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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee on Education and Committee of the Whole  
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Performance Oversight Hearing  
Office of the State Superintendent of Education

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## **Introduction**

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson and Chairman Grosso and members of the Committees. My name is Michael Villafranca. I am a Policy Analyst at the Children's Law Center<sup>1</sup> 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 almost 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. Nearly all the children we represent attend public schools in DC – whether traditional public schools or charter schools.

I appreciate this opportunity to testify regarding the performance of the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). My testimony today will focus on the important role OSSE plays in supporting District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and Public Charter Schools (PCS) in implementing strategies to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline and to sustain trauma-informed education settings. However, my assessment of OSSE's performance in this area is narrow due to the limited information provided in the agency's oversight responses and given the absence of its annual public report on the District's school discipline data, which is overdue.<sup>2</sup>

As the District's state education agency, OSSE plays a vital part in keeping students in school, and attendance is critical to students' academic success. We testified

last year, and many times before, that reducing the use of exclusionary discipline is an important part of making sure every student is in school every day of the school year, so they can learn and succeed. In fact, we advocated alongside parents, teachers, mental health professionals, and many other advocates, last year, in support of the *Student Fair Access to School Amendment Act*, which is now law, in order to build an education system that is more effective at identifying and responding to students' needs.

One of the most common barriers to academic success that goes unidentified is trauma. We know, through years of research and our own experiences, that students in the District, especially those we serve, bring traumatic experiences with them into the classroom everyday—impacting their behavior and ability to learn.

Children in the District experience trauma at a high rate.<sup>3</sup> Trauma is a severe emotional response to a frightening or threatening event or to a series of experiences that leaves a person overwhelmed and unable to cope.<sup>4</sup> While experiencing any one discrete negative event, such as physical abuse or witnessing a murder, can cause trauma, children can also experience trauma through the cumulative effect of multiple, ongoing events, like living in poverty, experiencing homelessness, or being repeatedly removed from one's parents. Importantly, there is now wide agreement that trauma significantly impacts a child's ability to progress at school.

Increasingly, experts on trauma agree that schools can play a significant role in the adjustment of traumatized children.<sup>5</sup> A supportive school community that views children and families through a trauma-lens can help children feel safe and connected—this is the first step in preparing children to learn. In schools best equipped to handle trauma, with staff trained in its effects and who are able to make strong linkages to mental health providers, teachers will be able to focus on teaching rather than continuously managing behavior issues.

OSSE has done, and continues to do, important work to bring trauma-informed practices into the District's schools. OSSE has offered a series of trainings to LEAs to address positive behavior support and effective response to behavioral crises. The trainings offered focused on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Trauma-Informed Care, Nonviolent Crisis Prevention, and Restorative Justice.<sup>6</sup> The Public Charter School Board (PCSB) noted, again this year, that some of these trainings focus on a team-based approach for success, and only one or a few staff from Local Education Agencies (LEAs) attend and are trained.<sup>7</sup> If the necessary staff members from each LEA/school are not properly trained in strategies with a team-based approach, teachers and staff will be ill-equipped to implement such strategies effectively. So, we continue to urge OSSE to work with PCSB and DCPS to ensure that trainings are offered in such a way to facilitate and encourage attendance by teams of staff from the various LEAs.

Besides providing training opportunities, OSSE has been supporting schools in addressing students' behavioral needs through its collaborative work on the Coordinating Council on School Mental Health, which aims to integrate school- and community-based provider services to ensure all schools provide prevention, intervention, and intensive mental health supports.<sup>8</sup> This collaborative work has been complemented with a five-year \$8.8 million dollar grant that OSSE received from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) in FY18.<sup>9</sup> We look forward to seeing the promising results these investments will bring.

While these resources and initiatives may be beneficial in reducing schools' use of exclusionary discipline, as envisioned in the new law, a much larger investment is needed to ensure that those resources are directly benefiting the teachers, staff and students in the schools that need them. Full funding and staffing in the schools to implement positive approaches to out-of-school exclusion, with fidelity, is essential. Additionally, we know that many LEAs still have questions regarding particular elements of implementation.<sup>10</sup> So, we urge OSSE to expeditiously provide guidance to the schools, on the new law, that is both clear and comprehensive that also includes a list of evidence-based and promising programs that give teachers tools and strategies, improve school connection and school climate, teach social-emotional skills to students, and improve behavior. We also urge OSSE, as it works to update its discipline data collection practices, to work collaboratively with stakeholders to produce universal

terms for the various reasons for disciplinary action, which would allow for better data transparency, and thus a clearer picture, of school discipline practices in the District.

## CONCLUSION

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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 almost 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.

<sup>2</sup> Since 2016, OSSE has been required, by law, to publicly report on the school discipline data provided by LEAs and community-based organizations during the preceding school year, including a relevant trend analysis. See D.C. Code § 38–236.09(d).

<sup>3</sup> DC Fiscal Policy Institute (2014). *Unlocking Opportunities: Services that Help Poor Children Succeed in the Classroom, Part 1: How Poverty Affects a Child’s Ability to Learn*. Retrieved from <http://www.dcfpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Part-I-Poverty-and-Childrens-Learning-Final.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2014). *Understanding Child Trauma*. Retrieved from [http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/policy\\_and\\_the\\_nctsn\\_final.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/policy_and_the_nctsn_final.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Tishelman, A.C., Haney, P., Greenwald O’Brien, J. and Blaustein, M. (2010). “A framework for school-based psychological evaluations: Utilizing a ‘trauma lens.” *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*, 3(4): 279-302, 280.

<sup>6</sup> OSSE FY18 Performance Oversight Responses, Q38-39.

<sup>7</sup> PCSB FY18 Performance Oversight Responses, Q28.

<sup>8</sup> OSSE FY18 Performance Oversight Responses, Q76.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> PCSB FY18 Performance Oversight Responses, Q18.