



## **June 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](mailto: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 June 2009.

### June Issues Received

The Office of the Ombudsman responded to 99 individuals regarding public education issues during the month of June, and has responded to 740 issues during the 2008-2009 school year. The Ombudsman continued to receive feedback in June from members of the current and former Benjamin Banneker Academic High School (BBAHS) community regarding the school's grading scale. This issue was highlighted in the Ombudsman's May report.<sup>1</sup>

In all, 59 of the 99 individuals contacting the Ombudsman in June did so to provide input on the Banneker grading scale. The majority of the feedback came from Banneker alumni, who were almost universally opposed to changing the grading scale that has been in place since the school's founding. Of the feedback from parents of current students, two parents contacted the Ombudsman in support of the current scale, while four parents were opposed to the current grading scale and felt the school should adopt the scale used by all other DCPS schools. DCPS has not yet communicated results of the internal review of the grading policy to the Banneker community or the Ombudsman. All 59 Banneker-related issues brought to the Ombudsman in June remain open pending communication from DCPS. As a result only 27% of Ombudsman issues were resolved within fifteen days in June, a much lower percentage than other months.

Closed issues were resolved in an average of 12 days.<sup>2</sup> Issues involving DCPS accounted for 91% of all issues received in June, while 8% involved public charter schools. 83% of all

<sup>1</sup> The Ombudsman's May report is online at <http://ombudsman.dc.gov>.

<sup>2</sup> Cases remaining open are not included in this calculation.

### *June Issue Breakdown*

Number of issues received: 99  
 Average days to close: 12

**By source:**

DCPS – 91%  
 PCS – 8%  
 UDC – 0%  
 Other – 1%

**By grade level (if applicable):**

Pre-S/Pre-K – 1%  
 Elementary – 11%  
 Middle School – 5%  
 High School – 83%  
 Post-Secondary – 0%

**Most common issues:**

Grade Dispute/Transcript – 63%  
 Registration/ Enrollment/  
 Classroom Placement/  
 Transfer – 8%  
 School Safety/Abuse/  
 Bullying – 6%

**Closed within 15 days:**

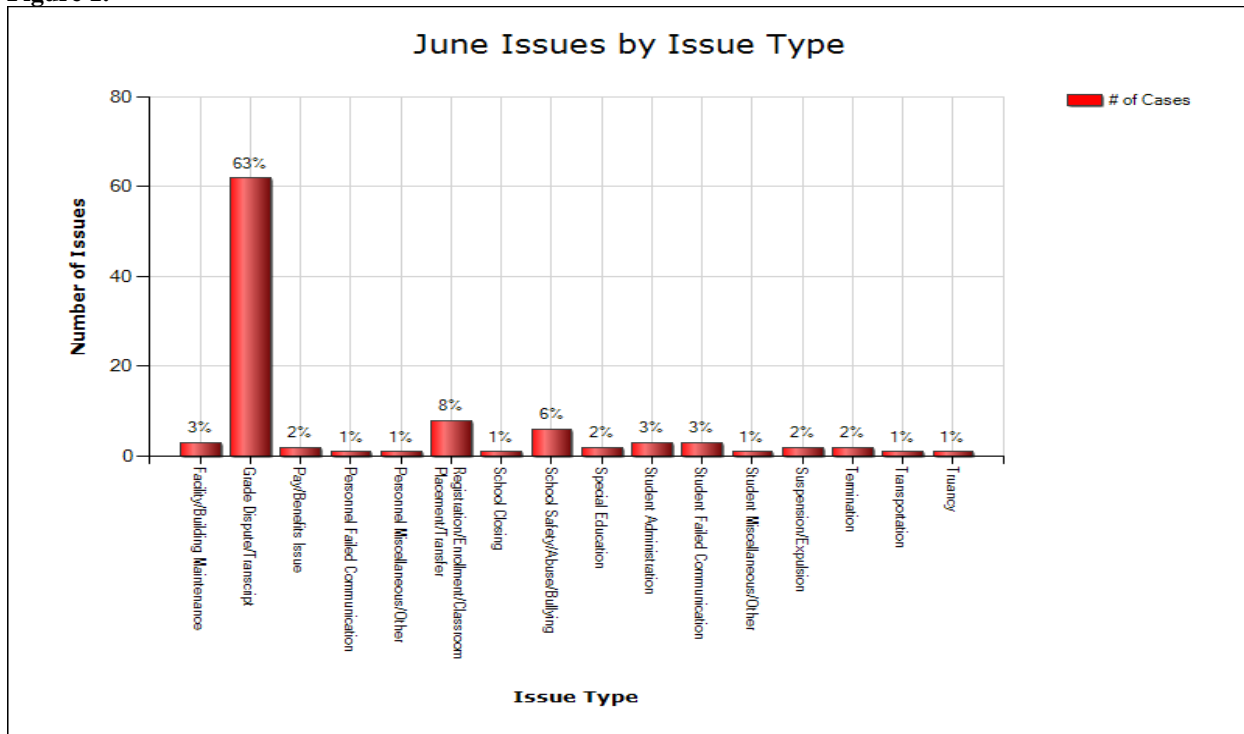
YES – 27%  
 NO – 73%

issues were at the high school level, reflecting the volume received from the Banneker issue. A full breakdown of issues received by issue type is represented in Figure 1.

Aside from communication pertaining to the Banneker grading scale, the most frequent issues to reach the Ombudsman in June were *Registration/Enrollment/Classroom Placement/Transfer* issues. These issues primarily involved student registration and enrollment in summer school. Three of the seven issues came from parents visiting the Ombudsman representative in the Mayor’s Services Liaison Office at D.C. Superior Court.<sup>3</sup> These students had been required by the judicial system to attend summer school. In all three cases the Ombudsman representative successfully worked with the parents and school to enroll the student, even in one DCPS high school that initially appeared to be at capacity. None of the cases appeared to represent a breakdown in functioning by the school system. Rather, the parents who contacted the Ombudsman had not yet contacted the school, or were attempting to enroll their child after the deadline and had been told school sites were full. In four of the five cases, parents were able to work with the school sites and the Ombudsman to enroll their children successfully. In only one case, that of a parochial-school student attempting to enroll after summer school had already started, was the school system unable to enroll the student.

Other issues in the *Registration/Enrollment/Classroom Placement/Transfer* category came from parents looking to enroll their children in different schools for next school year. In each case the Ombudsman directed parents to online information regarding school options and provided referral information to non-profit organizations specializing in school options for parents.

Figure 1.



<sup>3</sup> See the Ombudsman’s March report for information about Ombudsman representation at the Mayor’s Service Liaison Office.

## **Issue Highlight: Leveraging Internal and External Resources for Students and Families**

This month's report highlights two issues received by the Ombudsman in June stemming from the challenging task of meeting the needs of students whose circumstances provide deeper rooted challenges.

### *Case Study 1: Communication and Support for Bilingual Students and Families*

The Children's Law Center referred a parent of a non-English speaking family with three children in DCPS schools to the Ombudsman to assist with the parent's academic concerns. The family had immigrated to the United States during the past year. After participating in the intake process through the DCPS Office of Bilingual Education, the two elementary school-age students and one high school-age student were placed in schools. After several months, communication difficulties developed among the parent, school, and Office of Bilingual Education. The parent felt the bilingual education programs at each school were not successfully educating his children, and he did not agree with the school system's recommendations to enroll the students in summer school or to consider alternative school placements with more language-specific resources.

After initial conversations with the parent and the Office of Bilingual Education, the Ombudsman representative conducted a home visit to meet the parent and students. After the Ombudsman representative's assessment of the family's educational and non-educational circumstances, the parent agreed to enroll the students in the summer school sites recommended by the Office of Bilingual Education. The Ombudsman representative returned the next day to facilitate the enrollment of the students in summer school. Since transportation costs were one of the factors keeping the students from the recommended school locations, the Ombudsman representative also arranged for the family's transportation costs to be subsidized.

The parent, Ombudsman representative, and Office of Bilingual Education officials had a follow-up meeting to improve the working relationship and evaluate the students' experiences at the summer school sites. The parent reported marked improvements in satisfaction with the educational experience for the students. The Office of Bilingual Education is assisting the parent in enrolling the students at these appropriate locations for next school year. Finally, the Ombudsman representative traveled with the parent to facilitate an intake at the local Collaborative to address the family's non-education concerns, which primarily involved housing and employment concerns.

### *Case Study 2: Additional Support for a Student and Parent*

The parent of a public charter high school student contacted the Ombudsman because the student was in danger of being retained for the second time due to poor academic performance. The parent worried that the student lacked appropriate motivation for school and requested academic support so the student would have a chance at passing courses. The conversation with the

Ombudsman representative revealed that the parent had not yet brought the concerns to the school administration. The parent also stated that he had just obtained custody of the student and expressed an uncertainty in how to address the academic issues.

The Ombudsman representative facilitated communication between the parent and school, and a meeting to discuss the concerns was promptly organized. In addition, the representative and parent discussed other potential areas of support for the parent. The Ombudsman representative contacted the parent's local DC Collaborative, who recommended the parent consider the Collaborative's Fatherhood Education Empowerment and Development (FEED) program, which offers case management services to allow fathers to provide improved support to their children.<sup>4</sup> The Ombudsman provided contact information to the parent, who reported that the meeting with the school was productive and resulted in an academic intervention plan for the student.

## **Analysis/Recommendations**

The cases above represent just two examples of the way schools in the District of Columbia must leverage internal and external resources to reach all students. In each of these case studies, providing the student with an environment for academic success meant going beyond the relationship between teacher and student. It also meant reaching out to parents who were not fully reaching out in return, spending time necessary to build trust, and having the integrated knowledge system in place to connect parents to the correct resources outside the school building. In these two instances, representatives from the Ombudsman's office were able to bridge the communication gap and, particularly in the first case, go far beyond the traditional level of assistance to put the student and family in a position to succeed academically. This type of work is sorely needed for many District students and families, and requires an incredibly coordinated approach at all levels.

Charter schools, DCPS, and the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education have recognized the need for greater breadth and depth of services within school buildings, and have undertaken a number of initiatives to attempt to provide these resources. One charter school visited by the Ombudsman in March used their well-attended PTA meeting to conduct lessons and skits to teach parenting skills. They taught parents how to provide an effective environment for students to study and how to efficiently manage children's morning routines before school. DCPS has developed three Parent Resource Centers and has piloted two programs, the School-wide Application Model (SAM) and Full Service Schools (FSS), specifically designed to provide additional academic, social, and clinical resources to students.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, through its work coordinating the Interagency Collaboration and Services Integration Commission (ICSIC), the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education has piloted the DC START program, in which trained school-based clinicians provide social and emotional services to students in seven DCPS

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<sup>4</sup> More information about FEED and other DC Collaborative programs can be found at <http://www.dccollaboratives.org/programs.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> More information about SAM and FSS can be found at <http://dcps.dc.gov/portal/site/DCPS/menuitem.1b5a3021e04d6a932c69621014f62010/?vgnextoid=c71aa1bb65822210VgnVCM100000416f0201RCRD>.

schools.<sup>6</sup> Both DCPS and the DME have reported preliminary success with these programs and plan program expansions in the 2009-2010 school year. These programs should continue to be analyzed for their effectiveness, and further expanded if found to have a positive impact.

While the school system should continue to implement, analyze, and expand such school-based services, it should not attempt to go at it alone. The city has a wealth of resources available to families in other government agencies and in non-government, non-profit, and community-based organizations. Part of schools' responsibility is to ensure they have sufficient knowledge of the academic and non-academic resources available outside the school building, and are making a concerted, regular effort to inform families of these resources which often go underutilized. Much of this integration for non-academic resources can be accomplished with communication between schools and their local DC Collaborative, as the Collaboratives play a vital role for residents in developing and facilitating a neighborhood-based family support system with government and non-government resources.<sup>7</sup>

In the two case studies above, the schools were effective in implementing plans and recommendations for the students' academics. However, in both cases the family needed additional assistance that went beyond academics. The first parent needed to address housing, employment, and cultural issues. The second parent needed a resource that could provide intensive parenting support and assistance. These resources are available, in the DCPS Parent Resource Centers, government agencies for housing and employment, and social work capacity in the DC Collaboratives. But the resources are only as effective as their integration and awareness allow. By further developing knowledge systems so that all school staff are aware of the internal and external resources available for families, local schools can provide support to families while keeping the teachers' primary focus on providing high-quality academics.

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<sup>6</sup> More information about DC START can be found at <http://dme.dc.gov/dme/cwp/view,A,1409,Q,608268.asp>

<sup>7</sup> More information about the DC Collaboratives can be found at <http://www.dccollaboratives.org/>.