



July 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 July 2009.

July Issues Received

The Ombudsman responded to 25 residents concerning public education issues in July, a marked reduction from previous months. The drop-off in volume is a product of July being the only month on the calendar when traditional school is not in session. DCPS issues accounted for 56% of issues received in July, while public charter school issues accounted for 20%. High school issues accounted for 60% of issues, while elementary and middle school issues each accounted for 15%. In July, 84% of issues received were closed within 15 days. Closed issues were resolved in an average of 9 days. Two issues remain open pending resolution.

Grade Dispute/Transcript issues were the most common issue type received in July, accounting for 24% of all issues. *Registration/Enrollment/Classroom Placement/Transfer* issues accounted for 12%, as did *Administrative issues (Personnel)* and *Administrative issues (Student)*. 16% of issues fell into the *Miscellaneous/Other* category (Figure 1).

Grade Dispute/Transcript Issues

Three of the six *Grade Dispute/Transcript* concerns brought to the Ombudsman were from former DCPS students who needed copies of their high school transcript or diploma for college or employment purposes. The process for a former DCPS graduate to request an academic transcript or a copy of a diploma is to contact the high school from which the student graduated. If the attended high school has since closed, the former student should contact the DCPS central office, and will be referred to the Closed School Record Office, which houses most academic records from closed schools.

July Issue Breakdown

Number of issues received: 25
 Average days to close: 9

By source:

DCPS – 56%
 PCS – 20%
 UDC – 8%
 Other – 16%

By grade level (if applicable):

Pre-S/Pre-K – 0%
 Elementary – 15%
 Middle School – 15%
 High School – 60%
 Post-Secondary – 10%

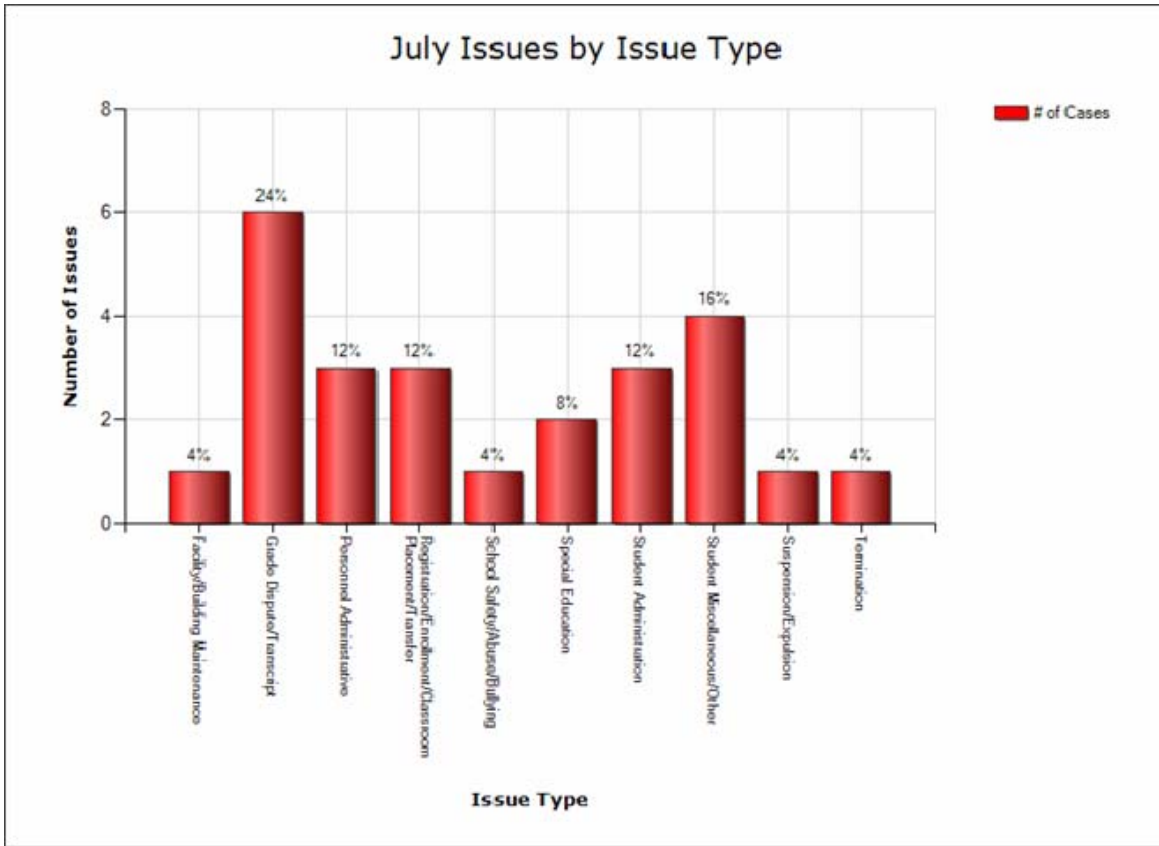
Most common issues:

Grade Dispute/Transcript – 24%
 Registration/ Enrollment/
 Classroom Placement/
 Transfer – 12%
 Administrative issues
 (Personnel) – 12%
 Administrative issues
 (Student) – 12%

Closed within 15 days:

YES – 84%
 NO – 16%

Figure 1.



All three requestors attended schools which had been temporarily or permanently closed. Two of the former students graduated over 40 years ago, and one had graduated in the last three years. Each had previously contacted DCPS, but had been unable to get the issue resolved because of either a lack in responsiveness (one case), problems in locating the transcript (one case), or insufficient time allowed for DCPS to process the request (one case).

All three students were eventually able to receive copies of their transcripts or diplomas, although not without delay in two instances. The recently-graduated student, who needed the transcript to transfer colleges, had to wait for nearly a month because of a lack of responsiveness by a school-based front office employee, who repeatedly told the student that the registrar was not available. The registrar, who alone had access to the transcript, was located at a different work site for the summer. The front office employee did not see it as a personal responsibility to contact the registrar directly, nor to provide the registrar’s contact information. It took the student contacting the Ombudsman representative, who had worked previously with the registrar, to communicate the need for the transcript. Once contacted, the registrar quickly resolved the issue, even hand-delivering the transcript to the student’s residence.

In the case where DCPS could not locate the transcript of a woman who had graduated over 40 years ago (despite the best efforts of the involved employees), the woman, who needed the transcript to show her employer, was asked to submit any evidence she retained from her graduation period. Thanks to the continued efforts of an employee, enough evidence was submitted to merit a letter verifying graduation and a duplicate diploma.

The other *Grade Dispute/Transcript* issues received by the Ombudsman in July involved complaints about failing grades received, leading to possible retention. A parent of a charter elementary school student stated that the student was being held back in the 3rd grade because of poor grades in one class. After being alerted, the principal quickly resolved the situation, ensuring the student would progress to the next grade.

In a similar situation where a charter school planned to retain an elementary school student, the parent claimed the student was not progressing because his Section 504 plan was not implemented during the school year. The incoming principal, who was new to the school, met with the parent and suggested a compromise that would retain the student initially but move him up after the first advisory if the student demonstrated adequate subject knowledge. The parent appeared resistant to the suggestion and planned to retain legal counsel.

In the other issue, a graduate student at the University of the District of Columbia planning to graduate this summer received an externship exam grade which kept her from doing so. The student felt she had not received enough support or timely notice to make improvements. After a meeting, the school upheld the grade and suggested that the student continue the externship into the fall and retake the exam.

Personnel Issues

There were four personnel issues brought to the Ombudsman in July, all involving DCPS. One teacher reported that she did not receive a letter mailed by Human Resources in May and was thus notified one month late that she was being excessed from a DCPS high school. She also expressed concern that she was excessed improperly, a claim which upon review was not substantiated. Finally, she expressed dissatisfaction with both the lack of effort by the Human Resources department and the Washington Teachers' Union in assisting her in finding a new position. The employee was placed in a different school by July 31 as required.

Another teacher wished to appeal her termination from a DCPS middle school, a formal grievance process outside the informal structure of the Ombudsman. A third school employee had attempted to return to a full time position from approved sick leave, but did not receive placement at a school for a significant period. The issue appeared to highlight a lack of clarity in the Office of Human Resources' policy and procedures regarding the return of employees to work from sick leave. The employee has since received a placement position for the new school year, but has related compensation inquiries which have yet to be fully resolved.

Analysis/Recommendations

The District of Columbia Municipal Regulations (DCMR) requires that DCPS maintain students' cumulative record folders, including academic transcripts, for at least 75 years.¹ In practice, records management has historically been inconsistent, leading the then DCPS Board of Education in April 2007 to draft a resolution providing guidance for handling requests of lost or destroyed transcripts. In instances of lost or destroyed transcripts, the resolution directed the school system to write a letter to verify the last level of school attendance. If the school system has no records of the student available, a letter is to be drafted stating such.

While the historically-inherited inconsistency in student record management is troubling, most transcript requests coming to the Ombudsman in the 2008-2009 school year have been located and completed successfully. In the instances where transcripts could not be found, in nearly all cases DCPS and the requestor have worked together in the manner described earlier to show some sort of verification. Although asking adults who graduated decades ago for verification is not the preferred method of operation, in instances where records were lost or destroyed years ago, there are unfortunately few other options.

Moving forward, DCPS should ensure that clear systems for the maintenance of past student records, including special education records, are widely understood and implemented by staff, particularly at the school level. The electronic data storage systems used by DCPS for academic and special education records of current students should mitigate the loss of records for current and future students. Although not the first priority for time or resources, an internal audit of housed records as well as the development of electronic storage for past student records should also be explored.

A more immediate, and more attainable, goal DCPS should strive for is to minimize the frequency or duration of instances that former students are left waiting for transcripts because of lack of responsiveness or communication by school staff. The earlier example of the former student who waited for weeks before the registrar was contacted is an example of the importance of staff to consider it their responsibility to assist individuals until the issue is resolved. Most school-based front office staff at DCPS and public charter schools provide friendly, knowledgeable, and persistent service during their work duty. As anyone who has had a bad experience with the phone or cable company knows, however, it is the bad experiences that linger in memory. In addition to transcript requests, other issues that reach the Ombudsman (enrollment problems, lack of coordination between schools for transferring students, administrative complaints) frequently involve complaints of the responsiveness or demeanor of administrative staff.

DCPS, as well as public charter schools, should continue to emphasize the importance of welcoming, responsive, and results-driven school-based front office staff through the continued clarity and distribution of district policies (particularly any changes in policy or practice), clear expectations, and individual accountability.

¹ Title 5, DCMR §2606.1.