

**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”**

**Sabrina Bishop
DCPS Parent**

Sabrina Bishop – Ward 7 Community Member Testimony
Student Fair Access to School Act
January 30, 2018

Good Morning. My name is Sabrina Bishop and I'm here today to testify in support of my ten year old son, Almard. I feel very strongly that our city needs a law like the Student Fair Access to School Act to protect children like Almard, who has been harmed so much in his young life by DCPS's suspension practices.

Almard has been at CW Harris, a DCPS school, since pre-K. He's in 4th grade now. Almard should be in 5th grade, but he was retained back when he was kindergarten. The school should have seen then that he had a learning disability and needed extra support. I saw him suffering and struggling and I saw him start to act out because of it. He wasn't easy—he'd yell and leave the class and do whatever he could to distract people from the fact that he couldn't do his work. I talked to the school about this and told them he needed extra help. But they wouldn't listen to me. By the time Almard was in 1st grade, the school was using suspensions all the time as their way of dealing with my child.

Of course, being suspended out of school, missing so many days, and not learning just made the root problem worse. In the first grade, when Almard was at his most impressionable stage, he was supposed to be learning the AEIOUs and sometimes Ys. "Aah" is for "apple." His basic numbers. But Almard missed those lessons. Kids that age are soaking up everything so quickly. If he was out of school for just a few days, his class was already on to the next lesson and teachers didn't have time to help him catch up with what he missed—they have too many students. My son just got lost and fell further and further behind.

Kids are tough, too. No little kid wants to be embarrassed in front of 15 other students. They'd see that he couldn't keep up and they'd clown him. Then Almard would get into more trouble by reacting. He got so used to being suspended that he started doing things just to get in trouble so he could avoid the embarrassment of not knowing how to do his work. If he had a quiz or a test coming up, I could guarantee he'd be suspended and home with me for a few days. I kept telling the school that they needed to stop focusing so much on punishment and focus more on what's causing his behaviors—which is that he doesn't understand any of the work they're trying to get him to do. After two years of asking the school, they finally evaluated him and gave him a special education plan. But even then they didn't stop with the suspensions until I got a lawyer right before Almard started 3rd grade.

That was a real turning point for me. Almard had one teacher who went above and beyond. She took me aside one day at the end of second grade and told me that what they were doing to my son wasn't right. She gave me the information to call Children's Law Center. When I started working with my lawyer I got this overwhelming feeling of happiness because I could finally start taking a stand.

The school was scared of my lawyer, so not only did they give Alnard a lot more academic supports, but the suspensions pretty much stopped. Since then, his reading levels have improved so much. It's the first time I've seen him actually be *excited* to learn. I get tears of joy when he comes home from school now and wants to talk to me about all the new things he learned that day. I'm happy not only because he's learning something, but he's *really* trying. He knows now that he can't just run away when he doesn't understand something. And the school can't run away from him either. They have had to learn to work with each other.

I truly believe if I hadn't gotten my lawyer, my child would be on track to drop out and would be just another statistic on DC's streets. I didn't want to create another black child that's going to get lost, dead, or in jail because he dropped out, doesn't have common sense, isn't educated, and who feels like other people don't care about him. Well he has a parent who cares and thank God I found a way to have a little bit of a voice.

It really shouldn't take a lawyer to give a loving parent a voice in a public school, but that's where things are right now. If CW Harris didn't have the opportunity to suspend Alnard in the first place, maybe my son and I wouldn't have had to go through all this. Missing those precious years will probably impact Alnard for a very very long time—he can't get those years back.

I'm hoping this Council will see that this law might save other children and families from my son's experience.