

**COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE
PUBLIC HEARING**

on

Agency Performance Oversight:

State Board of Education

Office of Student Advocate

Ombudsman for Education

District of Columbia State Athletic Association

District of Columbia Public Charter School Board

University of the District of Columbia

on

Tuesday, February 27, 2024 at 9:00 a.m.

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Robert Henderson. I am here in my individual capacity as Ward 5 member of the State Board of Education, and I am not representing the views of the Board as a whole.

As an elected education-related representative, Ward 5 families often contact me when they encounter difficulties navigating our complicated school system or with a particular challenging school situation. More often than not, the solutions to their problems lie outside of areas that I can directly influence. In those cases, I often turn to the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education.

Last year, under Ombudsman Serena Hayes and then under interim Ombudsman Toni Criner, the team has been unfailingly responsive and supportive every time I have reached out for help. When I refer a family to the ombudsman's office, I know that they are in good hands. Since last year's oversight hearing, the ombudsman's office has assisted me in responding to issues of school safety, discipline, student safety, and enrollment. The team pursues all options to help a family resolve their situation satisfactorily. I am also appreciative of the clear and consistent communication and updates from the office. This is a relatively small team that plays an essential role in our system as an independent third-party arbiter and facilitator. I can't say enough about the value of their work. A subdivision of this office, the Special Education Hub, is likewise a vital support to families for understanding special education rights and resources. I ask the council to continue to support this office and its independence.

Similarly, in my position as a representative on the State Board of Education, I have had several opportunities to see the Office of the Student Advocate in action both in community outreach and student engagement. Many of us value student input on the issues of the day; the office of the student advocate is especially consistent and effective in seeking it out. Chief Student Advocate Dan Davis has also been able to connect student voice to his work representing the State Board on the DME's School Safety Enhancement Committee.

I will conclude with the Public Charter School Board. Under our current governance system, the Public Charter School Board's obligations are to its constituent charter members, their employees, and their students, and that's not a criticism of the Board, just a description. Yet the Board's decisions often have implications for the broader education ecosystem. I am hopeful that the Board will be open to any recommendations from the DME's Boundary Study that require cross-sector collaboration specifically and will consider cross-sector implications of Board decisions generally, with an eye to promoting stability and overall system health.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.

Robert Henderson

Ward 5 Member, State Board of Education