

**Testimony of Marlana Wallace, Policy Analyst  
At the Public Hearing on Bill 22-0594, Student Fair Access to School Act of 2017 and Bill 22-0179  
D.C. Public Schools Alternatives to Suspension Amendment of 2017  
DC Council Committee on Education  
January 30, 2018**

Chairperson Grosso and members of the Committee, good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Marlana Wallace and I am the education policy analyst at the DC Fiscal Policy Institute. DCFPI promotes budget choices to reduce economic and racial inequality and build widespread prosperity in the District of Columbia, through independent research and policy recommendations.

As members of the Every Student Every Day coalition, DCFPI supports the Student Fair Access to School Act of 2017. The SFASA offers reasonable parameters to ensure student access to school and requires accurate records of formal and informal exclusionary discipline. It would steer all DC schools away from an ineffective, counterproductive, and costly overreliance on punitive discipline—one that negatively impacts all students, school communities, families, and the city at large. This bill would also limit out-of-school suspensions for the kinds of subjective infractions that disproportionately hurt special education students, low-income students and students of color.

We recommend that the sensible protections offered in this legislation are paired with corresponding investments in school resources. This legislation should include the creation of a “Positive School Culture Fund,” which would empower schools to pursue promising strategies for decreasing their reliance on exclusionary practices that interrupt learning. Mayor Bowser and the DC Council should also increase funding for Restorative Justice Models in schools, as well as ensure the student populations most affected by punitive school discipline receive the resources the city has already promised them through the 2014 special education reforms that remain subject to appropriations, and through the targeted use of “at-risk” funding.

### **Suspensions and Expulsions Create More Problems Than They Solve, Especially for the Students Most in Need of Supportive Schools**

When schools rely on suspension or expulsion as discipline methods, they create more problems than they solve. Students miss lessons, fall behind when they return, and are more likely to drop out, struggle to find jobs, or become involved with the Juvenile Justice System. This costs everyone in the District, both ethically and financially. Prevention is far less expensive.

The District’s over-reliance on the use of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions pushes out of the classroom the students who are most in need of a strong, supportive school environment. In 2017, a third of out-of-school suspensions were for “disrespect, insubordination, or disruption”—that’s 4,335 suspensions for subjective offenses.<sup>1</sup> Students under the care of Child and Family Services are *2.85 times more likely* to be suspended than their peers.<sup>2</sup> Students with disabilities and homeless students are both about *two and half times more likely* to be suspended than students without disabilities or students living in stable housing.<sup>3</sup> Students with disabilities are often even suspended for behavior directly caused by or related to

their disability. When students with disabilities have their specialized needs neglected, they can understandably become frustrated and act out more.

Over-reliance on punitive discipline also disproportionately hurts students of color. There is no evidence that students of color misbehave to a greater degree than white students. Yet in DC, 10 percent of Black students were suspended and sent out of the classroom compared to only 0.5 percent of white students.<sup>4</sup> Students of color should not receive harsher disciplinary responses than white students for the same behaviors. We should stop relying on these unsuccessful approaches and give schools the resources they need to address root causes through solutions like Restorative Justice.

### **Invest in Programs and Practices that Foster Student Success**

- **Restorative Justice Coordinators.**

When schools have the funds to fully staff Restorative Justice, they can better address the root causes of disruptive behavior. Students acquire the skills to manage their emotions and actions, learn to take responsibility for their mistakes, develop a greater sense of empathy, strengthen relationships, and repair harm. Students thrive in strong school communities, where they are embedded in meaningful relationships. Teachers are better supported in managing the classroom without interrupting the learning of individual students. A more positive school climate allows for greater attention to academics, benefitting everyone and boosting student performance.

Chancellor Wilson recognizes the value of reducing punitive school discipline. He stated his intention last year to expand Restorative Justice to 74 schools, but without any additional funding from DC to do so.<sup>5</sup> DCFPI recommends that the Mayor and Council make that expansion effective, by providing schools with the funding to hire coordinators.

- **Positive School Culture Fund.**

We also recommend that this legislation include a Positive School Culture Fund, which would empower schools to pursue other evidence-based solutions and promising practices that reduce school push-out. For example, school leaders might offer new teacher trainings or trauma-responsive services.

### **Ensure the Students Most Affected by Suspensions Receive Already Promised Resources**

- **Ensure Every Dollar of “At-Risk Funding” is Used for Targeted Supports.**

The city’s funding formula promises additional money to schools to better support low-income students and those falling behind in the classroom. But because of budget constraints over the last few years, roughly *half* of those “at-risk” funds are funding regular staff positions, instead of dedicated supports.<sup>6</sup>

Students identified as “at-risk” of academic failure because of poverty or performance are *2.71 times more likely* to be suspended than their peers.<sup>7</sup> Upholding the city’s commitment to spending “at-risk” funding on preventive and supportive services would also likely reduce suspensions, along with this legislation.

- **Fund the 2014 Special Education Reforms.**

Students with disabilities are often suspended for behavior directly related to their disability. Three critical special education reforms would improve access to needed services for special education

students, and better support teachers, but have been on hold since 2014 due to lack of funding.<sup>8</sup> It is time for DC leaders to fund early intervention for more children, faster evaluations and better transition planning.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.

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<sup>1</sup> [2017 State of Discipline Report](#), Figure 40

<sup>2</sup> Calculated using an odds ratio from [2017 State of Discipline Report](#)

<sup>3</sup> Calculated using an odds ratio from [2017 State of Discipline Report](#)

<sup>4</sup> [2017 State of Discipline Report](#), page 29; [SY 2017 Citywide Equity Reports](#)

<sup>5</sup> 2017 DCPS Government Witness Budget Hearing

<sup>6</sup> DCFPI, [What's in the Fiscal Year 2018 Budget for PreK-12 Education?](#)

<sup>7</sup> Calculated using an odds ratio from [2017 State of Discipline Report](#)

<sup>8</sup> DCFPI, [Testimony at the Special Education Roundtable](#)