



Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee of the Whole  
November 9, 2021

Public Oversight Hearing:  
School Security in District of Columbia Public and Public Charter Schools

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## **Introduction**

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, and members of the Committee. My name is Danielle Robinette, and I am a policy attorney at Children’s Law Center. I am a resident of the District and, prior to law school, I was a public-school teacher. I am testifying today on behalf of the Children’s Law Center which fights so every DC child can grow up with a stable 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.<sup>1</sup>

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding developments in school security in DC Public Schools (DCPS) and public charter schools. We appreciate the Committee continuing to provide oversight regarding the transition away from police in schools and toward best practices in safe and welcoming schools. We support DCPS’s continued efforts to reimagine school safety in a way that does not contribute to the criminalization of Black and Brown students, but instead enhances their educational experience in DC’s public schools. We also ask the Committee to ensure that charter schools are included in the conversation about reimagining school safety. School policing and security practices at charter schools affect more than 40,000 children and young people in DC. Just as with DCPS, the Committee is responsible for ensuring that charter school security practices do not criminalize students, but instead support a safer environment for all. In particular, we urge the Council to ensure DCPS, OSSE, and the

charter sector are making the investments in behavioral health services and teacher supports that we need for our schools to be safer for all students and teachers.

### **DC Must Follow Through on Commitments Made to Reimagine School Safety**

In previous hearings on this topic, and throughout the performance and budget oversight season,<sup>2</sup> Children’s Law Center repeatedly testified in support of a two-part strategy that divests local dollars from the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) School Safety Division, then invests those dollars in programs that create and reinforce safety in our schools.<sup>3</sup> Our investment recommendations focused on existing programs and partnerships already operating to varying degrees within our schools and communities, and included the following:

- Increase investments in the School-Based Behavioral Health Program (SBBH);
- Provide teachers and staff with trauma-informed training, professional development, and support;
- Expand restorative justice programming in schools and communities;
- Explore funding the expansion of credible messengers in communities and schools; and
- Adequately fund behavioral intervention support staff, administrative staff, and behavioral support technicians at each school.

While DCPS and the charter school sector have made many promises to address these recommendations, we urge this Committee to ensure DCPS, OSSE, and the charter sector follow through on these promises and make the investments necessary to meaningfully improve school safety and create positive school climates.

### *DCPS's Management of the School Security Contract*

In FY21, DCPS assumed management of the school security contract previously under the control of MPD. During the April 2021 hearing before this Committee, DCPS outlined plans to invest significant resources in mental health, trauma-responsive practices, restorative approaches, and stakeholder engagement as part of its approach to school security.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, Dr. Elliot noted that “\$4.2M was shifted from traditional, contracted security toward school-based emotional well-being investments.”<sup>5</sup> Of this amount, \$1.7M was reallocated “to provide additional culture and social-emotional learning supports.”<sup>6</sup> Further, Dr. Elliot gave examples of how schools would be able to use this money to fund “additional social-emotional learning curriculum, Pathways Coordinators to support academic planning, Behavior Technicians to provide direct student support, and new positions like a dedicated Restorative Justice Coordinator.”<sup>7</sup> We encourage the Committee to ask DCPS to provide a detailed update on the status of these investments, including utilization and outcome data, to ensure that these investments have resulted in tangible supports for students, teachers, and schools in SY21-22.

### *Council's Investments in School Security in the FY22 Budget*

The Council took several critical steps towards reimagining school safety and creating positive school environments in the FY22 budget. We particularly appreciate the Council's commitment to divest from MPD's School Safety Division<sup>8</sup> and the

Council's investment in the School-Based Behavioral Health expansion program.<sup>9</sup> Both of these changes, however, require the continued attention and oversight of the Council to ensure they are fully and effectively implemented.

In the Fiscal Year 2022 Budget Support Act of 2021, the Council included a commitment to reduce law enforcement presences in schools.<sup>10</sup> Under this provision, the MPD's School Safety Division shall be phased out of schools slowly over the next 4 school years.<sup>11</sup> While this divestment serves as an important promise to students in DC, the Committee must ensure the phase out of the School Safety Division takes place in a timely and thoughtful manner, and that schools are adequately supported through this transition.

The FY22 Budget also included funding to expand the School-Based Behavioral Health (SBBH) program to every DC public school – traditional and charter. This means that, for this fiscal year, every school in DC has funding for a full-time behavioral health clinician. However, because these clinicians are funded through annual grants, school leaders are often worried that each new fiscal year provides an opportunity for this funding to disappear. It is important that the Council create sustained investments into the SBBH program so that schools and students can meaningfully rely on the clinicians as a member of their school community and support system. Investments in mental health supports are just the start of a significant culture shift in schools that will take many years to take root. If funding for clinicians is at risk every year, it is difficult for the

school community to invest the emotional labor required to move this culture shift forward. Therefore, we call on the Council to provide careful thought and sustained investment in the SBBH program so that it has a sustainable funding source that is regularly adjusted for inflation so that clinicians can stay in schools to serve students.

The budget process is just the start of meaningful change in our schools. The Council must continue to provide oversight of DCPS, OSSE and the charter sector not only to ensure that they are implementing changes with fidelity, but also to quickly spot issues where the budgetary investments are insufficient to meet the needs of school communities.

### **The Charter Sector Must be Included in School Safety Conversations**

In the April 2021 hearing on this topic, the focus was largely directed at DCPS. In fact, among the government witnesses, only DCPS was represented. However, nearly half of DC's public-school students attend a charter school.<sup>12</sup> As such, it is crucial that we not overlook the significant impact of school safety and security practices implemented at charter schools. Today's hearing, like April's hearing, features only DCPS as a government witness. It is essential that the Committee engage with charter leaders to find out what they need to ensure that they are providing safe and welcoming schools. This engagement must not be limited to the Public Charter School Board (PCSB) that serves largely as a charter authorizer, not as a regulatory body. Just as the DCPS Chancellor is called to testify about the status of DCPS as a Local Education Agency

(LEA), leaders of charter LEAs could provide valuable insight into the needs of the 40,000+ students who do not attend a DCPS school. At a minimum, OSSE and/or the Deputy Mayor of Education ought to be present as entities responsible for the education of both the traditional public and charter sectors.

## Conclusion

Thank you for this 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 stable 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> See *Metropolitan Police Department*, Public Oversight Hearing Before the Comm. on the Judiciary and Public Safety, D.C. Council, (March 11, 2021), (testimony of Danielle Robinette, Policy Attorney, Children’s Law Center), available at: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CLC\\_MPD-Oversight-Testimony\\_FINAL.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CLC_MPD-Oversight-Testimony_FINAL.pdf) ; see also *Metropolitan Police Department and Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement*, Budget Oversight Hearing Before the Comm. on Judiciary and Public Safety, D.C. Council, (June 10, 2021) (testimony of Danielle Robinette, Policy Attorney, Children’s Law Center), available at: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CLC-Testimony\\_MPD-FY22-Budget-Oversight-Testimony.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CLC-Testimony_MPD-FY22-Budget-Oversight-Testimony.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., *The Recommendations of the Police Reform Commission*, Joint Public Hearing Before the Comm. of the Whole and the Comm. on Judiciary and Public Safety, D.C. Council, (May 20, 2021) (testimony of Danielle Robinette, Policy Attorney, Children’s Law Center), available at: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CLC-Testimony\\_Joint-Hearing-on-PRC-Recommendations\\_Revised.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CLC-Testimony_Joint-Hearing-on-PRC-Recommendations_Revised.pdf) ; *School Security in the District of Columbia and Public Charter Schools*, Public Hearing Before the Comm. of the Whole, D.C. Council, (April 21, 2021) (testimony of Danielle Robinette, Policy Attorney, Children’s Law Center), available at: [https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CLC-Testimony\\_School-Security-in-the-District-of-Columbia-and-Public-Charter-Schools.pdf](https://childrenslawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/CLC-Testimony_School-Security-in-the-District-of-Columbia-and-Public-Charter-Schools.pdf) ;

<sup>4</sup> See *School Security in the District of Columbia and Public Charter Schools*, Public Hearing Before the Comm. of the Whole, D.C. Council, (April 21, 2021) (testimony of Dr. Brenda Elliot, Chief of School Improvement and Supports, District of Columbia Public Schools).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*, at 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*, at 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> See Fiscal Year 2022 Budget Support Act of 2021, Sec. 3082(b)(2).

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<sup>9</sup> See “FY2022 Approved Budget and Financial Plan, Vol. 4: Agency Budget Chapters – Part III,” Table RM0-5 at E-44, (Sept. 17, 2021), *available at*:

<https://dcmov.app.box.com/s/d1i9ucek7s85n84vo9sw3p33nxwi1iw> (noting a recurring enhancement of \$5,838,000 to support the School-based expansion and a one-time enhancement of \$1,873,000 to support the SBMH program expansion for community based providers).

<sup>10</sup> See Fiscal Year 2022 Budget Support Act of 2021, Sec. 3081 *et seq.*

<sup>11</sup> See *id.*, at Sec. 3082(b)(2).

<sup>12</sup> District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, “Audit Verification of Student Enrollment for the 2020-21 School Year,” at 4 (Jan. 29, 2021), *available at*:

[https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page\\_content/attachments/2020-21%20School%20Year%20Annual%20Enrollment%20Audit%20Report.pdf](https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/2020-21%20School%20Year%20Annual%20Enrollment%20Audit%20Report.pdf) (reporting total audited public and non-public enrollment metrics in which DCPS had 50,317 students and Public Charter Schools had 44,229 students).