

STILL WAITING FOR YOUR CALL...

A FOLLOW-UP SURVEY OF NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION PARENT COORDINATORS

A REPORT BY THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC ADVOCATE OF NEW YORK CITY

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Executive Summary

In 2003, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) created a new, school-based “Parent Coordinator” position to assist parents and children in navigating the school system and local offices. Per DOE guidelines, Parent Coordinators are required to be available to parents at night and over the weekend.

In November 2003, the Office of the Public Advocate released a report to determine the ability of Parent Coordinators to answer questions from parents and measure their availability outside of normal school hours when parents are more likely to call. The results showed that two-thirds of the Parent Coordinators surveyed were not reachable after-hours and more than half of those surveyed did not return phone calls.¹

In June 2004, the Office of the Public Advocate conducted a follow-up survey to determine whether the problems uncovered in the November 2003 report still exist. The results from this follow-up survey are detailed below.

Findings

- Overall, Parent Coordinators are harder to reach and less likely to respond *now* than in November 2003.
- Nine Parent Coordinators had non-working phone numbers, up from three in November. One school had no Parent Coordinator at all.
- 11 schools did not have Parent Coordinator contact information listed on the DOE website.
- 77 percent of Parent Coordinators were unreachable after 5 pm, up from 68 percent in November. Callers were only able to speak to 23 Parent Coordinators out of 99, down from 32 in November.
- Nearly two-thirds (62%) of Parent Coordinators did not return phone calls; up from half (51%) in November.
- Parent Coordinators in Brooklyn were the least reachable after 5 pm. Out of the 20 Parent Coordinators surveyed in the borough, only 3 were available on the initial call. In November, coordinators in Queens were least reachable.
- Brooklyn Parent Coordinators were also least likely to return phone calls.
- Both high school and middle school Parent Coordinators were hardest to reach after 5 pm.
- High school Parent Coordinators continue to be the least likely to return calls. Notably, they are much less responsive than they were in November.

¹ Office of the Public Advocate of the City of New York. *Waiting For Your Call...: A Survey of New York City Department of Education Parent Coordinators by the Office of the Public Advocate.* November 2003.

- Reached Parent Coordinators were, for the most part, friendly, helpful and able to provide answers to basic questions.

Recommendations

The Department of Education must:

- Enforce Parent Coordinators' after-school hours.
- Ensure that Parent Coordinators return calls from parents in a timely manner.
- Maintain and publicize accurate contact information for all Parent Coordinators by making it available on their website.
- Equip Parent Coordinators with the most accurate and up-to-date information possible to ensure that they are well-informed about education issues.
- Increase the level of supervision provided by Regional Parent Support Office Supervisors.

Introduction:

According to the Department of Education (DOE), Parent Coordinators must “engage with and involve parents in the school community by working with the principal, school leadership team, parent associations, community groups and parent advisory councils.”² Additionally, Parent Coordinators “identify parent and related school/community issues and work with the principal to see they are addressed in a timely manner.”³ The DOE created 1,273 new Parent Coordinator positions at the beginning of the 2003-2004 academic year at an estimated cost of \$40 million.⁴

Because the DOE downsized the local district offices, which previously handled parent issues, it is highly important for Parent Coordinators to be knowledgeable and accessible to parents outside of normal school hours. In November 2003, the Office of the Public Advocate released a report to determine the ability of Parent Coordinators to answer parents’ questions, and measure their availability outside of normal school hours when parents are more likely to call. The results showed a whopping two-thirds of the Parent Coordinators surveyed were unable to be reached after-hours and more than half did not return phone calls.⁵ As the 2003-2004 academic school year drew to a close, the Office of the Public Advocate conducted a follow up survey of nearly one hundred schools to determine how responsive Parent Coordinators are to parent queries.

Methodology:

This is a random telephone survey of 99 public schools throughout the five boroughs.⁶ The Office of the Public Advocate selected 20 schools in Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and the Bronx; 19 were selected in Manhattan. Phone numbers for Parent Coordinators were obtained from the DOE website when available, from the schools themselves, and by calling 311. Using the set of questions provided in Appendix (A), callers contacted each Parent Coordinator once. When Parent Coordinators were unavailable, the caller left a message requesting a call back. The survey was conducted between 5 pm and 6 pm, from June 14th to 16th. Parent Coordinators were given one week to return phone calls.

Findings:

² New York City Department of Education job posting for parent coordinators. Accessed from the following Internet address on 6/10/04: <http://www.nycenet.edu/offices/dhr/opportunities/ParentCoordK279.pdf>

³ Ibid.

⁴ New York Post, “Klein Will Hire \$40M Gripe Crew”, April 30, 2003

⁵ Office of the Public Advocate of the City of New York. *Waiting For Your Call...: A Survey of New York City Department of Education Parent Coordinators by the Office of the Public Advocate.* November 2003.

⁶ We surveyed 103 schools in November 2003.

Overall, Parent Coordinators are harder to reach and less likely to respond than in November 2003.

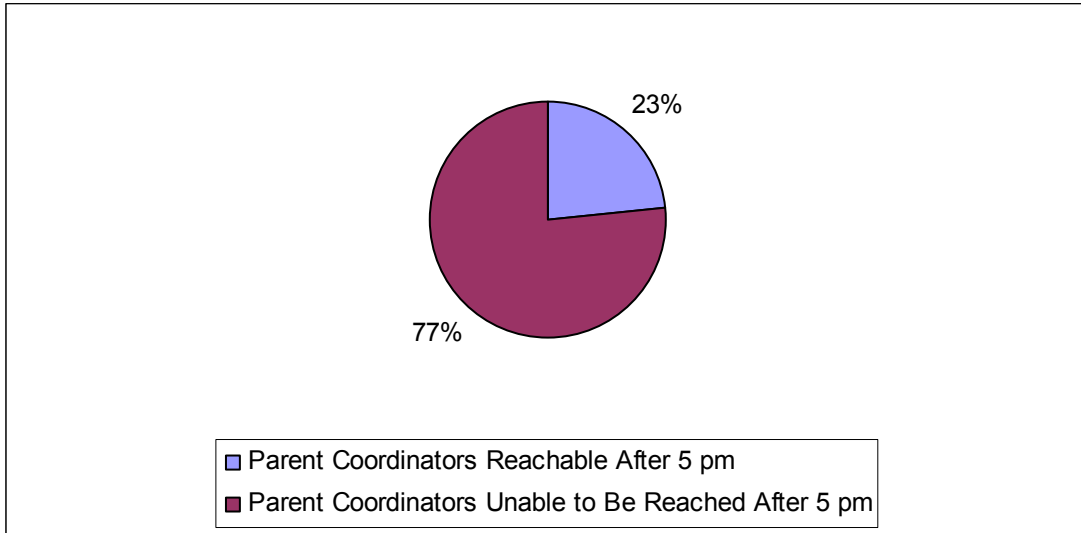
- Of the 99 total schools surveyed, nine (9%) did not have working numbers for their Parent Coordinators, up from three in November. One elementary school in Manhattan, PS 77, did not have a Parent Coordinator on staff.

11 of the schools surveyed did not have Parent Coordinator information listed on the DOE website.

- Of the 99 schools surveyed, 11 did not have Parent Coordinator contact information listed on the DOE website.
- Surveyors had to either call the school directly or dial 311 to obtain contact information.

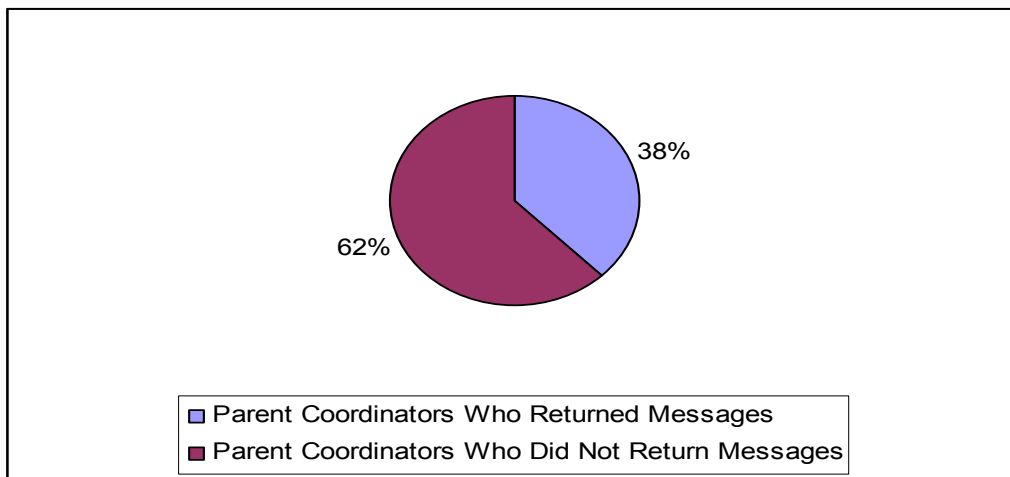
Parent Coordinators are now less accessible than before, with 77% of Parent Coordinators unreachable after 5pm.

- Of the 99 schools surveyed, 77 percent were unreachable after 5 pm, up from 68 percent in November 2003.
- We were only able to speak to 23 Parent Coordinators, down from 32 in November.



Nearly two-thirds of Parent Coordinators we left messages for did not return phone calls, up from half in November.

- Of the 66 Parent Coordinators we were able to leave messages for, 41 (62%) did not return phone calls, up from 51% percent in November.



Parent Coordinators in Brooklyn were the least reachable after 5 pm.

- 85 percent of Parent Coordinators surveyed in Brooklyn were unreachable after 5 pm. Out of the 20 Brooklyn Parent Coordinators surveyed, only 3 were available on the initial call. In November 2003, coordinators in Queens were the least reachable after hours.
- Manhattan and Queens were similarly hard to reach, with 80 percent (16 out of 20) of their Parent Coordinators unavailable after hours.
- Staten Island Parent Coordinators fared slightly better with 74 percent (12 out of 19) unreachable after 5 p.m.
- Parent Coordinators in the Bronx continue to be easiest to reach, but they fared worse than before with 35 percent (7 out of 20) available after hours. In November, 57 percent of Bronx Parent Coordinators were reachable.

Parent Coordinators in Brooklyn were also the least likely to return phone calls.

- Brooklyn Parent Coordinators were the least likely to return phone calls, with only 21 percent (3 out of 17) returning initial calls⁷.
- Manhattan Parent Coordinators were also largely unresponsive, with a 29 percent (4 out of 18) return rate.
- Queens Parent Coordinators fared slightly better, with a 36 percent (5 out of 18) return rate.

⁷ All parent coordinators we were able to leave messages for were given one week from the date of the initial call to respond.

- Parent Coordinators in the Bronx and Staten Island were the most likely to return calls, with a 42 percent (5 out of 19) and 41 percent (7 out of 17) return rate, respectively.

Both high school and middle school Parent Coordinators were hardest to reach after 5 pm.

- High school Parent Coordinators, who were the easiest to reach in November, were hardest to reach this time. Only 20 percent (5 out of 25) were reachable after 5 pm.
- Middle school Parent Coordinators were also tied for the hardest to reach, with only 20 percent (5 out of 25) of the Parent Coordinators available after hours.
- Elementary school Parent Coordinators were easiest to reach but still mostly unavailable, with 28 percent (13 out of 49) reachable after 5 pm.

High School Parent Coordinators continue to be the least likely to return calls. Notably, they are much less responsive than in November.

- High school Parent Coordinators were least likely to return phone calls. Only a meager 12 percent returned phone calls, down from 43 percent in November.
- Middle schools, which were previously the most reachable with a 52 percent return rate,, fell to a 36 percent return rate in June.
- Elementary school Parent Coordinators showed a slight increase in returning phone calls. While 50 percent returned calls in November, 52 percent returned our calls in June.

Reached Parent Coordinators were, for the most part, friendly, helpful and able to provide answers to basic questions.

- When answering basic questions, such as providing information about enrolling a child into the school, Parent Coordinators gave accurate information.
- When asked more detailed and specific questions, Parent Coordinators were unable to provide the information needed.

Third-grade retention:

- To correctly appeal a third grader's retention, a parent must submit an appeal in writing to the school's principal. That appeal will only be considered once the child has completed summer school.⁸
- A majority of the elementary school Parent Coordinators we spoke with provided limited and unclear information regarding the third-grade retention policy.

Special education:

⁸ Source: Conversation with official from New York City Department of Education 6/15/04.

- To have a child evaluated for special education services, a parent must submit a request in writing to the regional Committee on Special Education (CSE). Only three Parent Coordinators told the caller to submit a written request.
- A majority of the Parent Coordinators we spoke with provided vague information about the special education evaluations process. One Parent Coordinator could not answer the question at all.

High school admissions:

- Parent Coordinators surveyed referred the caller to other parties for further information about the high school admissions process.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

Seven months after the Public Advocate's original survey of Parent Coordinators across New York City, an overwhelming and increasing majority are difficult to reach after 5 pm. Few returned phone calls. With the DOE undergoing a variety of reforms everyday, it is more important than ever that parents have their questions answered. It is crucial for Parent Coordinators to be provided with the most up-to-date information on all of the DOE's reforms so that they can be a useful resource for parents.

The Public Advocate recommends the following measures be adopted in order to improve Parent Coordinator accessibility and responsiveness.

The DOE must enforce Parent Coordinator after-school hours.

Despite the fact that Parent Coordinators are provided with cell phones to ensure that they are accessible after hours, it is clear from this survey that they are not as responsive as they should be. DOE must provide parents with a consistent after-hour Parent Coordinator schedule and ensure that hours are strictly adhered to. The DOE must also identify and resolve any problems that may prevent Parent Coordinators from being available to parents.

The DOE must ensure that Parent Coordinators return calls from parents in a timely manner.

Parent Coordinators must use the tools they are provided with to respond to messages in a timely manner. If Parent Coordinators do not return calls, the DOE must determine why calls are not being returned and take action against Parent Coordinators when warranted.

The DOE must maintain and publicize accurate contact information for all Parent Coordinators by making it available on their website.

Currently, the DOE lacks complete contact information for Parent Coordinators on its website. The DOE must make this information readily available to parents and should consider sending out informational pamphlets in the mail if they are not already doing so.

The DOE must equip Parent Coordinators with the most accurate and up-to-date information possible to ensure that they are well-informed on all educational issues.

Parent Coordinators we were able to reach were, for the most part, friendly and helpful. They were aware of answers to basic questions. Yet, when it came to dealing with more specific issues, the majority of Parent Coordinators could not provide clear and accurate information to callers. The DOE must ensure that Parent Coordinators are well-informed and kept up-to-date on all reforms.

The DOE must increase the level of supervision provided by Regional Parent Support Office Supervisors.

With the advent of the Parent Coordinator position, the DOE also created the Regional Parent Support Officer position. According to the DOE, Officer job responsibilities include identifying and ensuring that parent issues are addressed in a timely manner.⁹ Based on our results, coordinators are difficult to reach and unlikely to call back. The DOE also employs supervisors at Regional Parent Support Offices. These supervisors are responsible for helping staff from the regional parent support office help resolve and track parent complaints by utilizing information technology.¹⁰ The DOE must ensure that regional staff provides greater supervision of school-based Parent Coordinators.

⁹ New York City Department of Education at <http://www.nycenet.edu/offices/dhr/opportunities/ParSuppOffReg6.pdf>

¹⁰ New York City Department of Education at <http://www.nycenet.edu/offices/dhr/opportunities/>

Appendix (A)

PARENT COORDINATOR SURVEY 2004 QUESTION SETS

Elementary Schools:

1. How do I get my children registered? What kind of documents do I need?
2. What is the average class size?
3. Is there a uniform curriculum?
4. Is this a failing school?
5. If the school is failing, will my children be eligible for supplemental services? How do I sign them up?
6. My child has been getting into a lot of trouble. What would happen to him if he were suspended?
7. I'm concerned that my son might need special education services. What is the process for getting evaluated?
8. My daughter is adopted and needs help with her English. What kind of help can we expect?
9. My nephew is in the 3rd grade, and his mom told me she's concerned he could be left back this year because of his performance on the reading exams. How can she appeal that decision?
10. Thank you so much for all your help! What are your available hours, in case I have any more questions?

Middle Schools:

1. How do I get my children registered? What kind of documents do I need?
2. What is the average class size?
3. Is there a uniform curriculum?
4. Is this a failing school?
5. If the school is failing, will my children be eligible for supplemental services? How do I sign them up?
6. I'm concerned that my daughter might need special education services. What is the process for getting evaluated?
7. My son has been getting into a lot of trouble. What would happen to him if he was suspended?
8. My daughter is adopted and needs help with her English. What kind of help can we expect?
9. My son will enter the 8th grade in the fall, and I'd like to prepare early for getting him into high school. What is the high school admissions process?
10. Thank you so much for all your help! What are your available hours, in case I have any more questions?

High Schools:

1. How do I get my child registered? What kind of documents do I need?
2. What is the average class size?
3. Is there a uniform curriculum?
4. Is this a failing school?
5. If the school is failing, will my children be eligible for supplemental services? How do I sign them up?
6. I'm concerned that my child might need special education services. What is the process for getting evaluated?
7. My child has been getting into a lot of trouble. What would happen to him if he was suspended?
8. Does your school have a metal detector? How many students were suspended last year?
9. Thank you so much for all your help! What are your available hours, in case I have any more questions?

Filename: StillWaitingForYourCallFINAL7-9-04.doc
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