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Testimony Before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Education
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Public Hearing:
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Youth Bullying Prevention Task Force

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Introduction

Good afternoon Chairman Grosso and members of the Committee on Education. My name is Michael Villafranca. I am a Policy Analyst at 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 more than 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, Children's Law Center reaches 1 out of every 9 children in DC's poorest neighborhoods – more than 5,000 children and families each year. Nearly all the children we represent attend public schools in DC.

I appreciate this opportunity to testify regarding the District's Citywide Youth Bullying Prevention Task Force over this past year (Task Force). Since the creation of the program several years ago,² Children's Law Center has engaged with its important work, and our experiences have been consistently positive, despite the small staff for the program and the magnitude of the task. Through the work of the Citywide Youth Bullying Prevention Program Director, Suzanne Greenfield, almost all public schools have compliant bullying prevention policies.³ However, the challenge of addressing bullying is more complicated than just having policies that are compliant with the law. We know from research that one of the best ways to prevent bullying is to address school climate issues, which is why we continue to be engaged with the program's school climate improvement work.

SAFE SCHOOL CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

Positive school climate is associated with academic achievement, school success, effective violence prevention, student's healthy development, and teacher retention.⁴ In September 2015, the District was awarded a \$3.8 million federal grant to focus on school climate and violence prevention through implementation of the evidence-based Safe School Certification Program (SSCP), through the work of the Task Force, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), and Child Trends.⁵ The three-year model of the program aims to help schools understand what is and is not working in their current programming and how to shift their focus to better address the needs of their communities. The Citywide Youth Bullying Prevention Program successfully recruited 30 middle and high schools to join and receive technical assistance on both implementing the SSCP and data collection and interpretation. The focus on middle and high schools is important because of serious school climate-related concerns in those grade levels.⁶ For example, in 2017, 27.2% of male and 37.6% of female middle school students reported being bullied on school property.⁷

Additionally, the federal grant provides funding for schools to enhance their current programming or implement new evidence-based programs that respond to their needs.⁸ For example, some schools are utilizing restorative practices to help strengthen students' ability to positively contribute to a positive school culture.⁹ We are concerned to see that nearly half of the schools in the program, which included both

DCPS and PCS schools, have discontinued participation in the project since its start.¹⁰ Just this school year, nine schools dropped out.¹¹ It is discouraging to see many schools turning away a critical source of funding and support that they could use to help improve their school climates, especially given the high level of school climate needs. If schools do not use the funds, the District will have to return the money to the federal government and students will not benefit.

BULLYING & STUDENT DISCIPLINE

I will focus the remainder of my testimony today on the use of exclusionary discipline in response to bullying.¹² It is pertinent to the *Student Fair Access to School Act of 2017*, about which this Committee recently held a hearing.¹³ As we testified during last year's oversight hearing on Bullying Prevention, excluding children who bully is not effective. We are concerned that schools continue to rely on suspensions despite the evidence and despite the fact that many children who bully are victims of bullying themselves, warranting a teaching approach.

Bullying is a complex issue and does not respond well to exclusion. In fact, years of research has shown that exclusionary discipline practices are not effective at reducing or preventing bullying.¹⁴ Despite this, the majority of disciplinary measures used by public DC schools to respond to bullying incidents are exclusionary.¹⁵ In school year 2015-2016, 93 schools reported bullying-related discipline. Of those 93 schools, 68% reported using exclusionary discipline more than any other form of discipline or

consequence. The current approach is not deterring or reducing bullying experienced by District children and youth. Data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) reports show that despite schools' use of exclusionary discipline to curb bullying behavior, the level of bullying in our schools remains unchanged.¹⁶

Additionally, data from these reports supports something else we know to be true, both anecdotally and from research—children who bully others are often victims of bullying themselves. For example, the 2017 YRBS report released by OSSE on Tuesday, shows that “high school students who report having been bullied during the prior 12 months were 7.8 times more likely to report having ever bullied someone else on school property during the same 12 months compared to students who did not report being bullied”¹⁷—an increase from 2015 when it was 6.5 times more likely.¹⁸ When victims of bullying are not taught skills and given new tools, they sometimes cope by repeating bullying behaviors, which means we need a fundamentally different response than suspending.

We need to fundamentally look at the issues of bullying and discipline in a different way. The incidents need to be seen less as infractions to be punished and more as opportunities for teaching and problems to be solved for both the victim and the child seen in that particular incident as the bully. This is why Children's Law Center continues to support the *Student Fair Access to School Act*.¹⁹ However, in addition to passing the bill, we continue to urge the Council to invest the resources schools need

to make bullying prevention policies and positive discipline policies an active part of their school culture.

CONCLUSION

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 advocate 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 more than 100 staff and hundreds of pro bono lawyers, we reach 1 out of every 9 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 See the *Youth Bullying Prevention Act of 2012*, DC Law L19-167.

³ Bullying Prevention Task Force FY17 Performance Oversight Responses, Q4e.

⁴ Cohen, J. McCabe, E. M., Michelli, N., & Pickeral, T. (2009). *School Climate: Research, Policy, Practice, and Teacher Education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Record Vol. 111, No 1.

⁵ Bullying Prevention Task Force FY16 Performance Oversight Responses, Q19.

⁶ For example, about a third (67.8%) of middle school students and a third (65.2%) of high school students do not report having at least one teacher or other adult in their school that they can talk to if they have a problem. See OSSE 2017 *Youth Risk Behavior Survey Results Summary Tables* for middle school (p. 50) https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/2017%20DC%20Middle%20School%20Summary%20Tables.pdf and for high school (p. 104) <https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2017%20DC%20High%20School%20Summary%20Tables.pdf>. Another example can be found in the bullying data found in Note 16.

⁷ See OSSE (February 2018). *2017 District of Columbia Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, p. 42. Retrieved from <https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2017%20YRBS%20Report.pdf>.

⁸ Bullying Prevention Task Force FY17 Performance Oversight Responses, Q2c.

⁹ OSSE FY17 Performance Oversight Responses, Q38-39.

¹⁰ At the start, 30 cross-sector schools were slated to participate in the pilot. See Bullying Prevention Task Force FY16 Performance Oversight Responses, Q2; now, there are only 18 schools currently in the project. See Bullying Prevention Task Force FY17 Performance Oversight Responses, Q16f.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² See Children’s Law Center testimony (February 28, 2017) from the 2017 Performance Oversight Hearing on the Bullying Prevention Task Force, at <http://www.childrenslawcenter.org/testimony/testimony-bullying-prevention-task-force-2017-oversight>

¹³ B22-594, the “Student Fair Access to School Act” found here: <http://lims.dccouncil.us/Legislation/B22-0594?FromSearchResults=true>

¹⁴ National Academy of Sciences (2016). *Preventing Bullying Through Science, Policy, and Practice*. The National Academies Press: Washington, DC. Retrieved from <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/23482/preventing-bullying-through-science-policy-and-practice>

¹⁵ In school year 2015-2016, 93 schools reported bullying-related discipline. Of those 93 schools, 68% reported using exclusionary discipline more than any other form of discipline or consequence. See Office

of Human Rights & Child Trends (January 12, 2017). *Youth Bullying Prevention in the District of Columbia: School Year 2015-2016 Report*, p. 6.

¹⁶ In 2015, 26.8% male/35.0% female middle school students and 10.8% male/13.1% female high school students reported being bullied on school property, while 8.6% male/16.5% female middle school students and 6.2% male/9.2% female high school students reported being electronically bullied. See OSSE (April 2017). *2015 District of Columbia Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, p. 42. Retrieved from <https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2015%20YRBS%20Report.pdf>.

In 2017, 27.2% male/37.6% female middle school students and 10.9% male/11.8% female high school students reported being bullied on school property, while 9.1% male/17.8% female middle school students and 7.4% male/9.8% female high school students reported being electronically bullied. See OSSE (February 2018). *2017 District of Columbia Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, p. 42. Retrieved from <https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/2017%20YRBS%20Report.pdf>.

¹⁷ OSSE (February 2018). *2017 District of Columbia Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, p. 43.

¹⁸ OSSE (April 2017). *2015 District of Columbia Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, p. 43.

¹⁹ See Children's Law Center testimony (January 30, 2018) from the public hearing on B22-594, the "Student Fair Access to School Act of 2017" and B22-179, the "D.C. Public Schools Alternatives to Suspension Amendment Act of 2017" at <http://www.childrenslawcenter.org/testimony/student-fair-access-school-act-2017-testimony>.