



# Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.

## The Parent Training and Information Center for the District of Columbia

**Testimony of Maria Blauer**  
**Director of Programs and Outreach**  
**Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.**

Committee of the Whole  
Agency Performance Oversight:  
Public Charter School Board (PCSB) and  
District of Columbia State Athletic Association (DCSAA)  
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My name is Maria Blauer and I am the Director of Programs and Outreach at Advocates for Justice and Education (AJE). AJE is the federally designated Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) and Family-to-Family Health Information Center for the District of Columbia. Each year we assist hundreds of families through direct services, training, and advocacy in navigating the District's public education and healthcare systems, especially for children with disabilities and special healthcare needs, including areas such as the special education process, negotiating school selection and placement, and addressing matters of school discipline.

In the last fiscal year, AJE provided direct assistance to 1,093 DC families to support their advocacy in addressing various educational issues relating to school, transportation, school discipline, special education services and more. AJE staff provided in-person and virtual training to over 2,100 parents and almost 500 professionals. AJE staff also attended over 333 meetings with coalitions, community organizations and other stakeholders working to improve the system that serve young people with disabilities and their families. Finally, AJE staff supported families in more than 60 meetings at schools - including eligibility and referral meetings, IEP and 504 meetings, and manifestation determination reviews. In a city that is approximately evenly split between charter and DCPS enrollment, naturally this means that we work with families whose children attend charter schools, and also directly with some charter schools as well.

AJE believes that education is a human right of all children and that a model of parent education and empowerment will lead to better outcomes for children at school and in life. This belief, and our experiences with families across the District inform our testimony today and leads us to focus on the following areas of concern in the charter section **Discipline, Governance and Capacity**.

Specifically, regarding the Public Charter School Board (PCSB), we are concerned about

- **A lack of transparent and accountable governance.** DCPS and OSSE have both made significant improvements in these areas, albeit sometimes in response to pressure and/or litigation, however the charter sector lags behind, preventing families from making fully informed decisions about school choice.
- **A lack of capacity to serve the full range of students with disabilities in both staffing and programming.** It is difficult to overstate the cascading consequences for students of the charter sector's lack of capacity to serve the full range of students, it leads to increased student

mobility, decreased student achievement, less access to school choice, and often more restrictive placements for students. Good work is being done on this problem by many people in the charter sector, including the Special Education Cooperative, however without a mandate from OSSE or the PCSB that teachers in the charter sector be fully credentialed, charter school capacity will continue to lag behind. Requiring fully credentialed special educators will not solve the entire problem, but it is an incredibly important first step to grow the competency and skills of the charter sector teaching corps and promote real school choice for students with disabilities.

- **A lack of due process and fundamental fairness in school discipline matters remains an issue,** especially when it comes to the appointment of independent hearing officers in school discipline matters, and when school discipline matters intersect with the previously mentioned lack of capacity. As I've testified before it remains the case that there is no student in the charter sector afford the same due process law afforded to DCPS. To be clear we are not arguing the charter schools need to be exactly like DCPS, nor are we asking that they all adopt Chapter 25 of the DCMR, we just don't think they can offer less than DCPS does.

I also wanted to share a few updates from the last time I spoke to the Council about the charter sector.

Since testifying last year, we have seen that more charter schools appear to have home and hospital instruction policies, but those policies should be readily available on their website and often are not. Also, compliance with the new home and hospital regulations has been a significantly less difficult process for families to navigate in the charter sector than it has in DCPS. We're thankful for this, but the lack of transparency and outreach about HHI means that eligible families may not know to apply. The PCSB should use its authority to encourage charter LEAs to affirmatively suggest HHI to families whose students may benefit from it, instead of placing the burden on families to discover and request it.

However, since last year, AJE has unfortunately discovered a new governance gap that uniquely impacts the charter sector. My School DC has matched students to charter LEAs they are ineligible to attend because of disciplinary actions, and then the matched charter has permitted the child to enroll, only to revoke that enrollment later. This problem happens because charter schools in the District of Columbia are allowed to expel students (an ability that is functionally unavailable to DCPS, and one that charter LEAs use, resulting in significantly higher expulsion rates) and deny them access to that LEA for the remainder of their public school careers. While AJE has significant concerns about both the wisdom and legality of this policy choice by the PCSB and charter LEAs and its compliance with the Student Fair Access to School Act, there does not seem to be any kind of mechanism required by the PCSB at the individual charter school level or by OSSE at the MySchoolDC level to prevent this from happening. Even more frustrating there is no easily accessible redress available to families who find themselves in this position, short of litigation. We encourage the Council to use their oversight authority to press for both a practical solution and end to the practice entirely.

Finally, I also have a few very brief comments regarding the DC State Athletic Association. We are pleased to see their efforts to increase the equity of DC athletics by creating a common set of rules and policies regarding eligibility. We also appreciate their work to grow competitive athletics for students with disabilities and introduce new sports to schools in the District, as well as the relative transparency they have conducted their process.

I welcome your questions both today and in the future.