



Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.

The Parent Training and Information Center for the District of Columbia

**Testimony of
Akela Crawford, Esq.
Director of Legal Services
Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.**

Committee of the Whole
Hearing on Student Absenteeism and Discipline
June 26, 2024

Good morning. My name is Akela Crawford and I am the Director of Legal Services at Advocates for Justice and Education (AJE). Thank you for this opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed legislation aimed at addressing student absenteeism and discipline.

As part of AJE's mission, we provide free legal representation to families in matters involving special education, school discipline, and school pushout issues with a specific focus on ensuring students have equitable access to education. Accordingly, my goal today is to provide some color to this important conversation by highlighting how the use of exclusionary practices and the lack of social-emotional support contribute to an increase in student absenteeism.

To start, I would like to refresh the Council's recollection by quoting directly from the D.C. Council's Committee on Education's 2018 Committee Report on the "Student Fair Access to School Amendment Act." In that report, the committee noted, "students who are suspended or expelled experience academic failure, grade retention and hold negative attitudes toward school."¹ The report also noted that "an out-of-school suspension restricts the opportunities for positive socialization and reduces feelings of school connectedness for the student who is put out of school, while worsening negative mental health outcomes such as alienation, anxiety, and rejection."² "Research also indicated that students who experience out-of-school suspension and expulsion are 10 times more likely to drop out of high school than those who do not."³ "Behavior that leads to a suspension can also be an early warning that a student will get off-track academically—research looking at academic performance, suspensions, and school attendance for 9th graders found that substituting another intervention for suspension could prevent future absenteeism and course failure."⁴

In my experience representing families in school discipline matters, we rarely see schools engage in early intervention to address behavior or alternative approaches to exclusionary practices. Nevertheless, the committee report referenced research from Chicago showing how efforts to reduce suspensions brought an increase in attendance and academic performance.⁵ The committee report also

¹ 2 See Committee on Education Report on Bill 22-594, March 13, 2018, at 6, available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/528921f4e4b089ab61d013d3/t/5aaaac57352f535a898c4b17/1521134679253/FINAL+B22-594+Student+Fair+Access+to+School+Committee+Report.pdf>.

² Id at 7.

³ Id.

⁴ Id at 7-8.

⁵ Id at 8.

shared that the students most in need of educational and social-emotional instruction are the most likely to be suspended.

Despite this legislature being well-versed in the factors that contribute to absenteeism and school discipline and passing legislation like SFASA that reflects such understanding, there seems to be a disconnect when it comes to engaging in vigorous oversight to ensure schools comply with the law.

For instance, none of the proposed legislation explicitly requires that OSSE include and analyze the impact of school disciplinary practices such as suspensions, expulsions, and involuntary transfers on student attendance. Requiring OSSE to publish a monthly attendance report but not requiring that the report include a comprehensive analysis of all relevant data will yield inaccurate conclusions and fail to decrease rates of student absenteeism and discipline.

In conclusion, AJE challenges this committee to consider the feedback received today and its institutional knowledge as you work to finalize meaningful legislation to address these important issues.

Thank you.