

**Education Public Hearing on B22-0594 - Student Fair Access to School Act of 2017 & B-22 - D.C. Public Schools Alternatives to Suspension Amendment Act of 2017**

**Testimony from:  
Jamila Larson, LICSW, Executive Director  
Homeless Children's Playtime Project  
January 30, 2018**

I come before you today - as a former school social worker in a DC Public Elementary School - where for five years, I witnessed firsthand the adult-centered reliance on school suspensions that solves nothing and devastates a child's right to a public education. I come to you as the founder and Executive Director of the Homeless Children's Playtime Project where every year, I see many of our children, already suffering from the trauma and stress of family homelessness, being pushed out of school, a place that should be an oasis of consistency and stability in their lives.

If you ask anybody in this room, whether we should do all that we can to dismantle the "Cradle to Prison Pipeline," everybody would agree.

And yet opponents of this bill, in essence, prioritize an adults' right to ban children from the classroom over a child's right to learn and get help from whatever is causing them to "act out" in the first place. Calls for "flexibility" and school "autonomy" favor the convenience and comfort of adults over uncovering and meeting the needs of children, which should always be our priority.

The other day, I consulted a former student, now a 19-year-old young woman, who I worked closely with since she first started getting in trouble as a first grader. When I asked what she recalls about one of those incidents, she replied, "I've been suspended so many times, I don't remember."

What did that feel like as a child, how did that pattern effect her? She explained:

"I felt like I was just being dismissed. It started to seem like the more I got suspended, the easier it was for them to suspend me. For example, I would have to get in a big fight for them to suspend me the first few times and then after that, I would be suspended for talking back, walking out of class, things that other kids would maybe just get a privilege taken away for. When you get that reputation as a 'trouble maker' or a 'bad child,' there's really no escaping it, especially at that same school; they even tell the new teacher about you, I guess to 'warn' them."

I remember this same little girl would reflexively punch a kid who might accidentally step on the back of her shoe; she would yell and talk back to anyone who she felt got in her face, adults and students alike. She was lazily diagnosed with ADHD and ODD; her mom was maligned for refusing to medicate her, and she continued to get suspended throughout elementary school until she was put out of the school. The teachers didn't know about her being a sexual assault victim when she was a kindergartener; this type of confidential information they would not typically be privy to. They didn't know her thoughts were preoccupied by whether she contracted AIDS from the teenagers who gang-raped her, whether she would ever see her dad who was back in jail, or whether that bullet that came through her kitchen window was intended for her or not. They didn't know any of that. We rarely know the origins of our children's behavior; we just see, and address, the symptoms. Being trauma-informed means you assume the population you serve has experienced trauma. And so you

put policies in place that are trauma-informed, like "leaning in" to help, rather than "pushing out" to suspend.

Next, this student's mother moved her into a fancy, award-winning public charter school, the kind that books are written about. There, she was suspended for talking too much. It was against the student code of conduct. I accompanied mother and daughter to the required parent-teacher conference and watched her being lectured for not fitting into their mold. Neither mother nor child felt comfortable revealing her history of trauma; it's not something most of us would want our teachers to know about us, or define us by. She got the message loud and clear she was not welcome there. She was not that school's material. Shape up or ship out. So, she got the message and drifted through her low-performing neighborhood middle and high schools.

The last day she set foot in a DC Public School was at the age of 14. She was expelled for getting into an altercation with a security guard, who she probably felt was in her personal space. Weeks turned into months, and while she waited to be assigned an alternative school, she drifted. Drifted from her home at the D.C. General Emergency Family Shelter into the arms of a female pimp who promised her a modeling career. She ended up in Los Angeles, a suspected victim of child sex trafficking, while her hometown didn't know or care she was missing. How would her story be different if her many schools had not pushed her out, but instead, pulled her close?

We need this bill because school push-out has a disproportionate impact on students of color, victims of trauma, and special education students. We know, for example, that:

- Students with disabilities are suspended twice as often as students without disabilities
- Ten percent of black students in D.C. were suspended last year, and .5% of white students.
- Suspending children for behavior related to their disability is allowed under current law for a staggering TEN DAYS. Imagine if this was your child, who already has just a 6% likelihood of being proficient in English and 7% in Math. How is sitting at home for ten days going to solve anything? How is punishing the student or the parent an effective intervention?
- Youth who are suspended are 3 times more likely to come in contact with the juvenile justice system the following year. Suspensions are one of the hallmarks of the cradle-to-prison pipeline. Anyone fighting to protect a school's right to suspend for anything but the most violent behaviors needs to ask themselves how serious they are about dismantling the pipeline.

Commitments to reducing suspensions that some schools are making on their own are certainly a step in the right direction. More innovative schools across the country are developing restorative justice programs and approaching behavior as a cry for help worthy of intervention. But a student's right to a public education should not be at the whim of whatever school they attend. Right now, the only way to all but guarantee your child won't be suspended is to pay money...to send them to private school. If we truly believe that a public education is a right that should be afforded to all, that's what this bill helps ensure.

I call on all council members to prioritize the voices of students when considering this legislation and help preserve the right to an education for ALL children, especially those who need our help.