



**D.C. POLICY  
CENTER**

**PUBLIC HEARING ON**

**Bill 22-594, “Student Fair Access to School Act of 2017”  
and  
Bill 22-179, “D.C. Public Schools Alternatives to Suspension Amendment  
of 2017”**

**Before the Committee on Education  
Councilmember David Grosso, Chairman**

**January 30, 2018 10AM  
John A. Wilson Building**

**Testimony of Chelsea Coffin  
Director, Education Policy Initiative  
D.C. Policy Center**

Good morning, Chairman Grosso and members of the Committee on Education. My name is Chelsea Coffin and I am the Director of the Education Policy Initiative at the D.C. Policy Center, an independent, non-partisan think tank committed to advancing policies for a strong and vibrant economy in the District of Columbia. I thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Student Fair Access to School Act of 2017.

If the bill is enacted, the proposed partial ban on out-of-school suspensions would have a large impact on the District of Columbia's schools and students. From looking at reasons and grade levels of last year's 13,000 suspensions, we estimate that about half the suspensions in D.C.'s traditional public and public charter schools would be prohibited under the bill.

As this would require a large shift in school culture, we took a close look at existing discipline policies in D.C. and surrounding school districts. Based on what we learned and published in a study, we have three issues to raise for the Committee's consideration: (i) unintended consequences of a potential shift to more in-school suspensions; (ii) need for adequate resources to support interventions that would reduce the use of suspensions; and (iii) a closer examination of middle schools and their students, who would be especially impacted by the bill.

1. **First, we recommend that the Committee consider better reporting of in-school suspensions.** A partial ban on out-of-school suspensions will not automatically increase learning time or eliminate disproportionalities in discipline. There is a real risk that schools (especially without additional supports) will simply replace out-of-school suspensions with in-school suspensions. This happened in Chicago: after the school district implemented policies to reduce instructional time lost to suspensions, in-school suspensions doubled

for African American students.<sup>1</sup> If this happens in D.C., the bill's provisions could obscure the underlying problems, rather than solve them.

In-school suspensions keep students on site, which is a step in the right direction. However, they are not inherently inclusionary: we don't know how much in-school suspensions allow students to access and complete academic work. Each school is different: some only mention in-school suspensions in passing in their policies, and others go as far as to define what an in-school suspension looks like in practice.

Furthermore, in-school suspensions appear to be underreported, and with more in-school suspensions, the city risks losing information on discipline patterns. More troubling, there is also clear evidence of non-reporting: several LEAs reported no in-school suspension for discipline purposes but reported hundreds of in-school suspensions for attendance purposes in the last school year. The city needs a better picture of how many students experience in-school suspension so it can continue to evaluate how groups of students are impacted by disciplinary actions.

2. **Second, we recommend that the Committee focus on the resources necessary to support interventions that would reduce the use of suspensions.** Many of the strategies the bill offers to purposefully reduce suspensions are similar to ongoing initiatives.<sup>2</sup> Increasing resources to strengthen these existing programs would be an important contribution. The bill does include new support to complete trauma-informed postsecondary degrees or certificate programs, which would be a critical next step.

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<sup>1</sup> Stevens, W.D., Sartain, L., Allensworth, E.M., and Levenstein, R. (2015)

<sup>2</sup> Office of the State Superintendent for Education (2018)

3. **Third, we recommend the Committee specifically consider middle schools and their students, who would be especially impacted by the bill.** There are more suspensions per middle school grade than elementary or high school grades. Middle school grades are currently included in the more restrictive ban of kindergarten through grade 8 suspensions, which are reserved for incidents that cause or threaten significant bodily harm or emotional distress. Suspensions are more frequent for middle school students and these years set the stage for high school behavior patterns, so any shift in discipline policies will have an outsized impact in middle schools.

School discipline is necessary, but it should not be a conduit for reduced learning time and easy exclusion. However, simply banning the practice will not eliminate these outcomes. Our objective should be fortifying existing strategies that mobilize students, administrators, and parents or guardians to adapt to a system that promotes alternatives to suspensions. This is challenging and may require new approaches if existing strategies have not been successful.

The city should look externally to other districts that have implemented similar policies and internally to DCPS and the DC Public Charter School Board as well as D.C. schools like Kingsman Academy PCS and Ron Brown College Preparatory HS that have proactively reduced suspensions at the school level to anticipate unintended consequences of a top-down discipline reform.

Thank you very much for your time, and I look forward to the continued discussion.

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