school placement for weeks at a time, causing an extreme disruption in the student's academic progress. Provided below are five real examples of registration, enrollment, and transfer issues brought to the Ombudsman by DC parents during the month of January. These case studies are highlighted for two reasons:

- 1) To reflect a sampling of the myriad of issues that can cause a student to need a new school placement during the school year.
- 2) To show demonstrable examples when school staff error, lack of communication, or inaction led to exclusion or significant periods of missed school for students.

*Case Study 1: Re-enrollment from home-schooling*

A grandparent home-schooled her grandson for over a year, but now wanted to re-enroll him in a DCPS high school in the ninth grade. She was told by the school registrar that because she did not have the correct home-school documents, she could not enroll the student, despite it being the student's neighborhood school. The grandparent contacted the Ombudsman, who listened to the situation and referred the grandparent to a Private and Home School Specialist at the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). The specialist worked with the parent and school to enroll the student, three weeks after the parent had originally contacted the school.

*Case Study 2: Enrollment of a student in transitional housing*

A student living in the transitional housing program for homeless youth wanted to switch from a GED program to a DCPS school to earn his high school degree. The neighborhood school for the housing program was not near his occupation and possibly unsafe based on the student's individual circumstances. He contacted a more suitable DCPS school but was denied enrollment due to his boundary status. The student and a third party contacted the Ombudsman, who researched district and federal policies regarding the enrollment and placement of homeless students. The Ombudsman facilitated communication with the school's principal, who had not been aware of the situation, and accepted the student based on the circumstances. The student was out of school one week before being enrolled.

*Case Studies 3 and 4: Improper suspension processes*

A girl at a DCPS high school was involved in a fight. The student's mother alleged (and the evidence appeared to support) that the school improperly threatened to formally expel her unless the student was withdrawn and enrolled elsewhere. Not wanting to have the incident on her daughter's record, the mother withdrew the student and attempted to enroll her in the neighborhood school. The neighborhood school refused to enroll the student because the appropriate suspension procedure was not followed. Unable to enroll

her child at either school, the parent contacted the Ombudsman, who communicated with the Chancellor's Office and the Cluster V Instructional Superintendent. While it appeared the original school had acted improperly and against policy, the frustrated mother did not want to send her child back to a school that did not appear to want her child. She requested that DCPS enroll her student at the neighborhood school. The DCPS central office helped resolve the situation, but the student was out of school four weeks before she was enrolled.

A boy at a public charter middle school was suspended for possessing an inappropriate item on school grounds. According to the grandparent, the student was originally suspended the first week of November for 7-10 days, and the grandparent was told by the charter school they would contact her when the student could return. No clear information was given for a month, when the charter school produced a letter stating the child was expelled and could not return. The grandparent attempted to enroll the student in a nearby DCPS school, which took a week to inform the grandparent it was not her neighborhood school. The student was out of school six weeks until being enrolled in the neighborhood DCPS school.

#### *Case Study 5: Expulsion from charter school*

A 9<sup>th</sup> grade student, older than a traditional 9<sup>th</sup> grader but still of compulsory age, was expelled from a public charter high school. The student's father attempted to enroll him at the neighborhood DCPS school but was denied enrollment by the school's front office. After being contacted, the Ombudsman facilitated a conversation between parent, principal, and registrar. Based on the student's age and academic level, the school recommended a placement in one of DCPS's S.T.A.Y. programs, evening academic programs for non-traditional students. The student was out of school two weeks until a placement was determined.

### **Recommendations**

It is important to note that the case studies above represent only five students in a public school system serving over 70,000 students (including DCPS and charter schools). However, these five students missed a total of sixteen weeks of school due to the aforementioned communication and logistical breakdowns. While the quantity of such issues the Ombudsman has received is relatively modest, the amount of missed school time and the concern that many similar issues currently do not reach the Ombudsman justify increased planning, scrutiny and coordination from schools when instituting mid-year transfers.

Both the Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE) and DCPS have proposed revisions to the current student discipline process that have the potential to substantially improve the purpose and effectiveness of student discipline in the district. However, the above examples suggest a responsibility gap between schools when students are moved during the academic year, a gap that does not appear to be addressed in these revisions.

The Ombudsman recommends that the DCPS central office, the DC Public Charter School Board, and the Office of the State Superintendent for Education consider among their current revisions further exploration of an effective communication policy between schools involving the transfer of students during the academic year. Specifically, the Ombudsman recommends that office collaborate to include in the current policy revisions clear expectations to school staff that if a school deems it necessary for a student to be relocated, staff at the leaving school is responsible for coordination of enrollment at a receiving school. Responsibility for the student should not end when suspension or withdrawal papers are filed, but rather when the school receives confirmation that the student has enrolled at another site. This increased level of expectation and coordination would serve to reduce the instances of students missing weeks or months of school due to staff confusion, lack of communication, or negligence, and serve to strengthen relationships between schools for other purposes.