



# **Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.**

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

**Testimony of  
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Committee of the Whole  
B25-847 “Advancing Equity in Special Education Protocols Amendment Act of 2024”  
and Oversight of Education for Students with Special Needs  
November 20, 2024

Good afternoon, Chairperson Mendelson, and members of the Committee of the Whole. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am Dara Gold, a ward 7 District resident and Staff Attorney at Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc. (AJE). Today I am testifying on behalf of AJE on B25-847 and special education in the District. I am testifying in the place of my colleague Maria Blaeuer.

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 health care systems, especially for children with disabilities and special health care needs. This includes 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. Finally, AJE staff supported families in more than 60 meetings at schools - including eligibility and referral meetings, Individualized Education Program (IEP) and 504 meetings, and manifestation determination reviews.

For the proposed bill, B25-847 “Advancing Equity in Special Education Protocols Amendment Act of 2024,” AJE believes that the ratios for the self-contained classrooms are a good start. Due to the varying and often intensive needs of students in self-contained classrooms, there are students who require more direct attention. As a result, staff members are required to allocate their attention and efforts to these specific students. This attention is necessary for the safety of these students and to ensure they can receive a free appropriate public education. Naturally, it is difficult for a teacher to provide appropriate instruction to all of their students when they must dedicate their

attention to ensuring that one to two of their students are not a harm to themselves or others. When this happens, the other students may not be receiving all of their IEP services, including the attention and unique supports they also need. AJE works with families who encounter this predicament.

Establishing clear staff-to-student ratio standards and abiding by these standards will help cultivate a safe and welcoming school environment for these students. This is essential for helping children develop a love for learning and reducing school-related anxiety and school-avoidance behaviors. This will mitigate school avoidance behaviors because self-contained students are often overwhelmed by the stimuli and distractions of their peers and academic demands. In addition, clear staff-to-student ratio standards can help the teachers feel less overwhelmed, allow them to effectively provide specialized instruction, and mitigate teacher burnout. This is why AJE supports this aspect of B25-847.

However, this is just a starting point. OSSE needs to be required to set teacher-student ratio standards for all settings. Right now, there is no required ratio for inclusion settings. D.C. has a continuum of educational placements to ensure that children can access their right to the least restrictive environment. This means that students with disabilities have a right to be educated with their peers without disabilities to the greatest extent practicable. This is to help prevent unfair exclusion. Clear staff-to-student ratio standards will help ensure students can remain in their least restrictive environment.

On a related, but more broad special education topic, OSSE needs to be clear on what makes a “general education setting.” This is important for providing the least restrictive environment for students, determining appropriate staff-to-student ratios, and assigning an appropriate location of service to each student. Right now, it appears that when there is one general education student – meaning they do not have an IEP or 504 Plan, then the entire classroom is considered a “general education setting.” In addition, OSSE needs to provide guidance on who can provide special education. For example, when can a general education teacher provide specialized instruction? What kind of supervision and collaboration is required for these general education teachers to provide specialized instruction to help implement IEPs?

We also want to take this time to testify about the OSSE Division of Transportation's (DOT) measures to help more special education students have reliable access to the transportation services in their IEPs and 504 Plans. AJE is happy that the OSSE DOT recently received a budget enhancement to put cameras on the DOT buses and to create an app for parents to track buses. We look forward to seeing how these initiatives progress.

Access to reliable transportation is important especially because it impacts student attendance. When a student is late or misses school altogether due to transportation issues, they miss vital instruction and related services necessary to make meaningful progress. In addition, many children with disabilities struggle with

attendance because school avoidance is one way their disabilities manifest. For example, students with anxiety, depression, executive functioning deficits, and learning disabilities are avoiding school because they are unable to handle the distress and frustrations of the school environment and academic struggles, and understand age-appropriate responses to social situations and conflicts, among other factors. Transportation access issues then exacerbate these school avoidance problems when they are already struggling to attend due to their disabilities.

Also, this school year the OSSE DOT rolled out the Monthly Parent Stipend Program. Through this program eligible families who are approved to participate receive \$400 per month to support the self-transportation of their children. AJE and eligible families are glad for this stipend program, however the administrative logistics have been a bit rough. For example, there have been administrative burdens connected to the required student attendance verifications from Local Education Agencies (“LEA”s). As a result, not all parents have received their monthly stipend in a timely manner. Nevertheless, this program has helped families. We appreciate that OSSE DOT has been working with eligible families that had technical errors with their applications.

Lastly, we want to address challenges parents have experienced when requesting interpreters to communicate in their native language when they contact the OSSE DOT Parent Resource Center. The main role of the Parent Resource Center is to serve as the primary communication link between families and schools, about transportation services. Under the Language Access Act of 2004, all district agencies, including OSSE, are required to provide language access services to all constituents who need assistance when conducting official business in English. This means when a parent requests an interpreter in their native language, the agency is supposed to provide an interpreter. Having an interpreter allows parents to effectively communicate and meaningfully participate in their child’s education – which includes making sure the IEP transportation services are being implemented.

However, I have worked with families in past school years and this school year that have had pushback when making this request with staff members at the OSSE DOT Parent Resource Center. The two most common languages this has been a problem for are Spanish and Amharic. However, this should not be an issue regardless of the language the parents speak. Parents have experienced being hung up on, being put on hold for prolonged periods of time, flat out being told no, being asked if they speak English and will just agree to proceed in English, and hearing that their request is a burden. All of these situations violate the Language Access Act. Requests for interpreters in one’s native language is not a burden. This is a basic right in D.C. and OSSE DOT needs to abide by it. Parents are feeling intimidated and embarrassed, which leads to them not asking for an interpreter, not asking again if they previously tried unsuccessfully, and ultimately, they are not able to meaningfully participate in their child’s education.

I have advocated for OSSE leadership to inform and train the Parent Resource Center Staff about the right to an interpreter. Each time I have been informed that they relayed this information to the staff, but this problem repeats every school year. I hope language access can improve for D.C. families.

Again, we thank you for the opportunity to share what we have learned from our work and welcome further questions.