

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



Public Hearing on
School Safety, Bill 25-234 – School Safety Enhancement Amendment Act of 2023, and Bill
25-420 – Conflict Resolution Education Amendment Act of 2023

Testimony of
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District of Columbia Public Schools

Before the
Committee of the Whole
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairperson

John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue NW

Thursday, January 11, 2024
10:30 AM

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, Councilmembers, staff, and members of the public. I am Paige Hoffman, Chief of the Office of School Improvement and Support at the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). Our office works with schools to promote whole-child practices, support diverse student needs, and increase staff effectiveness. I am joined today by my colleague, Ricky A. Brown, Jr., our Deputy Chief for School Security. As a former DCPS student, DCPS teacher, and Central Services employee for the past 11 years, I know the importance of school safety. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important topic.

The Safest Place for Students is at School

Public safety is on the minds of Washingtonians today, particularly when it comes to the safety of our young people. We have said it before, and we will continue to emphasize the point – the safest place for students is at school. Every day, DCPS teachers, principals, and staff prioritize positive relationships with students so that students feel safe, loved, and challenged at school. Whether it is principals greeting students at the door by name to ensure students feel like they belong, teachers working thoughtfully with students on engaging lessons, or school social workers deescalating conflict and supporting students' mental health, DCPS provides students with the support they need to build social, emotional, and academic skills. These are the skills that we need our young people to develop so they can navigate life's challenges and contribute to our community.

To better understand the student experience at school, DCPS regularly surveys students about whether they feel loved, challenged, and prepared. It is promising to know that more than 80% of students report they feel safe at school. Research shows that students learn best when they have trusting, caring relationships with adults and peers. After new investments to support staff training among other improvements, this fall, more students than ever before reported feeling loved.¹

To support a safe and positive environment for social, emotional, and academic learning and development, all DCPS schools leverage Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). MTSS provides a framework for schools to holistically understand the strengths and needs of students and adults. School teams meet regularly, with support from Central Services to design interventions for students who need additional support, including with respect to safe behavior. School teams coordinate interventions like daily check-in check-outs and then regularly monitor student progress to determine if adjustments are needed. When a student is exhibiting unsafe or

¹ 60% of students reported feeling loved after the largest year over year improvement (5%) since DCPS began administering the Panorama survey in 2018.

disruptive behavior, MTSS is a key tool that schools can use to develop an intervention aligned to the root cause of the behavior, and ultimately result in safer and more productive behavior.²

In partnership with Transcend, we recently launched our DCPS Becoming Pilot with 41 schools. Pilot schools like Johnson Middle School deeply trained their staff in the science of learning and development, including the impact of stress and adversity on the brain and the body. From the moment students arrive at the sidewalk in front of Johnson each morning, staff flood them with love and connection. Pilot schools have also launched a new check-in survey to keep a pulse on how students are feeling each week and month. This fall, Tier 4 and 5 infractions, the most serious incidents, are down 16% Year to Date, and the percentage of students feeling loved is up 7 points year over year, putting Johnson in the 99th percentile nationally for urban middle schools. We are proud of the work we're doing to support student safety and learning and know there is more work to be done. I would now like to turn to my colleague Deputy Chief Brown to speak about one of the bills under consideration today.

Bill 25-234 – School Safety Enhancement Amendment Act of 2023

I am Ricky Allen Brown Jr., the Deputy Chief for School Security at DCPS. I am responsible for overseeing our contracted security staff, our DCPS police force, and for working closely with public safety partners. Student safety is not the responsibility of any one individual or agency alone. That is why DCPS school teams work collaboratively with Central Services and other government agencies to promote student safety and respond to critical incidents. I would like to speak to the *School Safety Enhancement Amendment Act of 2023 (B25-0234)* and our response to it. The bill would direct the Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE) to convene a school safety committee to create guidelines that would be used to review and enhance district school safety plans. The legislation would also require Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to publish school safety plans annually and would establish a new position of School Safety Director at every school, and an Assistant School Safety Director at every high school. The bill would also establish procedures for school safety teams to coordinate with the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD). As part of the Fiscal Year 2024 budget development process, the Council established a school safety committee under the auspices of the Deputy Mayor for Education, in alignment with the first component of the bill.

DCPS currently participates in the school safety committee and looks forward to the release of recommendations soon. DCPS creates robust emergency response plans in keeping with current District requirements and nationwide best practices. DCPS submits Emergency Response Plans

² Currently, 23% of students are receiving an intervention. These interventions can be for academics, attendance, or behavior.

to the District's Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency (HSEMA). These plans are reviewed by the school's principal, DCPS Central Services, and the District of Columbia Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department (FEMS). DCPS participates in a daily public safety call with the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) and a half dozen public safety and education agencies. DCPS also partners with Rave Mobile Safety, a public safety industry leader, to streamline communications during emergencies.³

While DCPS would always support additional resources for school safety, we do not think it is necessary or beneficial for the Council to mandate that all schools hire a School Safety Director. Currently, each school's staffing approach is dictated by its needs and a one-size-fits all approach could divert resources from other priorities. Currently, DCPS schools can and do staff Social Workers, Behavior Technicians, Attendance Counselors, Coordinators for In School Suspension, Deans of Students, Restorative Justice Coordinators, Behavior Analysts, Psychologists, Directors and Managers of Strategy and Logistics, contracted security staff, and DCPS police officers. With our school teams and instructional superintendents, DCPS ensures that each school has a team of individuals who promote student safety on site. We do not believe that requiring schools to hire a Safety Director will be a responsible or effective use of resources, particularly as school districts and cities around the country face challenges hiring qualified law enforcement personnel, social workers, psychologists, and other mental health professionals. Finally, in our initial conversations with other members of the School Safety Committee, we have not heard the need for such a role. I'd like to turn to Chief Hoffman to speak about another bill under consideration today.

Bill 25-420 – Conflict Resolution Education Amendment Act of 2023

DCPS believes wholeheartedly in the importance of teaching students to effectively manage and resolve conflicts. Conflict resolution skills help reduce youth violence and contribute to student success in college and career. The *Conflict Resolution Education Amendment Act of 2023 (B25-0420)* would require Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to adopt a model curriculum developed by OSSE that would develop students' conflict resolution skills or to adopt an alternative conflict

³ See press release announcing partnership in 2018 here - <https://ouc.dc.gov/release/bowser-administration-introduces-rave-panic-button-streamline-data-and-communication-sharing>. Following a safety or security incident that occurs on a DC Public Schools (DCPS) campus or even one that occurs off campus but impacts DCPS students, the Office of Communications works with DCPS School Security, School Operations, and school administrators to determine details of the incident and prepare communications for families. Messaging summarizes pertinent information regarding what happened, identifies our partners in addressing the incident (MPD, FEMS, DGS, etc.), includes resolution efforts, and outlines supports being offered to the school community. Most often, messaging is distributed by the Central Services Operations Communications Team on behalf of the school through the Blackboard online messaging platform which has text, email, and robocall capabilities. This Central management of communication allows for school leaders to focus on their students and staff during the incident and its aftermath.

resolution education program. The bill would also require DCPS to receive input from Local School Advisory Teams (LSATs) on the adequacy of resources for conflict resolution education at each school. We appreciate the Council's interest in this important topic and expend considerable time and resources supporting the development of students' conflict resolution skills. Having said that, we do not believe that legislation is necessary to improve outcomes for students related to conflict resolution.

DCPS believes that each child has the potential to be successful in school. DCPS staff proactively work to establish trust and relationships with students that are critical to leverage in times of conflict. Building off those relationships, DCPS emphasizes the use of practices that resolve conflicts without excluding students from school. These practices are often referred to as restorative practices. When we talk about restorative practices, we mean a group of actions intended to build community, manage conflict, and resolve tensions by repairing the harm caused by individual(s) toward another and restoring relationships.⁴

In the 2022 – 2023 school year, the Restorative Practices team trained 2,300 DCPS stakeholders in the Whole Child Framework, Restorative Practices, Bullying Prevention, and on other related topics. These training courses increased staff capacity to implement restorative practices as a proactive measure for strengthening relationships within classrooms, schools, and community. Finally, DCPS has codified the strategies that exemplify model restorative practice schools so that schools have clear standards of excellence.

And this year, we are seeing results. So far this school year, we have seen the recorded use of restorative practices in schools more than double, and now nearly 30% of all infractions have a restorative response. These practices can look like student-student mediations, staff-student mediations, restorative circles or conversations, reflections by students, or a re-entry circle. Restorative Practices often start with adults supporting students to talk through a conflict they are having with each other that could have otherwise resulted in something like a fight. As students see the value and develop skills, they often ask for mediations or restorative conversations to avoid escalated conflict, as we heard from a Principal a few weeks ago when, after a weekend fight in the neighborhood, students came in Monday morning asking for a mediation instead of further escalation.

⁴ For more information on DCPS' approach to using restorative practices, see the DCPS Safe and Positive Schools Policy at <https://dcps.dc.gov/node/1578396> and DCPS' Restorative Practices resource page at <https://dcps.dc.gov/page/restorative-practices>.

OSSE recently released draft Social and Emotional Learning standards for public comment, and our team participated in the standards writing group. These standards focus on skills that will help students develop an awareness of their emotions, manage stress, and use relationships to resolve conflicts non-violently. We look forward to continuing to collaborate with OSSE on their implementation in the future.

With respect to the bill's LSAT consultation requirement, DCPS provides multiple mechanisms for school communities to provide input on needs related to conflict resolution. Each year, schools create Comprehensive School Plans with their communities. Schools create these guiding documents and discuss needs related to school culture, student behavior, and interactions between students and staff in the building. Furthermore, LSATs already provide formal input into the budget development process and can already note needs related to conflict resolution. Finally, DCPS annually convenes a public budget hearing with the Chancellor, where any member of the public can provide feedback about school budgets or programs. We recently held this hearing in November and look forward to providing the Council with the record of the hearing soon.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify about the important topic of school safety. Deputy Chief Brown and I are available to answer your questions.