



Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.

The federally designated Parent Training and Information Center for Washington DC

**Testimony of
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Committee on Education and of the Whole Performance Oversight Hearing:
Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE)

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My testimony today is one that tells my own experience as a parent of children with disabilities dependent on OSSE DOT services but also reflective of the many families that I serve as a Parent Support Specialist with Advocates for Justice and Education. Recently, I filed a State Complaint (“Complaint”), noting the problematic experiences that my family has experienced this school year with student transportation. The Complaint cited the following violations:

- 1) Denial of services during the first two weeks of school;
- 2) Disrespectful interaction by the bus driver with me, the parent;
- 3) Late arrival of the bus;
- 4) Denial of transportation services for my oldest son, Atty, when I was out of town for work and had to be convinced to take the bus home versus his regular stay in aftercare. (the bus left both him and his brother, even as the school staff asked the bus driver to stay); and
- 5) Refusal of OSSE DOT to transport my children home after aftercare, the only inclusive time in the day that my children get to interact with their nondisabled peers.

I filed this complaint on January 16th, after several months of attempting to resolve these issues with both Takoma EC, where my children attend, and OSSE DOT. My children have benefitted from transportation services for the past three years and in this time, we have lived in the same location. My children are growing up, now 5 and 8 years old, and their needs for consistent, reliable routines are more essential to their academic and social success.

The constant disruptions with transportation services are disorienting for me, as a parent without disabilities, and the impact on my children are also telling. For example, during the first two weeks of school when we were denied transportation services due to a mix up with my home address (which in the past three years, the only change has been a change in apartment units in the same complex) was a contributing factor to behavioral issues for my oldest son – who has a tough time with transitions. For my youngest son, who struggles with a sensory processing disorder that impacts his feeding, has for the past three years taken a juice or small snack on the bus to school. Yet this school year, an accommodation that has been granted to him was denied by the bus driver and attendant, who upon explaining that he needs to take his snack with him on the bus, I was told something to the effect that it wasn’t their job to teach me how to parent my child. And this is just my story and attempts to advocate for better transportation services. I have heard from

many families who also have transportation issues. For example, a military dad whose daughter has constantly been picked up late, delaying both him and his wife from getting to work on time. I've also supported a single father who is an English language learner and the late pickups for his oldest daughter who is eligible for transportation services causes him to drop off his younger children to arrive to school late. Or a mother with a high school student who was constantly being dropped at either wrong location or came home very late. Or another mother, who had to choose between taking on new employment or ensuring her children had access to aftercare. And the stories go on.

I have reviewed the steps OSSE-DOT has taken to improve their performance (Q57 on page 149) and while I am pleased that they recognize that customer service is a growth area, I am concerned that we have not seen the results of that work from OSSE in my experience or in the calls I get at work from families, and I am very concerned that only 5.9% of parent complaints (re: unprofessional conduct) are substantiated, this leads me to think that these investigation are not comprehensive or adequate

I am also concerned that OSSE is not reporting pick up from school performance...my experiences and our calls lead me think this is an area of real concern for families that is going untracked

In addition, as you review OSSE's responses, it is important to note that the 3 settlements listed in response to Q119 only include complaints filed at ODR, not complaints made to OSSE-DOT's own process and the reimbursements provided there. For example, I have been approved for reimbursements for having to personally transport my children from aftercare, which is an ongoing tally considering that there isn't a transportation resolution despite requesting a change in evening pick up time since September 2019. This transaction is not captured in OSSE's response at Q119.

It is a privilege to offer this testimony as both a parent and an advocate, so I implore the Committee on Education to pay attention to this issue of the dysfunctions of student transportation services.

OSSE DOT's response to my complaint thus far is as hostile as the numerous communications made last semester, in which their position is not to help to correct these errors but to deny the existence of these dysfunctions and do nothing. Is that the sort of leadership we need serving some of our city's most vulnerable students?

One of the most frustrating parts of attempting to advocate to improve student transportation is that there is too much passing the buck. OSSE DOT blames the schools for some of the issues and the schools (LEAs) turn around and do the same. How does anything get resolved with passing the buck?

OSSE DOT has a Parent Resource Center, which is a hotline and has parents on hold for an extremely long time due to high call volumes, only to speak with a representative that cannot help to resolve some of the most pressing issues facing student transportation.

Like many things related to Special Education, individual families are left to find solutions around the dysfunctions of a school system that seems burdened to meeting the needs of our children to participate in the public education system.

In this case, transportation is an essential service. Many of our children cannot easily or readily take other modes of public transportation due to the nature of their disabilities. And with this accommodation, if functioning well, our children are able to get to and from school on time, participate in aftercare activities that are afforded to other students and are treated with dignity and respect, giving them the much-needed confidence boost to develop and grow into contributing members of society.

I don't know what the result of the Complaint will be, but I can assure you that without leadership no individual complaint can address the systemic problems facing OSSE DOT's ability do their part in providing free and appropriate public education.

To this end, I ask that Chairman Grosso and the Committee on Education to closely examine the parent complaint data provided to Q57 and hold OSSE accountable for the promises made to improve issues such as customer service training, timeliness and late pick up from afterschool activities, which are the fabric of my complaint that OSSE DOT has denied responsibility for. Notably, the issue of timely pickups and drop offs is a particular point of contention for me. I fear that although the language in the report reflects concern for this issue, the method of solution is questionable as I've had my children's pickup time changed from 7:55am to 8:34am in the middle of the school year, likely because I've complained so many times about late pickups – which are typically close to 8:30am. It's a slippery slope that leadership is needed to monitor and ensure true accountability and not just optics.

Thank you for the time and consideration.