



# Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.

Testimony of Stacey K. Eunnae, Esq.  
Senior Staff Attorney  
Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.

District of Columbia Council  
Committee of the Whole & Committee on Education Joint Public Hearing  
on  
B23-0046, the “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

My name is Stacey Eunnae and I am a Senior Staff Attorney at Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc. (AJE). I am also a DC resident. AJE is the federally designated Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) for the District of Columbia. AJE responds to calls from nearly 800 DC families each year to help them address issues with public education. These families come to us for advice, guidance, help understanding their rights and we support their advocacy to improve childrens’ educational outcomes. From our direct work with families over the years, AJE is uniquely aware of many of the challenges families and students face when it comes to navigating DC’s public school system.

To improve student outcomes and close the achievement gap across the District, **all of DC’s local educational agencies need increased oversight and targeted technical support to address the root problems of low enrollment and high absence rates, segregation, teacher turnover and low graduation rates. A rising tide should lift all boats; however, we know that not all students, families and schools are equally affected by these problems.** We know schools are not equitably funded based on student need, but ask parents, teachers and professional policy experts, and you’ll have a hard time finding anyone who can clearly articulate why—largely due to a lack of transparency and thus, the input of direct stakeholders (students, teachers, families) in school budgeting and funding.

**Today my testimony is in support of the proposed legislation and the Council’s effort to increase transparency as a path to ensure equitable funding in the public school system. Families and school personnel need access to information about each school’s funding and budget to hold DC schools accountable and make informed school choices about where they want to work and send their children.** School and family engagement is linked by research to improving student outcomes—and increasing transparency and opportunities for the stakeholders to influence decision-making that directly impacts them.



# Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.

## **(1) Increased Transparency in Funding (and analysis of student performance) within and among DCPS schools is necessary to ensure schools and students receive equitable funding based on need.**

The Office of the D.C. Auditor recently released a report<sup>1</sup> exposing how funds that DC taxpayers and legislators agreed would go to support students deemed “at-risk” was not getting to the schools and the students who needed them most. The D.C. Auditor made her recommendation that DCPS establish transparent base funding and publish each school’s base and supplemental funding separately.

Requiring schools to provide detailed information for each school’s funding, including a separate line-item for at-risk funding for each school, **is a very reasonable legislative ask and response** to the information in the D.C. Auditor’s report. I urge you to not be dissuaded by administrators’ pleas about the burden of “more paperwork.” Just like in an individual tax situation, we expect we will be audited if our numbers don’t line up.

Students living in and attending schools in areas of the District with concentrated gun violence and poverty need additional support and resources in school, including increased trauma-informed counselors and programming. Schools that enroll more than double the national average of students with disabilities need smaller teacher to student ratios and specialized training and professional development for staff (e.g. de-escalation techniques, using assistive technology in the classroom). Instead, schools in these areas are not even receiving the base funding they need to hire and maintain their core staff.<sup>2</sup>

This imbalance and inequity in DCPS’s schools must end in order to reduce gaps in student achievement. DC needs to hold all of their schools accountable for complying with federal and local laws that exist to protect students. This will not only help the students remain at their chosen school and achieve more, it will also help equalize the playing field and alleviate the DCPS schools with disproportionately high numbers of at-risk students and insufficient funding and resources to serve them. DC cannot achieve this without the help of students, teachers and parents --- but it’s very hard to advocate on the front lines when we don’t even know where our money is going.

.

---

<sup>1</sup> “D.C. Schools Short Change At-Risk Students” (June 25, 2019), Office of the D.C. Auditor, available at: <http://dcauditor.org/report/d-c-schools-shortchange-at-risk-students/>.

<sup>2</sup> In February, I testified before this Council about the blatant dismissal of civil rights laws apparent by DCPS’s “5-star” selective admission high schools self-reporting 0% students enrolled with special education needs, contrasted with “1-star” neighborhood schools that report nearly one-third students enrolled with special education needs. For example, Ballou High School, which received a one-star rating, [reported](#) that out of 1024 students, nearly one-third (26%) had special education needs.



## Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.

### **(2) Increased Transparency in Funding within and among DC's public charter schools is necessary to prevent financial mismanagement, reduce school closures and increase opportunities for meaningful family engagement.**

There are unique challenges to increasing transparency in DC's charter sector, which makes it even more difficult for direct stakeholders to evaluate, compare, hold accountable and provide targeted support to individual schools.

We cannot ignore that 43 charter schools have been shut down by the DC Public Charter School Board in the last decade alone.<sup>3</sup> When schools close it has a devastating impact on families, students and teachers whose ability to focus on teaching, learning and investing in local schools is greatly limited because they must transition to new jobs, classmates, curriculums, and commutes, instead of teaching and learning.

With multiple charter schools and non-public special education schools<sup>4</sup> closing at the end of this school year, as well as the "surprise" letters of "uninvitation," "involuntary transfers" and "changes in location assignment" we see each summer, DC parents face yet another summer scrambling to get or keep their child into a school. Many of the families who bear the brunt of failing charter schools that close or fail to meet children's needs are families with incomes at or below poverty lines, which add an additional burden to families who may be already struggling to find and maintain stable housing, work and childcare.

Considering the unique circumstances of Charter Schools, AJE supports the proposed provisions to ensure that all meetings of the Board of Trustees to a charter school be open to the public and recorded. I urge the Council to further require all charter schools be subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and ensure they have sufficient funding and technical support to appropriately respond to these requests.

I represented two families this year enrolled at one of DC's larger charter operations, whose young children were physically assaulted by teachers. In one circumstance, I read a report written by a school administrator who observed a teacher pinning a 9-year-old girl up against the wall by her arm, leaving bruises, with her little legs kicking in the air because she was off the ground. In another instance, a four-year-old was choked, in front of other students, by her teacher. Imagine this happening to you or someone you know, and even

---

<sup>3</sup> See, "All Approved LEA 1996 to Present," DC Public Charter School Board publication, available at <https://dcpcsb.egnyte.com/dl/Rfj8UyEEUh/> (last accessed 6/26/19); see also, <https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/where-are-these-kids-going-to-go-43-dc-charter-schools-have-been-closed-since-2009-this-one-is-next/65-7dde2862-2da2-4c29-863b-6c04acf688d7> (last accessed 6/26/19).

<sup>4</sup> Kingsbury Day School and Episcopal Center for Children announced plans to close after this school year.



## Advocates for Justice and Education, Inc.

though the event is “substantiated” by the school or by police, you are told that you do not have a right to access video footage of your child being harmed, you do not have a right to know what personnel action was taken, and you may never know how many other students this happened to in past school years. Allowing public charter schools to continue to avoid obligations to provide the public with critical information severely stunts the ability of the public to hold schools accountable, to see problems coming before they arrive and course correct, and to prevent harm to students.

IN CONCLUSION: DC needs to readjust our framework of rating and evaluating schools and teachers in a District where schools that need additional resources to meet their student population’s needs have not been getting them, and schools with the least demonstrated student need that are referred to as “high-performing” are fully funded and possibly even receiving funds that were supposed to go to the other students.

The DC Council can help by ensuring that special education programs, SFASA and At-Risk funds are given to schools that need additional resources to meet their student needs and fully funded. We believe that increasing transparency among and within DC’s public schools will increase community engagement, reduce mass “student migration” and improve students’ educational outcomes.