



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL BOARD

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

AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

**Committee on Education Hearing on
Pre-K Discipline Amendment Act of 2015
The Honorable David Grosso, Chairman**

February 4, 2015

Good afternoon Chairman Grosso and members of the Committee. My name is Scott Pearson, and I am the Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB). I appreciate the opportunity to testify today.

We are here to discuss the Pre-K Discipline Amendment Act of 2015 that was introduced by Councilmember Grosso this January. The bill would ban many suspensions of PreK students at public schools, including public charter schools, as well as create reporting requirements on discipline for all public schools.

First, we would like to thank Councilmember Grosso and his staff for engaging with PCSB and DC public charter schools as they moved forward with this bill. We are hopeful that through this collaborative process we can come to a workable solution that both reduces exclusionary discipline and preserves charter schools' freedom to set disciplinary policies they believe to be in the best interest of their students.

First, we believe it is important to reiterate that charters are expected to comply with tough standards--but they need flexibility to do the job. For the schools this is not simply an abstract principle, it is key to their ability to provide quality and choice for DC students

and families. And we fully accept that, with flexibility comes increased accountability for performance and equity.

PCSB also fully understands the importance of keeping students in school and in their classrooms. With that goal in mind, nearly three years ago, we launched an initiative on the use of discipline and suspensions. Rather than using strict mandates or requirements, we focused instead on transparency and information sharing. By publishing suspension and expulsion rates, school-by-school, we let each school know where they stood in comparison to each other – and to the district average. This opened the way for schools to learn from each other and forced schools to defend their discipline results in the court of public opinion.

The results have been excellent. Expulsions are down more than half since 2012 and are now below the national average for similar populations. Suspensions are down by nearly a fifth just in the last year alone.

We believe this has been the right approach when working with charter schools. Yes – school discipline rates were too high. But we have been bringing these rates down in a way that preserves the schools’ freedom of operation – a freedom that we believe is essential to their success.

Turning to pre-school discipline – it is first of all important to point out that no preschoolers were expelled last year, and none were subject to long-term suspensions. Of the 122 suspensions that did occur, 76% were for one day. Indeed, we believe that the figure overstates the rate of charter school suspensions because many schools counted children sent home early, rather than students excluded for an entire school day. Overall, 1.9% of PreK-3 and PreK-4 students were suspended last year.

To be sure, it feels odd to defend the practice of exclusionary discipline for a three year-old, and we would be the first to admit that PreK discipline rates are too high. But we have seen examples

in schools – including some of our very highest-performing schools -
- where the targeted use of short-term suspensions has been a
useful tool for school safety, truancy reduction, and creating an
orderly school culture conducive to learning. These top-performing
schools are leading the improvement of education in the District of
Columbia.

Just as we've made progress reducing overall suspensions, we are
making progress reducing pre-school suspensions. In fact, year to
date suspensions are down 31% compared with a similar time
period last year. We look forward to being able to show the results
of our efforts at the end of the year.

Given the progress we have made, we respectfully ask that you
consider delaying this legislation by a year, so that we can continue
to demonstrate that the charter sector can make meaningful
progress on this issue without a legislative fix that would intrude on
the schools' ability to manage their schools for academic success.

However, if this legislation were to move forward we are hopeful that changes could be made to make the law more workable for schools. Specifically, we ask that the definition of suspension to be revised, to make it clear that the bill does not ban sending a student home for part of a day or sending a child to another classroom. We also ask that additional work be done on the exemptions in the legislation to allow schools more flexibility to protect students from injury and preserve the educational environment from persistent and extreme disruptive behavior. We look forward to working with you on these changes.

Beyond this, we also would like to work with the Council and other education stakeholders on additional approaches to school discipline and culture, particularly in finding more resources for charter schools to hire and train mental health professionals and behavioral specialists that can help support students before discipline becomes necessary.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. We share your commitment to ensuring that DC public charter schools provide *all* families with a quality choice for their child's education. We look forward to continuing to work with you to pursue this goal.