



616 H Street, NW · Suite 300
Washington, DC 20001
T 202.467.4900 · F 202.467.4949
childrenslawcenter.org

Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Education
February 28, 2017

**Performance Oversight Hearing
Citywide Youth Bullying Prevention Task Force**

Michael Villafranca
Policy Analyst
Children's Law Center

INTRODUCTION

Good morning Chairman Grosso and members of the Committee on Education. My name is Michael Villafranca. I am a Policy Analyst at Children's Law Center¹ and a resident of the District. I am testifying today on behalf of Children's Law Center, which fights so every DC child can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. With 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, Children's Law Center reaches 1 out of every 9 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year.

I appreciate this opportunity to testify regarding the performance of the District's Citywide Youth Bullying Prevention Task Force over this past year. Since the creation of the program several years ago,² Children's Law Center has engaged with their important work. Our experiences have been consistently positive, despite the small staff for the program and the magnitude of the task. Through the work of Program Director Suzanne Greenfield over the last four years, 100% of DC agencies and 95% of Local Education Agencies (DCPS and Public Charter Schools) have compliant bullying prevention policies.³ Increased efforts to engage with the community have also been made, including participation on panels hosted by both the Anti-Defamation League and the Capital Area Muslim Bar Association (CAMBA) to address concerns around the rise of anti-Muslim incidents in schools.⁴

Through a four-year research grant from the National Institutes of Justice, the Office of Human Rights, under which the Task Force is housed, has partnered with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) and Child Trends to focus on school climate and violence prevention in the District's schools through implementation of the evidence-based Safe School Certification Program (SSCP).⁵ We are honored to be part of the program's Certification and Advisory Board and look forward to seeing the positive school climate outcomes sure to result from this program. We also look forward to supporting the continued work of the Citywide Youth Bullying Prevention Program with all youth-serving DC agencies.

BULLYING INCIDENTS & STUDENT DISCIPLINE

In addition to creating the Task Force, the *Youth Bullying Prevention Act of 2012* requires the submission of a biennial report to include the current status of youth bullying incidents in the District.⁶ The most recent report, released this past January, highlights a very disturbing trend, which we'd also like to discuss: the use of exclusionary discipline in response to bullying incidents. In school year 2015-2016, 93 schools reported bullying-related discipline. Of those 93 schools, 68% reported using exclusionary discipline more than any other form of discipline or consequence.⁷ We also know from OSSE's most recent discipline report that middle school students (grades 6 through 8) make up nearly 50% of students who received an out-of-school suspension for bullying-related incidents.⁸

Research clearly shows that exclusionary forms of discipline, such as suspensions and expulsions, are generally not effective at reducing or preventing bullying nor do they address the underlying causes of bullying behavior.⁹ The use of such disciplinary practices is linked to decreased academic performance, dropping out, substance abuse, and criminal activity.¹⁰ Some experts are even concerned that responding to bullying through means of exclusionary discipline could reduce students' willingness to report bullying behavior.¹¹ This might explain conflicting data highlighted in the bullying report on the prevalence of bullying in the District.¹² For example, data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey shows 31% of middle school students and 12% of high school students reported feeling bullied in the last year, yet this is not reflected in the incidents reported by the schools, where less than one percent of the Districts students are reported to have been bullied.¹³

We hope the Council will continue encouraging and supporting schools to implement evidence-based alternative disciplinary practices, and we continue to urge the Council to limit the use of exclusionary discipline to the most serious offenses, in which a student poses a physical danger to the school community.

CONCLUSION

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I welcome any questions.

¹ Children’s Law Center fights so every child in DC can grow up with a loving family, good health and a quality education. Judges, pediatricians and families turn to us to be the voice for children who are abused or neglected, who aren’t learning in school, or who have health problems that can’t be solved by medicine alone. With 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, we reach 1 out of every 9 children in DC’s poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year. And, we multiply this impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit all children.

² See, the *Youth Bullying Prevention Act of 2012*, DC Law L19-167.

³ Bullying Prevention Task Force FY16 Performance Oversight Responses, Q6.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Bullying Prevention Task Force FY16 Performance Oversight Responses, Q2.

⁶ See, Section 8 of DC Law L19-167.

⁷ Office of Human Rights & Child Trends (January 12, 2017). *Youth Bullying Prevention in the District of Columbia: School Year 2015-2016 Report*, p. 6.

⁸ OSSE (2016). *State of School Discipline: 2015-2016 School Year*, p. 54.

⁹ National Academy of Sciences (2016). *Preventing Bullying Through Science, Policy, and Practice*. The National Academies Press: Washington, DC. Retrieved from

<https://www.nap.edu/catalog/23482/preventing-bullying-through-science-policy-and-practice>

¹⁰ OSSE (2014). *Reducing Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions in District of Columbia Public and Public Charter Schools*, p. 7.

¹¹ Orr, D.P. & Abramson, C.P. (2014). Brief of Amici Curiae Advocates for Children of New York, Empire State Pride Agenda, National School Climate Center, Robert. F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights and Student Pres Law Center, *People of the State of New York v. Marquan W. Mackey-Meggs*, 004 N.Y.S.2d 554 (N.Y. 2014). Retrieved from

http://www.advocatesforchildren.org/sites/default/files/on_page/nyvmarquan_amicus_brief.pdf?pt=1v

¹² Office of Human Rights & Child Trends (January 12, 2017). *Youth Bullying Prevention in the District of Columbia: School Year 2015-2016 Report*, p. 9.

¹³ Office of Human Rights & Child Trends (January 12, 2017). *Youth Bullying Prevention in the District of Columbia: School Year 2015-2016 Report*, p. 17.