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Written Testimony of Faith Gibson Hubbard, Chief Student Advocate
Office of the Student Advocate, DC State Board of Education
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Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, Councilmember Grosso, committee members, and staff. My name is Faith Gibson Hubbard, and I am honored to lead the work of Office of the Student Advocate as Chief Student Advocate for the District of Columbia. Our office supports and guides families in navigating our complex system of public education in the District. Every day our office works in partnership to equalize the balance of power between families and schools by increasing family and student voice, access, and power in our system of public education. I am excited to share our work with you today, and I thank you for this opportunity to testify.

In school year (SY) 2017-18, our office focused on expanding our services and supports for students and families throughout all eight wards of the city. By leveraging our partnerships with government agencies, schools/local education agencies, and community-based organizations and by increasing our strategic outreach efforts, our office has nurtured vital working relationships that are student and family centric. The core of our work focuses on equity through the framework and lens of student and parent voice. The voices of students and families must be at the forefront of all public education planning, policy, and decision-making processes, at both the citywide and school levels. As we work as a city to tackle the myriad of systemic issues surrounding public education in the District, leveraging the power and voices of students and families at the decision-making table is an essential step. Our work focuses on demystifying systems, eliminating barriers, and providing resources and avenues for access for

families. The work of our office supports the needs and advocacy of students, families, and educators in three distinct ways:

First, our Requests for Assistance line, which serves as a 311 for all things public education in the District of Columbia.

Per statutory mandate, our office operates a public education hotline to answer questions and provide information regarding relevant public education resources and agency/organizational referrals. Our Request for Assistance (RFA) line allows us to provide those supports to any education stakeholder in need of information, resources, coaching, and/or referrals. By answering live Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm, the RFA line supports our ability to work directly with students, parents, families, and community members to address their education inquiries and concerns. In SY 2017-18, we were able to serve 425 callers through our RFA process. In addition to the 425 callers served during our operating hours, we received an additional 206 calls outside of our operating hours. The number of calls made to our line outside of our operating hours highlights the need families have regarding public education. When callers reach our voicemail during non-operating hours, the bilingual voicemail message shares our website resources, accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. To date, for Quarters 1 and 2 of SY 2018-19, we have supported 254 individuals through our Request for Assistance process. At this rate, we will continue our trend of exceeding the number of RFAs for the previous school year.

Over 50% of our RFAs came from Wards 7 and 8, home to the largest number of school-aged children in the city. In SY 2017-18, our presence continued to increase citywide due to our outreach efforts, particularly our Know Your Rights Special Education workshop in Wards 3, 6, 7, and 8, our Parent Leadership Series in Wards 7 and 8, and our Citywide Bullying Prevention workshop.

Over half of our RFAs came from students and families being served by DCPS. DCPS families continue to drive majority of the calls to our line because they are the largest LEA in the district

with approximately 115 schools. We did see an increase in calls from families attending one of the District's 60+ charter LEAs, accounting for one-third of our total RFAs. In SY 2017-18, we worked to connect with charter school leaders in addition to our continued partnership with the Public Charter School Board.

Since our office opened in 2015, issues of enrollment/access and special education have consistently trended high. Enrollment/access captures questions and concerns ranging from school choice and the lottery process to uninvite notifications from schools not communicated to parents until the next school year. We also saw an increase in calls related to special education services. Families reached out to our office looking for special education support as it related to individual education plans, 504 plans, initiating the evaluation process, and available resources.

Other RFA topic areas that trended high were student safety and discipline at 24% of total RFAs. Student safety refers to issues and questions around safe passage, assault, and facilities maintenance while student discipline is directly related to exclusionary discipline practices. Though the two categories denote different areas of need, both categories heavily impact school climate and culture and ultimately student learning outcomes. (Phone: 202-741-4692 or <https://sboe.dc.gov/page/request-assistance-rfa>)

Secondly, we support the needs of families and educators through the Informational Resources & Tools developed by our office.

As we review questions and concerns that come to our RFA line and collect feedback from our stakeholders, we create resources that can best address information and resource needs that can create barriers to access. Our online Education and Community Resource Guide, Information and Advocacy Resources and Tools, and Parent & Family Go-To Guide, all housed on our website, are evidence of our effort to streamline information that helps families better understand the public education system and its policies and procedures. Our online resources include:

- Advocacy & Lobbying Toolkit
- Attendance and Truancy Resources
- Behavioral & Mental Health Resources
- Bullying Resources
- Effective Communication
- Enrollment
- Graduation Requirement
- Homeless Children & Youth Resources
- Parent Leadership Toolkit
- Right to Know Ask Sheets
- Safe Passage
- Special Education & School Supports
- Student Discipline
- Student Leadership
- Testing & Assessments
- DC Public Education Governance

<https://sboe.dc.gov/page/advocacy>)

I will highlight a few specific examples that were created or updated in FY 18:

Go-To Guide: In FY17, we released our “Right to Know” ask sheets, which provide helpful information and conversation starters so parents and families feel informed. In FY18, we compiled those resources into one guide for families. Our Parent & Family Go-To Guide is a collection of parent and student-centered documents previously offered in isolation on our website and made available during outreach events, trainings, and workshops.

<https://sboe.dc.gov/page/advocacy>)

This guide is a readily available resource that families can use to easily navigate laws and processes relevant to public education, allowing families to access and utilize their power in a fuller capacity. This guide – which has been translated in Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, Amharic, and French – is available both online and in print. In FY18, over 4000

printed copies were distributed to parents, schools, libraries, and other resource centers. Additionally, in FY19, 2000 Go-To Guides were placed in bags given to EdFest attendees.

Student Discipline Guide: DC is a relatively small jurisdiction, yet we have more than 60 local education agencies (LEAs), or school districts, which operate within the District of Columbia with 60 plus student discipline policies that families must understand when they select a particular LEA for their child. Through our communication with families, either in-person or through Request for Assistance line, we discovered that students and parents lack clarity regarding the student discipline policies that govern the diverse LEAs in the District and the schools they operate. While Chapters 24 & 25 govern our DCPS schools, many families have no idea about the different student discipline policies that govern each of the charter LEAs. In a city like ours, families exercise their right to choose on an almost yearly basis, yet most families tend to think about student discipline only when an issue arises.

Over the last three years of operation, our office has frequently mentioned the difficulties families experience as they transition for LEA to LEA due to the wide array of student discipline policies. Our office in partnership with Howard University School of Law worked to collect and conduct a comparative analysis of all of the LEA student discipline policies in the city in order to have a better understanding of the policies and to offer policy recommendations toward the streamlining of these policies in order to better serve the needs of students and their families. (<https://sboe.dc.gov/page/discipline>)

Families often feel alone and overwhelmed when figuring out how to move forward after the school makes a discipline decision for their student. All students and families should know their rights whether or not they seek to challenge a disciplinary decision. In the fall of 2018, our office, in partnership with the Every Student Every Day Coalition and the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education, created District of Columbia Student Discipline Guide to help students, families, and school staff navigate the new law, the Student Fair Access to School Amendment Act of 2018. This comprehensive guide not only understandably

explains the new rules for student/school discipline in all DC public schools, both DCPS and public charter schools, but it also highlights terms to know and breaks down organizational structures families and educators should understand. Furthermore, the guide connects families and educators to resources, both governmental and non-governmental, that can offer additional support as needed. This guide will be released at the end of February 2019 and distributed widely.

Safe Passage Toolkit: The safe passage of our students, as they travel to and from school, is paramount but we know that the instances of community violence that surrounds our schools and our communities puts the safety of our students, and the safety of our community at large, at risk. In FY18, we re-engaged with the community in the area of student safety and safe passage. Given the volume of RFAs concerning student safety, we worked to update and re-release our Safe Passage Community Resource Toolkit. The toolkit is a compilation of resources for families, schools, and communities based on the 6 E's from National Safe Routes to School that utilize a comprehensive and integrated approach for safe passage initiatives. (<https://sboe.dc.gov/page/safe-passage>)

Website Updates: Our website houses our Online Education and Community Resource Guide, our Information and Advocacy Resources and Tools, and our annual reports from years past. In FY18, we were also able to continue to revamp and update our website in order to be intuitive and interactive. In addition to adding more internally-developed resources and information from partner organizations, we have re-organized pages to include icons and other visual aids to ensure that anyone seeking specific information about public education in DC is able to find it with ease. (studentadvocate.dc.gov)

Third, we support the needs of families, educators, and the community through our workshops, trainings, and strategic outreach efforts.

Our relationships with families and community members are at the center of our work. We have continued to strengthen these relationships through our outreach efforts and build capacity and offer additional support through our workshops and trainings.

In addition to the increased volume of class through our RFA line, we increased our interactions and contacts with families, engaging over 3300 individuals beyond our office walls in SY 2017-18. 53% of our outreach efforts involved engaging families, communities, and individual schools. This focus allows us to tailor our services to the needs of those most impacted by our work. 47% of our outreach centered on government and organizational stakeholders. We strive to create and sustain partnership with agencies and organizations that allow us to work collaboratively and more effectively as we meet the needs of our families. Along with our position in the education landscape, this balance of our work reinforces our ability to serve as liaisons between all stakeholders.

To date in SY 2018-19 for Quarter 1 & 2, more than 4000 students and families have been touched by our office via one of our engagement and outreach modes at 49 meetings and events, which also includes the workshops and trainings hosted by our office.

Parent Leadership Series: In SY 2017-18 we rebranded our Parent Leadership Series (formerly named “Parent Empowerment Series”) by continuing to focus our work on family partnership and deepening families’ knowledge of the public education landscape. To further this work we continued our working relationship with SBOE members by partnering with Karen Williams (State Board President and Ward 7 representative) and Markus Batchelor (Ward 8 representative).

We expanded this work from Ward 7 to Ward 8 by hosting various conversations on how the public education system works, connecting knowledge to advocacy, DC government budgeting, and understanding how DC budget impacts schools. For this series we took a more disaggregated approach in an effort to reach more families in the

places they already trust and are showing up. Our approach included hosting parent leadership sessions in partnership with a wider array of schools, community-based organizations, and service providers who work specifically in Ward 7 & 8.

<https://sboe.dc.gov/node/1211770>)

Special Education: Our office continues to be committed to supporting parents and students who need specialized instruction. In SY 2017-18 we hosted our informational sessions on special education in Wards 1, 3, 6, and 8 in partnership with DC State Board of Education Representatives, Councilmembers, and ward-based education organizations. Thanks to our government and organizational stakeholders, we changed the format of the session from panel presentations to small group table discussions in which providers had the opportunity to interact with families and respond to questions and concerns specific to their student's educational needs. This series is focused on providing information to families about provisions of federal and local special education law, the difference between 504 plans and IEPs, prompting evaluation, determining eligibility for services, and understanding procedural safeguards. This forum also gives families the opportunity to interact with local level special education experts to workshop their specific concerns.

In addition to our workshop series, we have expanded the resources and tools related to special education on our website, including our workshop presentation, as both a printable handout and a webinar; a list of special education acronyms, abbreviations, and definitions; a list of resources and organizational supports; our ask sheets; and our Parent & Family Go-To Guide. (<https://sboe.dc.gov/node/1153932>)

Bullying: In SY 2017-18, our office launched our first bullying prevention workshop in partnership with DC Office of Human Rights Citywide Bullying Prevention Program. This workshop was developed to provide clarity regarding local laws and definitions of

bullying, to discuss bullying prevention practices, and to share accessible resources and supports for students and families.

We were intentional about partnering with offices and organizations that were able to share practical tools and techniques with parents and other caring adults. These workshops provide resources and supports to families, while also provided a facilitated forum to discuss proactive steps that families can take to reduce incidents of victimization and aggressive behavior. We have released a recording of our conversation about bullying prevention in DC which is available on our website for those unable to attend the live workshops. (<https://sboe.dc.gov/node/1334956>)

Parent and Student Advisory Committee: Parent and student voice is essential. Within our education landscape, we must create more spaces for parents and students to express their thoughts and concerns about a system that relies on their participation. In school year 2017-18 we convened the first Parent & Student Advisory Committee for our office. The intent of the advisory committee was to provide an outlet for parents and students to assist the office in better serving families throughout DC. In this space, we were able to have conversations and discuss potential solutions to issues that impact education stakeholders. The committee was composed of DC Public Schools (DCPS) and public charter school parents and students, with representation from all 8 wards.

During our bimonthly meetings, members were able to discuss systemic issues plaguing our education landscape. With feedback collected from their respective communities, committee members were able to have broader conversations about short and long-term goals for public education in the District. We learned several lessons in piloting our advisory committee. Much of what we learned is now serving to support the multi-generational and collaborative approach we are taking with the student safety and safe passage work we are doing in this current school year 2018-19. Student voice does not need to be prioritized solely in student engagement events. Our conversations about

safe passage in SY 2018-19 is a reflection of our commitment to create space for students in all conversations about improving public education.

<https://sboe.dc.gov/page/parent-student-advisory-committee>)

Language Access: We have done significant outreach to non-native or limited English speaking communities. This outreach has been made possible through our relationships with other organizations and government offices who have trusted relationships within those communities. We are committed to developing deeper relationships within those communities in a effort to reach more families in order to offer support and resources. We utilize Language Line services in order to communicate with callers to our RFA line who do not speak English. While access to the Language Line has been valuable to our office, we know that in order to serve all communities well we need to be present within those communities through other trusted persons and entities. To that end, our community outreach to communities non- or limited-English speaking communities has been possible through collaborative efforts with the Mayor's offices on various affairs (i.e. African Affairs, etc.) and community-based or religious organizations that are trusted in those communities. In SY 2017-18, we were more intentional with our outreach strategy by releasing advertisements for our office, resources, and upcoming events in multiple languages. We also offer live interpretation services for Spanish and Amharic-speaking families during our bullying and special education workshops to eliminate English mastery as a barrier for access.

Moreover, we have implemented additional language access improvements to be in compliance with the Language Access Act by translating portions of our website, materials, and our outreach brochure into all of the required languages (e.g. Spanish, French, Vietnamese, Amharic, Chinese and Korean). We have translated our Go-To Guide and other outreach materials as well as portions of our webpage into all of the required languages (e.g. Spanish, French, Vietnamese, Amharic, Chinese and Korean).

Our office finished the translation of all of our materials into all six languages. While each of the resource materials are in various stages of production, some have been posted to our website, some will be printed in the coming months, and others have already been printed and distributed. It is our hope to have this completed by April.

Needs Remain

As the work of our office continues to grow, so does the demand for our office to do more and to be more increasingly more present within the community and schools to support families and schools.

We understand the great need for our services within the communities we serve, and we are committed to doing all that we can to support families and schools. Even with our commitment to this work, the need for additional staff to support this work is essential. An additional FTE would allow our office to increase our presence within the community and support even more families and schools. We are currently in need of a Spanish-speaking staff person and additional administrative support in order to reach more families and to increase our technical support to schools/local education agencies.

Conclusion

Before I close, I want to underscore the importance of demystifying our system of public education in the District. The work that I have highlighted here today speaks to the office's commitment to interjecting the voice of students, families, and communities into decision-making. The choices that individual families make regarding their students' education is impacted by the structure. Understanding the changing governance structure is essential as families shape their advocacy. Currently in school year 2018-19 we are continuing to build upon all of the aforementioned work and have scaled and deepened our work with the following projects and initiatives:

Family Engagement Framework: Since opening in 2015, our office has made the follow recommendation around family engagement: "Design a framework for the regular citywide engagement of families and communities on issues of public education and the policy

development decision-making processes. Make the authentic engagement of families and communities a mandatory part of the policy process and find room for their voices at the decision-making table.”

Given our position within DC’s public education landscape, we recognize how certain systems and processes within education contribute to barriers in engagement. Each year our office has seen how the lack of a citywide framework for family engagement has made way for public scandals and an increase in the anxiety and levels of distrust of the families who do choose our public systems of education. With no action on this area to date, our office has decided to move forward the conversation of designing a citywide, and school-wide, family engagement framework. In December 2018, our office planned and brought a panel of local family engagement experts to testify on family engagement at the DC State Board of Education public hearing. In realizing the importance of this work, our office is planning a series of convenings – roundtable discussions, school and community focus groups, and a working group – around the development of a citywide framework for family engagement. We have started this work and it will continue over the course of this school year.

Ward 8 Safe Passage work: We are expanding our work around student safety and safe passage in Wards 6 and 8. In Ward 8 specifically, we have established a Ward 8 Student Safety and Safe Passage Working Group, which includes students, parents, Ward 8 non-profits and community-based organizations, government offices and agencies, and schools/LEAs. We are working with Ward 8 students to support the facilitation and the leadership of this work. The goals of these conversations are to bring education, health and safety, and community leaders together in order to deepen our discussion on how to address and take action regarding the community violence impacting students, schools, and communities.

Race, Equity, and Inclusion resource: In our work, we highlight the need for equity in public education through the lens of family engagement. We know that race and class serve as barriers to engagement and all too often go unaddressed in engagement efforts. These inequities show up in the work that we do daily and regularly come up as the undercurrent of conversations we have with families and schools. To further our commitment to tackling issues of race, class, opportunity gaps, and persistent disparities that plague the students and families we serve, we are creating a school-facing race, equity, and inclusion toolkit that would provide school communities with a framework to create and sustain race, equity, and inclusion training in schools. This interactive online toolkit will provide resources for school leaders to discuss issues of educational inequities with their school community, along with strategies for reaching out to neighbors and community members to collaboratively make our schools more equitable and just spaces.

Student Discipline Guide: With the passing of the Student Fair Access to School Amendment Act in 2018, we have noticed the schools and families are confused about not only the changes the law made to student discipline policies but also what the policy changes mean for their child. In partnership with the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education and the Every Student Ever Day Coalition, our office has worked to develop a comprehensive guide designed to explain to families and educators the new rules for student/school discipline in all DC public schools, both DCPS and public charter schools. The guide also highlights terms to know and breaks down organizational structures families and educators should understand. Furthermore, the guide connects families and educators to resources, both governmental and non-governmental, that can offer additional support as needed. This guide will be released at the end of February 2019 and distributed widely.

School Selection resources: In school year 2018-19, we have developed a several resources to support families in the school selection process, including tools and conversation starters for families to support their efforts in finding the right school for their child by raising

questions regarding teacher quality, school culture and environment, and race/equity. This resource will be available in the spring.

LEA Technical Support: In SY 2018-19, our office has started to offer additional support to individual schools and LEAs on various topics ranging from family engagement practice to school discipline to special education and everything in between. Each school year we do extensive outreach to schools to offer resources and supports. This school year we have gone one step further in offering technical support to help schools being proactive in their approach to engaging in meaningful ways with families and mitigating issues as they arise.

So in closing...

Over the past three and a half school years, it has been an honor to serve families and education stakeholders in the District. During our years of operation, we have served over 11,000 families through our RFA process and through our trainings, workshops, and outreach efforts. This work has only been made possible due to partnership with families, community-based organizations, and government and organizational partners. As we continue to scale our work, we look forward to serving families and students in more direct, comprehensive, and collaborative ways.

Finally, if there is any person interested in contacting our office, they can do so by calling us at 202-741-4692 or emailing us at student.advocate@dc.gov. Again, thank you all for this opportunity to testify. I welcome any questions that you might have.