



501 3rd Street, NW · 8th Floor
Washington, DC 20001
T 202.467.4900 · F 202.467.4949
childrenslawcenter.org

Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Education and Committee of the Whole
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Public Hearing:
B23-046, the "At-Risk School Funding Transparency Amendment Act of 2019"
and
B23-239, the "School Based Budgeting and Transparency Amendment Act of 2019"

Michael Villafranca
Policy Analyst
Children's Law Center

Introduction

Good afternoon Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso and members of the Committees. 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 nearly 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.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the "At-Risk School Funding Transparency Amendment Act of 2019" and the "School Based Budgeting and Transparency Amendment Act of 2019." Transparency is an important tenet of democracy because it provides residents and their elected representatives the ability to meaningfully participate. This is particularly critical for a public education system that is a mix of traditional and charter schools and which requires students and parents to make important choices about what school to apply to attend. How scarce resources are allocated and how those resources will be used to support specific students is central to this process. We commend both Councilmember Grosso and Councilmember Allen for their continued leadership in demanding financial transparency in our schools. The District invests a lot of money into the education of our youth, and we deserve to know

how that money is being spent and whether it is being invested appropriately and equitably.

Children’s Law Center believes that all public schools – whether they are traditional or charter – should be held to the same standard of transparency. In addition to providing information critical to school choice, there is no reason both traditional and charter schools should not be accountable to parents, students and other residents in the same way.

Similar to most states, education represents one of the largest expenditures in the District’s overall budget. Despite the countless hours Children’s Law Center and our advocacy partners spend each year examining education agency budgets, we are unable to discern basic information about how resources are being allocated. For example, how many at-risk dollars are going toward restorative justice initiatives in each school? This is but one example of the kind of vital information that parents, educators, advocates and policymakers need to make good decisions for our youth.

More specifically, Children’s Law Center looks to the budget every year to determine what supports are planned for the District’s most vulnerable youth—youth with disabilities, youth in foster care, parenting youth, and youth who are homeless. Robust funding, staffing, and other supports are necessary for these students, who face the largest academic achievement gaps,² large disparities in suspension and expulsion,³ and biggest challenges to school attendance and completion. But, every year we are

stymied in our attempt to learn how the city is allocating its resources for these students.

One example of the lack of transparency is the budget for DCPS's Home and Hospital Instruction Program (HHIP), which provides educational access to students who are too ill to travel to and attend school on-site. We have testified many times over the years about this program's failings, including inconsistent and subjectively-made eligibility determinations, as well as poor provision of services to students found eligible. We see too many children who should be served by DCPS' HHIP program fall irreparably behind their peers. The opacity of DCPS's budget makes it impossible to discern whether the problem is a lack of financial resources or a programmatic failing. Greater financial transparency would mean greater accountability for the educational outcomes of these vulnerable youth.

Many states outshine the District when it comes to transparency and accessibility of school funding.⁴ They make the information easy to find and relatively easy to understand. They also break down their budget expenditures into specific categories so that there is uniformity across all schools. For example, the Colorado Department of Education provides financial reporting information for public schools through an online platform that is clear, consistent across schools, and very user-friendly. Colorado's transparency law requires all education providers to provide online access to information regarding annual budget, annual audited financial statements, quarterly

financial statements, salary schedules or policies, accounts payable, and investment performance.⁵

As the nation's capital, we can and must do better. Our school system's budgets are the vehicles for allocating financial resources to meet student needs and should demonstrate a level of efficiency. For effective financial transparency, the budgets should be, at minimum: easy to find, uniform, detailed, searchable and regularly updated. The time is now. We look forward to working together with this Council and other stakeholders to make financial transparency in our education system a reality.

Conclusion

Thank you again 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 advocate 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 nearly 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 Only six percent of DCPS students with disabilities are proficient in English/Language Arts (ELA) and seven percent in Math, compared to 35% ELA and 31% Math for all DCPS students. Similarly, only 17% percent of DCPS students identified as at-risk are proficient in English/Language Arts (ELA) and 13% percent in Math, compared to 35% ELA and 31% Math for all DCPS students. See OSSE (August 16, 2018). *DC's 2018 PARCC Results*. Retrieved from https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/2018%20PARCC%20Results%20Release%20%28Aug.%2016%2C%202018%29.pdf

³ In SY2017-2018, at-risk students were 2.39 times more likely to received at least one out-of-school suspension compared to students who are not at-risk. Additionally, students with disabilities were 1.83 times more likely to received at least one out-of-school suspension compared to students not having a disability. See OSSE (2019). *State of Discipline: 2017-18 School Year*. Retrieved from https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/2017-18%20School%20Year%20Discipline%20Report.pdf.

⁴ Arkansas, Florida, Kansas, New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Texas statutes all require school districts to post the budget in a specific, prominent part of the website to make it easy for a website visitor to find; require a plain language format so the average person can understand it; and require school districts to break down their expenditures into specific categories. *See* Ark. Code Ann. § 6-11-129; Fla. Stat. § 1011.035; Kan. Stat. Ann. § 72-8254; N.J. Stat. Ann. § 18A:22-8a; Okla. Stat. tit. 70, § 5-135.4; and Tex. Educ. Code Ann. §§ 39.084, 44.004.1

⁵ C.R.S. § 24-6-400 *et seq.*