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Testimony Submitted to Pittsburgh Public Schools Board of Directors

by Kayla Edwards-Scott
Education Law Center (ELC)
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Good evening. My name is Kayla Edwards Scott. I am the program associate in the Pittsburgh office of the Education Law Center-PA (ELC).

Tonight, I am here to raise concerns that we have about Pittsburgh Public School (PPS) District's Code of Conduct, particularly around summary citations and school suspensions. In its current iteration, the District's Code of Conduct strives to "move away from reactionary and exclusionary practices toward proactive approaches and interventions," but it falls short.

The culture of responding to adolescent behavior with criminal charges and suspensions can be traced back to policies found within the PPS Code of Conduct that leave room for school police officers to issue summary citations for instances of drug and alcohol use; and for the school to suspend students for behaviors like leaving the classroom during instruction and using profanity. This can and must change.

Summary Citations: Data from the District shows that Black students are 12 times more likely to receive a summary citation than their white peers. Overall, Black girls, are issued summary citations at the highest rate. Summary citations put children in front of a magistrate to face criminal charges, and these charges oftentimes lead to costly fines and fees that are burdensome for families. It is clear that citations are not a solution. We urge the District to revisit the Code of Conduct and work to address these disparate outcomes.

School Suspensions: Data from the District also shows that Black students are far more likely to be suspended from school. Students with disabilities are suspended at a rate nearly 2 times more than their peers. Further, the District currently allows for in-school suspensions, without oversight and at the discretion of individual school buildings. The District must monitor and collect data on this practice so that we can determine whether there are disparities here, too. We urge the District to revisit the Code of Conduct and reconsider the overall usefulness of school suspension.

The District's current school policies have the potential to harm children and further perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline. There are more effective alternatives to address student misbehavior, including employing transformative and restorative justice practices, ensuring adequate mental health supports, and making sure students with disabilities are fully supported. While we recognize the District's recent plan to hire additional social workers and counselors, more change is necessary. We urge Pittsburgh Public School District to reevaluate the Code of Conduct and continue to work towards creating school communities that respond to misbehavior with resources and care, rather than punishment and pushout. Our students deserve better.

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.