



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

**State of School Discipline: 2015-2016 School Year
Committee on Education
February 2, 2017**

Chairman Grosso, members of the Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Scott Pearson, Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board. Your commitment to students having safe, orderly and compassionate learning environments has supported efforts across the city to decrease out of school discipline rates.

Since I began my tenure at the Public Charter School Board, reducing out of school discipline rates at public charter schools has been a priority of mine. It is a priority of our agency that public charter policies and practices are consistent with both educational equity and academic quality. Beginning in 2012, DC PCSB began to require schools to collect and report monthly, accurate, out of school discipline data. We launched with our partners across the city, city-wide Equity Reports, which I would say has had the unexpected benefit of causing all of us to standardize our definitions. Every month we analyze the data we collect, intervening with outlier schools. We also publish this data in our Equity Reports and elsewhere. We hold direct meetings with the boards of schools that have particularly high rates of discipline. We also review school discipline policies every year. Finally, we provide professional development for school leaders on alternatives to out of school discipline.

The results have been extremely promising. Over the past several years the public charter sector has seen suspension and expulsion rates fall sharply. Let me cite two examples. In school year 2011, public charter schools expelled 395 students. Last year, despite serving more than 10,000 additional students than in 2011, expulsions fell to just 81. That is a rate that is below the national average.

With suspensions, a key number is the number of total days that students are out of school. In 2013, more than 23,000 days were spent on suspensions at public charter schools. Last year, this number had dropped to just more than 15,000. As a share of total school days, suspensions at public charters have dropped over 40% in three years. Meanwhile test scores at our public charter schools continue to rise even as our schools serve an ever more vulnerable student population. Behind these numbers are countless stories of how schools have modified their practices, their philosophies, and

their cultures. You have heard and will hear several of these stories. What is important is that each school has done this in their own way, consistent with their own philosophy. This could never have occurred with a top down mandate, regulation or law. If there are some commonalities behind these stories, some of them we have identified, would be that first students and teachers must build strong relationships. Many students have underlying issues and acting out is a symptom. Having a strong relationship with a student better allows teachers to get to the root of the problem. Second, a school's disciplinary philosophy should consider if the behavior is a symptom of a larger problem and addresses the issue in this context. Finally, authentic parent engagement is crucial to addressing the broader issues.

I want to highlight a few schools that have made outstanding progress, going from some of the highest disciplinary rates in our sector to some of the lowest. Center City PCS, Cesar Chavez PCS, Friendship PCS have all made this journey. We highlight these schools in a report on our website that focuses on our efforts to reduce out of school discipline. Schools are showing what can be done by focusing on their school culture, analyzing and responding to discipline data and keeping an open line of communication between the school, students and parents.

I want to emphasize that the instructional and operational flexibility granted to schools in the School Reform Act has allowed these schools to be creative and authentic in how they approach these solutions. Maintaining this flexibility is critical as we move forward in thinking about new ways to further reduce suspensions and expulsions. One size fits all regulations are not only inconsistent with the School Reform Act, they interfere with the organic and authentic practice by which each independent LEA evolves its discipline policy in a manner consistent with its unique mission, culture and pedagogy. We also need to keep in mind that public charter schools are schools of choice. Parents select these schools and often tell us that an orderly environment that allows for a focus on academics is a reason they have chosen their school.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I and the rest of the public charter school sector appreciate the care and thoughtfulness in which you and the Council has approached this issue. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.