We thank you for the opportunity to provide joint testimony on the “Student Fair Access to School Act.”

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We generally support the other provisions in the bill aimed at reforming school discipline practices, particularly in regards to suspensions, in the District and believe they will make our schools more equitable and supportive of all students. Our testimony, however, focuses on the trauma informed provisions (Section 5) of the “Student Fair Access to School Act,” which we believe could help lead to a transformation in how District schools support students who have experienced adversity.
Trauma is Pervasive Among the District’s Children
Exposure to traumatic, negative events and stressors—referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)—are directly linked to brain development, behavior, and the ability of children to learn. ACEs can also impact health outcomes later in life, such as increasing likelihood of developing obesity and other chronic diseases. ACEs include traumatic events such as abuse or witnessing violence as well as family disruption, including maternal depression, parental incarceration or addiction. Food insecurity or unstable housing also cause harm and may disrupt a child’s healthy development and cause behavioral problems or other impediments to learning.

The 2016 National Survey of Children’s Health (conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau) found that over 47% of all children in the District have been exposed to an ACE and nearly one in four District children have experienced 2 or more ACEs. Given the prevalence of ACEs among District children, there are students in every school in the District who have experienced some type of trauma and would benefit from trauma-informed practices.

Trauma Impacts How Children Learn and Behave in School
In addition to negative health impacts, trauma can impact students’ relationships with their peers and school employees as well as their reaction to certain situations. This is because traumatic experiences activate a child’s stress response system and the body responds with a “fight, flight or freeze” reaction, which releases hormones meant to be protective; however, repeated exposure to trauma may lead to an over-reactive stress response system. When this occurs, it is as if a child is in a constant state of emergency and minor occurrences at school, such as a misguided joke from a classmate or a perceived slight from a teacher, can lead to a disproportionate reaction. Picture a student who lives with a parent with an alcohol problem who also verbally abuses the child’s other parent. That child may view authority figures with suspicion, including teachers, and classroom rules may be viewed as un-fair or arbitrary, increasing the likelihood of a negative behavioral response or the child being re-traumatized if the school relies on exclusionary discipline.

In addition to impacting a child’s behavior, research has also found that exposure to trauma can make it more difficult to learn and pay attention due to functional changes in areas of the brain responsible for learning. This may manifest itself in children having difficulty paying attention, as well as retaining or retrieving information. A number of peer-reviewed studies¹ have found children exposed to trauma to be more likely to be held back a grade level, have irregular attendance, and be placed in special education classes.

Trauma-Informed Schools Can Help Children Bounce Forward from Adversity
Exposure to ACEs and trauma do not determine a child’s destiny. Through stable relationships, appropriate mental health and behavioral supports, and other interventions, children can demonstrate resilience and bounce forward, even in the face of adversity and trauma. In addition, making influential systems, such as schools, trauma-informed can create a supportive and nurturing environment for all children, including those exposed to trauma.

¹ See e.g. https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/brain_development.pdf
Trauma-informed approaches can take many forms, but start with a shift from a sole focus on the conduct of a child to a deeper understanding of what happened to that child to affect his/her behavior. For schools, becoming trauma-informed typically includes comprehensive training for all teachers and staff on the impacts of trauma and the implementation of tools to help traumatized students regulate their emotions. Such training creates a shared understanding amongst all of the adults at a school. Trauma-informed schools also focus on students’ emotional, social, physical and academic safety. This might include paying closer attention to the physical environment of the school or creating safe spaces where a child’s behavior can be discussed in a non-adversarial manner. It also includes policies and protocols to ensure that disciplinary approaches maximize student well-being, while reinforcing that school is a safe place, and effectively balances individual accountability with an understanding of underlying trauma that may be causing disruptive behavior.

Although perhaps outside of the scope of this legislation, it should be noted that increasing mental health interventions in schools as well as links to mental health interventions for staff are critically important to support both traumatized students as well as teachers and staff who often experience vicarious trauma and burn-out.

The “Student Fair Access to School Act” would facilitate much needed reforms to create trauma-informed District schools. Limiting exclusionary discipline policies is a critical step in avoiding re-traumatization of students and ensuring students can remain in school with the supports they need to succeed. Just as important, the bill’s provisions related to promoting trauma-informed educational settings will help to provide teachers and staff with the tools they need to both understand and address the impacts of trauma in school settings. We strongly support the legislation and offer additional recommendations below to further strengthen it.

**Recommendations**

It is important to recognize that the benefits of schools adopting trauma-informed approaches extend beyond the positive benefits for behavior and should not be viewed solely through a disciplinary lens. For that reason, we suggest not directly tying the provisions related to promotion of trauma-informed schools in Section 5 to reducing the use of exclusionary discipline. Because of the immense benefits of implementing trauma-informed practices in schools, we also recommend strengthening the language in Section 5 and making it the policy of the District of Columbia that all schools adopt trauma-informed approaches.

Teachers and school staff may also be exposed to trauma and such exposure may impact their ability to effectively do their job or impact longevity and turn-over. Teachers and other employees who work with children exposed to trauma may also experience secondary trauma, which can negatively impact their health, job performance and satisfaction. We recommend that Section 5 include development and dissemination of resources related to the amelioration of secondary trauma experienced by school employees. Because many school employees, including bus drivers and custodial staff,
interact with students and stand to benefit from being trauma-informed, the language in Section 5 can also be modified to explicitly include all school employees to ensure that materials and trainings are relevant and useful for all school staff engaging with students.

We also recommend that trainings and professional development opportunities include information about both the prevalence of trauma among District children as well as the underlying causes of that trauma, including guidance on changes to practice that would help create more supportive and nurturing school climates.

Finally, we would encourage the committee to consider adding items to both the annual reporting requirements in Section 6 and the evaluation requirements in Section 7 related to the trauma-informed provisions in the legislation. For instance, the annual reporting requirements could include data on the number of school personnel who received trauma-informed training or who achieved a trauma-informed educator certificate. In addition, it would be important to track the referrals to school-based or school-linked mental health support provided to students with disciplinary infractions and their families.

In summary, we strongly support the “Student Fair Access to School Act” and believe it will enhance the health, behavioral and education supports for the District’s most vulnerable children through the widespread adoption of trauma-informed practices across District schools. Thank you for this opportunity to comment.