



**Testimony of Scott Pearson
Executive Director
DC Public Charter School Board**

**Public Roundtable on Youth Bullying in the District of Columbia
Committee of the Whole and the Committee on Education
January 14, 2020**

Chairman Mendelson, Chairman Grosso, and councilmembers, thank you for inviting me to speak today on the issue of youth bullying in the District of Columbia. I am Scott Pearson, Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board.

Bullying in school is a serious matter – one made more challenging and complex with the rise of social media. I have been struck by the data produced by OSSE in its Youth Risk Behavior Survey that indicates the extraordinary prevalence of bullying in middle school, with a full third of students saying they had been bullied. The shockingly high rates of suicide ideation, as well as the fact that one in six students said they skipped school because they felt unsafe are just some of the consequences. We also recognize that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and non cisgendered students are at sharply greater risk for bullying.

Each public charter school has the status of a school district. Therefore, the primary focus on addressing bullying needs to be addressed at these schools. For this reason, we work closely with schools to provide them support where we can.

Every school is required to have a bullying prevention plan and we have worked closely with the Office of Human Rights to support our schools. I am pleased to report that every public charter has a compliant anti-bullying

policy. We are aware that there is more that many schools can do and stand ready to further cooperate with OHR to provide supports to schools.

Our principal ongoing effort at the Public Charter School Board is to use the Community Complaint process to help us address bullying incidents.

Since 2011, the DC PCSB has refined a community complaints policy to address with care concerns or unresolved issues from parents, school staff, and other members of the community.

When a parent or community member reaches out to the Board with a complaint or concern, the primary goal is to ensure that the school has (a) followed its complaint process in order to address the parent; (b) is in compliance with its charter and charter agreement; and (c) has not violated any applicable laws.

When a parent or community member submits a complaint or a concern, a DC PCSB staff member will ask a series of questions to capture a detailed account of the issue. Within two business days, we will notify the school's complaint point of contact and inform its designated board of trustees member of the complaint. Within five business days, the school must respond acknowledging receipt of the complaint and provide information about the steps taken to address the concern. Within seven business days, we will follow up with parents to inquire on the status of the complaint. If the complaint has not been resolved, we will contact the school for more information.

In response to serious community complaints involving the violation of law or troubling data trends, we created a structured process for visiting schools outside of a high-stakes review. This often involves an unscheduled visit to determine whether there are systemic issues related to the complaint or data trend. Depending on the observation, we may conduct another visit or a series of visits, launch an audit, a quality site review or a high-stakes review.

We also monitor complaints for patterns. I can recall one instance where a pattern of low-level complaints regarding bullying on the school bus resulted in an investigation and review that ultimately resulted in the school losing its charter.

I am pleased to report that we have witnessed large reductions in community complaints of bullying within the charter sector, over the years. In SY 2017-18, we recorded 27 complaints of bullying—a sharp decrease from the 72 complaints reported during SY 2014-15. I am pleased to report that this decline continues this year. By this time last year, we had received 15 bullying complaints; so far this year we have received just six.

In line with our transparency initiative, we publish parent complaint and key staff's contact information for each charter school campus, on our website. As outlined in our community complaints policy, we will continue to monitor ongoing and/or incoming complaints and share the aggregate data with each school and its board of trustees at the midpoint and end of each school year.

As part of the Youth Suicide Prevention and School Climate Survey Amendment Act of 2016, teachers and principals are required to complete a program provided through the Department of Behavioral Health once every two years to help participants identify students who may have unmet behavioral health needs, refer students to appropriate services, and recognize the warning signs and risk factors for youth suicide. The training is also intended to assist schools in implementing best practices for suicide prevention, intervention and postvention. We are pleased to report that 2,500 educators successfully completed these trainings, within the charter sector, prior to the start of the current academic year. The deadline for staff to complete the training this year is January 17. We continue to actively promote this training to our schools.

I appreciate the Council's focus on school climate and culture and look forward to providing continued support to our public charter schools in their ability to proactively address issues pertaining to school student safety.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.