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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Education
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Public Hearing:
"Youth Suicide Prevention and School Climate Survey Act of 2015" and the "Assessment
on Children of Incarcerated Parents Act of 2015"

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Introduction

Good afternoon Councilmember Grosso and members of the Committee. My name is Kimberly Waller. I am a Policy Attorney at the 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. The overwhelming majority of children we serve are in the DC public school system and would greatly benefit from improved school climates and school-based suicide prevention programs.

Data tells us that, in the District of Columbia, suicide is the second leading cause of death for ages 10 to 24.² Schools play a critical role in the lives of our youth and school-based suicide prevention programs are a viable solution to aid in reversing this tragic statistic. We also know, through research and our own experiences that DC children, and especially the children we serve, bring traumatic experiences with them into the classroom every day impacting their ability to learn, as well as their mental health and wellness. The "Youth Suicide Prevention and School Climate Survey Act" is one of many ways a school can address and counteract the trauma our students face by encouraging feelings of safety, trust, and comfort amongst students, teachers, staff, and families.

While my testimony today will focus primarily on the school climate provision of the "Youth Suicide Prevention and School Climate Survey Act", I want to briefly address Councilmember May's "Assessment on Children of Incarcerated Parents Act." DC has the highest incarceration rate in the country, and the number of women arrested in DC has increased dramatically.³ We know that having an incarcerated parent has a significant and long-lasting impact on children and it is important that we find ways to counteract these negative effects.⁴ We applaud the Council's attention to this important issue.

DC's Youth

Adverse childhood experiences impact a child's ability to learn and cause long-term negative consequences throughout adulthood. DC children are more likely to grow up in poverty, be homeless or witness violence than most children across the country. A joint Office of the State Superintendent of Education and Department of Health study reports that 13 percent of middle school students and 9 percent of high school students reported not going to school on one or more days during the previous month because they felt unsafe either at school or on their way to or from school.⁵ Other notable statistics include:

- Children in DC are at far greater risk of abuse and neglect than children in other states;⁶
- In DC, forty percent of high school students reported seeing or hearing violence and abuse during the past 12 months;⁷

- Many DC children also witness or are victims of domestic violence; there were nearly 33,000 domestic violence calls made to the police in 2013;⁸
- One in four DC children live in poverty – currently defined as less than \$24,000 a year for a family of four – and, in Wards 7 and 8, the figure is closer to one in two children;⁹
- During the 2013-2014 school year, approximately 4,000 DC public school students were homeless.¹⁰
- At the end of 2014, there were over 1,000 DC children growing up in foster care and many more are at risk of entering into care because of parental neglect.¹¹

School Climate and Trauma-Informed Schools

Trauma-informed schools and a positive school climate, where students are supported, respected, engaged, and emotionally and physically safe, can help counteract many of the adverse childhood experiences our student's face.¹² Supportive and reliable relationships in schools lead to a healthier teaching and learning environment.¹³ Schools that provide a safe and supportive community help students grow emotionally and socially, while avoiding problems like emotional distress, behavior problems and suspensions, drug use, and violence.¹⁴

A school climate survey can help schools understand their strengths, needs, and weaknesses in providing the best learning and working environment for their students and staff. Important measures of school climate should include frequency of suspensions and expulsions, data about school bullying, and survey results showing if students and teachers feel safe at school and if students are receiving the support they

need to thrive.¹⁵ Each school is unique and school climate improvement will look different from school to school. School climate surveys will provide the schools the knowledge they need to engage in data-driven decision making to improve their school community.

Other Jurisdictions

School climate surveys have been successful in many other states and jurisdictions. For instance, California has administered school climate surveys since 2004.¹⁶ The California Department of Education issues regular reports advising schools on how to use school specific climate survey data to implement programmatic changes that will benefit the school community, including school violence and bullying prevention, attendance rates, mental health services, and substance abuse prevention and treatment.¹⁷ Additionally, California decision-makers examine school-specific survey results to determine “how and where to allocate often-limited resources that address the needs of students within schools.”¹⁸

Advocacy organizations and other groups also use survey data to advocate for specific changes in individual schools. The California Endowment, an organization that advocates for improved school climate in California schools, recommends a number of approaches that have been successful in a variety of school settings. These approaches include: (1) trauma-informed schools – meaning changing the environment of the entire school and asking “What happened to this child?” as opposed to “What is wrong with

this child?," (2) incorporating Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS) in school discipline responses; (3) implementing restorative practices in responding to behavior problems; and (4) bullying prevention programs.¹⁹

Conclusion

As the District continues to find ways to improve academic outcomes in DC schools, it is imperative that decision-makers understand that this cannot be done without comprehensive school and city-wide interventions specifically designed to address children's exposure to trauma and its impact on classrooms. Collecting school climate survey data is one tool in continuing the progress that our city has already made in incorporating trauma-informed approaches in schools. I look forward to continuing to work with Councilmember Grosso, members of the Education Committee, and my colleagues working in this field to push for improved school climate and trauma-informed schools. My hope is that this legislation is just one step in a larger reform effort to improve our schools, provide a safe and supportive environment for all students, families, and staff, and making all public schools, traditional and charter, trauma-informed.

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 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 *Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS)*, Center for Disease Control (2010), www.cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars.

³ *A Capitol Concern: The disproportionate impact of the justice system on low-income communities in D.C.*, Justice Policy Institute (2010), available at http://www.justicepolicy.org/images/upload/10-07_EXS_CapitolConcern_AC-PS-RD-DC.pdf.

⁴ *Incarcerated Parents and Their Children: Trends 1991-2007*, The Sentencing Project (2009), available at http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/publications/inc_incarceratedparents.pdf.

⁵ *District of Columbia Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, Office of the State Superintendent of Education & Department of Health (2012), available at http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2012%20DC%20YRBS_OSSE_0.pdf.

⁶ Child abuse and neglect occurs at a rate of 19 per 1,000 children in DC, compared with 9 per 1,000 children nationwide. *Children Who are Confirmed by Child Protective Services as Victims of Maltreatment*, Kids Count Data Center (2014), <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/6221-children-who-are-confirmed-by-child-protective-services-as-victims-of-maltreatment?loc=10&loct=3#detailed/3/any/true/868,867,133,38,35/any/12943,12942>.

⁷ Julie Ost & Laura K. Maurizi, *District of Columbia Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, Office of the State Superintendent of Education (2013), available at http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2012%20DC%20YRBS_OSSE_0.pdf.

⁸ *Domestic Violence Facts*, DC Coalition Against Domestic Violence, http://dccadv.org/img/fck/file/Resources/DCCADV_DomesticViolenceFacts_Sheet.pdf.

⁹ Bhat, *Supra* note 1.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Presentation by Yuliana Del Arroyo, OSSE, to the Mayor's Advisory Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect (MACCAN), February 24, 2015.

¹² *Making Sense of School Climate*, California Department of Education (2011), available at http://californias3.wested.org/resources/S3_schoolclimateguidebook_final.pdf.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Positive School Climate*, California Department of Education (2015), <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/se/schoolclimate.asp>.

¹⁵ *School Climate*, The California Endowment, http://www.healthhappenshere.com/lcff_school_climate.

¹⁶ *California School Climate Survey*, WestEd, <https://cscs.wested.org/>.

¹⁷ *Making Sense of School Climate*, California Department of Education (2011), available at http://californias3.wested.org/resources/S3_schoolclimateguidebook_final.pdf.

¹⁸ *Making Data-Driven Decisions in Student Support & School Mental Health Programs: A Guidebook for Practice*, California Department of Education (2012), available at http://chks.wested.org/resources/SMH_guidebook_20130306.pdf.

¹⁹ *School Climate*, *Supra* note 13.