

EDUCATION

DCPS Parent Alleges Denial of Special Education Services

Courtney McFerson Talks about Three-Year Fight for Her Son's IEP

By Sam P.K. Collins
WI Staff Writer

For three years, as her son fell behind in reading and math, Courtney McFerson continued to ask special education coordinators at Anne Beers Elementary School in Southeast, D.C. to create an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for him.

McFerson said the coordinators, to this day, haven't honored her request.

Now, she's seeking an appeal of a decision she said coordinators made ear-

lier this year to deem her son ineligible for an IEP. Though she recounted coordinators, as recently as Oct. 7, telling her that they are collecting more data, she admitted not having much clarity about how, or if, she's even able to file an appeal.

"I've been trying to reach out to the Student Advocate's Office to understand the process," McFerson said. "I don't feel like [the special education coordinators] are forthcoming with the correct information to maneuver through the situation. I know the basis



▲ For three years, Courtney McFerson has been working diligently to get special education coordinators at Anne Beers Elementary School in Southeast, D.C. to create an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for her son, who fell behind in reading and math. (Ja'Mon Jackson/The Washington Informer)

of a student being behind...qualifies them for special education services. People are overlooking it instead of being a crucial part of what my son needs."

As McFerson recounted, the Ward 7 school's special education department's decision culminated an eligibility process marred by a lengthy

timeline, turnover in the special education office, and a teacher she called uncooperative.

By the time McFerson met with Kennard Branch, the principal of Anne Beers, and Karen Faulk, her son's teacher earlier this school year, she had already expressed concerns about her son's instruction in emails to D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser, D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) Dr. Lewis D. Ferebee, and DCPS Cluster 2 Instructional Superintendent Mary Ann Stinson.

McFerson's mediation with Branch, Anne Beers' principal since last school year, took place during the latter part of October. The D.C. Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education facilitated the meeting upon McFerson's request. On Nov. 6 McFerson and Faulk sat down at a mediation coordinated by the Office of Integrity that ended in administrators' assurance that her son would return to Faulk's classroom.

As McFerson explained to The Informer, her son had been without grade-level English & Language Arts and social studies instruction for nearly a month, due mostly to Faulk's refusal to teach him. She said administrators at Anne Beers often pull her son out of Faulk's class at points during the day and place him in a lower-level classroom.

Though McFerson admitted initially wanting her son out of Faulk's classroom after a tenuous fourth grade experience, she said that she changed her mind, hopeful that Faulk would start the new school year off on a positive note.

"The administrators were supposed to develop a plan with my son and

Ms. Faulk to help build on their relationship and make sure my son got what he needs," McFerson said. "My son needed accommodations and he wasn't getting any. On top of that, Ms. Faulk was creating a toxic environment for my son... to the point that he didn't want to go to school or her classroom."

McFerson recounted first attempting, unsuccessfully, to tell Faulk about her son's feelings during their first encounter at a parent-teacher conference last school year. Months later, they would meet once again, after what McFerson called Faulk's refusal to participate in the special education eligibility process.

As McFerson explained, Faulk hesitated to make a referral, as well as compile and present data about McFerson's son's academic progress at meetings that the special education coordinator hosted. She said Faulk sometimes went as far as calling out from work on the day that meetings were scheduled.

Faulk's alleged actions, McFerson said, delayed action on the special education eligibility process until the end of the previous school year. Ultimately, McFerson wasn't able to have her request fulfilled, even after a vision screening and the academic data McFerson said they had about her son.

"There's a whole new special education team, a bunch of missing pieces [in the process and people claiming they don't know where documents are]," McFerson told The Informer. "They said there wasn't enough data to show my son's eligibility. But they had enough data from his test scores

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and teachers' comments."

AN ANNE BEERS PARENT TOUTS THE POWER OF DIRECT INVOLVEMENT

At Anne Beers, located on Alabama Avenue in Southeast, more than 60% of students are designated as high risk, while more than one out of four children have been identified as special needs.

With an in-boundary rate of less than 40%, Anne Beers has become a magnet for District parents living outside of the enrollment boundaries. One parent, Bianca Phillips, said she enrolled her autistic son at Anne Beers at the recommendation of staff members at Step-by-Step Therapeutic Services on Bowen Road in Southeast, who cited previous special needs clients finding success at the school.

Three years later, Phillips says that she too has no regrets.

"My son started out nonverbal, but he had his IEP when he started," Phillips told The Informer, emphasizing that after her son's diagnosis at 2 years old, she sought an IEP through D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) Early Stages evaluation center. "By the time he finished Pre-K4, he was saying words."

In her second year as Anne Beers' parent-teacher organization vice president, Phillips has her sights set on boosting engagement among parents, particularly parents of special-needs children. She told The Informer that her son's involvement in Communications & Education Supports enrollee showed her the lack of parental engagement around training and resources.

Phillips pointed out a similar lack

of engagement in the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO)

"We can't even get parents to participate in the classroom," she said. "We send out emails, post on our PTO Instagram and Facebook pages and [post] fliers for parents to come out to meetings. We do them virtually [and] there's still a lack of participation."

Phillips said that, out of the 20 or so people who usually attend meetings, she is the only person raising issues specific to special needs families. If there are concerns about IEP eligibility or proper dissemination of resources, Phillips said parents aren't making them known publicly.

"I haven't heard anything negative from parents in the program, and I haven't heard anything negative from parents trying to get their child an IEP," Phillips said. "No one brings anything to the PTO's attention related to special education. One staff member asked me what I did with my son, but as far as parents, nothing."

MCFERSON'S ATTEMPT AT CLARITY IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION ELIGIBILITY PROCESS

McFerson told The Informer that while she's spoken with Anne Beers PTO affiliates about her clash with the special education team, she hasn't seen much action on their part.

"I was supposed to get a follow up from them," McFerson said about the PTO parent she's been engaging. "I stopped asking...because I can't make anybody do anything and I'm really exhausted with the whole situation at this point." **WI**

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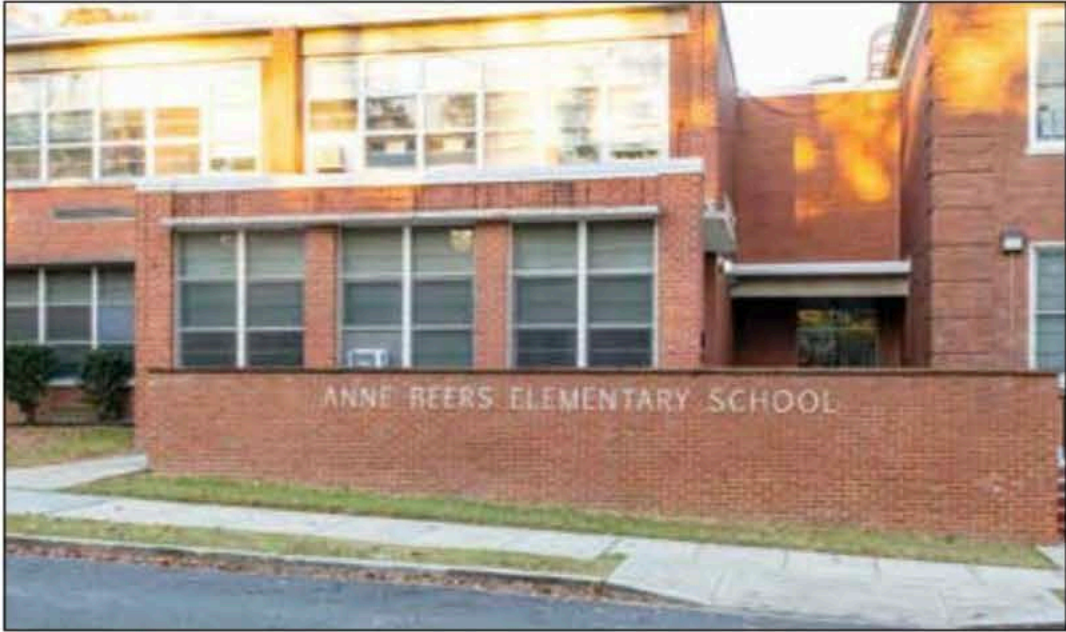


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▲ With an in-boundary rate of less than 40%, Anne Beers in Ward 7 has become a magnet for District parents living outside of the enrollment boundaries. (Ja'Mon Jackson/The Washington Informer)