

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
OFFICE OF THE STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Dispute Resolution
810 First Street, N.E., 2nd Floor
Washington, DC 20002

OSSE
Office of Dispute Resolution
January 9, 2015

STUDENT, ¹)	
through the PARENT,)	Hearing Officer: NaKeisha Sylver Blount
)	
<i>Petitioner,</i>)	
)	
v.)	
)	Date Issued: January 8, 2015
District of Columbia Public Schools,)	
)	
<i>Respondent.</i>)	

Hearing Officer Determination

SUBJECT MATTER JURISDICTION

Subject matter jurisdiction is conferred pursuant to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ("IDEA"), as modified by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, 20 U.S.C. Section 1400 et. seq.; the implementing regulations for the IDEA, 34 Code of Federal Regulations ("C.F.R.") Part 300; Title V, Chapter E-30, of the District of Columbia Municipal Regulations ("D.C.M.R."); and D.C. Code 38-2561.02(a).

PROCEDURAL BACKGROUND

This is a due process complaint ("DPC") proceeding pursuant to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ("IDEA"), as amended, 20 U.S.C. §§1400 et seq.

The DPC was filed on October 31, 2014 by Petitioner (Student's mother), a resident of the District of Columbia, against Respondent, District of Columbia Public Schools ("DCPS"), the local education agency ("LEA"). On November 10, 2014, Respondent filed its Response, denying that Respondent denied Student a free appropriate public education ("FAPE"). The Hearing Officer Determination ("HOD") in this matter is due January 14, 2015.

The undersigned Impartial Hearing Officer ("IHO" or "Hearing Officer") held a Pre-hearing Conference ("PHC") by telephone on November 18, 2014, during which the parties discussed and clarified the issues and the requested relief. At the PHC, the parties agreed that five-day disclosures would be filed by December 4, 2014 and that the DPH would be held on December 11, 2014. The PHC was summarized in the Pre-Hearing Conference Summary and Order ("PHO") issued November 18, 2014.

¹ Personal identification information is provided in Appendix A.

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Petitioner was present throughout DPH. Student Support Services Compliance Manager, who served as the LEA Representative, was also present throughout the DPH.

Petitioner's and Respondent's disclosures were timely filed. At the DPH, Petitioner's exhibits P-1 through P-23, P-25 and P-26 were admitted without objection. Petitioner's exhibits P-24 and P-27 were admitted over Respondent's objection. Respondent's exhibits R-1 through R-16 were admitted without objection.

Petitioner called the following witnesses at the DPH:

- (a) Petitioner/Parent;
- (b) Educational Advocate;
- (c) Parent's Clinical Psychologist.

Respondent called the following witnesses at the DPH:

- (a) DCPS Early Stages School Psychologist;
- (b) Student Support Services Compliance Manager.

Petitioner and Respondent each gave an oral closing argument.

ISSUES

As discussed at the PHC and reflected in the PHO, the following issue was presented for determination at the DPH.

- (a) Whether DCPS denied Student a FAPE by failing to comply with its "child find" obligations under the IDEA to identify Student as eligible for special education services, and/or develop an IEP for Student and make services available in a timely manner, from January 14, 2014 through the present time.

RELIEF REQUESTED

Petitioner requested the following relief:

- (a) a finding in Petitioner's favor on the issue in the DPC;
- (b) an Order finding Student eligible for special education, and developing an appropriate IEP based on the information available, or ordering DCPS to do so within 10 days of the HOD;
- (c) an Order awarding compensatory education in the form of 84 hours of academic tutoring, 21 hours of counseling services.

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. Student resides with his mother ("Parent"/"Petitioner") in Washington, D.C.

² Testimony of Parent.

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2. Student attended a licensed private daycare center and a DCPS Head Start program during the 2012-2013 school year,

3. Student began attending District Elementary School's pre-kindergarten program in the 2013-2014 school year, and he continues to attend District Elementary School.⁴

4. Student has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder ("ADHD").⁵ He was provisionally diagnosed with ADHD on around August 14, 2013, and the diagnosis was confirmed on or around October 28, 2013.⁶

5. Student has average cognitive and academic functioning.⁷

6. Student's was able to stay on track with some of the basic four-year old pre-kindergarten skills during the first advisory of the 2013-2014 school year.⁸ The Hearing Officer credit's Parent's testimony that Student's performance on skills (such as identifying seven uppercase letters, writing his first name, counting to 39, and identifying shapes⁹) reflected, in part, the fact that Student had been introduced to some of these skills in his daycare and Head Start classes.¹⁰

7. Student exhibits a number of disruptive behaviors, as well as noncompliance and tantrums. These behaviors began at early age when Student was attending Head Start, and they have persisted through the present time. By January 14, 2014 (when Student's multidisciplinary team convened an eligibility meeting for Student), there had been a consistent and lengthy pattern of such behaviors.

8. Student was suspended on two separate occasions in 2013. The first suspension was for kicking and attempting to scratch his teacher.¹⁵ The second suspension was for a behavioral escalation episode wherein Student initially refused to transition to classroom

³ R-2-2.

⁴ Testimony of Parent.

⁵ P-1-1; P-19-1; testimony of Parent's Clinical Psychologist; testimony of DCPS Early Stages School Psychologist.

⁶ R-4-1 through R-4-2.

⁷ Student's Independent Comprehensive Psychological Evaluation, dated August 14, 2013; testimony of Parent's Clinical Psychologist; testimony of DCPS Early Stages School Psychologist.

⁸ R-13-1.

⁹ R-13-1.

¹⁰ Testimony of Parent.

¹¹ P-1-2.

¹² R-13-1.

¹³ R-4-3.

¹⁴ P-1-2.

¹⁵ P-6-1.

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carpet/morning meeting time, and then began throwing modeling clay, flipping a chair, kicking a trash can, and repeatedly kicking his teacher.¹⁶

9. Throughout the 2013-2014 school year, and continuing through the time of the DPH, Parent was frequently called to pick Student up early from school, and Student is frequently sent out of the classroom and/or placed in timeout due to his behavior.¹⁷

10. A behavioral intervention plan (“BIP”) was put in place for Student in June 2013.¹⁸ Student’s multidisciplinary team has revised Student’s BIP a number of times;¹⁹ however, Student’s disruptive behaviors have persisted.²⁰

11. Student received an Educational Assessment , conducted by DCPS Early Stages. The evaluator had to utilize several interventions in order to be able to complete the assessment with Student in a one-on-one setting, because Student was defiant, refused to follow directions, and was moving around the assessment room, aggressively bumping into walls and the door, walking on furniture, and refusing to sit down. The evaluator concluded that, due to the fact that Student performed in the average range in general information, reading, mathematics, writing and spoken language, Student did not need specialized instruction in order to access the general education curriculum.²¹

12. On May 2, 2013, Student received a Confidential Psychological Assessment from DCPS Early Stages School Psychologist.²² Student was distracted, impulsive and restless throughout the testing. The standardized testing portion of the evaluation had to be suspended due to Student’s behavior, difficulty exerting mental control, and difficulty engaging in goal directed behavior.²³ The evaluation report notes that Student “will have difficulty participating in a general education classroom setting” and that he will benefit from a “structured classroom, teacher scaffolding, and behavioral interventions such as one-on-one support and visual cueing or prompting to engage in appropriate classroom behavior and remain on task during independent and group work.”²⁴

13. A multidisciplinary team (“MDT”) met on January 14, 2014 to determine whether Student was eligible for special education and related services.²⁵

14. Parent, Parent’s Attorney, Educational Advocate, DCPS Early Stages School Psychologist, a DCPS Early Stages evaluation coordinator, and team members from District

¹⁶ P-6-2.

¹⁷ P-1-3.

¹⁸ P-7.

¹⁹ R-9; testimony of Educational Advocate; testimony of Parent.

²⁰ Testimony of Parent; testimony of Educational Advocate.

²¹ R-1.

²² R-2.

²³ R-2-5.

²⁴ R-2-13.

²⁵ P-12; R-5.

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Elementary School including a social worker, two special education teachers, and a general education teacher participated in the MDT meeting.²⁶

15. The team explored Student's eligibility under the classifications of "Other Health Impairment" ("OHI") and "Developmental Delay," and Student was not determined eligible under either category.²⁷

16. Student's MDT team agreed that Student has ADHD and, thus, he met the first of two criteria for OHI.²⁸

17. With the exception of DCPS Early Stages School Psychologist and the DCPS Early Stages evaluation coordinator, the members of the team (including each team member from District Elementary school, Parent, Parent's Attorney and Educational Advocate) thought Student also met the second of two criteria for OHI, which was that his disability impacted his educational performance.²⁹

18. DCPS Early Stages School Psychologist and the DCPS Early Stages evaluation coordinator did not think Student's disability impacted his education, because Student's cognitive and academic scores and abilities are in the normal range, as compared to other general education students his age.³⁰

19. Student's MDT reconvened on March 3, 2014 and put services in place for Student pursuant to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 29 U.S.C. § 794(a) ("504 plan"). By way of his 504 plan, Student was provided preferential seating, movement breaks, some degree of leniency from adults regarding Student's need to move about the classroom during instructional time, redirection from adults provided in a calm, even tone, 120 minutes per month of counseling services from a social worker, and 120 minutes per month of occupational therapy.³¹

20. Parent was in agreement with putting the 504 plan in place, so that Student would receive at least some services, in light of the fact that he had not been determined eligible for special education and related services.³²

21. District Elementary School put a "Bolting Plan" in place for Student in October 2014 to prevent Student from leaving the classroom or building without permission after attempted de-escalation strategies.³³

²⁶ P-12-1.

²⁷ P-15; P-12-3; R-6; R-7.

²⁸ P-12-3.

²⁹ P-12-4.

³⁰ P-12-3.

³¹ P-19-2.

³² Testimony of Parent; testimony of Educational Advocate.

³³ P-21.

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22. Student is bright and demonstrates a number of positive personality traits toward his teachers and other children, when his behavior is under control.³⁴

23. Upon reviewing the DPH record and relevant data included therein, the Hearing Officer concludes that, at the time of the January 2014 eligibility meeting, and even at the present time, the following statement contained within Student's March 2014 504 plan is accurate: "[Student]'s . . . ADHD limits his ability to fully participate in school day activities without accommodations. Behaviors related to ADHD that [Student] presents include impulsivity, inattention, [and] emotional outbursts. These behaviors have prevented [Student] from appropriately participating in school day activities. The school team has utilized several intervention strategies in [an] effort to accommodate for [Student]'s presenting ADHD related behaviors. However, additional services are needed in order to further accommodate for [Student]'s ADHD related behaviors."³⁵

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

"Based solely upon evidence presented at the hearing, an impartial hearing officer shall determine whether the party seeking relief presented sufficient evidence to meet the burden of proof that the action and/or inaction or proposed placement is inadequate or adequate to provide the student with a FAPE." 5 D.C.M.R. E-3030.3. The burden of proof in an administrative hearing is properly placed upon the party seeking relief. *Schaffer v. Weast*, 546 U.S. 49 (2005). Through documentary evidence and witness testimony, the party seeking relief must persuade the impartial hearing officer by a preponderance of the evidence. DCMR 5-E3022.16; *see also*, *N.G. v. District of Columbia*, 556 F.Supp.2d 1, 11, 17 n.3 (D.D.C. 2008).

A hearing officer's determination of whether a child received a FAPE must be based on substantive grounds. In matters alleging a procedural violation, a hearing officer may find that a child did not receive a FAPE only if the procedural inadequacies (i) impeded the student's right to a FAPE; (ii) significantly impeded the parent's opportunity to participate in the decision-making process regarding the provision of a FAPE to the parent's child; or (iii) caused a deprivation of educational benefit. 34 C.F.R. 300.513(a).

1. Whether DCPS denied Student a FAPE by failing to comply with its "child find" obligations under the IDEA to identify Student as eligible for special education services, and/or develop an IEP for Student and make services available in a timely manner, from January 14, 2014 through the present time.

Pursuant to 34 C.F.R. § 300.111 and 34 C.F.R. § 300.131, DCPS is responsible for identifying, locating and evaluating all children with disabilities who reside in the District of Columbia who are in need of special education and related services, including children with disabilities who are attending private schools, regardless of the severity of their disability. DCPS' Child Find obligations are triggered as soon as a child is identified as a potential candidate for services. *Long v. District of Columbia*, 56 IDELR 122 (D.C.D.C. 2011). In this case, Petitioner is not alleging that DCPS failed to evaluate Student and/or that DCPS failed to

³⁴ P-1-1.

³⁵ P-19-1.

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take any of the procedural steps required under the IDEA. All parties agree that a multidisciplinary team (“MDT”) convened on January 14, 2014 to review DCPS-conducted and independent evaluations for Student, as well as data gleaned during classroom observations, and input from Student’s Parent and teachers. Petitioner disputes the MDT’s determination that Student was ineligible for special education and related services.

A child is eligible for services under the IDEA if he has been evaluated as having one or more of the disability conditions listed and defined in the IDEA statute and regulations, and “by reason thereof, needs special education and related services.” *See* 34 CFR § 300.8. Petitioner contends that Student was denied a FAPE by the failure of Student’s MDT team to find him eligible for special education as a student with an “Other Health Impairment,” (“OHI”) due to Student’s ADHD. A student with OHI has limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment, that (i) is due to chronic or acute health problems, including for example, ADHD, and (ii) adversely affects a child’s educational performance. *See* 34 CFR § 300.8(c)(9). No member of the January 14, 2014 MDT disputed Student’s ADHD, and neither party currently disputes that Student has ADHD. It is the second prong of the eligibility determination that is at issue here – whether Student’s disability adversely affects his educational performance.

Respondent argues that the January 14, 2014 MDT determination that Student is ineligible did not constitute a denial of FAPE. That determination heavily relied on the conclusion drawn by the two Early Stages team members (DCPS Early Stages School Psychologist and the Early Stages evaluation coordinator) that Student’s disability did not adversely affect his educational performance because Student’s cognitive and academic testing scores fell in the average range. Each and every other member of the team, including all team members from District Elementary School, as well as Parent, Educational Advocate and Parent’s Attorney, believed during the January 14, 2014 that Student’s educational performance was adversely impacted by his disability. Based on a careful review of the record, the Hearing Officer concurs with vast majority of the team that Student’s ADHD disability clearly affects his educational performance. While Student’s academic and cognitive scores fell in the average range, this is more indicative of Student’s prior academic exposure and/or natural intelligence than a reflection of any academic progress. Student was tested at a mere four years of age. He had also already been in a classroom environment for several years at that point – via daycare, and then Head Start – where he likely had been introduced to many of the skills he was assessed on. The fact that he tested in the average range at that young an age is likely impacted by the early educational preparation he received that many other children against whom his scores were being measured had not received, as not all four year olds have had much academic exposure. It may also be due in part to his natural intellectual abilities; however, natural intellect and the need for special education and related services in order to access one’s education are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Moreover, “‘there is nothing in IDEA or its legislative history that supports the conclusion that... 'educational performance' is limited only to performance that is graded.” *Mr. I. v. Maine Sch. Admin. Dist. No. 55*, 480 F.3d 1 (1st Cir. 2007).

The impact of Student’s ADHD disability on his educational performance is quite apparent to the undersigned, when one considers that the child is barely able to remain in the

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classroom without significant supports. *M.M. v New York City Department of Education*, 63 IDELR 156 ISDNY 2014) (Holding a student's disability impacted school performance where, "[a]lthough the student continued to do fairly well grade-wise, there were times when her disorder so consumed her that she was not able to attend school.") He had been suspended more than once by the January 14, 2014 meeting, and his mother was frequently being called to pick him up from school. When he was in the school building, he was often sent out of the classroom due to his unruly behaviors. He was unable even to complete the evaluation process with DCPS Early Stages School Psychologist due to his short attention span, inability to remain focused and on task and his unruly behaviors. The behaviors as described from both Petitioner and Respondent are those of a child who must receive supports to maintain his behaviors at a level that will make it possible for him to be present and attentive in a classroom on regular basis and learn. Without such supports to bring his behavior under control, it not likely that once more advanced academic skills are introduced he will be able to focus long enough to absorb them.

Student's MDT undoubtedly had good intentions in deferring to the two Early Stages team members, and especially to the clinical expertise of DCPS Early Stages School Psychologist. However, the Hearing Officer notes that there was no disagreement among any of the team members regarding Student's clinical diagnosis of ADHD. When it came to the second prong of the eligibility criteria related to whether Student's disability impacted his educational performance, the Hearing Officer finds that the many members of the team who had experienced Student's behavior from day to day correctly concluded that Student's behavior did impact his educational performance; however, they unfortunately deferred to the two team members who drew the opposite conclusion.

Respondent further argues that the determination of ineligibility does not constitute a denial of FAPE, or in the alternate that Student did not suffer educational harm due to the determination of ineligibility, because Respondent provided some services to Student by way of a "504 plan" pursuant to the Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 29 U.S.C. § 794(a). Staff members of District Elementary School who work with Student obviously care a great deal about him, and Petitioner conceded at the DPH that they were resourceful in attempting to get some level of services to him once he was not found eligible. However, even where a student qualifies for services under Section 504, an LEA is not relieved of its obligations under the IDEA, and must provide the student the services to which he is eligible. *See District of Columbia*, 2006 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 14900 (D.D.C. 2006) (Rejecting the LEA's contention that a "parent's acceptance of the use of alternative strategies relieves a school district of the obligation to comply with the child find provisions of the Act.) *See also, N.G. v. District of Columbia*, 556 F.Supp.2d 1 (D.D.C. 2008) (Providing accommodations under a 504 plan does not alleviate an LEA's requirement to comply with Child Find); *see also, Yankton School District v. Schramm*, 93 F.3d 1369 (8th Cir. 1996) ("Although an individual who is eligible for services under IDEA may also qualify for assistance under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the school district must comply with both statutes").

Once a child is determined eligible for special education and related services, the LEA has an obligation to ensure that an IEP meeting is conducted within 30 days, and that special education and related services are made available to the child in accordance with the child's IEP as soon as possible following the development of the child's IEP. 34 CFR 300.323(c)(1)-(2).

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Allowing 30 days for the IEP team to convene after the MDT should have determined Student eligible on January 14, 2014 would have meant that an IEP should have been in place for Student no later than February 13, 2014. Special education services should have begun as soon as possible, which this Hearing Officer will construe in this instance to mean within fifteen school days after the date by which the IEP team should have met. Therefore, had Student been determined eligible, Student's services would have needed to have been in place by February 28, 2014. DCPS' child find obligations are affirmative in nature, and Student's behavior continues to impact his education; therefore, DCPS's obligation to find Student eligible is ongoing. As of the DPH, Student had not yet been found eligible.

As stated above, a hearing officer's determination of whether a child received a FAPE must be based on substantive grounds. Defaulting on its statutory child find obligations prevented Student from gaining the IEP he needs, and was a substantive violation of IDEA, constituting a denial of FAPE. *G.G. v. District of Columbia*, 924 F. Supp. 2d 273 (D.D.C. 2013), citing *N.G. v. District of Columbia* 556 F.Supp.2d 1, 16 (D.D.C. 2008). Even if the violation had been a procedural, it would have constituted a denial of FAPE because it impeded the child's right to a FAPE and it caused a deprivation of educational benefit. Petitioner, therefore, met her burden of proving that DCPS denied Student a FAPE by failing to comply with its child find obligations under the IDEA to identify Student as eligible for special education services, and/or develop an IEP for Student and make services available in a timely manner, from January 14, 2014 through the present time.

Compensatory Education

IDEA gives hearing officers "broad discretion" to award compensatory education as an "equitable remedy" for students who have been denied a FAPE. *Reid ex rel. Reid v. District of Columbia*, 401 F.3d 516, 522-523 (D.C.Cir.2005). The award must "provide the educational benefits that likely would have accrued from special education services" that the school district "should have supplied in the first place." *Id.* at 524. A compensatory education award must "rely on individualized assessments" after a "fact specific" inquiry. *Id.* "In formulating a new compensatory education award, the hearing officer must determine 'what services [the student] needs to elevate him to the position he would have occupied absent the school district's failures.'" *Stanton v. Dist. of D.C.*, 680 F.Supp.2d 201, 206 (D.D.C. 2010), quoting *Anthony v. District of Columbia*, 463 F.Supp.2d 37, 44 (D.D.C. 2006); *Reid*, 401 F.3d at 527. *See also, e.g., Turner v. District of Columbia*, 2013 WL 3324358, 10-11 (D.D.C. July 2, 2013).

Here, Petitioner claims Student was harmed by the LEA's failure to determine him eligible for special education and related services starting from the January 14, 2014 meeting. As discussed above, the IHO has concluded that had Student been determined eligible, Student's services would have needed to have been in place by February 28, 2014, and that DCPS' affirmative child find obligations are ongoing; yet, as of the DPH, Student had not been found eligible. Therefore, the Hearing Officer concludes that the time period to be remedied is February 28, 2014 through December 11, 2014, the date of the DPH. Though Student was not determined eligible, Respondent provided him some services by way of a 504 plan, including 120 minutes per month of counseling with the school social worker. Without knowing exactly what services an IEP team would put in place for Student, the Hearing Officer concludes that the

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services provided offset, to some extent, the services Student should have received through an IEP.

Toward that end, Petitioner's request for 84 hours of academic tutoring and 21 hours of counseling services is reasonable to place Student back where he would have been had he been found eligible on January 14, 2014 and had an IEP in place by February 28, 2014. In developing Petitioner's proposed compensatory education plan, Parent's Clinical Psychologist testified that she took into account services Student received through his 504 plan, and the Hearing Officer finds the proposed compensatory education services to be reasonably calculated to restore Student to the position he would have been in, had he had an IEP in place over the past approximately one year.

ORDER

Based on the Findings of Fact and Conclusion of Law above, it is hereby **ORDERED** that:

- A. Student is eligible for special education and related services under the disability classification "Other Health Impairment," due to his disability of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, unless and until Student's MDT determines Student no longer meets the eligibility criteria for this disability classification.
- B. As soon as possible, and no later than 30 calendar days from the issuance of this decision, DCPS shall reconvene Student's MDT/IEP team to develop Student's IEP;
- C. DCPS shall provide compensatory education to Student in the form of 84 hours of one-on-one tutoring in academic subjects agreed to by the Parent and other members of the MDT/IEP team and 21 hours of counseling services. The tutoring and counseling services shall occur outside of school hours, and shall be provided by providers of Parent's choice. All tutoring and counseling hours not utilized by June 30, 2016 shall be forfeited.

All other relief Petitioner requested in the complaint is **DENIED**.

IT IS SO ORDERED.

Date: January 8, 2015

/s/ NaKeisha Sylver Blount
Impartial Hearing Officer

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NOTICE OF RIGHT TO APPEAL

This is the final administrative decision in this matter. Any party aggrieved by this Hearing Officer Determination may bring a civil action in any state court of competent jurisdiction or in a District Court of the United States without regard to the amount in controversy within ninety (90) days from the date of the Hearing Officer Determination, in accordance with 20 U.S.C. §1415(i).