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**Written Testimony of Dan Davis, Chief Student Advocate
Office of the Student Advocate, DC State Board of Education
FY 2020 Performance Oversight Hearing
Committee of the Whole
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Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, committee members, and staff. My name is Dan Davis and I am honored to lead the work of Office of the Student Advocate as Chief Student Advocate for the District of Columbia. Our office supports and guides families with concerns through our system of public education in the District. I am excited to share with you today our work and I thank you for this opportunity to testify.

This past year we all experienced change at an uncomfortable pace. Pre-pandemic practices, policies, and predictabilities halted as COVID-19 changed capacities and shuffled school communities' priorities. The community responded to this crisis with patience, but over the past 12 months the collective tolerance of students and families are wearing thin. Our office pivoted to maintain service for residents embracing tech solutions as bridges to stay connected with students and families, connecting with partners to get our material into communities lacking access to technology; embracing this challenge as an opportunity to reinvent and improve the way we support public education grounded in the voices of students and families. Our focus remains on clarifying systems, reducing barriers, and providing resources and access for families. We support the needs and advocacy of students, families, and educators in three distinct ways:

First, our Requests for Assistance line, which serves as a 311 for all things related to public education in the District of Columbia.

We operates a public education hotline to answer questions, walk students & families as well as stakeholders through concerns/issues with their public school while providing information and coaching on how to use public education resources and agency/organizational referrals. Calls to the hotline are answered live Monday through Friday, from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm; in SY 2019-20, served 401 families. To date, in quarters 1 & 2 of SY 20 – 21, our office served 218 families through our RFA line, and received over 325 calls as of January 31st, with 108 calls being made outside of our operating hours. The high volume of calls made to our RFA line outside of operating hours highlights that families are seeking public education supports. We are currently on course to exceed last year's RFA totals.

In SY 19-20 almost half of RFAs came from the wards 7 and 8. More than 65% of our RFAs came from students and families being served by DCPS, slightly over 20% of our calls came from families that attend a public charter school. Nearly a third of all our RFA cases are for students with a disability, the other two areas that significantly stood out by volume came from families seeking assistance with enrolling or accessing public schools, and families dealing with a concern around student safety. SY 20-21 families seeking support for students with disabilities still drives the volume of our calls, although the needs have shifted. Families are bringing concerns about the quality of service, the effectiveness of interventions and accommodations, and how Covid related delays to the IDEA processes continues to be a barrier to a free and appropriate education . Enrollment access concerns continue to be area families seek support, a substantial amount of these families faced distant learning challenges such as technology, access to reliable internet, and navigating learning portals. Families with questions about academic/instruction and communication grew this school year with concerns about grading policies, GPAs, and duties to notify parents.

Secondly, we support the needs of families and educators through the Informational Resources Tools developed by our office.

As we process data from our RFA line and collect feedback from stakeholders, we produce resources that reduce barriers and demystifies processes for families. Our online Education and Community Resource Guide, Information and Advocacy Resources and Tools, and Parent &

Family Go-To Guide, all housed on our website, are evidence of our effort to streamline information that helps families better understand the public education system and its policies and procedures. Our online resource are available at <https://sboe.dc.gov/page/advocacy>.

We made strides to increase traffic at our online/social media sites. In SY 19-20, more than 4,500 unique users accessed our online information via our websites, and more than 3,500 unique users engaged with our social media pages. In SY 20-21 (until January 31), more than 1,100 unique users accessed our online information & advocacy tools/resources and nearly 900 people engaged with our social media pages.

Based on the evolving needs of our families, we launched, and will be adding the following resources and supports for the remainder of SY2020- 21:

- Student & Family Behavioral Health Toolkit
- Special Education Workshop: Your Rights During Distant Learning
- Parent Empowerment Training: Understanding Your School's Budget
- Virtual Learning Support Guides: PODing 101 & Remote Learning Basics
- Safe Passage & Student Safety: Student Focus Groups on Returning to the Building & Transportation

Third, our office support the needs of families, educators, and the community through our workshops, trainings, and strategic outreach efforts.

Students, Families and Community members are at the heart of our work. We continue to foster those relationships through our outreach efforts, and strive to enhance their capacity by making additional support available through workshops and trainings.

In SY 19-20, we engaged over 3,280 students, families, and educational stakeholders at more than 120 events, in-person meetings and trainings, and distributed more than 4,850 resources in English, Spanish and Amharic to communities in each ward in the District.

With school closure due to COVID-19, we shifted engagement efforts to ensure families received the resources and support they need, we connected with more than 1,500 students,

families, and stakeholders virtually. These stakeholders include students who participated in focus groups we facilitated, numerous Zoom meetings with CBOs, nonprofits, and government agencies. We also made an effort to increase our online / social media presence.

Special Education: Our office continues to be committed to supporting parents and students who need specialized instruction. Our office collaborated with parent and community leaders from Decoding Dyslexia DC to develop a DC centric Dyslexia Guidebook. This handbook was created to inform families and educational stakeholders about dyslexia. This toolkit includes need-to-know information regarding dyslexia including important terminology, signs and symptoms to look for, common myths, a guide of questions to ask school staff members, as well as important local and national resources for families with children diagnosed with dyslexia. This online resource provides families and stakeholders with pertinent information that will help guide them through the initial phase of navigating the current dyslexia supports. This resource can be found in the Information & Advocacy Resources and Tools section of our website: <https://studentadvocate.dc.gov>.

In the past we hosted our informational sessions on special education across the District in partnership with DC State Board of Education Representatives, Councilmembers, and ward-based education organizations. We have since adapted this workshop to be more responsive to the current distant learning environment and are hosting Special Education sessions virtually for families who have a student with a disability. The workshops cover IDEA regulations in regards to distance learning, evaluation and assessment changes, updated school roles and responsibilities, and procedural safeguards. Sessions will be expanded to be conducted in Spanish and English with live interpretation available for Amharic speakers.

In addition to our workshop series, we have expanded the resources and tools related to special education on our website, including our workshop presentation, as both a printable handout and a webinar; a list of special education acronyms, abbreviations, and definitions; a list of resources and organizational supports; SPED ask sheets for School Choice ; and our Parent & Family Go-To Guide. (<https://sboe.dc.gov/node/1153932>)

Safe Passage, A Student's Perspective (Report): Relying on student voice to inform policy and shape initiatives is a principle that navigates our work. In SY 19-20 we spoke with and surveyed students regarding their safety traveling to-and-from school (prior to school closures in response to COVID-19). We partnered with numerous students serving organizations including Global Kids, Black Swan Academy, Young Women's Project, SBOE Student Advisory Committee and Pathways 2 Power. For a month, we facilitated small focus group discussions with 10–25 students per session about how and what safe looked like while traveling to and from school. We met with more than 450 students from all eight wards attending 15 DCPS and 12 public charter schools.

In collaboration with the Urban Institute, we processed, coded and produce a report highlighting the students' responses and experiences from SY 19-20. More than one-third of students reported feeling uncomfortable or in danger. When asked more specifically about their level of safety, more than half of the respondents reported feeling either uncomfortable, concerned, afraid, or in danger while traveling to-and-from school. The full report with recommendations can be found on our website: <https://sboe.dc.gov/page/safe-passage>.

Supporting increased access to School Based Behavioral Health: Our office recognizes the need for additional conversations, guidance, and awareness on topics regarding mental health and students. While we believe a focus on mental health is part of regular health care, too often, mental health is discussed in terms of crisis response. As a result, we created a podcast discussing topics related to the intersection of mental health and student success. Prior to COVID-19, the podcast premiered weekly on our social media pages and featured interviews with knowledgeable professionals across various fields, anecdotes from students, and highlights from CBOs specializing in care for youth. In response to social distancing requirements and physical closure of schools, we decided to pivot our existing Mental Health based podcast to meet the needs of students and families. In partnership with the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME), we hosted virtual student focus groups and centered our conversations on listening to student needs and experiences with existing resources. We re-purposed the podcast to serve as a vehicle to communicate with students via social media. The goal was to create additional

conversations around mental wellness with students that provide guidance on accessing school based behavioral healthcare in DC, and present information that targeted and engaged students. We crafted a weeklong initiative entitled, Don't Mute Mental Health Week, consisting of a series of interactive Instagram Live conversations with speakers from across DC agencies and community organizations.

Language Access: We are committed to developing deeper relationships within our non-English or limited English-speaking communities. We utilize Language Line services in order to communicate with callers to our RFA line who do not speak English. While access to the Language Line has been valuable to our office, we know that to serve all communities well, we need to build trust and be present within those communities. To that end, our outreach to non-English speaking or limited English-speaking communities is a collaborative effort with the Mayor's offices on various affairs (e.g. Latino Affairs, African Affairs, etc.) and community-based or religious organizations that are trusted within those communities. In SY 19-20, we were intentional with our outreach strategy by releasing advertisements for our office, resources, and upcoming events in multiple language and on platforms such as Spanish language radio and newspaper. Our office continues to translate all our materials into Spanish and Amharic and on requested can produce materials into all six Languages Access Act requirements.

Conclusion

While we hope that we can scale to meet demand, capacity (3 FTEs) restraints prevent us from serving all the families needing support with accessing a high-quality public education. There are opportunities to reclaim some capacity currently connected to the way we process data that could be redirected to serving more families. Currently we direct a substantial amount of staff time to tasks such as data entry and processing because we do not have access to a secure data platform.

We must meet the demand that students and families are bringing forward. Pre pandemic practices will not suffice as we shift towards recovery, solutions not centered on the experiences of students and families will produce pre pandemic outcomes. Supporting students

and families is key, creating avenues to incorporate their voice into the policy making process will lead to improved outcomes and move us closer to equity.

The work that I highlighted here today speaks to the office's commitment to centering student and family voice in the policy making process. This pandemic has continued to underscore the need for families to have direct access to resources to allow them to make informed decisions regarding their student's education. We continue to look forward to serving families and students in more direct, comprehensive, and collaborative ways.

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. Again, thank you all for this opportunity to testify. I welcome any questions that you might have.