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Committee on Health & Human Services
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Deputy Mayor for Education

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Good morning Chairman Grosso and members of the Committee on Education.

My name is Sharra Greer. I am the Policy Director 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 8 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year.

I am pleased to testify today regarding the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education. As the Committee knows, the Deputy Mayor's role is to oversee the District-wide education strategy and manage interagency coordination. This is a complicated task. The Deputy Mayor must oversee and coordinate with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), the DC Public Schools (DCPS), the DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB), 62 Public Charter School Local Education Agencies (LEAs),² and the State Board of Education (SBOE). The Deputy Mayor has a wide array of projects and tasks including being responsible for MySchoolDC.org (the District's centralized education and lottery resource), improving early childhood education (by, among other things, working with the Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services on the Early Success Council), and managing facilities.³

Today I am going to focus on three areas where the Deputy Mayor should play a key role in coordination and strategy: school engagement, school based mental health and cross-sector collaboration.

School Engagement

Truancy

None of the education system's other goals for providing students with a high-quality education can be achieved, if students are not engaged in their education.

Despite some reductions, truancy continues to be a serious problem in the District. In school year 2014-2015, the DCPS reported a 17.2% truancy rate⁴, and PCSB reported a 14.64% truancy rate.⁵

Although DC has put into place programs that are showing success, for example *Show Up, Stand Out* and *Access Youth*,⁶ there has not been a coordinated cross-sector plan to increase school engagement. We are, however, encouraged by the important steps the Deputy Mayor has taken in the last year to move towards such a plan.

Some of the steps have been foundational building blocks: collecting better and consistent data, developing common rules and definitions of truancy, and developing a committee structure for the Truancy Taskforce.⁷ Others have been targeted to address clear problems; for example, working with the Council to introduce emergency truancy legislation so tardiness was not considered truancy.⁸ Allowing the two different issues, truancy and tardiness, to be dealt with separately will help schools provide appropriate

supports and services to students and families. The Deputy Mayor, with the Taskforce, has also been working to map current resources to develop a strategic plan to address truancy and to build a data collection plan.⁹ The draft plan included in the oversight answers appears to be a solid step toward a more comprehensive approach to address truancy.¹⁰

We urge the data collection part of the forthcoming strategic plan include collecting information on the root causes of chronic absenteeism, in order to ensure the resources invested in will be effective. *Show Up, Stand Out* has done some analysis and found that the most frequent barriers to attendance for elementary students are related to getting to school – 30 percent of students walk with their parent or sibling to school, and 29 percent report taking the bus to school.¹¹ Twenty two percent of the students who responded to the survey are homeless or in an unstable housing situation.¹² Fifteen percent reported medical issues as a barrier to getting to school, and 13 percent said they have too far to go to get to school.¹³ Of the middle school students surveyed, 52 percent of students listed transportation, specifically the bus, as the biggest barrier to getting to school. The second most frequent barrier was medical issues, which impacted 27 percent of students.¹⁴ These barriers can be addressed using school and community resources. The “Doing What Works” phase of the strategic plan should include services and supports to help remove these barriers and other identified barriers.

In addition, as part of “Evaluate the Efficacy of Current Interventions,” data should be collected on our current Court and Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) referral system. The *Attendance Accountability Amendment Act* requires Court referral after 15 absences for students aged 14 and older and requires students aged 5 to 13 to be referred to CFSA upon 10 days of unexcused absences.¹⁵ After reviewing the education related oversight responses and other publicly available data, it is clear we do not have adequate data to determine whether these referrals are having any effect. Given the expense of these referrals and our experience that they can often be counterproductive, an assessment should be made of their effectiveness.

Suspension and Expulsion

It is also important to reduce missed instructional time because of suspensions and expulsions. The *Pre-K Student Discipline Amendment Act of 2015* was a good first step, stopping suspensions of pre-K students.¹⁶ We need to do more to keep kids on track. In school year 2014-2015, 6,486 students were suspended for 5 days or less, 1,786 students were suspended for 6 to 10 days, and 1,264 students were suspended for over 10 days.¹⁷ There were 9,536 students of all ages suspended during the 2014-2015 school year, a minimal decrease from 10,000 students of all ages suspended during the 2012-2013 school year.¹⁸ The oversight data continues to show students classified as “at-risk” were more likely to be disciplined than their peers.¹⁹

We strongly encourage policies and practices that move all DC public schools to stop using suspension and expulsion as a form of discipline. We urge the Deputy Mayor to play a role in ensuring schools have the training, support and funding to implement alternative programs that promote a positive school climate and appropriate disciplinary approaches.

Mental Health Services in Schools

One way to improve school engagement and outcomes for students is to address the impact of trauma and other mental health needs at school. We know, through research and our own experiences, many DC children bring traumatic experiences with them into the classroom every day, impacting their behavior and ability to learn. Children in DC have a high rate of experiencing trauma. There has been important work to bring trauma-informed practices and services that ameliorate the impact of trauma into the DC schools. For instance, the District has expanded the community school model to “integrate academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement, in order to improve student outcomes.”²⁰ OSSE’s recently released annual report for the *Community Schools Incentive Initiative* highlights promising practices, such as providing increased access to mental health services in schools and linking families to healthy food options.²¹

Unfortunately, past efforts to implement programs have not been well coordinated as part of a larger plan, and many of the efforts are unknown to other

agencies and the community. That is why I am excited by the news that the Department of Health (DOH), through a collaboration between the Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) and schools, will be conducting a School Health Needs Assessment which will include the “resource mapping and mapping of current mental health and substance use screening portals in the District.”²² This effort, hopefully, will show a full picture of the successes and needs of our current system. We know DBH, in conjunction with DOH, DCPS, PCSB, and community partners, plans to then create a Comprehensive Plan for Expanding Early Childhood and School-Based Behavioral Health Services.²³

The Deputy Mayor should play a key role in supporting this interagency effort across the education and human services agencies. If these agencies are able to maintain a long-term working relationship around early childhood and school-based mental health and develop a truly comprehensive plan for serving children in schools, it will be tremendously beneficial to children across the District struggling with mental health issues. We hope this effort is made a priority and moves quickly from plan to action.

Cross-Sector Collaboration

DC’s public schools are almost evenly split between traditional and charter schools.²⁴ Coordination and collaboration between our public schools is key to the success of all our students. Last year, the Deputy Mayor created and is in the process of

launching a Cross-Sector Collaboration Task Force.²⁵ This Task Force has several announced objectives.²⁶ We are hopeful one of the educational challenges the Task Force will tackle is special education. Having a school system that can meet the needs of all of our students will require coordination between the sectors to ensure the District has the capacity to meet the varied needs of our students with disabilities.

We know the Deputy Mayor has already taken some steps to enhance the supports of students with special education needs in the District. Specifically in FY15 the Deputy Mayor worked with the PCSB to create a satellite or shared education classroom across LEAs to help meet the needs of students, especially students in smaller LEAs. While ultimately that effort did not come to fruition this year,²⁷ we expect future work will result in adding successful satellite classrooms to the District's resources for students with disabilities. The Deputy Mayor also worked to implement a preference for students with disabilities in the lottery process. This preference was made available under the *Special Education Quality Improvement Act* to help small LEAs build specialized programs.²⁸ So far, one charter school has adopted this newly available preference.²⁹ We look forward to continued work to improve the schools capacity to serve our students with disabilities.

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 8 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 PCSB FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q1.

³ DME FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q29 Attachment.

⁴ District of Columbia Public Schools, *DCPS at a Glance: Attendance* (2015), <http://dcps.dc.gov/page/dcps-glance-attendance>.

⁵ DC Public Charter School Board, *Attendance, Discipline and Truancy Report* (2015), <http://www.dcpsb.org/report/attendance-discipline-and-truancy-report>.

⁶ The *Access Youth* program states that, of the students who were referred after 5 unexcused absences, 22 percent avoided 10 unexcused absences, 58 percent avoided 15 unexcused absences, and 38 percent increased their rate of attendance.⁶ *Show Up, Stand Out’s* outcomes are also extremely promising – 74 percent of referred elementary school students and 86 percent of referred middle school students were not re-referred for poor attendance during the following school year. DCPS FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q52.

⁷ DME FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q 1.

⁸ *Truancy Referral Temporary Amendment Act of 2015*, B21-432.

⁹ DME FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q1 & Q6.

¹⁰ DME FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q6 Attachment.

¹¹ DCPS FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q52 Attachment.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Attendance Accountability Emergency Amendment Act of 2013*, DC Act 20-0072.

¹⁶ *Pre-K Student Discipline Amendment Act of 2015 – DC Act 21-0050*.

¹⁷ OSSE FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q9 Attachment.

¹⁸ OSSE FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q9 Attachment; *Reducing Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions in District of Columbia Public and Public Charter Schools*, available at:

http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/OSSE_REPORT_DISCIPLINARY_G_PAGE_S.pdf.

¹⁹ OSSE FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q9 Attachment.

²⁰ OSSE Community Schools Incentive Initiative. Retrieved from <http://osse.dc.gov/service/community-schools-incentive-initiative>

²¹ OSSE *Community Schools Incentive Initiative Annual Report: School Year 2014-2015*, <http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/Community%20Schools%20Annual%20Report.pdf>.

²² DBH FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q62.

²³ DOH-CHA FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q15.

²⁴ SY15-16 DCPS enrollment is 48,439 and PCS enrollment is 38,905. <http://www.dcpsb.org/blog/enrollment-public-schools-increases>

²⁵ DME FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q1.

²⁶ DME FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q2.

²⁷ DME FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q5.

²⁸ DC CODE § 38-1802.06

²⁹ DME FY15 Performance Oversight Responses, Q5.