

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”

Sherina Davis
Ward 6 Parent

A Mom's Testimony in Support of Eliminating Suspensions
Sherina Davis, Ward 6 Resident
1/30/2018

Good afternoon. My name is Sherina Davis, I am a Ward 6 resident, working single mom to seven children, three of which are still school age. I'm here to say that I am in strong support of the Student Fair Access to School Act, and any other laws that will make it harder for schools to suspend students.

I want to tell you about my experience with my son Emmanuel, who has ADHD and a learning disability in reading. Emmanuel is now in 5th grade and he's doing pretty well now. But when Emmanuel was in kindergarten and first grade, he was attending Walker Jones, a DC public School. While he was there, Emmanuel was getting suspensions all the time, mostly "unofficial" suspensions which the school didn't mark down as suspensions.

Not long after he started at Walker Jones, I'd get calls what felt like every week, sometimes more, to come pick him up in the middle of the school day. He was a small child—he wasn't a danger to people at the school, but they'd send him home for things like throwing tantrums, leaving his classroom, yelling, and just generally being hard to deal with. Sometimes, they'd have me pick him up on a Thursday in the middle of the day then tell me he couldn't come back to school until Monday. Most of the time, they didn't record these middle of the day "pick-ups" as suspensions.

When they called, I'd tell them I can't come get Emmanuel because I'm at work. I had a really good job then. I'd been working for this company for four years, and I was up to making \$16/hour. But the people at the school told me I didn't have a choice and had to come get him. If we had this type of law then, I could have said to them "you're not allowed to send my child home for these kinds of things," and I'd feel empowered to do that. But without this law, the school held their power over my head and said "if you're not here in an hour we will call Child Protective Services." After my boss started getting angry about me having to leave work in the middle of the day with no notice, I would beg them and say "please I'm going to lose my job." But they didn't care.

I lost my job because of those suspensions. You can only imagine how hard that was for me and my family. It took me a really long time—almost a year—to get another job and the best one I could get only paid \$14/hour. Eventually I lost that job too for the same reasons. My current job only pays \$12/hour.

So back when Emmanuel was going in to second grade, I hoped moving Emmanuel to a public charter school would help. I knew I just had to get him out of Walker Jones. But we had the same problems at his new school too. After two years there, I moved Emmanuel again and now he's in a public charter school that doesn't really suspend kids. It's not the best school, and academically it wouldn't be my first choice, but at least I have job security and can provide for my family.

What Emmanuel needed at these schools was staff with good training who didn't just see Emmanuel as a problem they wanted to get out of their sight.

I see this law as being positive for so many reasons. Schools will be forced to figure out how to work with children like Emmanuel, who may not be the easiest of kids, but who still deserve love and a good education. It will help kids' self-esteem because they won't feel like they're just problems to be gotten rid of. It will keep kids learning and engaged instead of out of school with nothing to do. Especially younger kids—after a few hours they don't even understand why they're not in school, so it feels like more of a punishment for the parent than for the child. Or, let's be honest, a break for the teachers. Those teachers need more supports and more resources inside of the school. I think this law will force schools to take a hard look inside themselves and figure out ways to improve things. Without this law, I just know that no matter what the schools say who are here today testifying, there are a lot of them that just won't change things at all. This is too important to just leave it up to schools to do themselves.

Thank you for your time.