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**Committee on Education – FY 2017 Performance Oversight Hearing
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**Official Written Testimony of Faith Gibson Hubbard, Chief Student Advocate
Office of the Student Advocate, DC State Board of Education**

Good Morning, Chairman Grosso, members of the committee, and staff. Thank you for this opportunity to testify. My name is Faith Gibson Hubbard, and I am honored to lead the work of the Office of the Student Advocate as the Chief Student Advocate for the District of Columbia. The work of our office primarily focuses on equalizing the balance of power between local education agencies and our public education governance structure in the favor of students and families in order to guide, support, and equip them with the resources they need to achieve equal access to a quality public education in the District of Columbia.

It should come as no surprise that despite the best of intentions, the public education landscape in our city is extremely complex. The uniqueness of the public education system in the District is both an opportunity and a barrier for students and families and finding ways to navigate the system can be extremely daunting. For families and their individual needs, understanding how the public education system should work for their child can be a huge challenge. In this landscape, the Office of the Student Advocate serves as a convener, connector, and liaison focused on supporting the needs of students and families. In our work, amplifying the voices of students, families, and communities within all facets of public education, and areas that impact public education, is vital, not only for the success of our students but for the city as a whole. This work entails supporting, equipping, and positioning

families to be their own best advocates through trainings, resource supports, one-on-one coaching, and leadership development.

The work of our office is enhanced through collaborative partnerships with government entities and community organizations on topics of importance to families through office-developed panels, workshops, and community events; early identification of issues through one-on-one conversations with parents, educators, and community organizations; and highlighting policy gaps through policy one-pagers, how-tos, and online trainings. Our outreach, advocacy, and engagement with families serves to eliminate barriers to collaboration through the coordination of siloed efforts, raising issues of importance to parents regardless of political agenda or priority of government agencies, and representation of parent and student voice in task forces, government stakeholder meetings, and public hearings.

The work of our office focuses on four strategic goals:

- **First**, to remove the existing power imbalance and shift the balance of power in favor of students, families and communities by convening stakeholders at all levels around topics of community importance;
- **Secondly**, to develop and support the knowledge base of students, parents, and community stakeholders;
- **Third**, to ensure that family and community perspectives are included in all relevant public education conversations; and
- **Lastly**, to mobilize community-level leadership, specifically parent and student leadership, in grassroots education advocacy.

In fiscal year (FY) 2017, our office worked to meet these strategic goals focusing on the following programs and initiatives:

Throughout school year (SY) 2016-17 and 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, 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 of student and parent voice. In this space, we focus on ensuring that the voices of students and families are at the forefront of all public education policy discussions and processes, which creates access to quality educational opportunities, resources, and services. As the city works 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.

Request for Assistance

As required by our statute, our office operates a public education hotline, or Request for Assistance (RFA) line. The RFA line supports our ability to work directly with students, parents, families, and community members to answer any public education related questions and inquiries. We consider our RFA line to be a “311 system” for public education through which we provide relevant resources, information, and appropriate agency or organization referrals to meet the specific needs of the caller. In addition to resources and referrals, the RFA line allows our office to provide one-on-one coaching to families on a variety of public education issues. In SY 2016-17, we started answering our RFA line LIVE Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. This change in process allowed our office to more than double the amount of families served through our Request for Assistance line from 135 calls in SY 2015-16 to nearly 350 calls in SY 2016-17. This growth represents a 150% increase in calls in SY 2016-17 as compared with SY 2015-16. To date, Quarters 1 and 2 of SY 2017-18, we have supported 220 individuals through our Request for Assistance (RFA) process. This accounts for a percentage increase of over 120% from where we were this time last year.

The majority of the RFAs to our office came from Wards 7 and 8, which have the largest number of school-aged children in the city. We believe that our increased presence in Wards 7 and 8 – as a result of our “Know Your Rights” special education workshops (in Wards 4, 5, 7, and 8) and Ward 7 and 8 Parent Leadership Series – also fueled the increased number of RFAs from those wards.

Roughly two-thirds of our RFAs came from students and families being served by DCPS. More calls from DCPS families is a result of several factors: 1) DCPS is the largest LEA in the District with approximately 115 school locations allowing support information sharing to flow easier from school to staff to parents and families in all 8 wards.

One of the top issue areas for our office in SY 2016-17 were inquiries regarding enrollment and access. Even with development of a common lottery system, which simplified the process of applying to and enrolling in school, confusion still remained at various times during the school year for varying reasons. In addition to enrollment, questions regarding attendance and truancy were also top concerns. DME's Every Day Counts! Task Force, which focuses on issues regarding truancy and attendance, was a positive step in the right direction to make this process works for families, but many families expressed a lack of understanding and knowledge regarding our citywide school attendance policies. Other top issues included student safety, student discipline, special education, and academics and instruction.

Additionally, 67% of DCPS callers identified as families with a student attending their in-boundary school, or school of right. While our interactions with public charter school families have also increased through our RFA process, we are continuing to identify better ways to reach and engage with public charter families and school leaders.

Enrollment and access concerns represented over 15% of all RFA inquiries made from in-boundary DCPS families. DCPS in-boundary parents also identified issues regarding discipline and student safety 40% of the time when contacting us with requests for assistance. This co-occurrence alludes to some of the underlying equity conversations on race and economic status echoed in the dialogue around walkability. Additionally, 50% of public charter school parents identified discipline and safety as the reason for their RFA inquiry. Unlike DCPS families, public charter students and their families find themselves with substantially limited avenues of redress regarding discipline/student safety incidents in comparison to DCPS.

Resources Supports and Tools

In addition to our RFA line, our office also operates an online Education & Community Resource Guide. Our Online Education & Community Resource Guide is a continuously evolving resource that currently has more than 400 resource listings organized into 20 category areas. The first publicly available citywide initiative of its kind, our guide provides students, parents, families, and communities across all 8 wards with a roadmap to getting started in navigating the public education landscape in DC. This guide was developed to highlight organizations and government agencies in the sphere of public education that provide critical services to residents across DC. This resource acknowledges the work that is already being done by countless government agencies, offices, and community-based organizations while connecting families to those vital resources in one centralized location.

In SY 2016-17 and continuing into FY 18, we embarked on revamping our website to ensure it is an easily accessible venue for sharing resources and information to families and communities. Our website hosts our Online Education & Community Resource Guide along with other educational resources:

- Advocacy & Lobbying toolkit
- Attendance & Truancy resources
- Behavioral & Mental Health resources
- Effective Communication toolkit
- Enrollment resources
- Graduation Requirements resources
- Homelessness resources
- Parent Leadership toolkit
- Right to Know Ask Sheets
- Safe Passage resource toolkit
- Special Education & Other School Supports resources
- Student Leadership information & resources

- Testing & Assessments resources
- DC Public Education Governance Structure

Our “Right to Know” ask sheets serve as a guide, providing helpful conversation starters so parents and families feel informed. Knowing what questions to ask during interactions with teachers and administrators helps ensure that communication is more effective and interactions are more meaningful. Ask sheets are available for the following topics:

- Absences
- Achievement
- Attendance
- Behavior
- Enrollment
- Homelessness
- PARCC Scores
- PK3/PK4
- Response to Intervention (RTI)
- Special Education
- Tardiness

Parent & Family Go-To-Guide

In FY 18, we have compiled our resources into one handy guide for families, our Parent & Family Go-To-Guide. This collection of parent and student-centered documents have been previously offered in isolation on our website and made available during outreach events, trainings, and workshops. This collection of resources is a handheld guide designed to help families in navigating the public education system in DC. While most of the tools are designed to stand alone, some of the resources direct families to additional tools that can be paired with the guide in order to maximize their understanding of LEA-specific policies and procedures governing certain topic areas.

Outreach and Engagement

Our ability to work within communities to address the needs of students, families, and communities is made possible through our outreach efforts, stakeholder engagement, and development of partnerships and coalitions. In SY 2016-17, our office made substantial outreach efforts and commitments to work with community-based organizations, which allowed our office to connect more deeply with our most vulnerable families through organizational partners they trust. Developing and facilitating training sessions focused on understanding the public education governance structure for service provider, school-based and community-based organizations, and providers for families that are from at-risk or disenfranchised communities. Maximizing our relationship with these trusted community partners allows our office to work closely with families within their own communities.

In SY 2016-17, in addition to the increased volume of calls through our RFA line, we significantly increased our interactions and contacts with families, engaging with over 2000 individuals outside of our office walls. We intentionally increased our outreach to parents, families, service providers, and government agencies that serve families in need of support from the District's social safety net by attending over 200 events and meetings citywide taking part in relevant public education conversations. 57% of our public engagement and outreach efforts involved interactions with families, communities, and individual schools. This level of engagement allowed our office to provide services tailored to the needs of schools and families. 43% of our engagement and outreach efforts focused on governmental, community-based, and organizational stakeholders. This balance of our work reinforced our ability to serve as liaisons between all stakeholders. To date in SY 2017-18 for Quarters 1 & 2, more than 900 students and families have been touched by our office via one of our engagement and outreach modes.

Student Discipline

In SY 2016-17, 15 percent of RFA calls our office received dealt with issues of student discipline and 16 percent of RFAs focused on issues of student safety. While these issues have distinct differences, we know that both issue areas are closely related to each other and often times

connect to issues of special education and truancy. We have learned through our communication with families that students and parents lack clarity regarding the student discipline policies that govern our diversity of local education agencies (LEAs) and the schools they operate.

In an effort to support the needs of families and students in the area of student discipline, at the beginning of SY 2015-16 into SY 2016-17 our office partnered with Council for Court Excellence (CCE) to conduct a comparative analysis of student discipline policies for DCPS and each of the public charter LEAs. This partnership was established in an effort to craft and share policy recommendations for a streamlined discipline policy based on our analysis. While our first year of analysis was useful in the creation of a baseline in order to understand the wide array of discipline policies in the city, we quickly realized the need to do more work in this space in SY 2017-18 in order to make more meaningful strides toward the conversation of student discipline transformation.

During Fall 2017, our office, in partnership with students in the School Discipline seminar and the Education Rights Center (ERC) at Howard University School of Law, worked collaboratively to further analyze the discipline policies in the handbooks of roughly 60 LEAs in the District of Columbia. We conducted an analysis of LEA handbook policies in five areas:

- 1) Parents/students' rights and responsibilities
- 2) Statements of infractions and penalties
- 3) Due process, appeal process, and impartial decision makers
- 4) Zero tolerance/positive or restorative justice
- 5) Alternative education for students out of school due to discipline or illness.

We have shared our findings from that analysis with this committee previously (which can be found in our written testimony at studentadvocate.dc.gov) and are currently working to make our findings publicly available to move the discipline conversation forward. It is our goal to make our findings available in a format in which students and families, as well as all

stakeholders, can access it and make informed decisions. The broader findings and results confirm that clarity is very much needed, and a cross sector embrace of a streamlined, District-wide discipline policy would benefit all.

Parent Leadership Series

In SY 2016-17, we continued our parent leadership work in Ward 7. Early on in the development of the series, we focused our sessions on conversations regarding the nuts and bolts of starting a parent organization. As time progressed we quickly realized that families were more interested in capacity building conversations more focused on understanding the education governance structure, making the process of the city budget cycle and the functions of school budgets more tangible, which led to sessions geared toward advocacy at the school and city levels. We hosted panel discussions with elected and appointed city government officials to discuss ways in which parents can be engaged and actively participate in decision making outside of school buildings. This series also provided parents with a forum for discussion across sector lines sparking conversation and collaboration, thus building community and capacity to support schools and communities in Ward 7.

Late in SY 2016-17, we partnered with Markus Batchelor, the Ward 8 State Board of Education representative, to launch our parent work in Ward 8. In Ward 8 we took a different approach to initiating this work by starting off with focus group discussions with community-based organizations, school leaders, parents, and other public education stakeholders. Our work in Ward 8 is taking a more disaggregated approach in order to reach more families in the places they trust and where they are showing up. This approach includes hosting parent leadership sessions in partnership with a wider array of schools in various neighborhoods, in conjunction with community-based organizations, and services providers who work specifically in Ward 8. This approach is exciting for us as we know our reach into the Ward 8 community will be more impactful as we support parents in a wider variety of ways.

Our parent leadership work led to the creation of our online Parent Leadership Toolkit. This online resource includes tools to support building parent capacity within schools through parent organizations and gives step-by-step advocacy support to parents for their individual child or for work within their community. In addition to the tools focused on advocacy and capacity building, this resource also shares with parents, and other interested stakeholders, guides on how to understand the public education landscape in the District, budget tools to understand the city budget cycle and school budgets, as well as a how-to guide on navigating the public education system and its wealth of supports and services. Our online tool will allow us to touch even more families and communities throughout the District.

Special Education

Students and families are faced with many issues in our city but one of the top issues continues to be special education. Roughly 14 percent of students have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and receive special education services in DC, accounting for approximately 8,000 DCPS students and roughly 5,000 public charter students. In addition to students with IEPs, 504 plans also provide supports and accommodations for students. One of the first calls we received on our RFA line was in regard to special education and that trend has continued for the almost three years that our office has been in existence. In FY 17, nearly 13 percent of RFA calls received dealt with issues of special education and needs for referrals and supports. Moreover, special education is an issue area that is highly correlated with issue areas such as student discipline and enrollment and access.

To address the needs of not only families but also our education and community partners, our office hosts a wealth of special education resources and tools on our website. Those resources include:

- Helpful Special Education Acronyms, Abbreviations, and Definitions
- DC Special Education Resources and Organizational Supports
- Transforming Emotions to Effective Advocacy: Understanding the Issues Surrounding Special Education Rights in the District of Columbia

- Understanding the Difference Between 504 Plans and IEPs
- OSSE: Strong Start (DC’s early intervention program that provides services for infants and toddlers with disabilities and developmental delays)
- DCPS: Early Stages (for children between the ages of 2 years and 8 months and 5 years and 10 months that helps to identify delays a child may have)
- Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP)
- Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) For Beginners

This fall, we revived our Special Education “Know Your Rights” Workshop series. This 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 with their LEA, while also supporting their ability to know their rights through access to information and organizational support. This series works to support families with vital tools and relevant information for their advocacy efforts on behalf of their child to:

1. Prompt an evaluation,
2. Understand the IEP and 504 processes,
3. Raise questions regarding special education services
4. Provide tools to support effective communication for engaging schools,
5. Understand the basic provisions of the law, and
6. Understand how to activate their rights.

For this series we have partnered with members of the State Board of Education 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, Disability Rights DC at University Legal Services, and more. To date, we have hosted this workshop in Wards 3 and 8, and will host the workshop in Wards 6 and 7 this

spring. Additionally, we have turned a portion of this workshop into a webinar that will soon be available on our website 24/7 at studentadvocate.dc.gov.

Language Access

In FY 17 our office was very focused on strengthening our efforts and outreach in that area of reaching our non-English speaking and limited English proficient families. We began this effort by partnering with government offices and community based organizations that have trusted relationships within those communities. Making the appropriate connections with trusted organizations is one step, but we went a step further by ensuring our outreach materials – our office brochures, some of our resource support materials, and portions of our website – were translated into the six required languages for families. Additionally, we utilize the services of the Language Line to support the language need of any caller to our RFA line. Furthermore, because of the strong relationships that we have nurture with various schools, we have been able to support non-English speaking families with the support of interpretation from bilingual staff members at some of the schools.

In FY 18, we have are scaling up our language access efforts even more by working to translate all of our materials, including our resource guide for families into the six required languages. We have also started to provide interpretation services at select workshops and trainings our office hosts in order to meet the unique needs of targeted communities.

Needs Remain

While FY 17 proved to be more equitable and moved our office closer to the funding we need to operate optimally for the students and families we serve, needs remain. As an agency, we continue to work toward the infrastructure we need in order to operate for effectively, but we have noted various areas for improvement. In both FY 17 and FY 18, it has become very clear that \$55,000 in programmatic funds is not enough to ensure the office has the adequate funding needed to reach the 90,000 students, their families, communities, and educators we are tasked with reaching out to and supporting. With each coming school year our need for

outreach funding increases. In FY 17, we used a large portion of our funds to reach compliance in the area of language access and those efforts continue now in FY 18. In FY 18, we are conducting more trainings and workshops, which in addition to printed materials, in all languages, and now we want to offer interpretation to provide access to programming to all families including those who do not speak English as a first language.

In FY 18 we have started to conduct deeper outreach through various mediums such as Metro bus and rail and newspaper and social media advertising. These efforts have been fruitful but expensive. We do hope that our budgetary needs will be met in order to continue to meet families and their need through a variety of mediums in addition to our traditional modes of outreach.

Additionally, we have started to move many of our online resource tools into the print format. This move has been a great way to connect more deeply with schools and the needs of the families they serve. For example, in FY 18 we have started to print large quantities of the following resources in order to reach more families and educators in a more tangible way:

- Our Parent & Family Go-To-Guide
- Copies of our Education and Community Resource Guide for Schools
- Our special education resources
- Our Understanding the DC Public Education Landscape resources

Our ability to reach families beyond our online connectivity is vital in order to ensure that we are able to support and nurture the needs of families as our office was statutorily designed to do.

For the last two years, I have spoken to our need for additional technology support regarding a secure database for our RFA line and optimization of data, in addition to our website needs to ensure our web presence in user-friendly to all who access it. We have worked hard to maximize all we can do with our current website format but as our resources and supports

increase so does our need for an online space to house the wealth of resources we house on our site. In years past, we have worked to use free databases, such as Google Drive and now Microsoft 365's OneDrive. Neither are as secure nor ideal for the kinds of information we collect, need to store, and protect. We are in need of funds to ensure we can procure a secure database for the sensitive information we collect from callers who reach out to our office.

Conclusion

I would be remiss if I closed this testimony without noting our deep commitment to tackling the issues of race, class, achievement and belief gaps, and persistent disparities that continue to plague the students and families we serve. While some barriers in our system are unintended consequences of the complexity of our system, others are systemic and institutionalized mechanisms of oppression. In our work, we recognized a need for equity in all aspects of public education, but we have narrowed our focus on equity within family engagement – specifically through the lens of parent, student, and community voice, access, and power due to the critical role it plays in student success. Our focus on family engagement as a lever for achieving equity is rooted in the belief that families, students, and community members are powerful and grossly underutilized catalysts who can provide meaningful programmatic and systemic change. Our lens for equity recognizes that families are the ultimate source of knowledge regarding the needs of their children. We know that families, as equal thought-partners in this work, and their voices are essential in education policy and practice decisions. Through the unique lens of their lived experiences, families are highly invested in the success of their children, other children, and their community.

To that end, starting in FY 17 and continuing into FY 18, our work regarding parent leadership and demystifying how our system of public education works speaks to this commitment to interjecting the voices of students, families, and communities into all areas of conversation and decision-making regarding public education and areas that impact public education. In our 2017 Annual Report, we laid our commitment to equity by presenting our lens for equity through the development of our Family Partnership model; that work continues for us in FY 18. This model,

coupled with other scholarship and best practice, has led us to deepen our work in more tangible ways. For example, this fall we opened up the application process for the first Parent & Student Advisory Committee for our office. This committee's purpose is 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. We are proud to have launched this committee in January with great representation from all eight wards of the city that is inclusive of both parent and student voice. We are excited about the future ahead with this work and look forward to the next steps in will provide in scaling our work to serve students, families, educators, schools, and communities in a more comprehensive way.

In closing, we are excited and hopeful for the road and work ahead for our office and the vital role of student and parent voice that we know will pave the road forward for our system of public education in the District. While we have a very long way to go in order in providing the quality of education and support students and families deserve, we know that the only way forward is through not only the engagement of families in that process but finding intentional ways to amplify the voices of students and their families. We are honored to play a part in this process and deeply honored to serve the families and students of the District of Columbia.

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