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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee of the Whole  
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Public Oversight Hearing  
Public Charter School Board

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## **Introduction**

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, members of the Committee, and staff. My name is Danielle Robinette, and I am a Senior Policy Attorney at Children's Law Center. Children's Law Center believes every child should grow up with a strong foundation of family, health and education and live in a world free from poverty, trauma, racism and other forms of oppression. Our more than 100 staff – together with DC children and families, community partners and pro bono attorneys – use the law to solve children's urgent problems today and improve the systems that will affect their lives tomorrow. Since our founding in 1996, we have reached more than 50,000 children and families directly and multiplied our impact by advocating for city-wide solutions that benefit hundreds of thousands more.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the FY25 performance of the Public Charter School Board (PCSB or the Board). Children's Law Center represents DC students who regularly face barriers in accessing their education. Through our medical-legal partnership, Healthy Together, we represent parents whose children are facing school attendance challenges related to chronic health conditions, lack of access to special education, housing conditions, among other concerns. We also represent children in foster care who face myriad challenges accessing their education.

Since the abrupt closure of Eagle Academy PCS in 2024, PCSB and the charter sector more broadly, has rightfully been subject to increased scrutiny. We are encouraged

that PCSB seems to have leaned into this increased accountability.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, enhanced oversight has led three more schools to voluntarily revoke their charters.<sup>2</sup> However, PCSB's focus on accountability through oversight has led them to explore alternative oversight tools to provide struggling schools with an opportunity to demonstrate improvement before the Board considers charter revocation.

In addition to increased oversight conducted by PCSB, we have also noted the agency's responses to oversight by this Committee. Between the Eagle Academy hearing in December 2024 and the charter review and renewal hearing in October 2025, we have seen PCSB initiate efforts to respond to feedback and collaborate with community stakeholders. While criticism could lead an agency to contract inward and share less with the public, PCSB has instead taken the opportunity to reach out to the community and seek new ways to address concerns in the charter sector. While there is still much more work to be done, we commend PCSB's recent trajectory toward increased accountability and collaboration with community stakeholders.

### **PCSB Has Taken Initial Steps to Improve Oversight and Accountability**

At this Committee's recent hearing on charter review and renewals, Children's Law Center testified about the need for PCSB to strengthen its oversight policies and practices to support struggling school and minimize the harm of charter school closures.<sup>3</sup> In the four months since that hearing, three new Board members were appointed and confirmed, including a new Chair.<sup>4</sup> Amidst this change, PCSB's day-to-day work moved

forward, and the Board confronted hard choices. Capital Village PCS voluntarily revoked their charter.<sup>5</sup> Shining Stars Montessori Academy PCS's charter renewal was denied, and the Board placed the school on probation.<sup>6</sup> PCSB completed its out-of-cycle review of the SEED School of Washington and voted to conditionally continue the school's charter.<sup>7</sup> Throughout this work we have observed various ways in which PCSB has been responsive to feedback and committed to meaningful improvement.

#### In Response to Feedback, PCSB Changed Their Charter Review Timeline to Better Supports Students

At the October hearing, several witnesses testified urging PCSB to amend their timeline for charter reviews to ensure that school closure decisions were made before the MySchoolDC lottery application window closes.<sup>8</sup> In apparent response to this feedback, the agenda for the Board's public meeting on January 26, 2026 – before the lottery application deadlines<sup>9</sup> – included decisions on Shining Stars and SEED as well as the announcement of the Capital Village Closure.<sup>10</sup> This important timeline shift ensured that students at Shining Stars and SEED could feel confident that their school would still operate in the next school year. Moreover, the displaced Capital Village students can participate in the lottery and take advantage of DC's robust school choice system. Additionally, PCSB promised that an enrollment specialist "will reach out to every Capital Village family to ensure they are aware of all available school options for the 2026-27 school year."<sup>11</sup> We thank the Capital Village team and PCSB for making these hard choices in a way that creates the most opportunity for DC students.

## PCSB Exploring Alternative Tool to Strengthen Oversight and Accountability

In addition to changes to their review timeline, our testimony at this Committee's recent charter review hearing included a recommendation that PCSB develop oversight mechanisms and internal processes that effectuate improvements at struggling schools.<sup>12</sup> PCSB's January meeting included the 15-year review of Shining Stars Montessori Academy PCS in which the Board voted to deny charter renewal and place the school in probationary status for a period of three years under specific conditions.<sup>13</sup> If the school does not meet the terms of its probation, it must close at the end of SY28-29.<sup>14</sup> If the school satisfies the terms, the Board will vote to renew their charter for another 15-year period.<sup>15</sup>

While probation is not a new tool for PCSB, it has not been used since 2013.<sup>16</sup> In that case, PCSB's use of probation – instead of closure – gave the school the chance to radically overhaul their operations. They hired an outside consulting group and replaced the management team and 70% of their teachers.<sup>17</sup> The focused attention on school improvement resulted in the school meeting the terms of its probationary continuance a year ahead of schedule. In SY14-15, PCSB noted that the school's "academic turnaround has been remarkable" and that it had "the largest increase in math proficiency among all public charter high schools."<sup>18</sup> We hope that probation leads to similarly focused attention and improvement for Shining Stars.

## Consistent Oversight Drives Change at the SEED School of Washington

The Board's January meeting also covered the out-of-cycle review of the SEED School. Children's Law Center has repeatedly shared our concerns about SEED.<sup>19</sup> At this Committee's recent hearing on charter review and renewal, we testified that even when PCSB's oversight process identifies concerns, the process is painfully slow leaving students and families in limbo while they wait for change.<sup>20</sup> For example, PCSB first received a community complaint regarding SEED in October 2022.<sup>21</sup> A PCSB audit from March 2023 highlighted concerning trends in the SEED's discipline practices for students with disabilities.<sup>22</sup> Then, in October 2024, issued a Notice of Concern against SEED.<sup>23</sup> In the Spring of SY24-25, PCSB conducted a Qualitative Site Review (QSR) and identified concerns across many domains. Considering these findings at their June 2025 public meeting, the Board declined to lift the Notice of Concern<sup>24</sup> and announced that it would conduct an out-of-cycle review of SEED in SY25-26.<sup>25</sup> This history of PCSB oversight of SEED highlights the limitations of their current practices to effectuate meaningful improvement in schools, even where concerns are well-documented.

During SY25-26, PCSB conducted an out-of-cycle review of SEED.<sup>26</sup> This review found that SEED *met* its charter goals in SY220-23, *partially met* its charter goals in SY23-24, but *did not meet* its charter goals in SY24-25.<sup>27</sup> As we have noted in our previous testimony, we are particularly concerned about SEED's compliance with special education and school discipline laws.<sup>28</sup> While PCSB's out-of-cycle review found no material

violation of law, the process “identified serious concerns regarding SEED PCS’s special education compliance and discipline data reporting compliance.”<sup>29</sup> Additionally, onsite monitoring by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) in SY24-25 “identified instances of student-level noncompliance, as well as concerns around SEED PCS’s ability to serve students with disabilities (SWD) in the least restrictive environment and operational capacity to deliver quality instruction to SWD in an inclusive environment.”<sup>30</sup> The review also noted, in response to the Notice of Concern and increased oversight from PCSB, that SEED implemented some operational changes to address safety and compliance issues.<sup>31</sup> PCSB also notes that SEED brought on a new Head of School, a new Board chair, and six new trustees.<sup>32</sup> Cumulatively, the continued concerns about compliance with charter goals balanced by the new leadership and operational changes led PCSB to recommend conditional continuance of SEED’s charter.<sup>33</sup>

The future of SEED remains quite uncertain. As we noted in October, closing a school is a drastic choice that necessarily displaces students and disrupts their education. Closing SEED would displace the 200+ students who reside on campus from Sunday evening through Friday afternoon. The unique model at SEED makes it even harder to consider closure. They are scheduled to undergo charter renewal in SY27-28. Hopefully, consistent oversight, paired with support, from PCSB will drive meaningful improvement for the SEED community.

## **PCSB's External Affairs Team Has Been Responsive to School Discipline Concerns**

Shortly after this Committee's hearing on charter review and renewals, PCSB's External Affairs team reached out to Children's Law Center to discuss the issues raised in our testimony and establish lines of communication for us to raise issues directly with PCSB. We commend PCSB for being responsive to the witnesses from the October hearing and for developing pathways by which they can learn about new issues as they arise. We acknowledge that it can be difficult for agencies to be open and trusting of legal services organizations like Children's Law Center who are often on the opposing side of adjudication. Despite the adversarial nature of litigation, often we all have the same goal – to ensure that DC students are receiving the education they need to be successful in life after school. By building trusting relationships with community organizations, PCSB will be better able to identify and address issues as they arise without the need for litigation.

We thank PCSB's External Affairs Team for being will to collaborate with Children's Law Center. In fact, in the short time since our initial meeting to open lines of communication, we have already successfully used this tool to address a school discipline issue. Over the past year or so, our education attorneys noticed an uptick in cases in which charter schools were requiring parents to attend reentry meetings before their student could return to school following an out-of-school suspension. However, this practice is specifically prohibited by the Student Fair Access to School Amendment Act of 2018 (SFASAA).<sup>34</sup>

To be clear, this provision of SFASAA does not prevent a school from holding a reentry meeting. It does not prevent a school from seeking a meeting with the student's parent/guardian to discuss behavior concern. It only prevents schools from requiring that a parent/guardian be present for a reentry meeting before the student is able to return from their suspension. As this Committee is well aware, students who are not in school are not learning. Exclusionary discipline further compounds the harms of missing school.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, research has shown that exclusionary discipline has "a consistent negative effect" on student attendance for both middle and high school students.<sup>36</sup> By prohibiting a school from requiring a parent/guardian be present at a reentry meeting, SFASAA works to get students back to school promptly after serving their suspension.

Before SFASAA, a student could be kept out of school long past their assigned suspension because the school and the parent/guardian could not quickly schedule a time in which all necessary parties could be available. As such, the purpose of this provision was to ensure that scheduling challenges between school staff and parents did not extend a student's suspension long past the intended length of suspension. In a recent case, a student arrived at school following a half-day out-of-school suspension (i.e., sent home early following a behavior incident), but was told that they could not return to school until they and their parent attended a reentry meeting. The parent made themselves available, but the school staff was unavailable due to busy schedules in the week before

Winter break. Ultimately, this student missed more than a week of school due to a half-day suspension. This was a clear violation of SFASAA.

Given the new line of communication proffered by PCSB, I reached out to the external affairs team to share our concerns about charter schools requiring parents to attend reentry meetings. The PCSB team reviewed the information I shared and reviewed school discipline policies and data. They agreed with our reading of the relevant provision of SFASAA and committed to provide some sort of guidance or training opportunities to ensure that school leaders understand the provision. School leaders are not lawyers. However, PCSB is responsible for ensuring that DC charter schools comply with applicable laws.<sup>37</sup> We appreciate the External Affairs team for opening lines of communication and for being responsive to this school discipline issue.

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

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g., DC Public Charter School Board, “Accountability Is a Promise, Not a Punishment: How DC Is Strengthening Oversight for Public Charter Schools,” (Sept. 16, 2025), available at:

<https://dcpcsb.org/accountability-promise-not-punishment-how-dc-strengthening-oversight-public-charter-schools>.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g., Janine Gomez, Executive Director and Co-Founder, I Dream Public Charter School, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee of the Whole, Public Hearing on Charter School Review and Renewal in the District, (Oct. 22, 2025), available for download at:

<https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/1945>.

<sup>3</sup> See Danielle Robinette, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee of the Whole, Public Hearing on Charter School Review and Renewal in the District, (Oct. 22, 2025), available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/public-oversight-hearing-charter-school-review-and-renewal-in-the-district/>.

<sup>4</sup> See PR26-0434, Public Charter School Board Maura Marino Confirmation Resolution of 2025; PR26-0436, Public Charter School Board Michelle Yan Confirmation Resolution of 2025; and PR26-0738, Public Charter School Board Antonio Williams Confirmation Resolution of 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Latoya Tolbert, Chair, Capital Village PCS Board of Directors to the DC Public Charter School Board (dec. 4, 2025), available at: <https://dcpcsb.egnyte.com/dl/Mc7tJJPgJDRV>.

<sup>6</sup> See DC Public Charter School Board, “DC PCSB January 2026 Board Meeting,” (Jan. 26, 2026), Video Recording at 02:27:45 – 02:29:50, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oIuZRzsq20Q>.

<sup>7</sup> Id., at 04:04:40 – 04:05:42.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g., Ariel Johnson, Executive Director, DC Charter School Alliance, Public Hearing on Charter School Review and Renewal in the District, (Oct. 22, 2025), available for download at:

<https://lims.dccouncil.gov/Hearings/hearings/1945>.

<sup>9</sup> The MySchoolDC lottery deadline for 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade applicants was on February 2, 2026 and the deadline for PK3-8<sup>th</sup> grade applicants is March 2, 2026. See <https://apply.myschooldc.dc.gov/login.aspx>

<sup>10</sup> See DC Public Charter School Board, “January Board Meeting Kicks off with Focus on Oversight, Access, and Opportunity,” (Jan. 29, 2026), available at: <https://dcpcsb.org/january-board-meeting-kicks-focus-oversight-access-and-opportunity>.

<sup>11</sup> See DC Public Charter School Board, “Capital Village PCS to Close at End of School Year,” (Jan. 27, 2026), available at: <https://dcpcsb.org/capital-village-pcs-close-end-school-year>.

<sup>12</sup> See Danielle Robinette, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee of the Whole, Public Hearing on Charter School Review and Renewal in the District, *supra* note 3, at 7-10.

<sup>13</sup> See DC Public Charter School Board, “DC PCSB January 2026 Board Meeting,” *supra* note 6, at 33:40-34:40.

<sup>14</sup> Id., at 34:43.

<sup>15</sup> Id., at 34:43-35:12.

<sup>16</sup> See DC Public Charter School Board, “Charter Board Denies IDEA PCS 15-year Charter Renewal Petition,” (mar. 19, 2013), available at: <https://www.dcpcsb.org/charter-board-denies-idea-pcs-15-year-charter-renewal-petition>.

<sup>17</sup> See Kavitha Cardoza, “How A D.C. Charter School Once Slated For Closure Changed Its Fate,” WAMU (Dec. 19, 2014), available at:

<https://wamu.org/story/14/12/19/how-a-dc-charter-school-once-slated-for-closure-changed-its-fate/>

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<sup>18</sup> DC Public Charter School Board, “2014-15 Charter Renewal Report: Integrated Design and Electronics Academy Public Charter School,” (Mar. 23, 2015), p. 1, available at:

<https://dcpcsb.egnyte.com/dl/Fzo3h5XOWC>.

<sup>19</sup> See Danielle Robinette, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee of the Whole, Public Hearing on The Closure of Eagle Academy, (Dec. 5, 2024), p. 2-4, available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/testimony-the-closure-of-eagle-academy/>; see also Danielle Robinette, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee of the Whole, Public Hearing on Charter School Review and Renewal in the District, *supra* note 3, at 7-10.

<sup>20</sup> See Danielle Robinette, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee of the Whole, Public Hearing on Charter School Review and Renewal in the District, *supra* note 3, at 9.

<sup>21</sup> See DC Public Charter School Board, “Special Education (SPED) Audit Form: SEED PCS of Washington DC” (March 14, 2023), available at: <https://dcpcsb.egnyte.com/dl/U2ISY529mY>.

<sup>22</sup> See *id.*; see also Lauren Lumpkin, “D.C. charter school accused of violating law for students with disabilities,” WASHPOST (November 3, 2024), available at:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2024/11/04/seed-dc-charter-school-students-disabilities/>

<sup>23</sup> See DC Public Charter School Board, “Staff Recommendation regarding Notice of Concern – The SEED Public Charter School of Washington, D.C.,” (June 2, 2025), available at:

<https://dcpcsb.egnyte.com/dl/cRmTXK4BxKTg>.

<sup>24</sup> See DC Public Charter School Board, Transcript of Public Hearing and Public Meeting (June 2, 2025), p. 49-50, available at: <https://dcpcsb.egnyte.com/dl/bGmhC8B7xRRQ>.

<sup>25</sup> DC Public Charter School Board, “Staff Recommendation regarding Notice of Concern – The SEED Public Charter School of Washington, D.C.,” *supra* note 23, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> See DC Public Charter School Board, “Charter Review: The SEED Public Charter School of Washington DC,” (Jan. 26, 2026), p. 2, available at: <https://dcpcsb.egnyte.com/dl/fdmm4MJ4jttF>.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*, at 2.

<sup>28</sup> See Danielle Robinette, Children’s Law Center, Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council, Committee of the Whole, Public Hearing on The Closure of Eagle Academy, *supra* note 19, at 2-3.

<sup>29</sup> See DC Public Charter School Board, “Charter Review: The SEED Public Charter School of Washington DC,” *supra* note 26, at 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.*, at 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*, at 4-5.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*, at 5.

<sup>33</sup> See DC Public Charter School Board, “DC PCSB January 2026 Board Meeting,” *supra* note 6, at 4:04:40-04:05:42.

<sup>34</sup> DC Code § 38-236.04(e) states “The return of a student to school upon conclusion of an out-of-school suspension shall not be made contingent on a parent accompanying the student, attending a conference, or otherwise being present at the school.” Further, DC Code § 38-236.02 clarifies that this part of the Code applies to both DCPS and public charter schools.

<sup>35</sup> See Taylor McCabe-Juhnke & Michael Wotorson, The GRAD Partnership, “To Solve Attendance Issues, Use Connections Not Suspensions,” (June 6, 2024), available at:

<https://www.gradpartnership.org/suspensions/>.

<sup>36</sup> Christina LiCalsi, et al., American Institutes for Research, “An Empirical Examination of the Effects of Suspension and Suspension Severity on Behavioral and Academic Outcomes,” (Aug. 2021), p. 36, available at: <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/NYC-Suspension-Effects-Behavioral-Academic-Outcomes-August-2021.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> See DC Code § 38-1802.11(a)(1)(B).