



**WASHINGTON LAWYERS' COMMITTEE**  
**FOR CIVIL RIGHTS AND URBAN AFFAIRS**

**Testimony of the Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs**  
**School Budget Oversight Hearing**  
**Before the Committee of the Whole of the Council of the District of Columbia**  
**April 4, 2023**

The Washington Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs urges the Council to redouble efforts to reverse the effects of generations of systemic racial discrimination and poverty, and to invest in a racially just education system in DC. The legacy of a segregated and unequal education system is still the reality for many parents and students today: Black and Latino students in DC are more likely to attend public schools that are under-resourced, outdated, and over-policed.

Our testimony today focuses on the need for the District's budget to invest in a supportive, care-based school safety infrastructure in our schools. The Council should invest in evidenced-based school-level strategies that promote public safety and an equitable learning environment, including mental, behavioral, and physical health services, enrichment and community building programs, non-punitive conflict resolution skills building training for staff and students, and restorative justice. These strategies – and not police in schools – will lead to true school and community safety by addressing root issues. The Committee fully supports the School Safety Enhancement Amendment Act of 2023, and urges the Council to both pass this legislation and dedicate at least \$4.5 million dollars to ensure that all DC high schools can hire a School Safety Director to respond to the demands of students, parents, and school communities. The Committee is also member of the Police-Free Schools Coalition,<sup>1</sup> convened by Black Swan Academy, which advocates for the divestment from school policing and the investment in supportive services for students.

**Invest in School & Community-Based Safety Measures like the School Safety Enhancement**

Young people deserve to feel safe and nurtured in schools. To truly achieve school safety, students, parents, educators and school leaders must work together to create communities of care that support students through non-carceral interventions like restorative justice programs, mediation, de-escalation, and violence interruption. Scaling back police presence in schools protects young people and prioritizes safe education spaces, particularly for students of color and students with disabilities. Nationally, Black students are more likely to be arrested at school for normal adolescent behavior than their white counterparts.<sup>2</sup> In 2019, 92% of school-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.blackswanacademy.org/policefree-schools>

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Goff, P.A., Jackson, et.al., *The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children*, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (February 2014); Epstein, Rebecca, Jamilia J. Black & Thalia Gonzalez, *Girlhood Interrupted: The erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*, Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality (2012).

based arrests in DC were of Black youth.<sup>3</sup> In particular, Black girls are five and a half times more likely to be suspended from school than white girls,<sup>4</sup> and 60% of girls arrested in DC are under the age of fifteen.<sup>5</sup> Girls, especially girls of color, are often the targets of harsh school disciplinary responses to their behavior due to stereotypes about gender and race.<sup>6</sup> These statistics highlight the vast disparities in the types of educational environments students experience. As the D.C. Police Reform Commission explained, “[y]outh of color in particular often do not feel comfortable, valued, or safe in educational spaces where they are interacting with representatives of a system that generally views Black and brown people as a threat. Indeed, a panel of youth told this commission that instead of fostering safety in school, officers often escalate altercations, create a hostile atmosphere, and cause anxiety among young people by their mere presence, especially since they carry guns.”<sup>7</sup>

The Council has been steadfast in its commitment to ensuring that DC schools are disrupting the school to prison pipeline in DC, first, by passing the Student Fair Access to Schools Act and then by transferring control of the security contract from the Metropolitan Police Department to D.C. Public Schools and by gradually reducing the size and scope of MPD’s School Safety Division. These legislative actions are a key part of addressing ongoing racial disparities in suspensions, expulsions, and school-based arrests in DC. However, further Council investment is needed to ensure alternatives to school police that will create true safety in our schools.

The Council should pass and fund the School Safety Enhancement Amendment Act. Any approach to school safety must be grounded in an understanding that lack of safety is a symptom of social and racial inequities and a lack of support and resources for students. Millions of students, disproportionately Black and Brown students, attend schools with police but without counselors, nurses, psychologists, or social workers. DCPS neighborhood schools serving mostly Black students are more likely to be deprived of the funding necessary to retain staff including school-based professionals to address mental health and other needs, such as psychologists, nurses, social workers and school counselors. The School Safety Enhancement Act recognizes that a safe educational environment requires funding for mental health services, violence interrupters, and safe passage, not for more police presence in schools.

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<sup>3</sup> The 2019 School Report Card indicates that there were 338 total arrests of students across the District – 312 of the arrests were of Black students and 26 of the arrests were of Latino students. (104 of the arrests were for students with disabilities).

<sup>4</sup> Adaku Onyeka-Crawford et al., Nat’l Women’s Law Ctr., *Let Her Learn: Stopping School Pushout for Girls of Color* 1 (2017).

<sup>5</sup> Rights4Girls & Georgetown Juvenile Justice Initiative, *Beyond the Walls: A Look at Girls in DC’s Juvenile Justice System*, 21-22, available at <https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/r4g/2018/03/BeyondTheWalls-Final.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Rights4Girls & Georgetown Juvenile Justice Initiative, *Beyond the Walls: A Look at Girls in DC’s Juvenile Justice System*, 9, available at <https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/r4g/2018/03/BeyondTheWalls-Final.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Bobb, et al., DC Police Reform Commission, *Decentering Police to Improve Public Safety: A Report of the DC Police Reform Commission*, 8 (2021), available at <https://dccouncil.us/police-reform-commission-full-report/>.

The School Safety Enhancement Amendment Act of 2023 provides schools with the resources to create safe, nurturing learning environments by doing two key things:

1. **The School Safety Enhancement Act** establishes the School Safety Committee, a community driven and collaborative process for addressing school safety. The Act will create a brain trust of students, families, educators, and education and health agency leaders that will develop guidance to proactively achieve school safety while avoiding the harms of school policing and student criminalization.
2. **The School Safety Enhancement Act** provides the resources and framework to hire and train School Safety Directors and School Safety Teams, who work with students and community members to build authentic relationships and implement evidence-based and trauma-informed approaches that improve student learning, safety, and wellbeing. The School Safety Enhancement Act calls for the hiring of full-time School Safety Directors in every school, tasked with building a team of supporters and implementing a safety plan unique to their individual school campuses. It allows an assessment of the unique circumstance and needs of individual schools.

Schools need resources in order to keep students safe and to implement the School Safety Enhancement Act. In order to provide every school with a School Safety Director, and to provide high schools with additional staff, the Council will need to allocate approximately \$26,000,000. This more than the District has historically spent each year on school security guards and school resource officers; in 2020-2021 school year, our city spent close to \$20 million dollars on school security within DCPS alone,<sup>8</sup> and about \$13.9 million on MPD officers to patrol DCPS and charter schools.<sup>9</sup> For Fiscal Year 2024, we are asking that the Council invest at least \$4.5 million in school safety so that every high school can hire a School Safety Director for the upcoming school year

### **Continue the District's Commitment to Reduce MPD Presence in Schools.**

The Council should reject Mayor Bowser's proposal to repeal the phase out of the MPD School Safety Division that the Council passed in the Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Support Act. The Mayor's proposal goes against the recommendations of the D.C. Police Reform Commission,<sup>10</sup> the D.C. Jails and Justice Taskforce,<sup>11</sup> and the State Board of Education.<sup>12</sup> It will jeopardize the safety

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<sup>8</sup> MPD FY2021 Approved Budget for the District of Columbia Government, Schedule 30-PBB, Division 2300, located at [https://cfo.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ocfo/publication/attachments/fa\\_mpd\\_tables\\_2021a.pdf](https://cfo.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ocfo/publication/attachments/fa_mpd_tables_2021a.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Qubilah Huddleston, *What's in the Fiscal Year 2021 Approved Budget for PreK-12 Education?*, DC FISCAL POLICY INSTITUTE (Sept. 9, 2020), available at <https://www.dcfpi.org/all/whats-in-the-fiscal-year-2021-approved-budget-for-prek-12-education/>.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Bobb, et al., DC Police Reform Commission, *Decentering Police to Improve Public Safety: A Report of the DC Police Reform Commission*, 18 (2021), available at <https://dccouncil.us/police-reform-commission-full-report/>.

<sup>11</sup> District Task Force on Jails & Justice, *Jails & Justice: Our Transformation Starts Today*, Phase II Report (February 2021), available at <http://www.courtexcellence.org/uploads/publications/TransformationStartsToday.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> SR20-10, State Board of Education of Resolution To Recognize the Importance of Removing All Police From D.C. Public and Charter Schools (July 15, 2020).

and well-being of the communities and students who are directly impacted by the presence of MPD officers in schools. Moreover, the Mayor's proposed repeal will have no impact on the Fiscal Year 2024 Budget and repealing the current law via the Budget Support Act is simply unnecessary. Per current law, the School Safety Division should have 40 FTEs funded in Fiscal Year 2024, and that is all that the Mayor has proposed.<sup>13</sup>

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The Committee urges the Council to evaluate its budget choices by prioritizing investment in students who are most in need and who have been most harmed by the District's failure to fully invest in them: students of color, students with disabilities, and students who are in poverty. We ask that the DC Council pass the School Safety Enhancement Amendment Act of 2023, invest at least \$4.5 million dollars in our young people, and fund School Safety Directors in each high school to expand support and build true safety for young people in school.

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<sup>13</sup> [https://cfo.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ocfo/publication/attachments/fa\\_mpd\\_chapter\\_2024m.pdf](https://cfo.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/ocfo/publication/attachments/fa_mpd_chapter_2024m.pdf)