



Testimony before the District of Columbia Council
Committee of the Whole
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District of Columbia Public Schools

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Good morning Chairman Brown and members of the Council. My name is Judith Sandalow. I am the Executive Director of Children’s Law Center¹ (CLC) and a resident of the District. I am testifying today on behalf of CLC, the largest non-profit legal services organization in the District and the only such organization devoted to a full spectrum of children’s legal services. Every year, we represent 1,200 low-income children and families, focusing on children who have been abused and neglected and children with special health and educational needs. The majority of the children we represent are enrolled in District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS).

I appreciate this opportunity to testify regarding the performance of DCPS over the past year. I will focus my testimony today on DCPS’s special education program. In the past year, DCPS has taken meaningful steps to strengthen its special education program, but much work remains to be done. I appreciate the commitment of the DCPS leadership to improving the array of special education options within DCPS so that fewer children will need to attend nonpublic schools distant from their homes. Building better special education programs in the neighborhood schools will have tremendous long-term benefits to the city’s children and families. It will also lead to cost savings in the long-term, though I caution that those cost savings may not be as large as some have projected because developing and operating effective programs in the local schools will require significant investment. In order to reach our shared goal of a future where the vast majority of the District’s children with special needs can receive a meaningful education within DCPS, I urge DCPS to focus on

¹Children’s Law Center works to give every child in the District of Columbia a safe home, meaningful education and healthy life. As the largest nonprofit legal services provider in the District, our 70-person staff partners with hundreds of pro bono attorneys to serve 1,200 at-risk children each year. Applying the knowledge gained from this direct representation, we advocate for changes in the city’s laws, policies and programs. For more information, visit www.childrenslawcenter.org.

building capacity in the local schools. I specifically suggest expanding and replicating successful models and engaging the community through clear information-sharing about programs currently available and plans for developing new programs.

If DCPS is to succeed in increasing the number of students with disabilities that can attend their local schools, it must develop specialized and well-resourced special education programs at those schools. The children who attend nonpublic schools do so because DCPS does not currently have the capacity to meet their needs. In order for a child to be placed at a nonpublic, either the child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team of teachers and psychologists or an independent hearing officer must have determined that the child could not make meaningful education progress at any DCPS program available. The children who are placed at nonpublics have complex and serious disabilities. They are the teenagers with reading disabilities who need intensive individual instruction to learn how to sound out simple words, the children with serious mental illness who need small, quiet classrooms with a clinician available at all times to help them manage their emotions, and the children with developmental delays who need instruction in basic life skills like counting money and cooking meals. At this point, DCPS has very few programs to meet the needs of children such as these.

In order to return these children successfully to the public schools, DCPS must develop new or expanded programs. Significant additional resources will have to be placed into local schools. More special education teachers will be needed, both to work alongside regular education teachers in inclusion classrooms and to staff self-contained classrooms for children who cannot be educated with their general education peers. More related service providers will be needed for children who require supports like speech therapy, physical

therapy, or mental health counseling. More special education administrative staff will be needed to coordinate the new programs.

If DCPS forces children to return from nonpublics before providing the local schools with the resources to serve them, those children will be set up to fail. While they may benefit from shorter commutes and friendships with peers in general education, they will be deprived of the opportunity to make academic progress. This means that DCPS cannot expect a substantial cost savings in the immediate future from returning children from nonpublics to local schools. Creating strong special education programs in the local schools will require a significant investment of resources upfront, but it will ultimately pay off as DC children have the opportunity to receive the services they need while remaining part of their local school community.

DCPS has developed several strong programs in recent years that it should consider replicating or expanding. In particular, I have been impressed by Project Search's program to provide job training to teenagers with intellectual disabilities. This program is well-designed to meet the needs of a specific population of children and capitalize on community partnerships with organizations that have a track record of success. I encourage DCPS to develop more programs like these that are targeted to meet a particular need and that build on the experience of community partners with expertise in serving students with disabilities. In the past, DCPS has contemplated partnerships with nonpublics and I encourage DCPS to continue exploring this possibility. I also encourage DCPS to focus specifically on developing additional transition programs for older students who require job training, a population that makes up a large percentage of the students enrolled in nonpublics because of the District's historic failure to provide appropriate services to children with disabilities.

As DCPS strengthens its special education offerings, it will need to reach out to the community to build trust. Many parents are reluctant to send their children to DCPS special education programs because their children have been poorly served by those programs in the past. Parents don't want to send their children on long bus rides to schools far from home, but they will choose to do so if they believe it's necessary for their children to receive quality educations. In order to gain parents' trust, DCPS needs to be much more transparent about its current programs and the new programs it develops. Currently, DCPS has not made public any listing of its special education programs. This makes it impossible for parents to learn about the different DCPS programs that might be able to meet their children's needs. If DCPS provides current, thorough information about the programs it offers, parents will be far more willing to consider those programs.

In conclusion, I encourage DCPS to continue prioritizing building capacity to serve students with disabilities within the public school system, but I caution that the city should not expect significant immediate cost savings from this process. It is critical that DCPS not remove students from nonpublics before putting in place the programs and supports that will allow them to succeed in their local schools. I urge the Council to work with DCPS on developing a robust continuum of public placements for children with special needs, including transition programs for older students.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.