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**State Board of Education Public Hearing
Family Partnership in District Education
Wednesday, December 19, 2018
Official Written Testimony of Faith Gibson Hubbard, Chief Student Advocate
Office of the Student Advocate, DC State Board of Education**

Good evening, members of the Board and staff. My name is Faith Gibson Hubbard, and I am honored to serve as Chief Student Advocate for Office of the Student Advocate. The Office of the Student Advocate provides guidance and resource supports for families to assist them in navigating our complex system of public education in the District of Columbia. In our day-to-day work, we support students and families in their advocacy through parent education, one-on-one coaching, resource supports, trainings and outreach. We do this work in order to equalize the balance of power between families and schools by increasing family voice, access, and power in our system of public education.

In addition to our work with students, families, and communities, we produce annual reports that summarize our office's work and offer systemic recommendations to address the city's top public education concerns. For the last three years, my office has made various recommendations regarding family engagement, and worked to articulate our vision for family engagement and equity, by offering two recommendations:

1. The authentic engagement of families and communities must be a mandatory part of the policy and decision-making processes. We recommend a focus on designing a framework for regular citywide engagement of families and communities on issues of public education and the policy development decision-making processes. As the agency that coordinates and supervises education-related activities, the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) would be the best to set forth such a framework.



2. We regularly see how lack of coordination across education agencies results in a misalignment of policies, confusion regarding resources, and an uneven implementation of practices creates access barriers for students and families. Cross-sector collaboration is vital. Under the leadership of the DME, we recommend deepening our cross-sector collaboration efforts with a focus eliminating barriers and increasing access for families at all levels of public education. This effort should work to demystify systems and processes; remove barriers of engagement for families; provide greater access to more comprehensive information; develop a more responsive system of public education governance centric to parents and families; and create avenues for education leaders and organizations to be more publicly accessible.

(More information regarding our annual reports and recommendations can be found at <https://sboe.dc.gov/page/annual-quarterly-reports>.)

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.

The need and importance of student, family, and community engagement in public education is not a new idea. From its inception, “public education has always been tied to democracy and its fundamental principle of public participation in governance.” A quality system of public education is only possible when meaningful interactions and authentic relationships are fostered with students, families, and communities. We recognize the need for equity in all areas that directly and indirectly impact public education, but in our work we have narrowed our



focus on equity within family engagement. Due to the critical role family engagement plays in student success, our work focuses on equity through the lens of parent, student, and community voice, access, and power. As a lever for achieving equity, our focus on family engagement 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 once given the opportunity to do so.

A common thread in the public education reform movement has long been rooted in the “promise of bridging the gaps” between the home, the school, and the community through which families and communities engage in public education. Dr. Joyce Epstein’s Overlapping Spheres of Influence well represents the relationship of co-dependence – shared between home, school, and community – on which a child’s academic success is grounded. This narrative of co-dependency is reflected in the overall increase of interest in family and community engagement initiatives on the part of many school districts, LEAs, and state education agencies (SEAs). While we know an increase in family and community engagement initiatives possess the ability to foster an environment of equity and cultural responsiveness in schools, we also recognize the collaborative and partnership possibilities that can be nurtured. Conversely, we have also seen the barriers such initiatives can create for families if they are only developed from a deficit perspective of families and communities or consider families to be “objects for rehabilitation.” Many early family engagement initiatives took the aforementioned approach only to realize families desired more than fixing. They wanted authentic interactions and opportunities for engagement, which included real connections to the academic success of their child and their community in the broader sense.

In reviewing data collected by our office for the past three school years, we have noticed a high correlation between the issues families raise with our office and the limited, or lack of, family engagement and clear communication channels within their child’s school. While we



understand schools are dealing with a myriad of issues on a daily basis, their ability to cultivate meaningful relationships with families is vital to the overall academic success of their students and to the sustainability of their school communities. Even in the midst of distrust, good faith steps can be taken in order to open the lines of communication with families. Open lines of communication can lead to a sense of transparency and have the ability to lead to the development of mechanisms to create meaningful engagement opportunities, which should capitalize on the expertise and interest of parents and families. Fostering an environment of community and transparency leads to the creation of shared norms, and increased clarity of roles and expectations between the school and families, both of which are building blocks for trust.

Our response to the lack of family engagement at the school level relies on ensuring that families are as informed and connected as possible in order to leverage the power that they already possess. This takes various forms, whether the information is shared during calls to our Request for Assistance line, a “311” for all things related to public education or during outreach events and trainings where we have the ability to connect with families face to face. We also rely on our informational resources and advocacy tools in order to share information broadly. In the past year, we have revamped our Parent Leadership Toolkit, Safe Passage Toolkit, discipline resources, and special education resources, which provide families with a wealth of information about how certain processes and procedures should work on their behalf. We have also created our Parent & Family Go-To Guide, which is a collection of parent-centered documents and resources designed to help families navigate the public education system in DC. These supports are intended to help families by providing access to useful tools and informational resources in order to build strong and effective partnerships at the school level.

We agree that meaningful family engagement at the school level is vital, but opportunities for parents at the citywide level are also critical. The inclusion of parent and student voices at the



city level remains a top priority of our office, and we are committed to ensuring the voice of parents and students is embodied and reflected not only in our policy debates, but in the policy formation and implementation as well. Engaging families and communities in thoughtful decision-making develops trust and supports buy-in to sustainable policy solutions and reforms. Creating a seat at the decision-making table for the voices of parents and students will require changing the current discourse in public education to a mindset inclusive of families and students as vital “knowledgeable partners” who must be a part of the process. This shifting of our relationships and mindsets with families in a role of experts and “knowledgeable partners” requires inclusive interactions such as “meaningful consultation, collaboration, and shared responsibilities” at the school, district, and city level. We cannot continue to shy away from the barriers of race, class, equity, and access, which continue to make meaningful interactions and relationships with families a challenge. Partnership with families cannot just be a one-way approach to advance the agendas of the school or the city at large.

Recognizing the distance or lack of trust can make authentic engagement possible. A relational approach to the engagement of families can be made possible through the involvement of trusted entities or community-based organizations who can serve as intermediaries between schools, government officials, and families. Intermediaries, such as our office and other groups who offer direct supports to families, can help shift the dynamic of home-school and home-district interactions by bringing a holistic view of educational issues to the attention of families and interjecting various approaches to engagement “...across [various] settings, contexts, relationships, and levels, with the goals of mutual engagement, relationship building, and shared leadership and power.” Our parent leadership work focuses on leveraging the power of parents and students, through increasing their knowledge of public education governance and school budget, while encouraging families to become active agents for transformation in their schools and the broader community. We believe our work with parents extends the forms of



power and increases their voice into conversations generally absent of parent or student input or participation.

Before I close, I want to stress that engaging families, while not an easy task, is a necessary one, particularly for those parents and families who were historically excluded from school-based decisions. Once families' value-add and skillsets are recognized, there is a greater opportunity for buy-in. In order to ensure more equitable outcomes for students throughout the District, parent and student voice must be at the forefront of our public education system. The voices of families and communities must be amplified throughout the policymaking process.

I want to remind those in this room or watching elsewhere that you can reach our office via phone at 202-741-4692. Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I welcome any questions you may have.