Mr. Chairman, Members of the Council of the District of the District of Columbia, and staff, thank you for allowing the D.C. State Board of Education to testify today on *No Shots, No School!*, which is aimed at ensuring that all students attending D.C. public, charter, private, and parochial schools have their required immunizations before the start of the 2022–23 school year. My name is Dr. Jessica Sutter and I have the honor to serve as the Ward 6 Representative and President of the D.C. State Board of Education (State Board). While all youth vaccination efforts are important, today, the State Board’s testimony will focus on youth vaccination efforts related to mitigating the spread of COVID.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the State Board has worked to fully understand how changes in school guidance on COVID have affected families across the District. At the State Board’s January 19 Public Meeting, residents like Becky Ballard testified, “It’s time we prioritize the social emotional needs of young children and parents...above restrictions around a disease that we are able to manage through vaccination. Our focus should be on vaccinating all students and teachers and doing everything we can to keep classrooms open for all students, especially our youngest learners who have the fewest coping skills to manage quarantines.”

At the end of January 2021, the State Board surveyed 1,060 public school teachers representing every D.C. Public School (DCPS) and the majority of public charter schools. This survey served to measure a specific moment in time when District teachers were beginning to return to in-person learning, receiving their first doses of the COVID vaccine, and reflecting on nearly a full year of wholly virtual learning practices. At that time, almost half of those surveyed considered leaving the profession because of the challenges of teaching during COVID. Over 75 percent of responding teachers indicated they were very uncomfortable with in-person learning in the absence of full teacher and student vaccination. A lot has changed since January 2021, but what this information tells the State Board is that teachers need and want safe school spaces for both themselves and their students.

The most recent rates from DC Health indicate that only 75 percent of D.C. residents ages 16–17 have completed a full-primary series of COVID vaccination. According to local education agency (LEA) guidance from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), *“all students age 16 and older are required to receive the primary series...of the COVID-19 vaccination for the*
“start of the 2022–23 school year.” While students under age 16 are not currently required to be vaccinated before the start of school, the rates for these age groups are also less than ideal, especially for our Black student population. Only 59 percent of Black students ages 12–15 and only 26 percent of Black students ages 5–11 have completed their primary vaccine series.

The State Board strongly believes that vaccination continues to be the most powerful tool we have to combat the ongoing pandemic. Just last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) approved COVID vaccinations for younger children, recommending that anyone 6 months and older should get vaccinated. Additionally, children 5 years of age and older should also get a booster vaccination, if eligible.

The State Board wants all students to be able to achieve educational success without worrying about getting sick, or not being able to attend classes in-person every time there is a potential COVID exposure in school. We understand that there are fears and misinformation circulating about getting vaccinated. We also know that each family has individual health concerns and unique factors that can influence this decision.

Members of our Student Advisory Committee (SAC), one of whom you will be hearing from shortly, report that students do not have the information about which sites and when at those sites they are able to get vaccinated, are concerned about side effects and misinformation, and are fearful of catching COVID in school or infecting younger siblings—who up until last week were ineligible for COVID vaccination. Our three (3) Student Representatives, Liv Birnstad, Skye-Ali Johnson, and Juliana Lopez, as well as the Student Advisory Committee (SAC) they all co-chair have been hard at work advocating for and educating their peers on the benefits of getting vaccinated. I am now going to turn it over to Student Representative Liv Birnstad.

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Members of the Council of the District of Columbia, and staff. My name is Liv Birnstad and I am a Student Representative on the D.C. State Board of Education and a co-chair of the Student Advisory Committee (SAC). I am a rising senior at Capital City Public Charter School. As part of the work of the SAC—which meets virtually the first and third Monday of every month—we are working to debunk myths and inaccuracies around the COVID vaccine. In our many discussions with students across the District, the SAC has found that the barrier for many, is lack of information about the vaccine—resulting in inaction. Some students are concerned about side effects, express distrust in the government, or think they will “be fine” without getting vaccinated. And, while some of my peers believe in the efficacy of the vaccine, their guardians are not allowing them to receive it. Others that may want to get vaccinated, say it is hard to find vaccination sites that fit into their busy schedules to receive it.

In April 2022, the SAC published a city-wide survey. Part of this survey asked students about their biggest concern regarding COVID safety at their school. The responses were diverse in content but one frequently received concern was about the lack of students—my peers—that were vaccinated. Students noted that concerns regarding COVID and the vaccine were not only manifesting in physical illness (i.e., getting COVID), but amplified emotional stress.
The SAC wants to ensure that we are always fighting for all students regardless of their physical abilities or health. This means that students who are immunocompromised, or live with someone who is, should have equal access to be able to go to school in-person and not risk getting or spreading severe illnesses (like COVID). As students, we know that the only way this is possible is if as many students as possible are vaccinated before the start of the 2022–23 school year and encouraged to follow other and all COVID safety procedures. At this time, the SAC is committed to increased communications and social media campaigns about the importance of vaccinations and COVID safety—we look forward to having you all follow along and engaging with us in this work over the summer.

In closing, the fact of the matter is that scientifically, the benefits of the COVID vaccination and others largely outweigh the risks. We are happy to learn that the Mayor is making efforts to expand vaccination sites around the city, making vaccination accessible to more residents, and we strongly encourage families to take advantage of this opportunity before the start of the 2022–23 school year.

We want to thank the Council for this time and we are happy to answer any questions you may have.