

# **Is Anybody Listening?**

## **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**

**Public Advocate Betsy Gotbaum  
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**OFFICE OF THE NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC ADVOCATE**

**Betsy Gotbaum**  
**Public Advocate for the City of New York**

**PREPARED BY:**

**Daniel Browne**  
*Director of Policy and Research*

**Mark Woltman**  
*Deputy Director of Policy and Research*

**Laurel Tumarkin**  
*Senior Policy Advisor*

**Gabriel Rosner**  
*Policy Research Assistant*

## Executive Summary

Five years after the Office of the Public Advocate (OPA) first surveyed the New York City Department of Education's (DOE) school-based Parent Coordinators and four years after the initial follow-up, the majority of Parent Coordinators surveyed are *more* difficult to reach and *less* likely than ever to respond to parent calls.

In 2003, the DOE created the Parent Coordinator position, designed to help parents navigate the school system and answer questions about their schools. Each school is provided funding for one Parent Coordinator, for a total of approximately 1200 system-wide. According to DOE guidelines, Parent Coordinators are supposed to be available to parents in the evenings and on weekends.

In November 2003 and again in June 2004, the OPA conducted a survey to measure the availability of Parent Coordinators outside of regular school hours when working parents are most likely to call. The results of the original report 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. The follow-up indicated that Parent Coordinators were actually more difficult to reach and less likely to respond than before.

In February 2008, the Office of the Public Advocate conducted a new follow-up survey to determine whether the problems previously reported had been corrected. The findings from this follow-up survey include the following:

- **Of the 100 Parent Coordinators surveyed, 78 percent did not answer calls after 5 pm, up from 77 percent in 2004 and 68 percent in 2003. Callers were able to reach only 22 Parent Coordinators.**
- **Callers were unable to leave messages for 13 Parent Coordinators due to full voicemail boxes, no voicemail, or non-working phone numbers.**
- **46 of 65 (71 percent) Parent Coordinators for whom messages were left did not return messages, up from 51 percent in 2003 and 62 percent in 2004.**
- **High school Parent Coordinators are the least likely to answer calls after 5 pm; 84 percent did not answer calls.**
- **The DOE failed to provide *any* contact information for 12 Parent Coordinators on its website.**

The Office of the Public Advocate recommends that the DOE take the following actions:

- **Enforce Parent Coordinators' after-school hours.**
- **Ensure that Parent Coordinators return calls from parents in a timely manner.**

Furthermore, the DOE should maintain and publicize accurate contact information for all Parent Coordinators, as well as information on Parent Coordinator vacancies, on its website.

## **Background**

In 2003, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) created a new, school-based Parent Coordinator position, designed to help parents navigate the school system and answer questions about their schools. Initially, the Parent Coordinator program cost nearly \$43 million, funds made available by the elimination of 800 full-time classroom aides and thousands of full-time and part-time hall and cafeteria monitors.<sup>1</sup> Each school is provided funding for one Parent Coordinator, for a total of approximately 1200 system-wide.<sup>2</sup> Today, Parent Coordinators are paid, on average, \$38, 138, and receive an additional \$500 per year to cover extra expenses, including mailings, copies, and refreshments for parent meetings.<sup>3</sup>

According to the DOE's website, the responsibilities of the Parent Coordinators "include outreach to parents, encouragement of parent involvement in their children's education, support of parent organizations within schools, responding to parent concerns and inquiries, and creation of a welcoming atmosphere for parents."<sup>4</sup> Parent Coordinators are to be "parents' first stop in their search for information about their child's school, the system in general, or for issues or concerns which need to be addressed at the school."<sup>5</sup> In order to ensure that Parent Coordinators are accessible to working parents, each Parent Coordinator is provided with a cell phone by the DOE and is required to keep a "slightly different schedule than other school staff. They [are to be] available during some school hours, as well as...night and weekend hours."<sup>6</sup>

According to a DOE job posting for the Parent Coordinator position dated 3/24/2008, responsibilities also include the following:

- Increase parent involvement in the school by working closely with all school, parent, and community organizations.
- Serve as facilitator for parent and school community concerns and issues including, for example, school policies or facilities issues.
- Conduct outreach to engage parents in their children's education
- Convene regular parent meetings and events around topics of key concerns to parents.
- Attend parent meetings along with the principal, where appropriate.
- Work with the school parent association, where needed, to provide assistance in establishing by-laws, holding elections and conducting their affairs in accordance with Chancellor's Regulation A-660.
- Serve as school liaison to Central and Regional parent support staff.
- Maintain ongoing contact with community organizations that are involved with providing services to the school's educational program.

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<sup>1</sup> The New York Times, "Cost of Parent Coordinators Too Much for Some Parents," May 2, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> New York City Department of Education (DOE) summary of school budget allocation, Memorandum 5, FY 08. Accessed from the following Internet address on 3/19/08:

[http://schools.nyc.gov/offices/d\\_chanc\\_oper/budget/dbor/allocationmemo/fy07\\_08/fy08\\_pdf/sam05.pdf](http://schools.nyc.gov/offices/d_chanc_oper/budget/dbor/allocationmemo/fy07_08/fy08_pdf/sam05.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> DOE website. Accessed from the following Internet address on 2/27/08:

[http://schools.nyc.gov/offices/d\\_chanc\\_oper/budget/DBOR/allocationmemo/fy04-05/datafiles/1.pdf](http://schools.nyc.gov/offices/d_chanc_oper/budget/DBOR/allocationmemo/fy04-05/datafiles/1.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> DOE explanation of Parent Coordinator position. Accessed from the following Internet address on 2/27/08:

<http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/exeres/2402B42E-8417-485E-9C08-F0DD6E5EB0EF.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

- Organize back to school and other events to increase parental and community involvement and create a welcoming school environment to parents.<sup>7</sup>

Pursuant to the New York City Charter, the Public Advocate is authorized to review and investigate the programs, operations, and activities of city agencies.<sup>8</sup> In accordance with this responsibility, the Office of the Public Advocate conducted a survey in 2003 to determine the ability of Parent Coordinators to answer parents' questions and to measure their availability outside of regular school hours when working parents are more likely to call. The results of the 2003 survey revealed that two-thirds of Parent Coordinators were unreachable after 5 pm and that more than half of those for whom messages were left did not return calls.<sup>9</sup>

In 2004, a follow-up survey revealed that Parent Coordinators had become more difficult to reach and less likely to respond to messages left on voicemail.<sup>10</sup> In 2007, the Office of the Public Advocate conducted a survey specifically testing Parent Coordinators' responsiveness to parents of students with special needs. As with the earlier surveys, Parent Coordinators were difficult to reach and largely unresponsive.<sup>11</sup>

Nearly four years after the initial report, in February of the 2007-2008 school year, the Office of the Public Advocate conducted a follow-up survey to determine whether the problems reported in 2003, 2004, and 2007 had been corrected.

### **Methodology**

This report is based on the findings of a telephone survey of Parent Coordinators from 100 public schools throughout New York City.<sup>12</sup> The Office of the Public Advocate assigned each school in New York City a number and then used a random number generator to randomly select 20 schools from each of the five boroughs.<sup>13</sup> Phone numbers for Parent Coordinators were obtained from the DOE website, when available, as well as from the schools themselves.<sup>14</sup> Calls to Parent Coordinators were made on weekdays between 5 pm and 6 pm, from February 7<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup>. Each Parent Coordinator received one phone call. In cases in which Parent Coordinators were unavailable, the caller left a message requesting a return call, if the option for leaving a message was available (in some cases, calls did not go to voicemail or voicemail boxes were full). Parent Coordinators were given five business days to return phone calls.

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<sup>7</sup> DOE Parent Coordinator job posting accessed from the following Internet address on 4/2/08: <http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/CA90FFF7-51F4-4F6C-BDA9-471D735D96B8/0/ParentCoordinator12x543.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> New York City Charter §24.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> Office of the Public Advocate of the City of New York. *Still Waiting for your Call...: A Follow-Up Survey of New York City Department of Education Parent Coordinators*. June 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Office of the Public Advocate of the City of New York. *Waiting for Help: Parents of Students with Disabilities Find Little Assistance Navigating New York City's Special Education System*. March 2007.

<sup>12</sup> 103 schools were surveyed in 2003, and 99 schools were surveyed in 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Random Number Generator available online at [www.random.org](http://www.random.org).

<sup>14</sup> Twelve schools did not have Parent Coordinator contact information available on their DOE website.

## **Findings**

### ***Overall, Parent Coordinators are less likely to answer calls after 5 pm than in 2003 or 2004.***

- Of the 100 Parent Coordinators surveyed, 78% were unreachable after 5 pm, up from 77% in 2003 and 68% in 2004.
- Callers were unable to contact or leave messages with 13 Parent Coordinators. Of those 13 Parent Coordinators, 6 had full voicemail boxes, 6 had no voicemail, and 1 had a non-working phone number listed on the DOE website.

### ***Parent Coordinators are now less likely to return messages than before.***

- Investigators were able to leave messages with 65 Parent Coordinators but 46 of them (71%) did not call back, up from 62% in 2004 and 51% in 2003.

### ***Parent Coordinators in Brooklyn are the least likely to answer calls.***

- 18 of 20 (90%) Brooklyn Parent Coordinators were unreachable after 5 pm.
- 17 of 20 (85%) Queens Parent Coordinators were unreachable after 5 pm.
- 15 of 20 (75%) Bronx Parent Coordinators were unreachable after 5 pm.
- 14 of 20 (70%) Parent Coordinators in both Staten Island and Manhattan were unreachable after 5 pm.

### ***Parent Coordinators in the Bronx are the least likely to return messages.***

- 8 of 9 (89%) Bronx Parent Coordinators for whom messages were left did not call back.
- 8 of 16 (50%) Brooklyn Parent Coordinators for whom messages were left did not call back.
- 5 of 14 (36%) Staten Island Parent Coordinators for whom messages were left did not call back.
- 3 of 12 (25%) Manhattan Parent Coordinators for whom messages were left did not call back.
- 2 of 14 (14%) Queens Parent Coordinators for whom messages were left did not call back.

### ***High school Parent Coordinators are the least likely of all grade levels to answer calls.***

- 22 of 26 (84%) high school Parent Coordinators in all boroughs were unreachable after 5 pm.
- 21 of 28 (75%) middle school Parent Coordinators in all boroughs were unreachable after 5 pm.
- 13 of 46 (28%) elementary school Parent Coordinators in all boroughs were unreachable after 5 pm.

### ***Some schools surveyed did not have Parent Coordinator contact information listed on the DOE website.***

The DOE website failed to provide any Parent Coordinator phone number or other contact information for 12 of the 100 schools surveyed. Callers had to contact the schools directly to obtain the information.

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

- When asked basic questions regarding the enrollment process for transfer students, Parent Coordinators were, with one exception, able to provide complete and accurate information.
- Without exception, all Parent Coordinators reached were friendly and helpful.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Five years after the Public Advocate's original survey and four years after the initial follow-up, the majority of Parent Coordinators surveyed are still difficult to reach after 5 pm when working parents are likely to call. With the school system undergoing a near-constant succession of reforms, it is critical that Parent Coordinators be available to provide information and answer parent questions in a timely manner.

The Public Advocate recommends that the DOE take the following measures to improve the accessibility and responsiveness of Parent Coordinators:

#### ***Enforce Parent Coordinator after-school hours.***

Despite the fact that the DOE provides each Parent Coordinator with a cell phone in order to ensure his or her availability to parents outside of regular school hours, Parent Coordinators remain difficult to reach and unlikely to respond to parents' calls. The DOE must enforce its after-school policy, as well as identifying and removing any barriers that prevent Parent Coordinators from adhering to it.

#### ***Ensure that Parent Coordinators return parent calls in a timely manner.***

It is the responsibility of the DOE to determine why Parent Coordinators do not return calls in a timely manner and take corrective measures to ensure they do so.

#### ***Maintain and publicize accurate contact information for all Parent Coordinators on the DOE website.***

Currently, the DOE lacks complete contact information for Parent Coordinators on its website. Several numbers were not available and had to be acquired by calling the schools directly. The Public Advocate recommends that the DOE website also include email addresses, in addition to phone numbers, for all Parent Coordinators.

#### ***Publish up-to-date information on Parent Coordinator vacancies.***

It is possible that Parent Coordinators at many schools did not return phone calls because the Parent Coordinator position in those schools is currently vacant. It is important that the DOE makes this information available to parents so they can find another contact at their children's schools who can answer their questions.