



Judith Sandalow, Executive Director, Children's Law Center

Remarks for the Introduction of Comprehensive Special Education Reform

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My name is Judith Sandalow, and I am the executive director of Children's Law Center. For those of you who don't know, Children's Law Center helps thousands of the District's most vulnerable children each year, children who are abused and neglected and children who have special education and health needs.

Let me first thank Councilmember Catania for introducing this legislation – which is the most historic special education reform introduced in DC in many decades. I also want to thank the many education advocates who have joined us today and the families who have worked for so long to improve special education in DC. And, I want to acknowledge the hard work of DC's teachers, principals, and agency leaders.

Children's Law Center strongly supports this historic legislation because we know it will make life-altering improvements for thousands of children across the District.

We have worked closely with Councilmember Catania, his staff and many of you over the past few months to develop the recommendations that informed this legislation. It reflects:

- The wisdom my colleagues have gained from helping more than 20,000 DC children over the past 17 years;
- The ideas elicited during interviews with more than 40 of the District's education advocates;
- Best practices from around the country; and
- The lessons learned from years of ongoing close collaboration between Children's Law Center and all of the District's education agencies.

This legislation is urgently needed. Every week our lawyers get dozens of calls from parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles who are struggling to understand why a school can't do more to help their child learn.

Take Ms. Quattlebaum (who has joined us here today). She called our helpline about her great-nephew, Kavon, who had made it to seventh grade without learning to read and even had difficulty talking. His DCPS middle school seemed to have given up on him. They refused to let

Ms. Quattlebaum send an education expert into his classroom to help her figure out why he wasn't making progress.

Or take Ms. Washington (also here with us today). Her 4-year-old daughter Journey was diagnosed with a chronic brain disorder. Even though it was clear that Journey should be evaluated for special services, the charter school ignored her mother's requests for help. Instead of helping, her school told Ms. Washington that she should transfer Journey to another school if she felt they weren't meeting her needs.

These are just two examples of many serious problems we've seen. In short, what we've learned from our clients' experiences is that the District begins special education interventions too late in a child's life, there is too little information given to parents about their children's education, and that quality services are far too limited.

Because our special education system is too late, too little, and too limited – the end result is that too many children with special needs are simply not learning. Last year, only one in four special education students tested proficient in math and only one in five was proficient in reading. The impact of this low achievement is that too many special education students graduate without the basic skills they need to support themselves and far too many do not graduate at all.

So how can we make progress? Councilmember Catania has introduced this important legislation to remove the biggest legal barriers that children with special needs face in getting a quality education.

There are three bills being introduced together this morning. Each one includes important reforms to address the challenges I noted a moment ago.

The *Enhanced Special Education Services Act* makes sure that children get services earlier, when they are most effective. The bill:

- Introduces a shorter timeframe for schools to start providing needed services, bringing DC in line with the majority of other states by requiring schools to complete evaluations in 60 days rather than the current 120 days;
- Expands eligibility for early intervention, catching us up to the many other states that provide services to infants and toddlers who have a 25% delay in one area of development;
- Requires schools to start transition planning for students with disabilities at 14, rather than the current 16, which is often too late; and
- Requires schools to make sure that high school students have all the evaluations done that they need to access adult disability services.

The *Special Education Student Rights Act of 2014* makes sure that parents have the information they need to make good decisions for their children. The bill:

- Guarantees that parents can observe their children in class.
- Guarantees that parents can bring in translators, therapists, and other experts to observe their child in class when the parent needs their help understanding what's going on in the classroom
- Ensures that parents receive copies of evaluations and other materials a week in advance of meetings to discuss them, so they have time to review before the meeting.
- Ensures that parents receive copies of final IEPs within a week after IEP meetings.
- Ensures that schools tell parents what specific school location they are assigning their child to.
- Ensures that parents are told how to contact the Ombudsman and Student Advocate if they have any concerns.

The *Special Education Quality Improvement Act of 2014* provides a framework to create more and better special education services. The bill:

- Allows charter schools to give an admissions preference to students with particular types of disabilities, ensuring that when charter schools invest in high-quality special education services they will be able to enroll the students who would benefit from those services;
- Requires all charter schools, whether or not they provide an admission preference, to take full responsibility for educating students with disabilities;
- Makes it realistic for charter schools to take on that responsibility by establishing a dedicated fund expand the capacity of all public schools to educate children with complex disabilities; and
- Through that fund, provides support to both charter schools and DCPS schools to develop innovative partnerships between public schools or with nonpublics to improve teacher training, service delivery, and before and after care for students with disabilities. Finally, ensures that schools that enroll students with high needs after the Child Count deadline have the funding they need to provide them a quality education.

Taken together, these bills will reshape the landscape of special education in DC. By ensuring that students receive services when they will have the most impact, parents are full partners in their children's education, and schools offer high-quality special education instruction, these bills will transform special education from a pipeline to underemployment and underperformance to a path to success and independence.

We have waited for decades for special education reform— decades during which children have grown up and left school without the skills to support themselves. The time is overdue for the District’s children and families to get the quality education they deserve.

Thank you again Councilman Catania for introducing this urgently needed reform and for your tireless advocacy on behalf of the District’s children.