



Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.

The Parent Training and Information Center for the District of Columbia

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Good morning. Thank you Chairperson Mendelson, and members of the Committee of the Whole for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Amelia French, and I am the Director of Advocacy at Advocates for Justice and Education (AJE). I am a proud parent of a high schooler and middle schooler in a public charter school in DC. I am also a third generation Washingtonian and Ward 5 resident. Today I am testifying on behalf of AJE on the interest of parents who have children with disabilities and special health care needs in public charter schools in DC.

AJE is the federally designated Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) and Family-to-Family Health Information Center for the District of Columbia. Every year we equip hundreds of families and professionals who serve them to be effective advocates to ensure that children and youth, particularly those with disabilities and special health care needs, receive access to appropriate education and health services. In addition to supporting families through direct services and training, we support families through advocacy programs.

Today, I am testifying about our findings from one of AJE's advocacy programs - Parents Building Bridges.

Through our Parents Building Bridges Program launched last year, we work with and train families at the individual school level to collectively address, in collaboration with school staff, issues and concerns regarding the delivery of special education and related services. The goal is to improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities. Over the last school year, we worked with 12 families from two charter schools and have been welcomed this school year by administrators of two additional charter schools to implement Parents Building Bridges at their school.¹

¹ We also began implementing our program at one DCPS elementary school last school year. To date we have trained cohorts of parents at 3 different schools on effective communication with school leaders, the special education process, dispute resolution, and collaborative partnerships between parents and schools, in an effort to improve educational outcomes for children with disabilities.

From our work with 12 parents through Parents Building Bridges we found the following:

1. The voices of parents who have children with disabilities are marginalized within Parent-Teacher Organizations;
2. Parents who have children with disabilities have a desire to drive school culture as partners with school leadership, but they don't usually have a space to articulate their vision; and
3. The inclusion of parent voice into the development and communication of school culture is an underutilized teacher retention strategy.²

Marginalized Voices of Parents within Parent-Teacher Organizations

Over the course of our Parents Building Bridges Program, parents have reported that they don't have the opportunity to speak on issues important to them within the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) dynamic. PTOs tend to be led by white, and higher income families.³ White, higher income families come into predominantly Black and Latino schools, push for leadership roles, and then also push for what's best for their children, without any concept of whether what they're advocating to change benefits the larger population of students who fall outside of their racial and ethnic demographic.⁴ Although, Black, Latino, and parents of children with disabilities are open to attend PTO meetings at their child's school, there is a big difference between an "inclusive" space and an "inviting" space. "Being *included* in a system that was not designed for your family's goals and edification is not a gift,' says Jennifer Malone, PTO co-president at Longfellow Elementary in Oak Park, Ill. 'Be sure you ask what your Black and Brown families want to see and need to see change. Just inviting is not necessarily welcoming. People who are disenfranchised are not going to just show up unless they believe they will actually get a seat at the table.'"⁵ Mike Dixon had this reaction when he went to two events at his son's new school, and he was one of few Black parents at the school open house and parent meeting.⁶ The issue of not feeling invited was compounded when White parents inquired about the legitimacy of his child's seat at the school.⁷

Schools and PTOs are legally not permitted to discriminate on the basis of race, national origin, disability, and other protected classes.⁸ However, our parents have reported the processes of the PTO are not open to address their needs, they're not asked for input on

² [Teacher Retention: Preventing Teacher Turnover; Effective Strategies for Retaining Qualified Teachers; 5 Strategies to Reduce Teacher Stress and Improve Retention](#)

³ [Stein, Perry. Wash. Post Sep. 20, 2019](#)

⁴ [Id.](#)

⁵ [Racial Equity in Your PTO or PTA: What Are You Doing?](#)

⁶ [Stein, Perry article](#)

⁷ [Id.](#)

⁸ Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

the agenda, and the discussions don't center around the needs of their families.⁹ This issue inherently creates and exacerbates a racial, ethnic, and ability divide that families want to heal.

Parents of Children with Disabilities Want to Drive School Culture By Working with School Leadership

On the heels of the lack of diversity in PTO leadership, our parents have looked elsewhere to get their voices heard. Some of our Parents Building Bridges Parents take part in SPED-specific parent groups that were created at their child's school because of the lack of diversity within the PTO. At one school, in particular, that group was disbanded because the teacher leading that group no longer works at the school, and their responsibilities to lead the group were not discharged to another teacher at the school.

After training these parents through Parents Building Bridges, they identified an issue they would like to address - teacher retention. Teacher retention is a national issue that is caused by a number of factors, some of which are outside of the control of individual schools.¹⁰ However, since these systemic concerns are occurring at the school level, we assisted that group of parents with researching the impact parent engagement can have on teacher retention.

Parent Engagement is An Underutilized Teacher Retention Strategy

We know evidence shows that effective family-school partnerships are linked to academic achievement.¹¹ Such partnerships and effective family engagement has also led a school in Minnesota to turn to parents to fill staffing vacancies to support students with disabilities.¹² This effort not only met the need of the school to effectively support students with the highest need, it also led to improved student behavior.

After assisting our Parents Building Bridges parents with researching the impact parent engagement has on teacher retention, we helped them craft a letter to the Principal requesting a meeting. Their ultimate goal was to have a system in place where their voices are continually incorporated into the development of school culture. Additionally, they wanted to work alongside teachers, administration, and other stakeholders at the school to foster an exchange of knowledge that would directly benefit, not only the teachers they intend to retain, but the students relying upon a cohesive, multi-stakeholder partnership. This work sparked conversation and deeper relationship development with school

⁹ This information was gleaned at school-specific trainings, and one-to-one conversations.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Mapp, K.L. & Bergman, E. (2019). [Dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships](#) (Version 2).

¹² Mara Klecker, February 23, 2024, [Faced with Special Ed Staff Vacancies, One Elementary Turned to Parents for Help](#), Star Tribune,

administration. Those parents are now feeling optimistic about being included in the development of school policy and culture that could lead to positive outcomes for students.

Given the flexibility of Charter LEAs, we think it is important for all charter schools to be open to deeper collaboration with families with an identified vision of creating a pathway for meaningful engagement on the board of trustees and other governance structures, such as PTOs, and school committees.

Specifically, we ask that PCSB support and encourage charter schools to do the following:

1. Identify the marginalized demographics within the Parent-Teacher Organizations (PTO) at each public charter school, and if a school doesn't have a PTO, start one;
2. Ensure that there is adequate representation on the PTO board of those marginalized groups;
3. Create a PTO subcommittee to specifically identify and raise issues important to those marginalized groups; and
4. Work in partnership with the PTO, and subcommittees of these marginalized groups to co-create a school culture where parents' voices are heard, valued, and incorporated into school policy development.

Thank you. I welcome any questions you may have.