

Testimony Submitted to Pittsburgh Public Schools Board of Directors

by Hetal Dhagat, Esq.
Education Law Center (ELC)

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For years, the Education Law Center has worked with Pittsburgh Public Schools and its solicitors on revisions to the Code of Student Conduct by elevating the voices of students, families, and communities most impacted by school discipline, policing, and pushout. We value this collaboration and applaud the steps the District has taken to meet students with supports and interventions in the place of punitive consequences that push students out of school.

With appreciation for all the changes that have already been made, ELC offers the following comments on the Code of Student Conduct:

1. **Suspensions:** District data demonstrates that Black students are disproportionately suspended from the District. The District presented data at last week's Policy Review meeting showing that during this school year so far, Black students have been suspended at rate that is nearly 2.8 times higher than their peers and that Black girls are suspended at a rate that is nearly 3 times higher than other non-Black girls. In addition, students with IEPs are suspended at a rate that is over 1.5 times higher than their peers without IEPs. We urge the District to address this harmful disproportionality and examine the overall effectiveness of suspensions.

In addition, we encourage the District to obtain documentation and data on how many in-school-suspensions are given, whether a disproportional student population is affected, and whether students are provided with class work during the in-school-suspension.

2. **Summary Citations:** The District's data on summary citations also shows that Black students, and Black girls in particular, are cited at a far higher rate than their white peers. The same is true for students with disabilities. Summary citations lead to involvement in the adult justice system and a conviction for an alleged summary citation offense may result in fines which burden families. We urge the District to make reforms to these referrals to the justice system by adopting the proposed revisions that would reduce and lead to the elimination of school-based citations.
3. **Conflicting Handbooks:** Through providing legal assistance to education attorneys and representing our own clients, we have noticed that individual schools have building-specific handbooks that may contain policies that conflict with the District-wide Code of Conduct. In these situations, the building handbooks may impose harsher consequences on students, often times in contravention of the District's stated goals of supporting students, which raises issues of fairness and equity across schools. We urge the District to review school handbooks to ensure that its positive changes have been implemented across all schools and that schools are aware that their handbooks must conform to the Code of Conduct.

Thank you for welcoming the Education Law Center as a collaborator in this work. We remain available as a resource and thought partner going forward.

Who we are: The Education Law Center (ELC) is a non-profit legal advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all Pennsylvania's children, from birth through twenty-one, have access to a quality public education. For 45 years, ELC has provided legal advice, consultation, and technical assistance to thousands of parents, advocates, and other professionals on issues of public education. Our work focuses on ensuring that the students, families, and communities most impacted are centered in the decision-making process and part of co-constructing solutions.