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**Written Testimony of Dan Davis, Chief Student Advocate
Office of the Student Advocate, DC State Board of Education
FY 2021 Performance Oversight Hearing
Committee of the Whole
Thursday, March 3, 2022**

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, committee members, and staff. My name is Dan Davis and I serve as Chief Student Advocate and lead the work of the Office of the Student Advocate for the District of Columbia. Our office supports and guides families with concerns through our public education system in the District. We are tasked daily with ensuring that students and families have the tools and resources to advocate for the outcomes and changes they want in their public education. Today, I am excited to share our work with you, and I thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Last school year, most students and families accessed public education virtually. As conditions with COVID improved towards the end of the year, some students returned to school buildings, but families' access to teachers, student supports, and campus decision makers remained remote. Our system of public education in the District functions when effective communication exists between school staff and families. We know that families are the experts on the needs of their children. Our office exists to support families whose communication with their children's school has hit a snag; we assist families and schools through parent and family education, one-on-one coaching, resource supports, and trainings. As COVID continues to shift where and how families connect with education in the District, our office has shifted to utilizing various methods to reach families where they are to best address their concerns:

First, we continued to operate our Request for Assistance hotline – also known as the RFA line. Our RFA line was and is operational Monday through Friday from 9 am to 5 pm. Through our Request for Assistance process we can individually assist families addressing education-related questions, provide resources, make referrals, and coach families on all public education issues. Last school year, we received 507 total unduplicated requests-for-assistance (RFA). Slightly over 25% of those requests came from residents seeking clarity about emergency health policies effecting school operations that included but was not limited to accessing transcripts and social distance practices within school buildings. Parents of students with disabilities accounted for nearly 23% of RFAs. While virtual, they sought clarity about quality of services provided for in IEPs and how 504 plans accommodations would transition. As school resumed in-person instruction, parents sought remedies for delays with initiating/completing the evaluation

processes, as well as rights about change of placements. To date, in quarters 1 and 2 of SY2021 – 22, our office has served more than 350 families through our RFA line and is currently on pace to exceed last year's total. As recurring themes emerge from the volume of RFAs from families, our office works to develop resources based on those needs, so families can be their own advocates.

Second, we adopted a hybrid community outreach model utilizing virtual and in-person strategies to further meet the needs of our families. As we continue to host meetings with families utilizing virtual platforms, we re-started our in-person engagement following the safety guidance outlined by the Center for Disease Control (CDC). Returning to in-person engagement, when safe to do so, was essential because so many families in the District do not have access to high quality internet. Furthermore, there are families that are uncomfortable accessing online workshops due to a lack of familiarity with a virtual platform. As an office we never want to create additional barriers for families to access the information they need to improve the education of their children. Our office continues to provide direct support to families beyond our RFA hotline. Last school year, we hosted virtual learning support workshops that aided families with creating structured learning environments at home. This current school year, we facilitated in-person discussions related to student safety. In SY2020-21, we engaged with over 1,500 stakeholders -- mainly students and families, as well as school staff, community-based organizations, and government agencies. So far in SY2021-22, we have engaged with nearly 1,100 students, families, and educational stakeholders with about 35% of those meetings being in-person. Unfortunately, the emergence of the Omicron variant forced us to pause our in-person engagement efforts. As COVID transmission rates continue to decrease to safe levels, we are positioning ourselves to again offer in-person supports to families.

Third, we developed resources for families based on the needs expressed through our RFA line and outreach efforts. We hosted bilingual workshops with families regarding their rights under special education laws and how procedural safeguards worked while school was virtual. We developed learning at home support guides and companion virtual workshops for families who struggled with virtual learning during SY2020-21. We advocated for increased access to school based behavioral health supports for students and developed our Navigating Behavioral Health toolkit. We have also continued to work with partnering organizations and agencies to address the safety of our children traveling to and from school. We led workshops on how virtual school attendance works in the District for community members at Family Success Center(s). We created supports and resources for families that needed more clarity about how public education shifted, what it looks like now, and how families could be successful managing it. As we all continue to navigate these unprecedented times, and the District offers solutions, we will continue to develop resources and supports that make those solutions accessible for student and families.

We are also planning to host our first Youth Advocacy Summit focused on empowering students by introducing some skills and resources to bolster their advocacy. Additionally, in partnership with community-based providers, we are planning to host a behavioral health workshop series

designed to answer questions that families often have and break down barriers in accessing care at the school level. As always, we will continue to develop resources and supports in alignment with the needs of families and students.

Fourth, we continued to make information and resources more accessible for all families by leveraging virtual platforms to bolster our engagement efforts. In SY20-21, our office virtually engaged with more than 3,200 students, families, and stakeholders utilizing our webpages and social media platforms. As we sought out ways to ensure the resources we produce for students and families are utilized, it became clear that information hosted on our website needed more accessible pathways. We shifted what and how we posted on social media. On social media, we no longer just posted announcements or where to go for details or information. We began to design toolkits and supports that family could easily navigate and access on social media. As of January 31st, more than 2,500 unique users were able to access our online information & advocacy tools/resources. We also adapted our virtual outreach efforts based on the trends in issues that emerged for families through the year. We adapted materials and hosted web-based conversations on topics ranging from attendance law to student safety. Though we shifted most of our efforts to minimize in-person contact in SY 2020-21, we still managed to distribute over 500 backpacks and activities for at-risk students, along with resource guides in English, Spanish, and Amharic for parents.

As we seek to provide support to all District families, we continue to target English language learner students and families with efforts that have yet to produce the desired increase level of engagement from those communities. In SY 2020-21 we went beyond our commitment to produce multiple language versions of our public resources and supports: we placed targeted bilingual outreach ads on buses and metro in or near communities with schools that have high English language learner enrollment, we ran ads in both radio and print publications, and we participated in small group conversations with stakeholders and families about improving connectivity between the Office and their community. In SY 2021-22, OSA continues to be committed to increasing engagement with the English language learner community and recently onboarded a bi-lingual staff member to support that effort. In addition, OSA is seeking to create formal partnerships with several community-based organizations that have a history of serving English language learning families across the District.

Fifth, the partnerships we built and continued to strengthen with schools, government agencies, and community-based organizations allowed us to produce our resources, distribute them to residents in need, and facilitate discussions directly with those families. In SY2020-21 our partnerships lead to tangible resources and supports for families. We collaborated with Decoding Dyslexia DC to develop a Dyslexia Resource Guide for families seeking guidance on how to get help for their students. Our office worked with the Department of Behavioral Health to develop our Navigating Behavioral Health Guide for families, and gather input from LEAs, CBO clinicians, students and parents. We partnered with DCPS and PCS teachers to facilitate workshops on Virtual Learning Support. We continued to work with the Office of the

Deputy Mayor for Education on student safety focusing on new and existing Safe Passage initiatives. Our office will continue to seek out connections with parent leaders, LEAs, District agencies and CBOs to improve District students and families' navigation of public education.

Our goals for SY2021-22 are to ensure student and family voice remain at the center of the District's return to classroom learning plans, and that communication between our school buildings and families is effective. We knew that challenges for students and families existed before the pivot to virtual learning, and that returning to campuses would lead to new ones. As we have engaged with students and families, several experiences seem to be shared:

1. That safety of students in school buildings and while traveling in community does not feel predictable.
2. There is a need to increase students access to social and emotional supports.
3. There is a need to increase access to social and emotional supports for teachers and school staff.

Finally, if there is any person interested in contacting our office, they can do so by calling us at 202-741-4692, emailing us at student.advocate@dc.gov, or by submitting our new online intake form by going to our website: studentadvocate.dc.gov. Again, thank you all for this opportunity to testify. I welcome any questions that you might have.