

**Testimony of Tim Vance, Policy Analyst
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Bill 21-001, Pre-K Student Discipline Amendment Act of 2015

**Before the Committee on Education
Council of the District of Columbia**

February 4, 2015

Good afternoon Councilmember Grosso and members of the Committee on Education. Thank you for the opportunity to address the Council at this hearing on the Pre-K Student Discipline Amendment Act of 2015. My name is Tim Vance and I am a policy analyst at DC Action for Children.

DC Action for Children (“DC Action”) provides data-based analysis and policy leadership on critical issues facing DC children and youth, to promote policies and actions that optimize child and family well-being.

We applaud Councilmember Grosso and the other members of this committee for addressing the critical issue of the use of suspensions and expulsions in our schools, especially with our youngest students.

When children miss school, they do not learn or benefit from school resources.

The early years of children’s development are critically important to their cognitive, physical and emotional development. We know that early childhood education programs can play an important role in supporting this development. However, if children are kept home, they miss out on these benefits. Last year, DC Action released a policy brief analyzing early absenteeism in the District titled, “Attendance Counts from the Start.” The brief explored the compounding effects of missing school during the early years on later academic achievement and grade-promotion. For low-income students, each missed day of school has a larger negative effect on academic outcomes than more affluent students because their families lack many of the resources to make up for lost educational opportunities outside of school.

Suspensions and expulsions are not developmentally-appropriate and can widen achievement gaps

Beyond missed classroom time, research also tells us that suspending or expelling preschool age students is an ineffective discipline strategy; young children may be unable to fully understand the relationship between their actions and the resulting punishment, and these discipline techniques, which can stigmatize children and families, can be particularly detrimental to healthy child development.¹ Even more troubling, data show that young students of color—

¹ Wilson, V.R. & Hanson, R. R. (2009). “Effective policies for promoting early behavioral development.” *Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy*, 15, 55-67.

especially males—as well as young students who are homeless or who have mental health needs are suspended or expelled at a disproportionate rate, both here in the District and nationally. These are the young children who stand to benefit the most from a supportive, structured learning environment. That is why we are happy to support the Pre-K Student Discipline Amendment Act of 2015, and we applaud DCPS for its early initiative in banning pre-k suspensions in all district run programs.

With the passage of this bill, the District would join a growing number of cities and school districts that have already banned or restricted the use of suspensions and expulsions for very young students, including Minneapolis, Chicago, and Baltimore City Public Schools. Some of these jurisdictions have gone even farther, banning suspensions and expulsions of young students through the second grade.

Expanding protections for our youngest students

The American Academy of Pediatrics has released a policy statement indicating its objection to the use of suspension or expulsion as a discipline strategy, except in ‘the most egregious circumstances,’ for all secondary students.² The risks to children who are expelled or suspended are especially high during the first 8-years of life when the brain is undergoing its most significant period of formative development. As we gather more data on suspensions and expulsions in the District, as required by this bill, the council should strongly consider expanding the ban on these forms of discipline through the third grade, as Councilmember Grosso has previously advocated.

The current bill also allows for the suspension and expulsion of prekindergarten age children who bring a weapon, controlled substance or other intoxicant to school. We believe that allowing young children to access these dangerous items is the fault of parents, and punishing these students for what is ultimately developmentally appropriate curiosity is wrong. As a result, we advocate for the removal of these exceptions to the ban on suspensions and expulsions in the bill under consideration today.

Teachers and students need supports to maintain safe learning environments.

While OSSE’s 2014 report titled “Reducing Out-of-School Suspensions and Expulsions in District of Columbia Public and Public Charter Schools” indicated that many of the Pre-K suspensions and expulsions in the District were inappropriate responses to non-violent, age-appropriate behavior, we also recognize that teachers must maintain a safe learning environment in their classrooms. If a teacher is unable to remove a student who is a threat to other children or themselves, we must provide them with additional resources to deal appropriately with more serious discipline issues. We strongly recommend the Council expand mental health services available in early childhood programs to ensure that children have the mental health supports they need to succeed.

² American Academy of Pediatrics (2003). American Academy of Pediatrics policy statement: Out-of-school suspension and expulsion. *Pediatrics*, 112(5), 1206-1209.

On-hand early childhood mental health specialists would be able to assist in diagnosing the root-causes of disruptive or dangerous behavior and work together with parents and teachers to address them. Existing research suggests that early childhood mental health consultation is an effective strategy in reducing problem behaviors in young children as well as the use of severe discipline strategies like suspension or expulsion.³ By identifying and treating the underlying causes of young children's discipline problems, students have a better chance of catching up to their peers academically and behaviorally in later grades.

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

³ Brennan, E.M., Bradley, J.R., Allen, M.D., & Perry, D.F. (2008). The evidence base for mental health consultation in early childhood settings: Research synthesis addressing staff and program outcomes. *Early Education and Development*, 6, 982-2022.

Gillam, W.S., & Shahar, G. (2006). Prekindergarten expulsion and suspension: Rates and predictors in one state. *Infants and Young Children*, 19, 228-245.