



202-741-4692 (phone) • [student.advocate@dc.gov](mailto:student.advocate@dc.gov) (email) • <https://studentadvocate.dc.gov> (web)

**Written Testimony of Dan Davis, Chief Student Advocate  
Office of the Student Advocate  
Public Roundtable on School Reopening and Academic Recovery  
Committee of the Whole  
Monday, May 24, 2021**

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, committee members, and staff. My name is Dan Davis and I am honored to lead the work of the Office of the Student Advocate as Chief Student Advocate for the District of Columbia. Our office supports and guides families with concerns through our system of public education in the District. Every day we work to ensure that family and student voice, stays at the center of our system of public education. I am excited to share with you today concerns brought to us from students and families across the District.

The past two years prove that our school leaders and teachers are wonderfully creative and capable of transformation. Our students and families have proved over and over that they are resilient and committed to be partners in education. As we move to return to the classroom, we cannot change the role of students and families in education from partners to followers. We must make certain that the framework for returning to school is a shared decision model between families and school leaders. Throughout the transition to distance learning, the ongoing efforts to recover, and this summer's push to combat learning loss, we are asking students and families to use faith again and again that their children's best interest will be served without including their input. We now ask families to return to school buildings that for many did not fully meet their needs prior to the pandemic.

The most pressing concern my team hears from families at both traditional neighborhood schools and charter campuses is that students with special needs have struggled to not only

keep pace with their peers but have lost progress made before the pivot to distance learning. These families for the past two school years have met with school leaders, instructors, and service providers desperately seeking any and every path forward. These families need recovery that accounts for the loss of progress during distance learning and accelerates their students to make meaningful progress at the rate their peers will post recovery. Moreover, families seek proactive engagement and transparency in what is occurring. We hear continuously from families, that a school is not willing to meet the requests the family is asking particularly with screening and evaluation and revisiting current accommodations. For some as we lead them through the process of speaking with the school and problem solving their concerns, we find two things- 1) that the school is aware of the concern and has been working to troubleshoot solutions at the classroom level but did not communicate this directly to the family and 2) the school had not yet communicated with the family where they are in the process of addressing the issue and the steps they plan to take such as response to intervention (RTI), small group instruction, etc. In more than a few instances, once the school and family are able to get on the same page we see an increased willingness for them to work together to improve outcomes.

Likewise, all students and families across sectors throughout the District need improved communication with their school buildings and leaders. The dialogue between schools and families on how we return to schools, our priorities, and the framework of school in the fall cannot be reserved for those who have the access and privilege to be vocal and present. This period of distance learning compelled us to take a more intentional, community centered approach to family involvement. We saw schools create new avenues for frequent check-ins with families and problem solve with them, not for them, to meet their most urgent needs. As we move forward, it is critical we ensure that our engagement with families restores confidence in our school system and prioritizes family voice in decisions made by leadership. We know that every parent and guardian holds essential expertise about their child, and as schools buildout recovery learning plans they should be grounded in that key experience.

Furthermore, there are communication challenges within our current efforts that students and families are unsure about:

- grading policies and the effect of neutral GPA credits on transcripts- is there an impact on admission to selective high schools or college admissions;
- student and staff vaccination requirements and roll out plan
- eligibility for summer programming, in-person offerings, and start dates
- options for families who don't want to vaccinate their children and are not ready to send their children back to school just yet
- options for families who feel virtual learning has benefited their child
- tutoring or enrichment options for families that are easily accessible

Improved communication at the school level between building leaders and families is a start but there are concerns from students and families that are shared with school leadership. One, in particular, is how we transport students to and from school. Now is the time to listen to students, families, and school leaders about what can improve the daily commute between home and school. We struggled in many areas with student use of public transportation before the pandemic- bus capacity during peak travel times, behavior and safety concerns aboard rail, and ultimately timeliness. Ensuring student's on time arrival to school safely as we all begin to use public transportation again must be present and clearly communicated in our reopening plans.

We cannot find complacency in believing we have made it to this point by our own efforts. Our teachers have played arguably the most crucial role supporting students in this time. However, their voices are consistently missing from the decision-making process. The trust students and families have with schools is earned in the classroom and is the product of so many dedicated and talented educators here in the District. Returning to the classroom must have buy-in from our teachers, so that families can have confidence that school buildings are safe learning environments. Our teachers have proven time and time again that they are devoted to this work and willing to do what is necessary to ensure the success of our students. While it certainly existed before, we have seen an increase in some of our most committed educators feeling undervalued and unappreciated for the work they have done. Aside from families, our teachers spend the most time with students and are another essential source of expertise. In

planning our path forward, teacher voice must be encouraged and accepted throughout the process.

Finally, if there is any person interested in contacting our office, they can do so by calling us at 202-741-4692 or emailing us at [student.advocate@dc.gov](mailto:student.advocate@dc.gov). Again, thank you all for this opportunity to testify. I welcome any questions that you might have.