



616 H Street, NW · Suite 300  
Washington, DC 20001  
T 202.467.4900 · F 202.467.4949  
[www.childrenslawcenter.org](http://www.childrenslawcenter.org)

**Testimony before the District of Columbia Council  
Committee on Education  
May 2, 2014**

**Agency Budget Oversight Hearing:  
Public Charter School Board &  
Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education**

**Elizabeth Tossell  
Senior Policy Attorney  
Children's Law Center**

Good morning Chairman Catania and members of the Committee. My name is Elizabeth Tossell. I am a Senior Policy Attorney at Children's Law Center<sup>1</sup> (CLC). I am testifying today on behalf of CLC, the largest non-profit legal services organization in the District and the only devoted to a full spectrum of children's issues. Last year, we provided services to more than 5,000 low-income children and families, with a focus on abused and neglected children and on those with special health and educational needs. Most of the children we represent attend DC public schools, including many at charter schools.

#### Public Charter School Board

The FY15 budget for the Public Charter School Board (PCSB) increases by \$2.5 million as a result of a proposed 0.5% increase in the administrative fee that each charter school pays to the Board. We support this increase. While it is important to make sure that as much funding as possible goes directly to schools and students, it is also important that PCSB have sufficient resources to fulfill its critical functions of authorizing, supporting, and monitoring the charter schools. PCSB has done excellent work in recent years, but the relatively small size of its staff has limited its capacity to provide in-depth monitoring and technical assistance to the over 100 charter campuses in the city.

With this additional funding, I encourage PCSB to focus on improving monitoring and technical assistance to help schools better serve students with disabilities, homeless students, and students who have experienced trauma. PCSB has made some progress in these areas, notably through the implementation of the Special Education Audit Policy, but there is still

potential for PCSB to take a greater leadership role in ensuring that all DC charter schools are prepared to serve the District's most vulnerable students.

Deputy Mayor for Education

*Reengagement Center*

The FY15 budget for the Deputy Mayor for Education includes \$372,500 and 3 additional full-time employees to support the DC Youth Reengagement Center. The Reengagement Center will focus on youth between 16 and 24 who are disconnected from school. Every week, our lawyers work with dozens of older youth in this position. These youth struggle to meet their basic needs for safe housing, food, childcare, and transportation. On top of that, they often find it difficult to reenroll in school or identify vocational training opportunities. I understand that the proposal is for the Reengagement Center to be a "one-stop shop" where youth can access services through multiple different city agencies and nonprofits. I am hopeful that the Center will be of real benefit to these youth.

However, I do have a number of questions about the proposed Center. A large proportion of the disconnected youth in DC have disabilities that impact their schooling. The staff at the Center will need training and expertise to help these youth navigate both special education and adult disability services. I am also concerned about whether the District has sufficient services for the Center staff to connect youth to. Case management will be of little value for the youth if there are not enough slots in the alternative schools, vocational programs, and other services that they need.

### *School stability for foster youth*

The Budget Support Act includes a provision, the Educational Continuity Act of 2014, allowing former DC foster children to continue at their current DC public school for up to three years after being adopted by a family in Maryland or Virginia.<sup>2</sup> Children's Law Center has advocated for this policy change for years. Currently, when DC foster children are adopted by a family out of state, the foster children lose the right to attend DC schools without paying tuition. This forces upon them a difficult and destabilizing loss. They must leave behind their teachers and their friends, and adapt to a new school and new curriculum. Rather than pulling children out of their schools, a number of adoptive families choose to delay adoptions until their children reach a natural transition point in their education. While this provides the children with educational continuity, it is not a good solution. The children must wait longer to have a permanent home and DC must pay tens of thousands of dollars per year to keep them in foster care.

The proposed BSA language solves this problem by allowing DC foster children to continue attending their DC schools for a reasonable period of time after adoption. We strongly support the intent of this proposal, and we look forward to working with the agency and the Committee to make sure that the wording is as clear as possible.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, Mr. Chairman, and I welcome any questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Children's Law Center works to give every child in the District of Columbia a solid foundation of family, health and education. We are the largest provider of free legal services in the District and the only to focus on children's comprehensive needs. Our 90-person staff partners with local pro bono attorneys to serve more than 5,000 at-risk children and their families each year. We use this expertise to advocate for changes in the District's laws, policies and programs. Learn more at [www.childrenslawcenter.org](http://www.childrenslawcenter.org).

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<sup>2</sup> Fiscal Year 2015 Budget Support Act of 2014, Title IV, Subtitle E.