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Written Testimony of Dan Davis, Chief Student Advocate
Office of the Student Advocate
FY 22 Budget Hearing
Committee of the Whole
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Good Morning Chairman Mendelson, Councilmembers, and staff. My name is Dan Davis, 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. Our office supports and guides families navigating our complex system of public education in the District. Every day we work to ensure that family and student voice drive the decisions that shape their educational experiences. Our focus remains on clarifying systems, reducing barriers, and providing resources and avenues of access for families.

Our office continues to support families and students in three distinct ways; operating our Requests for Assistance (RFA) line live, Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. – 5 p.m; self-advocacy resource development for students, families and stakeholders; as well as trainings and workshops that help families connect their knowledge to power.

This school year we supported over 500 unique requests-for-assistance representing families from all 8 wards seeking assistance, clarity and resources to help them get the best possible education available. Families whose student have special needs contacted us the most regardless of sector. These requests share a similar narrative that the skills mastered prior to the pandemic seem to be fading, that schools are not sharing the same urgency they have, and that the solutions being offered are not what's being requested. In more than a few instances, schools and families are able to get on the same page after gentle prodding from our office that both parties want the student to thrive; we see increased willingness for them to work together to improve outcomes (although some occasions families needed to pursue their IDEA procedural safeguards). Conversely though families far too often need an Advocate or outside supported to help LEAs become more collaborative in the search for a solution.

This current school year we also saw an increase for request for assistance from district residents needing help locating records, transcripts, and diplomas to obtain IDs, benefits, employment, or to further their education. The process for obtaining these documents involves lengthy waits and

too often result with an inability to locate requested documents. Students and families enter an agreement when selecting an LEA that hinges on the school's ability to provide proof of enrollment, proof of credits earned, proof that you are a part of that school community. Failing to not uphold that agreement has profound and immediate consequences for district residents.

Like our schools and many others, we pivoted in response to the pandemic relying on tech solutions to stay connected with students and families, but we also connected with partners to get resources and supports into communities lacking access to technology. We delivered materials like our Go to Guide, and other supportive learning resources to the short-term family shelters, the family success centers and several CBOs hosting learning pods/hubs across the district. As social distancing restrictions are eased our office continues to distribute resource in English, Spanish, and Amharic across the District to schools, community organizations, and District agencies.

We reinvented how we host trainings and workshops by not only moving to online platforms but also seeking stakeholder organizations partners to cohost from ward-based parents groups to parent teacher organizations, even connecting with student led community based organizations. We cohosted SPED Know Your Rights workshops with the Ombudsman for Public Education in both Spanish and English for parents, we reviewed our Safe Passage Report with student groups across the city, hosted virtual learning workshops for multi-generational guardians and co-led sessions on supporting families with attendance challenges for service providers. We continue to support initiatives that are inclusive of whole school communities that elevate students and family leaders with school leaders and fellow community members as partners and champions.

We have expanded our digital footprint by prioritizing virtual engagement with families by growing what is available on our social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. We are making all the information and resources we produce to be mobile friendly and accessible.

We continued to develop new resources for families including:

- Creation of the Behavioral Health Toolkit to help families navigate the school based behavioral health system;
- Parent Empowerment Series: Understanding Your School's Budget;
- Virtual Learning Support Trainings: PODing 101 & Remote Learning Basics

In January of this year, we released a detailed report on Safe Passage in the district titled "*Safe Passage: A Student's Perspective.*" Our office spoke with and surveyed students regarding their safety traveling to-and-from school prior to the pandemic. For a month during school year 19-20, our office facilitated small focus group discussions with 10–25 students per session, meeting with more than 450 students from all eight wards attending 15 DCPS and 12 public charter schools. We are currently in the process of scaling that effort this school year to capture not only students but guardians' concern on student travel. We hope to release in the Fall a follow up

report that reflects student and families concerns around safe passage as we move towards a full reopening of schools.

When asked in FY21 what OSA can do to help the District as the pandemic is expected to cut revenue for the city and we must tighten belts, we gave up increases, cut our supply cost, shelved staff development, and pushed scheduled computer replacement. We did not ask for any enhancements that were needed like an additional FTE to support students and families nor a secure database that can store student and family information we collect while assisting them. When asked again for FY22 to find cost savings when we all assumed belt tighten would continue, we cut increases again, reduced supply spending, and had plans to limit operating cost to make do with what will be available. Currently the team of 3 FTEs that supported students and families through the pandemic will see a portion of the operating and supply cost restored in FY 22 but will not see increases in pay.

Our FY22 budget will allow us to fulfill our mission to guide and supports students, parents, families, and community members in navigating the public-school system in DC, but it doesn't allow us to connect with all of the students and families that could be accessing our services. We will continue to work to fulfill our mission, but the lack of investment will result in less tools for families, limited supports for households with unique learners, and a reduced scope for engagement within target communities who need support the most to recover from the impact of the pandemic. Substantial obstacles for families existed before COVID-19, and those barriers will continue to magnify as we recover. As schools welcome back students into the building this fall, families understand a lot was missed this past school year even in the best virtual learning environment. More than 60 LEAs in SY21-22 will offer each student and family a path that we all hope will lead to that students' recovery, however we expect families to need assistance and support in navigating that path. We project in SY21-22 an increase of families seeking support and clarity about their rights, school policies and how to navigate the return to the classroom.

The work of our office is made possible through the invaluable commitment of our 3 FTEs and 2 part-time fellows. Last year, nearly 4,000 families, students, and community members were impacted by our outreach, virtual events, and request for assistance services. But we continue to meet barriers in scaling our impact due to the limitations in our staff size. Our third FTE was allotted to us in 2017. Despite our demonstrated impact on families across all 8 wards and our yearly increase in requests for assistance, we have not had an addition to our staff in nearly 4 years. To meet the current demand for services, our staff often works beyond office hours and do not have the capacity to continue to develop, implement, and support more initiatives throughout the city. Recently, the strain on our staff was felt more intensely when one of our staff went on family leave, resulting in two people operating the day to day responsibilities of our office with assistance from our two graduate student fellows who stepped up to make this possible. Adding another full-time employee would allow us to avoid stagnation by increasing our outreach and maximizing our impact in all eight wards and allowing our staff to focus on meeting the needs of students and families who need it most.

We must also have the resources needed to properly safeguard the personal information shared with us by student and families. Our office currently collects and stores student and family information in Excel. We have never had access to a secure database to house data we collect, all of our data management occurs manually, from un-duplicating, cleaning, sorting into trendlines and reporting out. The effort to manage and maintain data integrity is staff time intensive and saps resources that could be better utilized supporting students and families.

We hope that funding for FY22 will allow us to retain and incentivize staff who stayed committed to supporting students and families during this pandemic with opportunities for merit increases. That the budget will allow the office to grow and support more District residents by adding an FTE, and we will have the resources to obtain a data management platform that will allow the office to maintain data we collect securely.

Before I close, I want to thank the Council for your continued support and encouragement for our office. The growth of our office and the expansion of the supports that we are able to provide is possible in part thanks to your support, and the support of many Councilmembers and staffs, by sharing information about our office and the services we provide.

Finally, 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. We also host a wide array of resources and tools on our website at studentadvocate.dc.gov. I thank you for this opportunity to testify and welcome any questions that you might have.