

**Testimony before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Education
February 12, 2018**

**Hearing on B22-594 “Student Fair Access to School Act of 2017” and B22-197 “D.C. Public
Schools Alternatives to Suspension Amendment Act of 2017”**

Anonymous, Parent of a DC Student

Council of the District of Columbia
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Ave, NW
Washington, D.C. 20004

Re: Bill 22-594, the “Student Fair Access to School Act of 2017”

Dear Chairperson Grosso and Members of the Committee on Education:

I am the parent of a middle school student who attends a DC public school. I am writing this letter anonymously because I am genuinely worried that my child’s school may retaliate against my child for the critique that I will give in this letter and my child has already been through too much.

My daughter’s grandmother passed away from an overdose. After that happened, she was frequently suspended from her elementary school for “acting out” or “being disruptive.” I begged the school to do an assessment for my daughter, because it seemed like she was having a mental health challenge. Once we finally got an assessment done, we found out that my daughter has three mental health disorders: one that makes it hard for her to regulate her emotions, another that makes it hard for her to pay attention, and one that puts her mind and body into flight mode. I educated myself on her needs and made sure that my daughter was connected to a psychiatrist and a counselor.

As my daughter transitioned to middle school, I really hoped that she would have a better experience in school. I worked with her middle school to make sure that it had a plan for how to respond to my daughter’s dysregulated episodes. One day, my daughter had a conflict with a peer, but instead of following the plan, the school sent her to in school suspension without notifying me or her school counselor. Then at the end of the day, the conflict continued and now my daughter has been suspended for more than 2 weeks.

My daughter is starting to question her self-esteem because suspensions are telling her that the school does not want to be bothered by children with mental health issues. Just last week, my daughter told me, “I must just be a bad child” because she gets suspended and can’t control her emotions.

I believe that suspensions are a set up for failure. In my daughter’s case, she has been sent to another school for an extensive time period and I worry that she will not have the same emotional and relationship supports that she is used to. I am worried that this new school will not be able to see my daughter’s behaviors as a result of emotional distress and that they will assume that my daughter is a “problem child” because of her previous school’s failure to respond to her needs in a trauma-informed way. If this bill gets passed then I think schools will start to see that they do not have the staff they need to be able to have trauma-informed responses to problematic behaviors. I hope that this bill will inspire schools to put more mental health staff in schools and to provide staff with an in-depth training on how to de-escalate situations.

Throughout my daughter's education, I have seen schools pick and choose when they follow procedures and that is another reason I support this bill. This bill will make schools create clear discipline procedures with input from the community. I think this will help students have a more fair experience in school and help relationships between schools and communities. The bill could be improved by requiring schools to have afterschool programming that teaches conflict resolution skills and helps build positive relationships between the students.

The consequences of suspensions have been very harmful for me and my whole family. The school was marking my daughter absent when she is suspended and the accumulation of those "absences" could trigger Child Protective Services to investigate whether I have been neglecting my daughter's education. This possibility is very stressful, especially because the school has already misreported my daughter's absences to a truancy support organization. Most importantly, the suspension are hurting my daughter. My daughter was home with me for over a week before she could start at a new school and the middle school did not provided her any access to education during that time. She fell behind and it was not her fault.

Too many schools are using suspensions to casting off the children they see as problems. Schools may not realize it but by suspending students for non-violent behaviors, they are teaching students to ignore the issues that underlie the problematic behavior. Schools should be teaching students to deal with the real issues, but first they need to lead by example.

Sincerely,

A Concerned Parent of a DC Student