

**TESTIMONY OF TAREK F. MAASSARANI,
REPRESENTING RESTORATIVE DC, A PROJECT OF SCHOOLTALK**

**FOR THE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
PUBLIC HEARING**

on

B22-0594 - STUDENT FAIR ACCESS TO SCHOOL ACT OF 2017

and

**B22-0179 - D.C. PUBLIC SCHOOLS ALTERNATIVES TO SUSPENSION
AMENDMENT ACT OF 2017**

on

TUESDAY, JANUARY 30, 2018

10:00 A.M., HEARING ROOM 500, JOHN A. WILSON BUILDING

1350 PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE, NW

WASHINGTON, DC 20004

Esteemed Council members,

My name is Tarek Maassarani. serving Restorative DC, a project that encompasses the Restorative Justice efforts of our school partners, local practitioners, OSSE, DCPS, the Office of Attorney General, and other community organizations and agencies as coordinated by the non-profit SchoolTalk.

I thank Councilmembers David Grosso and Trayon White for seeing and responding to what many of us plainly describe as a crisis. Without you, we would not be here today.

Much of what you have heard and will continue to hear today sharpens our picture of the crisis. Through personal stories, research, social-psychology, and statistics, we come to grasp the tens of thousands of days of instructional time that are lost every year and how profound the social, economic, and social impacts on our students, families, and community.

We learn how the harmful behavior triggering these suspensions is rarely arbitrary or rationally intentional, rather the expression of basic human needs through the filters of limited social-emotional capacity and adverse experiences, which are themselves linked to systemic issues of poverty, racism, and marginalization.

We must acknowledge the stresses and limitations of the adults issuing these suspensions, factors that make them susceptible to implicit bias and drive the disproportionate impacts on our most vulnerable social groups.

The crisis of over-exclusion calls for action. The Student Fair Access to School Act places what justified limits on the use of suspensions and the Alternatives to Suspension Amendment Act seeks transparency and thoughtfulness in applying suspensions. Both encourage the use of non-exclusionary approaches such as Restorative Justice practices and neither provide for the resources to implement such alternatives. I am here to convey a deeper understanding of Restorative Justice.

Restorative Justice is a philosophy, and related set of dialogue-based practices that center a community around shared power, equitable and inclusive relationships, and accountability for harm. It reflects indigenous ways of living in right relationship with one another, including traditions of storytelling in circle and re-integration of those who have harmed other members of the community. Restorative Justice is emerging as a national and international movement to transform communities at various levels, from individual families and schools to larger structures of power and systems of oppression.

Restorative DC supports schools in taking a whole-school restorative approach. What does it look like? A student who walk into the classroom on edge from a stressful home situation the night before is offered the space to express their emotions and hear of others' personal lives before being asked to do math. Similarly, staff circles provide adults with time to share, grieve, and laugh with peers. Both students and staff leave the school with a strengthened sense of belonging to a caring community.

A teacher who struggle to manage their classroom with the disregulated outbursts of a few students has the training and support to understand root causes of the behavior and shift their own orientation in the moment to one of calm compassionate curiosity. As a result, they engage the unfocused students in intentional conversations and reach agreements that honor everyone's needs - in the process modeling and building key social emotional awareness and skills in the whole class.

A dean receives a referral for a student that stole another's cell phone or cursed at a teacher. The dean brings those directly involved and affected together for a dialogue in which everyone shares what happened, how they have been affected, and what is needed to repair the harm and prevent it from happening again. Over time, the conversation shifts from blame and defensiveness to empathy and acknowledgment, ending with a consensus agreement for how to move forward. Everyone involved leaves more connected to each other and the school. The incident never happens again.

Creating a restorative school culture where such interactions are the norm takes three to five years of committed investment and hard work. Currently one of the most critical challenges to the durable integration of Restorative Justice in the District is the shortage of adequate funding, staffing, and technical guidance for schools to develop their own independent and self-sustaining capacity. While the legislation in question limits the use of suspension, more is needed to empower alternative and preventative measures - otherwise our schools are left unequipped to deal with a concentration of challenging behavior and a suspension crisis will simply turn into another kind of crisis.

Further, Restorative Justice is just a piece of a larger policy-making puzzle. It needs to be complemented by equitable social and mental health services and community-based economic upliftment programs in order to begin addressing systemic root causes.

Tarek Maassarani may be reached at tarek@schooltalkdc.org or 202-374-0369.