

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**  
*District of Columbia Public Schools*



**Public Hearing on**  
**B22-594, the “Student Fair Access to School Act of 2017,” and B22-179, the “D.C. Public Schools**  
**Alternatives to Suspension Amendment Act of 2017”**

Testimony of  
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Before the  
Committee on Education  
The Honorable David Grosso, Chairman  
Council of the District of Columbia

Room 500  
John A. Wilson Building  
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Good afternoon, Chairman Grosso, members of the Committee, and staff. For the record, my name is Antwan Wilson, and I am the Chancellor of District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). Today, I appreciate the opportunity to come before you to discuss two bills: B22-594, the “Student Fair Access to School Act of 2017,” and B22-179, the “D.C. Public Schools Alternatives to Suspension Amendment Act of 2017.”

DC Public Schools is committed to creating a positive school environment where all students feel loved, challenged, and prepared. Our district is a community where students have a voice and get the tools they need to succeed. We believe that every child deserves a school environment that is welcoming, safe, and supportive. This is a core tenet of our new strategic plan, *A Capital Commitment*.

Bill 22-594 aspires to create institutional change in school discipline, achieving policies that focus on positive approaches and aim to limit suspensions and expulsions. Although we share the sentiments of this bill and the intent of Chairman Grosso, DCPS has concerns about some of the overly prescriptive and restrictive elements of the legislation and the likely unintended consequences that would result from them.

As we work to create positive learning environments and promote restorative disciplinary approaches in our schools, we must not restrict the ability for local education agencies (LEAs) to ensure student and school safety. DCPS urges the Council to hold on any legislative actions that would govern schools or their ability to address issues unique to their school communities.

In our new strategic plan, DCPS highlights the need to prioritize many of the issues that this legislation aims to address. This includes strengthening our support for social emotional learning to help students develop key skills and character traits that will help them navigate the many challenges of learning in school and growing in life. Our strategic plan also focuses on promoting positive and strong school cultures, because we know students learn best and are more likely to attend school when the environment is stable, supportive, and nurturing. Our school culture team, in addition to expanding support and training to schools on restorative practices, is developing a discipline ladder and accompanying guidance to be rolled out to all District schools for School Year 2018–2019.

Student satisfaction is extremely important to us. We believe that in order to diminish persistent gaps in student achievement in our schools, it is important to train our educators differently. Our schools must utilize restorative practices that improve social emotional development. To this end, we have made it a priority to engage with our students and ask for their perspectives. I meet with students each week in elementary, middle, and high schools to ask them directly about their experiences in our schools. I then share this feedback with school faculty, staff, and school leaders during faculty meetings. It is our goal for 100 percent of students to feel loved, challenged, and prepared, and we will continue to strengthen and deepen our supports to reach that goal.

Many of our schools have implemented restorative practices to encourage positive student behaviors, minimize disruption of instructional time, and provide an alternative to using punishment as a way to manage behavior. We are seeing leaders in schools, such as Brookland, Sousa, and Hardy Middle Schools; Ketcham, Kimball, and Noyes Elementary Schools; and Ron Brown College Preparatory and Phelps ACE High Schools, embracing this work, and our District suspension rates continue to decrease.

While we applaud the intent of the legislation and are aligned to its goals, we have significant concerns about its overly prescriptive limitations. We believe these restrictions will undermine schools' and LEAs' ability to ensure student safety and promote a secure school environment. As we align to a progressive discipline approach, we simply cannot put our students' safety at risk. We cannot create a disincentive to maintain order for all students or an incentive to push students out who struggle.

Decisions about the lengths of suspensions and the circumstances under which a suspension or expulsion is necessary are best left for LEA leaders to implement. As a former principal, I can tell you circumstances on the ground are much more complex and nuanced than reflected by the restrictions in the bill.

In most cases, the behavioral approach in the bill is what our principals and school leaders strive for in their buildings. But, sometimes, in cases unique to an individual school, unique to a student, and unique to the day, we have to make decisions for student safety and to maintain a positive learning environment that do not align with the limitations prescribed in the bill. In those unique cases, it must be up to the LEA to work with the school leaders to decide what is best for the student and school.

We suggest the bill remove the limits on the length of single-incident suspensions and on cumulative days. Instead, LEAs should be able to set limits on the lengths of suspensions that school leaders can impose without LEA approval. This would allow school leaders the flexibility to respond to the needs in their buildings, while setting clear parameters on the circumstances in which further consideration is called for by the LEA. In DCPS, the process for LEA approval would be public along with the consequence ladder and appeal process.

DCPS also has concerns about the restrictions on the circumstances under which a student may be suspended or expelled. The truth is that limiting suspensions or expulsions to "significant bodily injury or emotional distress" or "the most serious offenses" in the policy will not work for all students. Hurting another student is wrong, and such situations, regardless of hospitalization or medical attention, may damage a school's culture and threaten student safety. Just last week I received communication from parents at an elementary school and a high school concerned about threats and harassment towards their children. While we support all students, even when they act out, we must also protect students who are affected by negative behaviors. In the case of the parents who contacted me, their children are afraid to come to school, even as the school tries to address issues.

Similarly, incidents that happen off school grounds may require actions from a school leader or the District, though they may not rise to the bill's standard of a "significant disruption to the school environment." For example, incidents of cyberbullying may impact only one student but require a substantial response by a school leader.

DCPS believes that school leaders and LEAs need the flexibility to make decisions within a system of graduated consequences that best promote a loving and secure school environment.

We believe that LEAs should develop a behavior ladder and train school staff in suspension alternatives, such as restorative practices, as a way of ensuring equitable delivery of consequences. LEAs, not legislation, should specify the actions a school leader may take in each circumstance and establish a clear process for school leaders to seek approval before taking these actions. In cases when the LEA is approving a longer suspension or a suspension in a circumstance that differs from the behavioral ladder, a written justification may be necessary. LEAs need the flexibility to phase in this new system over a period of years to ensure that school leaders, teachers, staff, students, families, and communities are aware, prepared, and supportive of the behavior system.

We would welcome the opportunity to work with the Council on the provisions regarding graduated consequences. However, moving forward, we urge you to remove the restrictions on the circumstances under which a student may be suspended or expelled out of risk of creating unintended consequences affecting safety in schools.

Students should wake up every day with excitement to attend school, which is why we are pleased that this legislation focuses on the important work of creating nurturing and safe learning environments for all students in DC. This is a top priority for DCPS. At the same time, we believe LEAs are best equipped to implement these reforms over time while building support and engaging students, teachers, families, and the community.

With regard to B22-179, as I mentioned, in some circumstances where an LEA is approving a suspension that differs from the circumstances in the behavioral ladder, a written justification may be necessary. However, when and how this is required must be left up to the LEA to determine. The content of a justification, as well as the process for the graduated consequences, must also be determined by the LEA leadership. We have our students' best interest at heart and need the ability to make the decisions in these important situations.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony today. I look forward to responding to any questions you have.