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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee of the Whole
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Public Hearing:
FY27 Budget
Deputy Mayor for Education

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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 provide testimony regarding the Mayor's Proposed FY27 Budget for the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME). To start, we appreciate the Mayor's proposed 2.55% increase to the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula (UPSFF) foundation level.¹ Specific to the proposed budget for DME, we are focused on their ability to address chronic absenteeism and to operate the Students in the Care of DC (SCDC) Coordinating Committee. The DME's leadership in each of these areas is crucial to ensuring a comprehensive and well-coordinated response to students' needs. We are hopeful that the proposed level funding will allow DME to maintain momentum on improving student attendance and supporting Students in the Care of DC.

In the coming years, the education sector is going to have to do more with less. There is no easy way to do this. However, we urge the Committee to remember that investments in education are investments in DC's future. Proposals to create new jobs for DC residents must be

accompanied by education investments that ensure that DC students are prepared to fill those roles. We must ensure that DC students are thoroughly prepared for the future that the District is trying to build for them. Recognizing the limitations of the current budget climate, we recommend that the Committee focus on oversight that examines whether existing programs are being implemented with fidelity to ensure that DC students are getting the most out of the dollars that the city invests in education.

The FY27 Budget Must Ensure that DME Can Continue to Lead to the District's Response to Chronic Absenteeism

As we have testified before, there will be no one-size-fits-all program or intervention that will “solve” chronic absenteeism in the District.² The reasons why students miss school include transportation, unstable housing, food insecurity, physical and behavioral health, unmet special education needs, community violence, laundry access, bullying, academic challenges, among myriad others. Given the numerous and nuanced needs of DC students, the education sector cannot meet the challenge alone. A comprehensive response to absenteeism will require improved cross-agency coordination and collaboration.

To address this need, the DME has been charged with the difficult task of gathering, organizing, and facilitating cooperation among disparate agencies to develop a comprehensive response and system of supports for students facing barriers to regular school attendance.³ Through the relaunch of the Every Day Counts! Taskforce, the DME's team has worked to break down the silos that exist between the various sectors of DC government. The Mayor's proposed FY27 budget includes a modest cut to the Agency Management Program but preserves the same number of Full-Time Equivalent (FTEs).⁴ We urge the Committee to ensure that the proposed

budget will allow DME to continue its attendance work and, in turn, prevent regression in the District's absenteeism response.

Additionally, the Mayor's proposed Budget Support Act (BSA) includes a subtitle that would amend DC Code Title 16 to allow the Office of the Deputy Mayor to inspect juvenile case and social records "for the purposes of carrying out their official duties."⁵ Presumably, this data-sharing provision is intended to allow the DME to better understand the attendance barriers facing students involved in Family Court. However, identifying and understanding the problem is only the first step; addressing these barriers will also require investments in the programs that directly support students and families. Moreover, in the current era of federal interference in District governance, there are valid concerns about whether "official duties" envisioned by the proposed language might include sharing data with federal immigration or law enforcement entities. We support improved coordination across DC government for the purposes of improving student attendance. However, we urge the Committee to ensure the provision is carefully drafted to protect DC youth.

Preserving the DME's Capacity to Maintain Momentum in Supporting Students in the Care of the District of Columbia

We are happy to report that the SCDC Coordinating Committee has been making steady progress over the past year. The working groups have met regularly and are actively developing proposals to address the needs of DC students in care. The Coordinating Committee recently voted to approve their first report and recommendations. We hope that report will be publicly available soon. The Mayor's proposed FY27 budget makes a small reduction (-\$22,000) to the funding for SCDC but maintains a level FTE count.⁶ We are hopeful that this modest cut will not

significantly impede the work for the Coordinating Committee. We urge the Council to use today's hearing to clarify the impact of this cut. After years of delay, we are encouraged by the recent progress of the Coordinating Committee. We urge the Council to ensure that the proposed SCDC funding level is preserved and that DME sustains the long-awaited momentum on work supporting students furthest from opportunity.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony. I welcome any questions.

¹ See Government of the District of Columbia, Press Release, “As District’s Public Schools Continue to Make Progress in Achievement, Enrollment, and Teacher Retention, Mayor Bowser Announces 2.55% Increase to the UPSFF Foundation Level,” (Feb. 18, 2026), available at:

<https://mayor.dc.gov/release/districts-public-schools-continue-make-progress-achievement-enrollment-and-teacher>.

² See e.g., Judith Sandalow, Testimony before the DC Council Committee of the Whole, Public Roundtable: Student Absenteeism and Discipline (May 13, 2024), available at:

<https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/committee-of-the-whole-public-roundtable-student-absenteeism-and-discipline/>.

³ See Danielle Robinette, Testimony before the DC Council Committee of the Whole, Performance Oversight Hearing (March 5, 2025), p. 2-3, available at: <https://childrenslawcenter.org/resources/2024-2025-performance-oversight-testimony-deputy-mayor-for-education-and-the-district-of-columbia-public-charter-school-board/>.

⁴ Proposed FY 2027 Budget and Financial Plan, Volume 3, Agency Budget Chapters – Part II, Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, p. D-67.

⁵ See B26-0661, the Fiscal Year 2027 Support Act of 2026, as introduced, lines 1957-1969.

⁶ Proposed FY 2027 Budget and Financial Plan, Volume 3, Agency Budget Chapters – Part II, Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, p. D-67.