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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Education
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Public Roundtable:
The Value of Investing in Trauma-Informed Public Schools and Support Services

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Introduction

Good afternoon Councilmember Grosso and members of the Committee. My name is Judith Sandalow. I am the Executive Director of 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 meet have been traumatized, sometimes by specific incidents of abuse and other times by the cumulative impact of homelessness, neglect or community violence.

DC's education system has undergone many structural changes in the past decade and debates about how to boost student performance continue to dominate policy debates and politics in the city. Despite the modest success resulting from some of the education reforms implemented in the last decade, students in DC continue to lag behind their peers in other jurisdictions.² Most of the children we represent attend DC public and public charter schools. We 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. Education reforms in the District will not fully succeed if schools do not address the trauma that students bring with them to class. Put another way: if we fail traumatized students our schools will fail as well.

I am thankful that you, Councilmember Grosso, and the other members of the Education Committee understand the importance of addressing the impact that trauma has on children and their ability to learn. This roundtable is a necessary step forward in

the effort to make all schools trauma informed. It is important to acknowledge that there has already been significant work to bring trauma-informed practices into the DC schools. However, these efforts have not been well coordinated as part of a larger plan and sister agencies, parents and others in the community often do not know about them. Our hope is that following today's hearing the Council, the executive agencies and the community will have a better understanding of the work already being done in the District to promote trauma-informed schools and will be inspired to develop a plan to work together to bring this vital change to our schools in a well-coordinated and efficient manner.

Today, the Children's Law Center released a position paper titled *Addressing Childhood Trauma in DC Schools* that urges the District to make all DC public and public charter schools trauma sensitive. I am attaching that paper to my written testimony. Today, I will focus my comments before you on the need in DC for this change and efforts made so far.

Childhood Trauma in DC

Children in DC have a high rate of experiencing trauma. Trauma is defined as a severe emotional response to a frightening or threatening event or series of experiences that leaves a person overwhelmed and unable to cope.³ 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 experiencing homelessness or being removed repeatedly from one's parents or moved from one foster family to another.⁴

DC children are more likely to grow up in poverty, be homeless or witness violence than most children across the country. And, too many DC children lack a safe,

stable home life with the parental support that can protect against the headwinds of trauma. When children lose their parents they lose this protection and also are further traumatized. Sadly, this is the reality:

- Children in DC are at far greater risk of abuse and neglect than children in other states;⁵
- In DC, forty percent of high school students reported seeing or hearing violence and abuse during the past 12 months;⁶
- 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;⁷
- 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;⁸
- During the 2013-2014 school year, approximately 4,000 DC public school students were homeless.⁹
- 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.¹⁰

DC has Already Begun to Implement Trauma-Informed Practices

Trauma-sensitive schools can improve academics by helping children become emotionally available to learn and improving their behavior. Educators who are trauma sensitive understand that children need to feel safe in order to learn. By training educators to recognize when children are struggling with self-regulation or experiencing intense emotions, and then providing them with an array of appropriate supports and responses, educators will be better able to help traumatized children cope with a variety of behavioral responses and to focus and learn.¹¹

Several agencies, including the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), and the Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) in the District have already begun work in this area.

For example, CFSA has been implementing a trauma systems therapy model in their practice and has worked with OSSE to train over 440 DC educators using this model.¹² In 2011, DCPS began piloting two practices specifically focused on children experiencing trauma: Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) and Structured Psychotherapy for Students Responding to Chronic Stress (SPARCS). Some individual public and public charter schools also offer other programs that address childhood trauma's impact on learning.

These efforts are to be applauded. It does not appear, however, that the agencies are coordinating with each other. New initiatives are started regularly in DC and information about both new and ongoing initiatives are not easily available to the public. To reach the most children effectively, it is imperative that these programs work together and have a coordinated approach to addressing childhood trauma and its impact on learning.

Conclusion

As the District continues to find ways to narrow the education achievement gap in DC schools, it is imperative that decision-makers understand that this gap cannot be closed without comprehensive school and city-wide interventions specifically designed to address children's exposure to trauma and its impact on classrooms. Children's Law Center urges the District to embrace this important change in approach and make all public and public charter schools trauma sensitive. The attached policy paper lists a set of recommendations to achieve this goal.

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 A federal study based on the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that despite some gains, DCPS trailed behind the average for large urban districts and the national average in terms of performance on national reading and math tests. Furthermore, the achievement gap between white and African-American students in DC was the widest in the nation. Emma Brown, *Despite DC School Gains, System Trails Behind Large City Average*, Washington Post, December 18, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/despite-dc-public-school-gains-system-trails-behind-large-city-average/2013/12/18/481bb332-67e2-11e3-a0b9-249bbb34602c_story.html.

³ *Understanding Child Trauma*, The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, available at http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/policy_and_the_nctsn_final.pdf.

⁴ Kathryn Collins et. al., *Understanding the impact of trauma and urban poverty on family systems: Risks, resilience, and interventions*, Family-Informed Trauma Treatment Center (2010), available at http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/understanding_the_impact_of_trauma.pdf.

⁵ 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>.

⁶ 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.

⁷ *Domestic Violence Facts*, DC Coalition Against Domestic Violence, http://dccadv.org/img/fck/file/Resources/DCCADV_DomesticViolenceFacts_Sheet.pdf.

⁸ Bhat, *Supra* note 1.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Presentation by Yuliana Del Arroyo, OSSE, to the Mayor’s Advisory Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect (MACCAN), February 24, 2015.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Child and Family Services Agency 2014 Performance Oversight Responses, Q44.