

**Testimony before the District of Columbia Council
Committee on Education
January 30, 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”**

Maria Morales, Ward 8 Parent

Maria Morales – Ward 8 Resident
Hearing: Student Fair Access to School Act
Written Testimony completed January 25, 2018

My name is Maria Morales, I'm a resident of Ward 8, and I'm submitting this written testimony with the help of an interpreter because my first language is Spanish. I am too nervous to testify in person, but I think this law is very important and I want to explain to the Council why I am in strong support of it.

I am a single mom with three children. My son, Daniel, who is my youngest, is an honor roll student and I'm so proud of him. My oldest children are identical twin girls, Johanna and Jasmin, and they are in 9th grade. I'm very proud of them too, but they've had a much harder time in school. This is because they have serious disabilities and they spent a long time in a school that would not meet their needs. That school was Cardozo Education Campus.

Jasmin and Johanna both have a chromosome mutation called Prader Willi Syndrome. As a result, they are intellectually disabled and function at about the level of a pre-schooler. They do not speak more than a handful of words and vocalizations. But they are very active, joyful children who love to play with others, give and receive affection, color, and lots of other things typical for young children to enjoy.

They have behaviors that are normal for three and four year old kids. Like toddlers who can't yet fully express themselves, Jasmin and Johanna sometimes become very frustrated when they can't communicate their wants and needs. They tantrum. They also push boundaries and rules. They say "no." But they're never violent or dangerous.

For all of middle school, Jasmin and Johanna attended Cardozo Education Campus. They were in a full-time special classroom there for children with intellectual disability. But even in that specialized classroom, DCPS did very little to work to understand my girls' disabilities, and they turned to punishment and suspension instead. During their three years at Cardozo, I was called to come pick them up from school almost weekly, sometimes two or three times in one week.

This was awful for me because I couldn't afford to live near Cardozo, where DCPS placed my girls (I didn't have a choice in this). Our home is in Southeast DC. It takes me three buses and almost 1.5 hours without traffic to get to that school. If I told the school I couldn't come get them, they would threaten to call Child Protective Services if I wasn't there in an hour. They followed through with that threat a few times, so I would spend \$25 we really could not afford to take a taxi to the school because I was so afraid of the government investigating my family again. For each of those investigations that happened, the social worker said the school shouldn't have made the report, that there was no case, but that they are required to do an investigation anyway. Bringing both girls home on the city buses by myself was so hard because of their disabilities and because both of them are bigger than me.

To make matters worse, almost all of these calls home happened without a translator on the phone, so I couldn't really advocate for myself or for my girls. I felt powerless and I felt like I was being punished. I couldn't keep a job. It was truly a nightmare and I would panic and feel dread every time I saw that the school was calling.

Another issue is the school never recorded these early pick-ups as suspensions. A lot of times they didn't even record multiple-day suspensions as suspensions in their books, I found out later.

Here are some examples of the suspensions my girls received while at Cardozo:

- When Jasmin was in 7th grade she was suspended for 5 days for drawing on the classroom wall with crayons.

- Jasmin and Johanna both received multiple day suspensions on multiple occasions for leaving the classroom and running down the hallway (without trying to leave the school).
- Johanna was suspended for two days for standing still and ignoring her teacher who had asked her to do something.
- Many of my calls to come pick them up and bring them home for the rest of the school day were for disobedience.
- For fighting with each other in the way siblings do.
- For having tantrums—laying on the floor, crying and screaming.
- This wasn't a suspension, but it shows how little they were willing to do for my girls: One day they called and asked me to come pick up Jasmin early from school because she had soiled her pants even though they had a change of clothes there for her. The school nurse refused to help clean her up, saying it wasn't her job. So she sat in soiled pants for several hours.

As I said before, these are just a few examples of dozens upon dozens of suspensions. Of course, my girls could not understand why they were being sent home. If Johanna was suspended, she would cry and cry when Jasmin left in the morning to get on the bus. I couldn't make her understand why she wasn't allowed to go to school with her sister. The same would happen if Jasmin was suspended. It was cruel.

So I decided to change my girls' school. They now go to St. Coletta's, which is a public charter school just for children with intellectual disabilities. I didn't want my girls to be at a school only for children with disabilities. I don't think this is the best environment for them because it's not the way the real world is—when they're older they won't only be around children with disabilities like them. But this school is doing so much more to understand my girls' needs and to teach them useful skills. And, most importantly, they don't suspend them. They understand that suspension is not the way to change their behavior.

Changing this law will give parents like me a little bit more power to stand up to the schools and say "this isn't right." It will force schools to do the work they should already be doing—figuring out what each child needs to be successful in whatever type of program they are in. It will be better for families too. Please vote in support of the Student Fair Access to School Act.