

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**  
**District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS)**



Joint Public Roundtable on  
**Youth Bullying in the District of Columbia**

Testimony of  
**Brenda Elliott**  
Chief, School Improvement and Supports

Before the  
Committee of the Whole  
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairman  
and  
Committee on Education  
The Honorable David Grosso, Chairperson

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Room 120  
John A. Wilson Building  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
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Good afternoon Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, members of the Education Committee, Committee of the Whole, and staff. My name is Brenda Elliott and I serve as the District of Columbia Public Schools' (DCPS) Chief of School Improvement and Supports. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on our efforts to prevent youth bullying.

DCPS is committed to ensuring that our schools are safe and positive learning environments, free from bullying and other harmful and disruptive behavior. As a part of DCPS' Capital Commitment, we have set the goal that 100 percent of students feel loved, challenged, and prepared. As a part of that work, it is our priority that every member of the school community feels welcomed, safe, and respected in every school, each and every day.

I would like to take a moment to thank all of those who came out today and those that have spoken out in other venues. I would like to acknowledge the courage and bravery that it takes to come forward to share these experiences. These types of conversations contribute to our goal of building a safe and inclusive community for all.

### **DCPS' Commitment to Social Emotional Learning (SEL) & School Climate**

At the heart of our efforts to prevent and address bullying, DCPS is committed to bringing social-emotional learning competencies to practice and creating learning environments centered around providing access, inclusion, and affirmation through equity. Centrally, DCPS has a dedicated team to focus on this work. At the school-level, we have invested in additional staff that focus on mental health and school climate. Our staff work to affirm our students' cultures and communities, incorporate social-emotional learning and culturally responsive practices, increase access to rigorous academic content and financial resources, and change policies to promote equity and remove barriers.

The most successful practice for building school culture is a whole school approach involving all education and community partners. DCPS believes that the following characteristics create positive school climate and prevent youth bullying:

- Students, staff members, and parents feel safe, included, and accepted;
- All members of the school community demonstrate respect, fairness, and kindness in their interactions;
- Building healthy relationships that are free from discrimination and harassment;
- The learning environment and curriculum reflects character education and appreciation for diversity;
- Bullying prevention and awareness-raising strategies for students, staff, and families are taught and reinforced; and,
- Students are meaningfully engaged and given support to succeed in an environment of high expectations.

The investment in Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is considered both a preventative method and a response to bullying behavior. SEL has demonstrated promise in increasing prosocial skills



through structured opportunities to learn five competencies: self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, positive relationship skills, and social and cultural awareness. As a part of this work, DCPS has also partnered with Turnaround for Children to equip school leaders and staff with the knowledge, skills, and tools to meet the holistic needs of students furthest from opportunity. In strengthening SEL skills, students are better able to accept differences in others, self-regulate, and engage with both peers and adults in socially acceptable ways. We believe this work is foundational to preventing bullying.

### **Bullying Prevention and Resources**

On behalf of DCPS, I do want to recognize that bullying is a serious issue with young people, both in the district and nationwide. It affects students at every level, from elementary to high school. As an agency, we share the responsibility to prevent behavior that threatens the emotional and physical safety and wellbeing of students. It is also critical for students that are being bullied to be aware of the resources that are available to them while also acknowledging that much more can be done to make all students feels loved, challenged, and prepared for lifelong success.

It is our goal to provide schools with strategic and comprehensive supports to systematically address bullying prevention. We work to ensure that each school has a bullying prevention designee who supports students and staff with the prevention, identification, and appropriate intervention of incidents of bullying. In addition, as a part of our Cluster Support Model, Central Office staff members that are part of the Social-Emotional Learning Team support and provide technical assistance for bullying prevention, social and emotional learning, restorative practices, behavior, and discipline in schools. We also train and provide ongoing resources to school-based LGBTQ Liaisons. These school-based staff members are uniquely positioned to understand the needs of their school communities, to respond to their school communities' needs, and to understand the types of resources that may be needed to increase awareness of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.

The most proactive approaches for bullying prevention focus on four key areas: promotion of positive behavior and positive school culture, whole-school prevention and intervention, investigation into every bullying incident, and providing support to individuals involved in bullying incidents.

DCPS continues to provide multiple opportunities for bullying awareness through monthly trainings and made its bullying prevention trainings more comprehensive to provide greater focus on creating a culture that supports all students. Trainings are provided on how to incorporate SEL skills and strategies into schools' preventative approach to preventing bullying.

DCPS recognizes that in addition to training, staff members require ongoing professional development to build the tools and knowledge needed to prevent, identify, and respond to incidents of bullying. As DCPS employees, we are mandated to report incidents of bullying. Once a report is received, in person or in writing, the investigation process begins at the school-level. Once the investigation is complete, and a determination is made, school-based personnel



work to determine what intervention will support the student and, when appropriate, create a safety plan which outlines these supports and next steps for the student and school.

I also want to take the opportunity to highlight two additional strategies DCPS uses to address bullying at the system-level:

### **DCPS Mental Health Supports**

As part of a holistic approach, the Mayor has invested heavily in mental health supports, which include response to bullying. Students who have been bullied, as well as those who have bullied can be referred to school social workers for screening and trauma-focused treatment as needed. There are trauma-focused treatments, each applicable for a specific trauma or for the generalized stress that accompanies exposure to bullying. As examples, DCPS uses the following research-based interventions to support our students. These include:

- ***Bounce Back***, a school-based group intervention for elementary students exposed to stressful and traumatic events. This program teaches students ways to cope and recover from traumatic experiences.
- ***Grief and Trauma Intervention (GTI)***, a program designed for children ages 7 to 12 with posttraumatic stress due to witnessing or experiencing one or more types of violence. GTI aims to improve symptoms of posttraumatic stress, depression and traumatic grief.
- ***Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS)***, a secondary-level, school-based intervention for addressing specific incidents of trauma exposure. This program also includes sessions with parents or guardians.

I do want to recognize that students experiencing bullying are not the only ones for which these interventions can be helpful in recovery from the effects of bullying. Often, the perpetrators of bullying have been bullied themselves, or are acting out pain by hurting others. DCPS ensures that screening and interventions are available and delivered to those students and works to disrupt patterns of bullying in our schools.

### **Restorative Practices**

As another key part of our strategy to address bullying, restorative practices utilize informal and formal processes that foster an intentional culture of proactive measures for relationship building and positive school climate. Many DCPS schools implement restorative practices at varying levels. This can be implemented through proactive circles, responsive circles, collaborative teach circles, teacher and student circles, mindfulness circles, and mediation circles all of which focus on creating a restorative mindset that repairs harm and addresses conflict that has occurred in the school community.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Proactive circles involve students ahead of a potential conflict; responsive circles respond to student behavior; collaborative circles bring students experiencing conflict together to learn about the harm; teacher and student circles resolve student to staff conflicts; mindfulness circles de-escalate students; and mediation circles resolve disagreements resulting from conflict.



DCPS' Social-Emotional Learning Team is responsible for promoting the restorative practice work in our schools. Specialists provide guidance and technical support around tiered implementation at each school as needed. DCPS has fully committed to this work in recent years, and has invested in this team through additional staff members. We also partner with expert organization, such Restore DC, Youth Families in Crisis, One Common Unity, and the International Institute for Restorative Practices. These partnerships ensure DCPS students have access to best practices when it comes to improving relationships and promoting school culture.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. DCPS shares your commitment to making every school a safe and welcoming space for every student. We also want to recognize that bullying can and does occur outside of the school environment and prevention must involve the whole community. DCPS is grateful for role that family members, community partners, and government agencies play in preventing bullying from ever occurring. We believe that by encouraging positive behavior in and out of school and providing supports for all students involved, we can ensure that all students can learn in a safe and supportive learning environment.

We recognize the importance of continuing to raise this issue with a sense of shared responsibility and appreciate your commitment to being collaborative partners in this work. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

