



Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.

The Parent Training and Information Center for the District of Columbia

Testimony of Maria Blaeuer
Director of Programs and Outreach, Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc. at the
District of Columbia State Board of Education on July, 14, 2021

My name is Maria Blaeuer, and I am the Director of Programs and Outreach at Advocates for Justice and Education (AJE). AJE is the federally designated Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) for the District of Columbia. It is our responsibility to provide free training, resources, individual assistance, and support to parents and youth navigating the special education process, negotiating school selection and placement, and addressing matters of school discipline, especially for students with disabilities. We serve homeschooled students and their families as a part of our efforts.

As the State Board of Education (SBOE) considers homeschooling in the District of Columbia, AJE would like to suggest some areas for the SBOE to explore in their fact-finding. These suggestions fall into three categories.

- The relationship between homeschooling and Special Education
- The relationship between homeschooling and student safety
- OSSE's governance and administrative role regarding homeschooling

What is the relationship between homeschooling and Special Education? In our conversations with families, unmet and/or unacknowledged disability-related needs are a factor in a family's decision to homeschool their child. We suggest the SBOE consider the following questions regarding special education and homeschooling. Where appropriate, I have added in italics AJE's insights from our work with DC families.

- Are families being attracted to homeschooling because their child has an unidentified disability and the school is not meeting the child's disability-related needs?
 - *In our experience, this is very often the case.*
- The District of Columbia's Child Find obligation covers all students, including homeschooled students. How is OSSE and DCPS meeting this obligation?
 - *Given the growth of the homeschooled population, and the probability that students with disabilities are overrepresented in the homeschooled population, AJE is concerned that DCPS needs additional guidance from OSSE and potentially needs additional staffing to serve the homeschooling community.*
- For students who have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 plans, are families choosing homeschooling because they do not feel that their child's LEA can or will implement the student's IEP or 504 plan with any degree of fidelity or quality?
 - *In our experience, this is something we hear frequently from families.*



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- Do families feel pushed out of public education and into homeschooling?
- How does the District ensure that students with disabilities or suspected disabilities have fair and equitable access to services? Currently, DCPS does not offer equitable services to homeschooled students, but does so for private school students. In the past, DCPS offered homeschooled students equitable services under IDEA, but stopped without going through any public comment or rulemaking process. Should the District explore regulatory changes to mandate that homeschooled students be treated like private school students for purposes of IDEA's equitable services?

What is the relationship between homeschooling and student safety? In our experience, concerns about safety, including gender-based violence or intimidation, is a factor in some families' decisions to homeschool.

- Are families attracted to homeschooling because of safety concerns at school, such as gender-based violence and bullying?
- Are families choosing homeschooling because of concerns about their ability to get to safe and appropriate schools?

What institutional support do homeschooling families need from the District?

- OSSE staff have done a remarkable job of running this growing program with minimal staff. OSSE's move to online registration and its publication of clear guidance has made a big difference for families. AJE encourages OSSE to continue to invest staff and resources into serving homeschooled students and their families.
- Additional clarification or guidance from OSSE would be helpful on: 1) record retention by OSSE; 2) the process and standard for portfolio reviews; and 3) the availability of other programs and resources from District agencies that serve homeschooled students.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and for paying attention to homeschooling students and families.