



Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.

The federally designated Parent Training and Information Center for Washington DC

**Testimony of
Chioma Oruh, Ph.D.
Parent Support Specialist
Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.**

JOINT PUBLIC HEARING

ON

B23-0046 “At-Risk School Funding Transparency Amendment Act of 2019”

AND

B23-0239, the “School Based Budgeting and Transparency Amendment Act of 2019”

Wednesday June 26, 2019

Good Morning, Chair Grosso, Chair Mendelson and all other Councilmembers present today. My name is Chioma Oruh and I serve as a parent support specialist for Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc. (AJE). AJE is the federally designated Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) for the District of Columbia. We provide free training, resources, individual assistance and supports to parents and youth in navigating the public education system, with a focus on students with disabilities. Our mission is to equip and empower parents and youth to be effective advocates to ensure the receipt of appropriate educational services. Annually we train over 1,000 parents, students and professionals and serve over 700 families through direct services.

Both personally as a District of Columbia parent and professionally as an education advocate, I encourage the Council to pass meaningful transparency reform, but I also know that legislation is necessary, but not sufficient condition for the change we all seek.

There are many transparency related oversights on both sides of the DC public education system that are common practice for all families - things like lack of proper notification about important school events (such as grade promotion ceremony notifications going out the day before or day of) or public health issues like the potential risk of lead on playgrounds suspected or confirmed and families first finding out from everywhere but the schools.

Yet, for parents of students with disabilities, there is an extra layer of special disregard for appropriate notifications and open sharing of important events and activities at school. For example, it is unfortunately common for families, especially if English is not their first

language or are immigrants, to not receive notification for IEP meetings at all or in a language they can understand, and for meetings to take place without the participation of the parent. Other common practices include not letting parents know that their children in more restrictive settings (i.e. self-contained classrooms) are not included in school wide events, either as participants or oftentimes as members of the audience, as well as not being upfront that our children are excluded from specials such as physical education, music and art. This is due to our children in self-contained classrooms learning in a parallel universe within the school environment than students with and without disabilities in the general education classroom. Rarely do schools on both DCPS and public charters that have these more restrictive classrooms inform parents of their rights to request a change in placement or notify them of the difference between a change in location and a change in placement. It is only in working with families other than my own and receiving guidance and supervision from experienced attorneys that I am privileged to know the distinction. It shouldn't be this way and these non-transparent practices must change both in policy and in practice.

Even as families may not know their rights afforded to them federally via the IDEA and other laws, the emotional pain from these exclusionary practices and omissions are immeasurable and lend to a lot of bad blood between parents and the public school system, these practices destroy trust and create barriers to the home/school collaboration we know all our students need to succeed.

These issues are resolvable with more investments in: (1) cultural and linguistic competences, (2) school culture that promotes emotional intelligence, (3) investments in implementing best practices in family engagement, (4) informed access to partners like AJE, the federally designated Parent Training Information Center under IDEA¹; and (5) working democratic systems. I am here today to stress the need for better working democratic systems to support the governance of our school, because nothing else listed above is possible without this.

In a Washington Post op-ed that I and a fellow parent advocate, LaJoy Johnson-Law, wrote, we stated emphatically that the rampant lack of transparent practices by both DCPS and DC public charters schools result in a betrayal of democracy. I stand by this sentiment and take the time today to further paint a picture of the consequences of not having transparent public education transactions. Let's for a second put aside the violations of federal laws, ignoring open government policies and the great inequity caused by lack of transparency in public education, particularly budget transparency – of which I am sure that other testimonies today will speak with more accuracy to these points. I want to stress

¹ Which not enough parents are aware of this fact because the school system underinvests in our relationship to school communities)

the human impact and the multi-generational devastation inflicted when so many critical decisions impacting families happen in the dark.

For example, when Monument Academy announced its closure, home to an almost exclusive population of DC youth eligible for at-risk funding, leaving over 100 students (60 of which are students with disabilities) without a placement. What do you think the summer looks like for these families? Similarly, what do you think this summer looks like for the families at Cesar Chavez, Democracy Prep, and City Arts and Prep— all also DC public charter schools that closed this school year. Or for vulnerable families with birth to five children observing this fiasco, nervous about what their children's educational future will be like? What do you think Ward 7 and 8 DCPS families and students feel when they find out a teacher or other school staff allies are not coming back next academic year due to budget cuts? I implore the Committee on Education to put humanity at the center of these conversations. Building trust between families and trust is vital for student success and we cannot have that trust without transparency.

Passing a transparency bill is very important. Yet, it is equally as important to have school based budgeting and at risk funding transparency. It is also critical that we also have transparency around IDEA funding, which more accountability and oversight is needed to explain the dismal test performance, graduation rates and lack inclusionary evidence-based practices that improve the quality of a child's educational experience. We need all our public schools to adhere to the Open Meetings Act – and this is not exclusive to DC public charter school boards.

As former first lady Michelle Obama stated in an interview about her book *Becoming*, “This notion that kids don't know when they're not being invested in—I'm here to tell you that as a first grader, I felt it.” No truer words have been spoken about the state of our public education system here in this great city, the nation's capital. As the Counsel knows, DC is often cited as a jurisdiction with one of the highest per pupil spending in the country, and yet we consistently one of the lowest performing. DC families have a right to know where that money is going. Are we investing in our kids, or are we investing in the central office?

I implore the Committee on Education to be the vehicle where courageous leadership acts to support the uniquely American practice of local democratic governance of education for the benefit of all the city's children and families.

Thank you for the time and consideration.