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Committee on Education Public Oversight Roundtable
The Future of School Reform in the District of Columbia
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Official Written Testimony of Faith Gibson Hubbard, Chief Student Advocate
Office of the Student Advocate, DC State Board of Education
Delivered by Dan Davis, Student Advocate

Good morning, Chairman Grosso, members of the committee, and staff. Thank you for this opportunity to testify. My name is Dan Davis, and I serve as the Student Advocate for the Office of the Student Advocate, which is an independent office housed within the DC State Board of Education (SBOE). Today I am here to testify on behalf of Faith Gibson Hubbard, the Chief Student Advocate for the District of Columbia.

The Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 (PERAA) brought forth mayoral control and removed day-to-day oversight from the local school board. Mayoral control led to the division of educational oversight into three bodies— the Executive Office of the Mayor, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), and the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). With operational accountability diverted to the Mayor, the local school board became the State Board of Education, an elected body responsible for advising the State Superintendent of Education on policy matters and for approving state-level policies.

While mayoral control sought to provide additional accountability for a struggling school system, the Mayor's lack of proximity to schools has limited community voice not only within the system itself but also within our structures and processes of decision making. The lack of a local school board inadvertently removed a direct mechanism for community members to raise questions regarding public education and to address school-related problems.

The Parent and Student Empowerment Act of 2013 was passed in order to remedy the issue of reduced opportunities for engagement in public education for parents, students, and

community members. The legislation addressed community members' need for a direct advocate within government who focused primarily on ensuring that the newly complex education system was more accessible. As a result, the Office of the Student Advocate was established.

Since our office was opened in 2015, our mission has been to support and guide families and students in achieving equal access to public education. We provide this support and guidance through advocacy, outreach, and information services. While we want families to be able to understand our public education landscape and to be aware of available supports, we want this understanding and awareness to equip families with resources and tools they need to be their own best advocates.

Various rationales, noticeable trends, persistent disparities, and a drastic need for educational improvement in DC made mayoral control desirable. While our model for mayoral control allows for schools to be more fully incorporated into city government, allowing for greater coordination for agencies serving youth across the District, and increases democratic accountability for school performance, a need for tweaks and adjustments remains. This shift in governance was intended to provide greater accountability and aligned, consistent leadership that in many ways that works for DCPS; however, it does not provide the kind of comprehensive, system wide improvements our citywide systems of public education need. Although the Mayor does have control over our public schools, her control is not equal. If we really explore what our model of mayoral control means, it is evident that the Mayor has control specifically over DCPS, not public charter schools. This is a fact that many students and their families do not understand. While DCPS is an agency of the city, with policies and procedures tied directly to our regulations and city codes, public charter schools are independent local education agencies (LEAs) that have exclusive control over their LEA, policies, and procedures and are not subject to the same level of oversight nor mayoral control. This structural challenge in our system is a barrier to not only cross-sector collaboration and innovation, but it also leaves our system without the vital mechanisms and supports for a

system that is student and family-centric. Student and family engagement and collaboration remains an area in desperate need of improvement, and ripe for opportunity and progress. In our work each day we work to fill the void and spark broader collaboration not just *for* families but also *with* families as true partners in the process.

The organizational chart for our city governance places “residents” at the top of the chart, but as we have seen on a daily basis too often the families we interact with feel they are at the bottom and not considered at all. Most families are unsure of how the city’s governance structure or educational organizations are supposed to work for them. Most students, parents, and families are familiar with their school site. When issues arise, many are unclear on which body to escalate those concerns to. In our conversations with residents through our Request for Assistance (RFA) line, parents often conflate the State Board of Education with the school board. This confusion about avenues for redress within government is amplified with the lack of proximity between the Mayor and individual schools and classrooms.

PERAA set forth few measures that mention public engagement practices, which include the establishment of an education ombudsman, required DCPS Chancellor meetings, and required SBOE public meetings. With the structures created by PERAA in response to the lack of accountability and the lack of oversight came increased complexity of an expanded governance structure that exacerbates those very issues.

There are other facets of PERAA that are either unclear, lacking specificity, or not at all included that need to be addressed in order to increase capacity across our public education system. The following questions must be answered:

- Does PERAA explicitly specify the relationship between education oversight agencies (OSSE, DME, SBOE)?
- Does PERAA account for the rapid growth of the charter sector?
- Does PERAA address the need for cross-sector collaboration?

- Does PERAA include information regarding programmatic substance of education reform to improve student achievement?

PERAA and mayoral control have shifted public education oversight and accountability, and there have been some improvements in the past ten years. Even with that improvement, we have still missed red flags for systems and processes in need of amendment or development because we have lost these pathways for engagement.

Our public education system is much more disaggregated than it once was within LEAs, sectors, and education agencies. The lack of collaboration within LEAs has proven to be a challenge when it comes to sharing learning practices. Issues regarding special education, student safety, and safe passage that arise across the city go unchecked due to the challenges of cross-sector collaboration. The lack of coordination across education agencies has resulted in a misalignment of policies, resources, and implementation and practices.

Our office has worked diligently to foster cross-sector collaboration and to build trust of the community by ensuring that the voices of students, parents, and community members are interjected into the public education system. Examples of this work include our parent leadership series, special education workshops, student discipline analysis, and parent and student advisory committee.

Our Parent Leadership Series involves engaging parents and other resident stakeholders by hosting various conversations on how the public education system works, connecting our knowledge to advocacy, DC government budgeting 101, and understanding how the DC budget impacts schools. This work has been done in conjunction with members of the State Board of Education and DC Fiscal Policy Institute.

Our “Know Your Rights” Special Education Workshop Series is designed to support the needs of families who have students with special education needs in navigating and understanding how

special education works in the District within their LEA, while also supporting their ability to know their rights through access to information and organizational support. For this series we have partnered with members of the State Board of Education, DC Council, and community groups to host a conversation that includes partners who regularly work in the special education space to support families. Those partners include: the Office the State Superintendent of Education, DC Public Schools, the DC Special Education Cooperative, Children’s Law Center, the Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education, Advocates for Justice and Education, and Disability Rights DC at University Legal Services.

Our office, in partnership with Howard University School of Law, conducted a comparative analysis of student discipline policies for DCPS and each public charter LEA in order to develop resource tools for families that would support their school selection and transition processes. These tools will allow for parents and students to explore their school options in a more informed way. We also want to help parents be more proactive with school discipline policies instead of reactive or when a problem arises.

This school year, we created and launched our Parent & Student Advisory Committee to provide an outlet for parents and students to assist the Office of the Student Advocate in better serving families throughout DC and to foster conversations and uncover solutions about the issues all stakeholders face within DC’s public education landscape.

Each year our office releases an annual report to summarize our work during the previous academic year and to make policy recommendations based upon those findings. For the last few years we have focused our work on equity in public education through the lens of student and parent engagement. The full versions of our annual reports can be found on our website at studentadvocate.dc.gov, but I wanted to highlight one particular recommendation relevant to our conversation today. PERAA provides rules and structures for how public schools should be governed, but our city is in need of something greater than a new governance structure. Through our work we have come to believe that we are in desperate need of a citywide

strategy for family and student engagement. We strongly believe that designing a framework for regular citywide engagement of families and communities on issues of public education, policy development, and decision-making processes is essential. The authentic engagement of families and communities should be a mandatory part of the policy process. Moving forward without thinking about this in a meaningful way will continue to push our public education system, both DCPS and public charter, down a path of less accountability and connectivity to our primary consumers, students and parents. Creating more pathways for engagement and collaboration with students and families has to be a primary focus of our actions moving forward in a way that can work to foster trust and build relationship in places where it is lacking due to a legacy of neglect and lack of real consideration.

We appreciate this opportunity to offer our thoughts regarding the current and future state of public education reform in our city. While we have made strides forward it is clear that there are vast areas for improvement. We must collectively continue to shine the light of transparency in various spaces while also continuing to make room at our decision making tables for students and families to be at the forefront of our system. Creating a student and family-centric system, that functions more proactively than reactively in response to student needs, requires us to think in a more holistic manner about our entire public education system and how we want to move forward. What kind of city do we want to be from a public education perspective? We have to question if we are really taking steps that are truly in the best interest of families or if we are holding our ground because of ideologies that are not central to the needs of students and families. We look forward to continuing these conversations collaboratively and we are committed to continuing to focus our individual work on ways to champion and amplify the voices of families within the education system and the city as a whole. Embracing the voices of our students and their parents is our pathway to moving our system.

In closing, 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, I thank you for this opportunity to testify and welcome any questions that you may have.