

**TESTIMONY OF SOUMYA BHAT, EDUCATION FINANCE AND POLICY ANALYST
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**At the Public Roundtable on the
Value of Investing in Trauma-Informed Public Schools and Support Services
June 23, 2015**

Chairman Grosso and members of the Committee on Education, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Soumya Bhat, and I am the Education Finance and Policy Analyst at the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI is a non-profit organization that promotes opportunity and widespread prosperity for all residents of the District of Columbia through thoughtful policy solutions.

I am here today to speak to the value of creating trauma-informed environments in all DCPS and charter schools. Schools are a logical place to identify students with mental health needs, and children are more likely to engage in mental health services in a school setting compared to other outside services. While DC is implementing some programs that help students address trauma, they are not available system-wide and often are only available to a small number of students with the greatest needs.

Across the city, over one in four children live in poverty, and in some neighborhoods in Wards 7 and 8, the child poverty rate is greater than 50 percent. Low-income children are more often exposed to trauma and stress during their developmental years, leading to high rates of emotional or social problems.¹ These children are more likely to have problems in school, be absent, be suspended or expelled, or drop out.² Repeated exposure to trauma can lead to chronic, toxic stress which hinders development of key skills necessary for learning, including memory, attention, and language.³

Schools can play a key role in how students who experience trauma adjust to the classroom by changing the entire school environment to allow students to feel safe and supported.⁴ Creating a trauma-informed environment across all schools means taking a system-wide approach, including training all staff to be sensitive to students affected by trauma and to understand how to respond.

Currently, there are some programs available in DC Public Schools (DCPS) that are helping students address trauma. For example, Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools

¹ Evans, G. W., "The Environment of Childhood Poverty", *American Psychologist*, Vol. 59, No. 2, February/March 2004, pgs. 77-92.

² Stagman, S. & Cooper, J., "Children's Mental Health: What Every Policymaker Should Know," National Center for Children in Poverty: Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, April 2010. Available at: <http://www.nccp.org/>.

³ Evans, G.W; Brooks-Gunn; J. & Klebanov, P., "Stressing Out the Poor: Chronic Psychological Stress and the Income-Achievement Gap," *Pathways Magazine*, Winter 2011, Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality.

⁴ Tishelman, A.C., Haney, P., Greenwald O'Brian, J and Blaustein, M. (2010), "A Framework for School Based Psychological Evaluations: Utilizing a "Trauma Lens," *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*, 3(4): 279-302, 280.

(CBITS), which is geared towards relieving symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety experienced by children who have been exposed to trauma, and Structured Psychotherapy for Adolescents Responding to Chronic Stress (SPARCS), a group intervention focused on adolescents. Yet, they are only available to a small number of students with the greatest needs in schools. (Attached to this testimony is an issue brief developed by DCFPI in 2014 that includes more information on what types of mental health services are already available and what could be expanded in DC's schools.)

More work needs to be done to ensure that DC's schools – both DCPS and charters - are truly trauma-sensitive. All staff who interact with students must understand trauma, how it impacts children and how to respond appropriately so that students feel safe. According to a paper released today by the Children's Law Center (*Addressing Childhood Trauma in DC Schools*), other cities and states, such as Massachusetts, San Francisco, Washington State and Wisconsin, are leading the way in this area and have created models for trauma-sensitive school environments that may be helpful to the District.

DCFPI commends the Committee for holding this roundtable. Expanding trauma-sensitive environments to all students can help ensure a wider range of children experiencing trauma can benefit, not just those with the most severe needs.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.