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Committee on Transportation and the Environment Public Hearing: B23-393, The Safe Passage to School Expansion Act of 2019

Written Testimony of Dan Davis, Chief Student Advocate  
Office of the Student Advocate, DC State Board of Education

Good morning, Chairwoman Cheh, Councilmember Grosso, members of the committee, and staff. Thank you for this opportunity to testify. My name is Dan Davis and I am honored to serve in the role of the Chief Student Advocate for the District of Columbia and lead the Office of the Student Advocate, which is an independent office housed within the DC State Board of Education (SBOE). The Office of the Student Advocate was created to help families navigate the complex educational landscape that exists within the District of Columbia. Our office supports students, parents, and families in their advocacy through parent education, one-on-one coaching, resource supports, and trainings in order to amplify the voices of families and communities in processes and decision-making. We provide families access to valuable resources and amplify the power those families already possess. Within our work, we noticed that there was a high volume of families with concerns related to student safety traveling to-and-from school.

Education is the foundation needed to succeed in an increasingly competitive world, but it is hard for many of our students to achieve academic success when their safety is in jeopardy. The safe passage of our students traveling to-and-from school is paramount to their success. Before we can adequately address closing the achievement gap within DC public and charter schools, we must assure that every student is safe. When we listen to our community, collaborate on solutions and put in the work, our students will thrive.

Too many families in DC have to worry about the dangers threatening their children outside of their homes and schools. Given the volume of calls concerning student safety, we updated and re-released our Safe Passage Community Resource Toolkit. This toolkit is a compilation of resources for families, schools, and communities. We promote using a comprehensive and integrated approach to increasing safety. This toolkit focuses on the 6 E's prescribed by the National Safe Routes to School initiative: education, encouragement, engineering, enforcement, evaluation, and equity. We have also facilitated Safe Passage working groups with community stakeholders and students across multiple wards. These groups are pivotal in creating solutions that address the unique safety concerns of our diverse communities.

For example, in Ward 8, we were able to create a cross-sector, multi-stakeholder working group that was guided by student voice. This collective was able to establish the "Safe Spots" initiative that is currently a joint pilot between the Deputy Mayor for Education and our office.

We used input from community stakeholders to coordinate with local agencies, businesses and organizations. “Safe Spots” are local businesses and organizations that have agreed to serve as a safe haven for students in fear of danger. These “Safe Spots” are located along two pilot Safe Passage routes in our Anacostia and Congress Heights communities. Over 20 organizations agreed to serve as a safe space for children and the list is open for growth.

We recently expanded these safe passage efforts outside of Ward 8. The facilitation process used to establish these initiatives is now being emulated across the District. We learned that needs vary based on location. In upper Ward 4, safe passage concerns revolve around traffic safety. We are gathering various community stakeholders to identify specific locations where the volume of vehicular traffic along paths to school impacts student safety. Currently, we are attempting to engage more DC public and charter schools, organizations and community members.

In Ward 7, we have focused on violence and traffic safety. To date, we have facilitated preliminary working group sessions. In these sessions, we are identifying key stakeholders who are actively working to keep students safe should be included in this process. We have also been able to organize how we will survey areas of need across the various neighborhoods in Ward 7.

Furthermore, our office has been able to amplify the safe passage efforts of multiple Local Education Agencies (LEAs). Richard Wright Public Charter School organized the “Man the Block” campaign, which actively recruited community stakeholders to patrol safe passage routes. Center City Public Charter School – Congress Heights Campus – has coordinated with “Man the Block” to have volunteers walk children safely along their paths home. Our office has been able to devote resources to establish a consistent physical presence along these routes on a weekly basis.

While these efforts may be a step in the right direction, much more is needed from all stakeholders to expand these efforts. Various communities across the nation have been able to reduce the number of students affected by violence by establishing safe passage strategies on a school-by-school basis. Our conversations from communities at the top of our District to the neighborhoods at our most southern point revealed three themes regardless of location, student make up, or sector:

- Consistent communication between LEAs that share a neighborhood is vital to safety
- Student-led ensures student buy-in
- Student public transportation needs are commuter transportation needs

We must continue to expand safe passage routes on a school-by-school basis. Schools must be a part of the creation of these routes because they are most familiar with the concerns of the students and families along these routes. There must also be a continued effort to expand the number of local businesses and organizations designated as “Safe Spots” along these routes.

We must invest in community organizations that will recruit and train volunteers to actively patrol safe passage routes. These volunteers should include local residents, parents and family members. They should report suspicious behavior along routes that have fewer "Safe Spots". Volunteers should fill in the blind spots of these safe passage routes.

We must collaborate with the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement's Violence Intervention and Prevention Program to respond to incidents along designated safe passage routes. This could help minimize involvement from the Metropolitan Police Department and establish a more community-based process of ensuring safety.

We cannot neglect homeless students while creating safe passage initiatives. Supplemental funding should be directed to school buildings for students experiencing housing instability to cover their transportation costs. Homeless shelters and service providers for homeless families are often located further away from the school parents chose before their housing crisis. Providing resources to school buildings will allow school staff and families to partner on solutions that are unique to their circumstance.

Ensuring the safe passage of all children will require a multi-layered approach from all community stakeholders. We must ensure that our efforts are consistently assessed and that our successes are replicated. This is an evolving issue within our city that requires adaptation and innovation. In order to fully engage the public in this effort, we must demonstrate that our level of commitment is substantial and consistent.

In closing, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to testify. I welcome any questions you might have and look forward to engagement more on this important topic. 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](mailto:student.advocate@dc.gov). Again, I thank you for this opportunity to testify.