

Building Inclusive Learning Environments Across the District

Testimony of Maura McInerney, Esq. before School Reform Commission, July 6, 2017

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Maura McInerney and I am a Senior Attorney at the Education Law Center and member of the Philadelphia Coalition of Special Education Advocates. I am testifying today regarding the need for inclusive learning opportunities for students with disabilities across the District – including those with low-incident disabilities, many of whom are currently in segregated settings. During the 2015-16 school year, over one thousand students with disabilities were educated in entirely separate private and public facilities outside the District, while an additional nearly 5,000 students received special education services while educated in regular classrooms less than 40% of the school day.¹ Rates of segregation are highest among children with emotional disturbance, where 17% were educated outside the District in the 2015-16 school year.² As Black students are 1.61 times more likely than White students to be identified with emotional disturbance, this segregation of students can result in greater racial isolation.³

¹ See Special Education Statistical Summary, 2015-2016, Pennsylvania Department of Education Bureau of Special Education available at https://penndata.hbg.psu.edu/Portals/66/documents/PennDataBooks/Statistical_Summary_2015-2016.pdf.

² *Id.*

³ See Special Education Statistical Summary, 2014-2015, Pennsylvania Department of Education Bureau of Special Education, Table 3 (November 2015) available at https://penndata.hbg.psu.edu/Portals/66/documents/PennDataBooks/Statistical_Summary_2014-2015.pdf.

We believe that the District must focus greater attention on building more inclusive learning environments to support students to be educated in integrated learning environments in order to better serve their needs. This will require a carefully considered, robust plan to target resources and services, train teachers, principals, and staff, and change an entrenched culture of exclusion that has been reinforced over many years. It will also require effective monitoring and evaluation of programs utilizing clearly defined objective, measurable benchmarks to assess efforts to ensure greater inclusion and the meaningful progress of students with disabilities.

The benefits of inclusion are well documented both for individual students with disabilities, their non-disabled peers, and larger school communities and culture. For students with disabilities, positive outcomes include higher graduation rates, positive achievement outcomes, higher quality individualized programs, lower suspension rates, and the acquisition of skills in a range of areas available in inclusive classrooms. As a result of inclusive learning, students with disabilities demonstrate greater social interaction with typical peers, greater social competence and improved communication skills. In addition, inclusive learning environments facilitate the acquisition of literacy and adaptive skills. One study examined the outcomes of 11,000 students with a range of disabilities and found that more time spent in a general education classroom was positively correlated with: a) fewer absences from school, b) fewer referrals for disruptive behavior, and c) better outcomes after high school in the areas of employment and independent living. Inclusive learning environments also provide a far better quality education for all children. They are instrumental in changing discriminatory attitudes and expanding the ability of individuals to interact, socialize,

and learn from individuals with diverse abilities and backgrounds and develop better social relationships and interactions.⁴

Building inclusive learning environments in neighborhood schools would vastly improve current graduation rates and school discipline outcomes for students with disabilities across the District. We know that students with disabilities are far more likely to be suspended, expelled, placed in Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth programs, and other school discipline settings despite legal protections. The graduation rate reported for all students with disabilities in the School District of Philadelphia for the 2015-2016 school year was 52.75% -- well behind the four-year statewide graduation rate for students with disabilities of 71.60%, the statewide rate for all students of 85% and the District's overall graduation rates -- 64.81% (four years), 71.63% (five years), and 72.09% (six years).⁵ A peer-reviewed study released across all disability categories concluded that students who are included in classes with their non-disabled peers for *most of the day* have substantially higher on-time graduation rates when compared to students in substantially separate placements, even when controlling for individual and community factors.⁶

"Inclusion" does not mean placing students in segregated settings *inside* the District. Nor does it mean simply mean placing students with disabilities in general education classes. Rather, it means fundamental changes in the way school communities support and address the individual needs of every child. Effective models of inclusive education create a school environment in which every student has the

⁴ Inclusive education Research and Practice. Xuan Bui, Carol Quirk, Selene Almazan, Michele Valenti, available at http://www.mcie.org/usermedia/application/6/inclusion_works_final.pdf (collecting studies).

⁵ See [2015-2016 Required Federal Reporting Measures](#)

⁶ See Using Survival Analysis to Understand Graduation of Students With Disabilities, Laura A. Schifter (December 17, 2015) available at <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0014402915619418>.

opportunity to learn effectively and flourish. Inclusive education for students with disabilities can only be successful when all students feel that they are truly a part of the school community. This is built on an *institutional* respect for all students of varying backgrounds, perspectives and abilities. And it must be led by trained principals in schools who understand the value and power of inclusion.⁷

We must invest in professional development. Inclusive schools place great importance on co-teaching and creating opportunities for students to learn and be assessed in a variety of ways. Teachers must learn how to differentiate instruction for all learners, including those with low-incident disabilities. This encompasses considering a wide range of learning modalities (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, etc.) in designing instruction and requires a concerted effort to expand professional development training. This enhances the way in which educators provide supports and accommodations for students with disabilities, and also diversifies the educational experience of all students thereby increasing student engagement. Inclusive schools provide academic supports (flexible pacing and grouping, reading and literacy specialists, tutoring, etc.) and create a more supportive environment for all learners. This is why inclusive schools have been shown to better challenge and engage gifted and talented learners by building a more responsive learning environment.

We must invest in consistent evidence-based behavioral supports. An important factor in effective inclusive education is the implementation of consistent positive behavioral supports throughout the learning environment. This consistency is essential for the success of students with emotional or behavioral disabilities in the general education

⁷ See Principals of Inclusive Schools, Christine Salisbury, University of Illinois-Chicago Gail McGregor, University of Montana (2005) available at http://glec.education.iupui.edu/equity/Principals_of_Inclusive_Schools.pdf.

environment, but school-wide behavioral supports also help to establish high expectations throughout the school community as a whole.⁸

We must make effective use of resources to support inclusion in schools. The stated purpose of segregating students with low-incident disabilities is for the purpose of specialized instruction. However, the category of emotional disturbance is often a “catch all” category for students with vastly different educational needs that cannot be met in any one-size-fits-all program. The reality is that many families of children with disabilities in the District are forced to choose between a segregated setting that offers supports, and an inclusive environment that lacks essential resources and interventions to support their child. This model of special education does not serve our children. A separate setting deprives students with disabilities of interaction with their peers, full access to the curriculum and also duplicates costly systems and resources in separate settings. In contrast, inclusive education makes efficient use of a school's resources by maximizing the availability of staff and materials for all students.

We urge the Commission to focus its financial resources and attention on building truly inclusive schools across the District and to reject separate segregated settings both outside and within the District so that *all* of our children can thrive.

Thank you.

⁸ See [Improving Education: The Promise of Inclusive Education](#), National Institute for Urban School Improvement, funded by the United States Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). This publication includes examples of inclusive educational environments, assessment and observation tools, and guidelines for supporting inclusive practices for students with disabilities.