

Committee on Education

COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Room 400, City Hall
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Thursday, August 6, 2026
10:15 a.m.

PRESENT:

COUNCILMAN ISAIAH THOMAS, CHAIR
COUNCILMAN ANTHONY PHILLIPS, VICE-CHAIR
COUNCILWOMAN NINA AHMAD
COUNCILWOMAN KENDRA BROOKS

RESOLUTIONS: 260617, 260647

Committee on Education

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2 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Good
3 morning, everybody. And I now call
4 the Committee of Education.
5 Colleagues, we're about to get
6 started. Good morning. Today is
7 Thursday. This is the Committee on
8 Education. Welcome to Philadelphia
9 City Council. I note that the hour
10 has come.

11 Madam Clerk, please take
12 the attendance. Members that are
13 present will communicate their
14 presence by saying aye.

15 THE CLERK: Vice-Chair
16 Anthony Phillips.

17 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
18 Present.

19 THE CLERK:
20 Councilmember Squilla.

21 (No response.)

22 THE CLERK: Councilwoman
23 Gauthier.

24 (No response.)

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1 THE CLERK:

2 Councilmember Lozada.

3 (No response.)

4 THE CLERK: Councilwoman

5 Ahmad.

6 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

7 Present.

8 THE CLERK: Councilwoman

9 Brooks.

10 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

11 Present.

12 THE CLERK: And, Chair

13 Thomas.

14 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

15 Present. A quorum of the Committee

16 is present. This is the public

17 hearing on the Committee of

18 Education on Resolutions No. 260617

19 and 260647.

20 Madam Clerk, will you

21 please read the titles of the

22 resolutions to be heard today.

23 THE CLERK: 260617,

24 authorizing the Committee on

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1 Education to hold hearings
2 examining preschool pushout, the
3 practice of suspension, expulsion,
4 and informal methods of exclusion
5 of our youngest learners, to
6 provide a space to hear stories
7 from impacted families and identify
8 solutions to ensure a bright future
9 for all of our young people.

10 260647, authorizing the
11 Committee on Education to hold
12 hearings examining the
13 accessibility and equity of Algebra
14 education curriculum in
15 Philadelphia schools and the impact
16 this has on accessibility to
17 special admission high school
18 schools.

19 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
20 Thank you, Madam Clerk. Both of
21 these issues were presented by
22 advocacy groups. And as result of
23 the concerns about the education
24 issue, they felt we should bring it

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1 to the forefront. And hopefully,
2 we explore these issues as a result
3 of addressing both problems now in
4 the summertime because we know once
5 we come back to school in
6 September, it will be busy.

7 There's no secret that
8 we're going to continue to advocate
9 against the current facilities
10 plan. That's a big issue for us.
11 I want to say thank you, especially
12 to my colleagues on the Education
13 Committee that's here today and I
14 want to take a moment to open it up
15 to who has any remarks before we
16 call up the first panel.

17 Chair recognizes
18 Councilmember Ahmad.

19 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
20 Thank you, Chair Thomas, and thank
21 you for bringing these resolutions
22 forward.

23 To all the parents,
24 providers and everyone testifying

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1 today, you've been working long and
2 hard in this space and we see that
3 work and we are so very grateful
4 that we're discussing this today.

5 This morning we'll hear
6 from all of the parents who will
7 tell us who their children really
8 are and what happened to them.
9 Some of these children were turned
10 away on their first day
11 and (inaudible).

12 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: I'm
13 sorry, folks. Give us five
14 minutes. We apologize. We just
15 need two minutes. Let us clear up
16 some technical issues we have and
17 we will definitely resume in two
18 minutes.

19 (Brief recess.)

20 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Good
21 morning again. I apologize for the
22 delay. Welcome back to the
23 Committee on Education. Again,
24 today is Thursday, August 6th. We

1 apologize for the delay for
2 technical difficulties. We've
3 already established a quorum and
4 I've given brief remarks. And I
5 think now we're ready to jump into
6 our dialogue for today.

7 Madam Clerk, would you
8 please call the first panel to
9 testify as it relates to the first
10 resolution being heard in today's
11 hearing.

12 THE CLERK: (Inaudible).

13 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: We
14 can't hear.

15 THE CLERK: We will
16 first hear from Jennifer Garrison
17 and Tanema Fannings, followed by
18 Sean Perkins.

19 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Say
20 the names one more time, Madam
21 Clerk.

22 THE CLERK: Jennifer
23 Garrison and Taneema Fannings.

24 (Witnesses approached

1 witness table.)

2 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

3 Please make your way to the front.

4 Please state your name for the

5 record and you may begin with your

6 testimony.

7 MS. GARRISON: Good

8 morning, Councilmember Thomas and

9 members of the Council. My name is

10 Jennifer Garrison --

11 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

12 (Inaudible) -- ma'am, you may

13 proceed with your testimony.

14 MS. GARRISON: My name

15 is Jennifer Garrison and I am the

16 mother of a 4-year-old autistic

17 child named Terrell, who we also

18 call Chuck. Terrell is one of the

19 sweetest, brightest and most loving

20 little boys you could ever meet.

21 His smile lights up a room. He

22 loves to sing, play instruments,

23 especially the guitar, dancing in

24 the mirror, climbing at the

1 playground, snuggling with his dad
2 and I, giving hugs and kisses. He
3 loves to hug and he loves to kiss.

4 Terrell has been
5 receiving therapy since 18 months
6 old and every provider describes
7 him as persistent, determined,
8 hard-working and a joy to work
9 with. He pushes through tasks even
10 when they challenge him, and he
11 remains loving, gentle and full of
12 energy. This is a child I
13 entrusted to preschool, a child
14 deserving of safety, care, and
15 understanding.

16 What we experienced was
17 the opposite. Terrell has
18 significant feeding difficulties
19 and relies on support to eat, which
20 the school did not provide. At
21 school meals and snack time, he
22 shut down and stopped eating
23 altogether. If therapists weren't
24 present, he simply didn't eat.

1 As a non-verbal child,
2 Terrell depends heavily on his AAC
3 device to communicate essential
4 needs such as hunger, thirst,
5 discomfort or help. Yet the device
6 was routinely left inside the
7 classroom while Terrell spent hours
8 outside on the playground without
9 his AAC device. My son had no
10 voice. Entire days passed where he
11 went without food, water or
12 communication access.

13 When I picked Terrell
14 up, he was extremely hungry and
15 thirsty almost every single day.
16 Terrell did not -- the school did
17 not implement his IEP and suggested
18 a restricted schedule. There was a
19 disregard for his needs, which
20 ultimately amounted to an indirect
21 expulsion. These suggestions were
22 never about what was best for
23 Terrell. It was simply about what
24 was easiest for them.

1 The impact on my son has
2 been devastating. He experienced
3 regression, emotional shutdown, a
4 loss of trust in school routines.
5 He spent days hungry, thirsty,
6 overwhelmed, and unable to
7 communicate. For his father and I,
8 the emotional toll has been
9 overwhelming. We are dedicated
10 parents who advocate daily,
11 communicate constantly and do
12 everything in our power to support
13 him. Yet the school still failed
14 him.

15 As a Black parent of a
16 child with disabilities, there is
17 an added layer of concern that
18 behaviors or needs associated with
19 autism may be misunderstood or
20 responded to differently. Families
21 of color often have to work harder
22 to advocate for the same supports
23 and assumptions about parenting,
24 discipline or behavior -- and/or

1 behavior can influence how
2 assumptions -- excuse me, or
3 behavior can influence how
4 situations are handled.

5 When those dynamics
6 intersect with disability, they can
7 create additional barriers to
8 receive understanding, patience,
9 and appropriate accommodations.
10 While each situation is unique, it
11 is important to acknowledge that
12 race shapes how families experience
13 systems that were not originally
14 designed with equity in mind.

15 I'm not sharing this for
16 sympathy. I'm sharing because no
17 autistic child should be ignored
18 ever. They shouldn't be silenced,
19 left hungry, denied communication
20 access, unsupported or quietly
21 pushed out of a school because
22 their needs required effort. I'm
23 speaking up to protect children
24 like my son and to advocate for

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1 accountability, training and
2 meaningful inclusion. Thank you.

3 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

4 State your name for the record.
5 You may begin with your testimony.

6 MS. FANNINGS: Good
7 morning. My name is Taneema
8 Fannings. I am the owner and
9 operator of Christ Like Childcare
10 Center. Okay, everyone, so I'm
11 here today to testify on behalf of
12 my over 25 years of experience in
13 education. I'm born and raised
14 here in Philadelphia. I have a
15 degree in elementary and early
16 childhood education from Temple
17 University.

18 After teaching for the
19 school district for several years,
20 I opened up my family child care
21 center. And it is my testimony
22 today that what is being asked of
23 child care providers is fair, but
24 no support or resources make it

1 impossible for family child care
2 providers such as myself. It is
3 one person to six children. It is
4 a highly regulated and demanding
5 field and I do it sheerly for the
6 love.

7 I have many of the
8 people in here. I've provided care
9 for people in Council, Philadelphia
10 Eagles, people on subsidies. I've
11 had a gamut of children in my care,
12 but it is hard to ask of me to do
13 all of these things to address the
14 needs of kids with physical
15 disabilities, mental issues,
16 challenges, behavior problems
17 without resources. I am only one
18 person. I am highly regulated. I
19 have 17 clearances. I have to do a
20 lot, not only for the business
21 aspect, but for the health and
22 wealth and safety of children.

23 Someone cannot continue
24 to sit in a room and demand of me

1 all of these obligations without
2 the resources. If you want to help
3 me, help me with my taxes that's
4 about to put me out of business.
5 You want me to keep kids in my day
6 care center, keep my day care
7 center in business. You want me to
8 support families and be a resource,
9 be a resource for me.

10 Do not continue to ask
11 me to meet these high standards and
12 give me no support. I completely
13 agree with this mom. It is not
14 easy and no child should be left
15 unattended or not given the needs
16 they have. But people cannot just
17 sit in rooms and make rules and
18 walk away from the results with no
19 obligation to it. And so, that is
20 my testimony and I thank you for
21 hearing me this morning.

22 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

23 Thank you for your testimony.

24 Thank you both for your testimony.

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1 We appreciate it.

2 (Applause.)

3 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: We
4 went out of order a little bit
5 because we wanted to give the child
6 care providers an opportunity to
7 testify. Clearly, they have
8 children to tend to. And so, thank
9 you all for sharing your story.

10 Are there any questions
11 from members of the committee for
12 this particular panel?

13 Chair recognizes
14 Councilmember Minority Leader
15 Kendra Brooks.

16 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:
17 Thank you. My first question is
18 for Shandell.

19 MS. GARRISON: Jennifer.

20 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:
21 Jennifer. I'm sorry I put the
22 wrong check next to the wrong
23 person.

24 MS. FANNINGS: Can you

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1 move to the mic a little bit?

2 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

3 Huh?

4 MS. FANNINGS: Can you
5 move to the mic so we can hear you?

6 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

7 Sure, let me move the mic to me.

8 MS. FANNINGS: Thank
9 you.

10 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS: So
11 my question is when it happened to
12 you, what supports were available?
13 And was there a centralized
14 location where you could go and
15 find out what to do next? Was
16 there a place you could go to say
17 that the child care provider needed
18 resources and how can you get them
19 or what type of services could you
20 apply for to help support your
21 child in this situation? What were
22 the next steps? Were you just left
23 high and dry? That's what I'm
24 trying to figure out.

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1 MS. GARRISON: As far as
2 in the school, it was kind of like
3 high and dry. I did start to do a
4 little bit of research, which is
5 when I found the Education Law
6 Center and there they were able to
7 provide me with everything that I
8 needed, resources. This is my
9 first child so everything was just
10 like I had to dig to find what --

11 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:
12 You had to dig and try to find
13 that.

14 MS. GARRISON: Yeah.

15 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:
16 And then for you, Ms. T, if you
17 were in the same situation, do you
18 know where to get the resources
19 that you need to support a family
20 before expulsion or suspension?
21 When it gets to that point, do you
22 have a point of contact to say this
23 parent needs support, how can I
24 assist them, because I don't have

1 the capacity to manage the
2 behaviors? Do we have that here?

3 MS. FANNINGS: That's a
4 great question. There is
5 absolutely no one singular place,
6 company or organizations that
7 addresses this. Often as a
8 business owner, it's not until you
9 make a mistake that everybody says,
10 oh, you could have did this, you
11 could have did that. There is no
12 one place that gives us training
13 that's not free or that's legally
14 accepted. I have to find out my
15 own training.

16 I have to find the
17 resources and the support to
18 support my parents. And yet I'm
19 supposed to provide family
20 engagement and resources. If it's
21 my job to provide all of these
22 things, then provide it for me or
23 give me a place to go where I can
24 pull it and provide for her. If I

1 did not have a degree, I would not
2 know how to do an IEP. Everybody
3 in child care does not have the
4 same experience or education. Even
5 with a CDA, it does not train you
6 to handle IEPs, children --

7 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

8 IEPs, CDA, you got to give us the
9 acronym. Everybody's not --

10 MS. FANNINGS: Okay. So
11 a CDA is a training someone can get
12 to work in child care. I'm sorry I
13 don't know the name for it because
14 I have a degree. But an IEP is an
15 individualized assessment plan, I
16 believe is the word --

17 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

18 Educational.

19 MS. FANNINGS:

20 Educational plan for children who
21 have needs that need to be
22 specifically met, and there's a
23 plan of how you're supposed to
24 address that. Often for those

1 plans, they want their providers or
2 their teachers to sit in on that
3 plan to give advice and help
4 provide resources to make this
5 possible.

6 But if I am working and
7 I have one child and I have five
8 children enrolled in my facility
9 and one child has a plan, how am I
10 supposed to leave the five children
11 to go to one child's meeting, how
12 am I supposed to provide all these
13 resources for one. And then I'm
14 not providing the basic care for
15 the five. So my answer to you,
16 there is no place for us to go. We
17 have to forge for ourselves.

18 And then if we don't or
19 something like this bad happens,
20 then it's like, oh, that horrible
21 child care center. No, we're
22 quality. There is a system that
23 doesn't exist to help us support in
24 all these demands that y'all ask of

1 US.

2 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS: So
3 one question. With ELRC, a lot of
4 your trainings come through them;
5 am I correct or, no, they just
6 provide funding, not training?

7 MS. FANNINGS: No. The
8 ELRC basically pays child care
9 centers through the state for
10 providing subsidy. They have
11 meetings that we can sit in on.
12 They don't offer any training. You
13 have to go to PA Keys or find other
14 companies and find the training for
15 yourself. There is no one place
16 where educators can go to get
17 trained.

18 As a former teacher, the
19 school district provided that
20 training. As a small business
21 owner, I have to find it, make sure
22 it's valuable and hopefully is
23 addressing the concerns that I
24 need.

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1 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

2 Thank you.

3 MS. FANNINGS: You're
4 welcome.

5 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

6 Thank you all for your testimony.
7 Jennifer, thank you for being
8 courageous to come here today.
9 You're speaking on behalf of a lot
10 of families in the City of
11 Philadelphia, so we thank you.

12 I just have a quick
13 question for -- correct me if I say
14 it wrong, Hydrea?

15 MS. FANNINGS: Taneema
16 Fannings, Christ Like Child Care
17 Center. Ms. T.

18 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

19 The order is messed up so we don't
20 --

21 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

22 Oh, Ms. T. Ms. T, if you as a
23 provider know from the outset that
24 it may not have the staffing or

1 specialized services or resources
2 to adequately support a child like
3 Ms. Garrison's, what factors are
4 considered in deciding to enroll
5 the child?

6 MS. FANNINGS: So for my
7 child care facility, we have an
8 intense interview process because
9 we have limitations. And that is
10 unfortunate to say I have the
11 skill, I have the temperament, I
12 have the resources to address many
13 problems. I just can't because I
14 have to consider all my kids. So
15 for my facility, we interview
16 first, we do tours and we ask for a
17 one-hour play date so that I make
18 sure I can fairly disperse myself
19 amongst the kids. It must be a yes
20 between not only the child care
21 provider, but also the parent. And
22 that's what I ask all parents to
23 do. Don't just check me out, check
24 other places.

1 Because child care
2 centers are like a fingerprint. We
3 handle the micro communities of the
4 City of Philadelphia. And so, my
5 facility, it changes, its morphs
6 based upon the needs of the kids
7 and the families I serve.

8 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
9 Have you been in a situation where
10 after that one-hour play date
11 interview that you find out later
12 that this is a child that you
13 probably can't service anymore and
14 now you're in a position where you
15 have to -- is there a way to
16 prevent that from happening?

17 MS. FANNINGS: The way
18 to prevent that from happening is
19 having resources. If I had another
20 staff member, if I had one-on-one
21 for that child, that might be
22 having some behavioral issues, then
23 I can address it. But otherwise,
24 no, there is no way that one person

1 can properly care for six different
2 children, six different households,
3 meet all the state requirements,
4 the city obligations, educational,
5 emotional, social needs, business
6 needs and do a great job.

7 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS: So
8 normally once you find that
9 information out, is it an immediate
10 we can't work with this student or
11 you give a parent some time?

12 MS. FANNINGS: For me,
13 we usually do a two-step interview
14 process and by the second
15 interview, we have that
16 conversation and be honest about --

17 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
18 No. I'm saying once they're in
19 your day care and you find that
20 out, how long --

21 MS. FANNINGS: Oh, I've
22 had that as well. So I have a plan
23 of -- we constantly do observations
24 within the first 30 days. I have

1 to do an observation. I interact
2 with the parents daily. We take
3 report cards on behavior,
4 conversations, interacting with the
5 family. And if there's a problem,
6 we try to mitigate it over 30 to 60
7 days. If we don't see that we can
8 move the needle in that area, I
9 have to go back to that parent and
10 apologize and say, I'm not able to
11 address the concerns your child
12 have in a way that keeps all my
13 other children concerned. I've had
14 children bite --

15 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
16 And then it's immediate removal
17 after you find that out?

18 MS. FANNINGS: It is not
19 an immediate removal. It is a
20 mediation. It's a working between
21 parents. We call ourselves
22 sometimes co-parents. We're
23 figuring this out together because
24 there is no set standard for this.

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1 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

2 Thank you.

3 MS. FANNINGS: You're
4 welcome.

5 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: I
6 think that's the important thing
7 and why we're here today, is
8 there's no set standard for this.
9 So I want to --

10 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: I
11 have a question for Ms. T.

12 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Can
13 we move on to the next panel
14 please?

15 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: I
16 just wanted to know is her size
17 limited because of what she wants
18 it to be?

19 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Can
20 we cut the mic on?

21 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: I'm
22 sorry. I'll be very quick. You
23 are a single operator for your
24 business. You have nobody else?

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1 MS. FANNINGS: I'm a
2 home-based child care provider,
3 which means that the ratio is one
4 person to six children, group is 2
5 to 12, and center is up to 166.

6 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: And
7 you're a PHLpreK?

8 MS. FANNINGS: I am
9 certified, yes, all of those.

10 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
11 That's where the support could have
12 come from if you were to say, I can
13 do more than this or in my six
14 ratio, I need support. That's
15 where you would have gone?

16 MS. FANNINGS:
17 Absolutely. I would get it from
18 the ELRC or a set place that
19 provides that resource for us. But
20 since there is none, I'm left on my
21 own and I'm left to turn parents
22 away or disenroll kids.

23 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: All
24 right. Thank you.

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1 Thank you, Chair.

2 MS. FANNINGS: You're
3 welcome.

4 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
5 Thank you. Can we call the next
6 panel please.

7 THE CLERK: Sean Perkins
8 and Diane Castelbuono.

9 (Witnesses approached
10 witness table.)

11 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
12 Please state your name for the
13 record and you may begin your
14 testimony.

15 MR. PERKINS: Good
16 morning. My name is Sean Perkins.
17 I am the Chief of Early Childhood
18 Education with the city's Office of
19 Children and Families. Good
20 morning, Chairman Thomas and
21 members of the committee. My name
22 is Sean Perkins with the city's
23 Office of Children and Families
24 here to testify in response to

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1 Resolution No. 260617.

2 As the Chief of Early
3 Childhood Education, I oversee the
4 city's investment in high-quality,
5 free, full-day preschool under the
6 PreK program. It aims to support
7 Philadelphia's children who are 3
8 or 4 years old prepare for
9 kindergarten and elementary school.
10 Since the PreK programs inception
11 in the 2016-17 school year, over
12 40,000 preschool-aged children have
13 been served at over 250 locations.

14 In that first year, the
15 city funded 2000 seats at 88
16 locations. Now, for this upcoming
17 '26-27 school year, we will have
18 5350 seats available at over 235
19 locations, which is an increase of
20 over 167% since the program
21 started. While this expansion
22 effort is both historical and
23 remarkable, it is equally
24 impressive to share that the number

1 of high quality seats offered has
2 gone from 56% in year one to now
3 more than 95% of our seats.

4 Last year our seats had
5 a 95% enrollment rate, which means
6 almost 500 3- and 4-year-olds were
7 funded by the city in high-quality
8 early learning programs. Each
9 year, we collect demographic
10 information from our families
11 attending for PreK programs, and
12 what we know from their self-
13 reporting is that over 80% identify
14 as children of color.

15 Over 70% are in homes
16 with an income under 200% of the
17 federal poverty level, which for a
18 family of four is under \$60,000.
19 13% speak a primary language other
20 than English. 10% have an
21 Individualized Education Program,
22 IEP, and/or an Individualized
23 Family Service Plan and IFSP. As
24 our city has expanded access to

1 high-quality early learning,
2 children are now in more structured
3 environments where trained adults
4 can identify developmental and
5 behavioral needs early before
6 kindergarten in the PreK program.

7 Each classroom is
8 required to conduct a developmental
9 and behavioral screening of a child
10 within the first 30 to 45 days. We
11 are encouraged by this committee's
12 hearing, as we know from research
13 that preschool pushout has
14 longstanding racial and
15 socioeconomic disparities.
16 Philadelphia's investment in
17 PHLpreK is intentionally designed
18 to counteract those inequities.
19 Now entering its 10th year, the
20 PHLpreK program has held firm on
21 its commitment of serving any and
22 all children who enroll.

23 Each center that
24 receives PHLpreK funding is under a

1 contractual obligation to meet this
2 requirement, as they are not
3 permitted to suspend or expel or
4 remove any enrolled child. For
5 example, providers are not
6 permitted to exclude a child from
7 the classroom, whether by placing
8 them in another part of the
9 building or excluding a child from
10 the building. They cannot send a
11 child home early or limit the
12 number of hours per day they can
13 attend, and providers are not
14 allowed to unenroll a child because
15 they are "not a good fit with the
16 program."

17 In some cases, this
18 commitment has been challenging for
19 providers, which is why we have
20 added additional measures to
21 identify and fast-track the
22 necessary services for children
23 exhibiting exceptional needs. This
24 effort is largely led by our SPARK

1 Quality Support Center and our
2 administrative intermediary. They
3 provide coaching, professional
4 development and technical
5 assistance to all PreK teachers,
6 which includes positive behavior
7 support training.

8 They hire early
9 childhood mental health consultants
10 and family navigators to provide
11 immediate support once an early
12 learning center says it needs help
13 with a child. They offer paid
14 summer professional training
15 sessions for teachers that focus on
16 trauma and behavior supports. They
17 deploy emergency responses to
18 traumatic events that link families
19 and support classrooms, navigate
20 how to handle the days, months and
21 years following a traumatic
22 experience.

23 And most recently, we
24 are piloting an initiative with two

1 centers where children who are
2 identified with autism spectrum
3 disorder to meet specific
4 requirements and receive additional
5 applied behavioral analysis
6 treatment for daily inclusion in a
7 neurotypical classroom. As a
8 result of these invested
9 initiatives, we can report that
10 last school year, there were over
11 350 professional development
12 training sessions with over 2100
13 teachers, assistant teachers and
14 staffers.

15 There were early
16 childhood mental health
17 consultation services provided to
18 35 children at 31 locations. There
19 are nine families who received home
20 visiting supports, and there were
21 four emergency responses to
22 traumatic events that were managed,
23 including the Northeast plane
24 crash, grief following death and

1 substance abuse disorders.

2 These supports are
3 designed for one purpose, to keep
4 children safely and successfully
5 included in their classrooms,
6 rather than being excluded or
7 removed. In one autism support
8 classroom, our inclusionary
9 techniques allowed a child --
10 excuse me, allowed a child to
11 attend their first ever birthday
12 party. After the successful first
13 birthday party, the child went on
14 to its own family party, picked up
15 the microphone and was able to sing
16 Happy Birthday.

17 In addition to our
18 existing supports, we are
19 continuously working alongside our
20 partners at the state's Office of
21 Childhood Development and Early
22 Learning, or OCDEL, the city's
23 Department of Behavioral Health and
24 Intellectual Disabilities,

1 Community Behavioral Health, the
2 School District of Philadelphia,
3 Elwyn Children's Crisis Treatment
4 Center, Public Health Management
5 Corporation and just recently, the
6 nationally accredited Lowry Center
7 to identify hurdles, bottlenecks
8 and gaps in the ways families,
9 teachers and early learning centers
10 are asking for help to then get the
11 necessary services to the child at
12 a location most convenient for the
13 family.

14 Philadelphia has made a
15 clear commitment young children
16 belong in the classrooms. We look
17 forward to continuing our
18 partnership with Council to ensure
19 that inclusive, high-quality early
20 learning remains the standard
21 across our city. Thank you very
22 much for your support. I'm here to
23 answer any additional questions.

24 MS. CASTELBUONO: Good

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1 morning, Chair Thomas, members of
2 the committee and members of the
3 public. My name is Diane
4 Castelbuono, and I serve as the
5 Assistant Superintendent for Early
6 Childhood Education for the School
7 District of Philadelphia. Thank
8 you for the opportunity to testify
9 today regarding our youngest
10 learners. We appreciate the
11 Council's commitment to ensuring
12 that every young child in
13 Philadelphia has access to a safe,
14 nurturing and inclusive educational
15 experience. The School District of
16 Philadelphia shares that
17 commitment.

18 We believe every child
19 deserves to begin their educational
20 journey in an environment that
21 supports their development, honors
22 their individual strengths and
23 provides the services they need to
24 succeed. We also recognize that

1 national and local data raise
2 important concerns about
3 disproportionate, exclusionary
4 practices affecting Black and Brown
5 children and children with
6 disabilities. These concerns
7 warrant thoughtful discussion and
8 meaningful action.

9 At the outset, it is
10 important to clarify that the
11 district's policies regarding --
12 it's important to clarify the
13 district's policies regarding
14 preschool discipline. The school
15 district does not permit the
16 expulsion or suspension of
17 preschool students. We recognize
18 that expulsion or suspension from
19 an early childhood program can have
20 profound and lasting effects on a
21 child's educational trajectory and
22 family stability. And our policies
23 reflect that belief, that removal
24 from educational opportunities

1 should not be the response to
2 challenging behavior.

3 There are, however, in
4 full transparency and consistent
5 with federal Head Start standards,
6 limited circumstances in which a
7 temporary exclusion from a PreK
8 classroom may occur. These
9 situations are not disciplinary in
10 nature and are not intended to
11 permanently remove a child from
12 preschool.

13 When a student presents
14 a direct threat to their own health
15 or safety or to the safety of
16 others and that risk cannot be
17 mitigated without additional
18 supports, a temporary exclusion may
19 be necessary. This allows time to
20 identify appropriate interventions,
21 secure needed resources and, if
22 necessary, plan for an alternate
23 placement that better meets the
24 child's needs while maintaining the

1 safety of all students and staff.
2 These situations are rare,
3 individualized and temporary. The
4 goal is always to return the child
5 to an education setting with
6 appropriate supports as quickly as
7 possible. This distinction
8 matters.

9 Our educators work every
10 day to support children with a wide
11 range of developmental, behavioral,
12 emotional and communication needs.
13 Staff collaborate closely with
14 families, early intervention
15 providers, school psychologists,
16 counselors and special education
17 personnel to identify and implement
18 appropriate supports. These
19 efforts reflect a core belief:
20 Challenging behavior is often a
21 form of communication. Rather than
22 viewing behavior as something to
23 punish, we seek to understand its
24 root causes and respond with

1 interventions that support the
2 child's long-term development.

3 At the same time, we
4 must acknowledge a significant
5 challenge facing not only the
6 school district but the broader
7 early childhood system in
8 Philadelphia. We have a shortage
9 of appropriate placements for
10 children with special needs. Some
11 young children have needs that
12 cannot be safely or appropriately
13 met within a general education
14 preschool classroom, even with
15 reasonable supports in place.

16 In classrooms serving
17 approximately 20 preschool-aged
18 children, educators must balance
19 instruction, supervision, social-
20 emotional learning and
21 individualized support throughout
22 the day. While full inclusion
23 remains our goal whenever
24 appropriate, there are

1 circumstances where a child
2 requires specialized therapeutic,
3 behavioral and educational supports
4 that exceed what can be delivered
5 in the classroom.

6 When this occurs, the
7 challenge is often the availability
8 of appropriate placements. This is
9 not a challenge the school district
10 or the city can solve alone.

11 Addressing preschool pushout
12 requires a broader examination of
13 the capacity of Philadelphia's
14 early childhood and behavioral
15 health systems. It requires
16 ensuring that children with
17 significant needs have timely
18 access to specialized education
19 placements, therapeutic services,
20 behavioral health supports and
21 early intervention resources before
22 situations escalate to crisis.

23 We also recognize that
24 equity must remain central to this

1 work. The disparities identified
2 nationally and raised in Council's
3 resolution require continued
4 examination. The district remains
5 committed to reviewing our
6 practices, monitoring data,
7 supporting professional learning
8 and partnering with families and
9 community stakeholders to ensure
10 decisions affecting young children
11 are made thoughtfully, consistently
12 and without bias.

13 The school district
14 welcomes the opportunity to
15 continue strengthening our
16 practices in partnership with City
17 Council, other early childhood
18 providers, advocates, families and
19 community organizations. This
20 hearing represents an important
21 opportunity not only to identify
22 concerns, but to advance practical,
23 system-level solutions that improve
24 outcomes for Philadelphia's

1 youngest learners. The school
2 district stands ready to be an
3 active partner in this work. Thank
4 you for including us.

5 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

6 Thank you for your testimony. This
7 has been informative so far and
8 we're just getting started. I
9 would like to start by taking the
10 testimony that we heard earlier and
11 listening to some of the concerns
12 from both parent and child care
13 provider. And so, from the seat
14 that you sit in, what is the
15 solution to how we service young
16 people who have these needs? But
17 at the same time, we're listening
18 to providers say, I don't have the
19 capacity or the resources to serve
20 them.

21 So from the seats that
22 you all are sitting in, you're the
23 leaders in the City of Philadelphia
24 as it relates to educating this

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1 specific demographic. What do we
2 do?

3 MR. PERKINS: So I think
4 Assistant Superintendent
5 Castelbuono gave some really great
6 recommendations, which is an
7 understanding of the capacity, a
8 capacity awareness of what each
9 location. There are about 1600
10 licensed child care centers in
11 Philadelphia. Between the city and
12 the school district, we have
13 regulatory oversight of about 370
14 of those. So there's about 1300 or
15 a little over 1200 licensed child
16 care centers in Philadelphia whose
17 regulatory capture isn't under the
18 purview of the city or the school
19 district. And between us, we have
20 about 17,000, 3- and 4-year-olds
21 who we're serving. There's about
22 40,000 3- and 4-year-olds. There's
23 about 100,000, 0 to 5 year olds.
24 So we're a sliver of the pie of

1 what we are regulating and what
2 we're supporting.

3 I think what Assistant
4 Superintendent mentioned here is
5 that it's important to understand
6 what it would take to meet the
7 capacity of all of those. And I
8 think one of the child care centers
9 who mentioned earlier, there are
10 varying needs. We have various
11 teachers with varying credentials.
12 We have varying agencies that are
13 providing behavioral health support
14 services and our early intervention
15 system. As we've expanded PreK, as
16 we've expanded child care options,
17 we are flooding that system of
18 families going, I need help for
19 this child.

20 So I think understanding
21 the capacity is really important
22 and it's continuously working with
23 what we have as well, being
24 efficient with the resources that

1 we do have and creating a seamless
2 system to identify what is the
3 problem, what are the antecedent
4 behaviors, are there cultural
5 competency issues, the teachers as
6 well. It's important to understand
7 each teacher's ability to meet the
8 needs of each child and each family
9 warrants, I think, a really good
10 investigation and understanding and
11 awareness.

12 We can, I think, between
13 the city and school district,
14 because we have a smaller slice of
15 the pie, I think. But then that
16 broader spectrum, we need to expand
17 that.

18 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Yeah.
19 I understand you guys got a smaller
20 slice of the pie, 100% recognizing
21 capacity and who has a say over
22 what is important. But if we have
23 state guidelines and the state
24 guidelines create a criteria and

1 then we have folks who are saying
2 it's very difficult to adhere to
3 all of the state guidelines and the
4 entire criteria -- so let's take a
5 step back.

6 Let's say,
7 hypothetically speaking, you know,
8 the situation that was communicated
9 earlier presented itself where a
10 child care provider program has a
11 young person enrolled in the
12 program who they don't have the
13 resources and the capacity to take.
14 So on the one hand, we're saying
15 you pretty much have to take the
16 child, right? Is that correct?

17 MR. PERKINS: Correct.

18 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: You
19 can't say, no, I'm not taking this
20 child?

21 MR. PERKINS: Under the
22 city and school district contracts,
23 that's correct.

24 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

1 Okay. So if I can't do that and I
2 don't have the capacity, I didn't
3 recruit this person, the child
4 comes in, the family is great, I
5 just don't have the capacity and
6 the resources to support the
7 child's need. What happens next?
8 And you can tell us what happens
9 when they're under your umbrella
10 and then when they're not under
11 your umbrella.

12 MR. PERKINS: Yeah.
13 I'll speak on what happens under
14 our umbrella. Once a center goes
15 help, right, like they send an
16 email, they send a text or they
17 send a message to its contracting
18 agency that says I need help, I
19 can't take this family anymore, I
20 can't take this child, whatever the
21 circumstances might be, we focus
22 the child first and foremost to
23 understand what is the behavior,
24 what is the antecedent instances

1 that are occurring for this issue,
2 to diagnose a little bit better of
3 is it a teacher -- it might be a
4 teacher issue.

5 We talk about
6 challenging behaviors, but we
7 haven't talked a lot about
8 behaviors challenging the teacher.
9 Those are two different things. I
10 think it's important to
11 understand which one might it be
12 while at the same time speaking
13 with the family, what does the
14 family want most, what do you see
15 happening in the home, what are the
16 things that you want to see best
17 happen for your child. So that's
18 how we do it under our contract.

19 We put in the
20 professional development supports
21 for the teacher, then coordinate
22 with the other agencies I mentioned
23 before like Community Behavioral
24 Health. Sometimes it's a crisis

1 situation where you have to work
2 with CCTC. Other times we call up
3 the school district and say, do you
4 have any of your behavioral health
5 analysts. We also employ mental
6 health consultants and family
7 navigators to help families go
8 through the identification and
9 support services system that exists
10 here.

11 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: That
12 don't work. That doesn't work.
13 That's unfortunate. We need to
14 brainstorm and figure out what do
15 we do. Because if I'm -- let me
16 offer a perspective. I have a son
17 who is in PreK, right. And for the
18 later hearing, I have a son who's
19 in 8th grade who's about to go to
20 9th grade, so both of these
21 conversations are lived
22 experiences, right.

23 So I'm partly Chair of
24 the Education Committee, but I took

1 that hat off for a second and put
2 my parent hat on and I thought
3 about the sister right there that
4 was just sitting here. That
5 doesn't work for her. That just
6 doesn't, right. We can't just say
7 we're going to call and screen and
8 re-examine a teacher and provide
9 training.

10 If my child has been
11 diagnosed with a specific disease,
12 that's not the teacher. That's
13 none of those things. So what I
14 think we need is a system that
15 says, if we're going to ask the
16 providers to take the child no
17 matter what, then there should be
18 resources available to address the
19 needs of the child no matter what,
20 right?

21 And so, I'm hearing what
22 you do on the side when it's under
23 your umbrella. But then what do
24 you do on the side when it's not

1 under your umbrella? Because
2 listening to what you do on the
3 side when it's under your umbrella,
4 I think those things work in a
5 traditional classroom setting or
6 when you have, you know, that
7 contract for a child to have a TSS
8 worker. Okay. In those
9 situations, it might work. But
10 when you don't have those resources
11 for a specific TSS worker or the
12 wraparound services and they're not
13 under your umbrella, what do we do?

14 MR. PERKINS: I think in
15 a lot of those cases -- so you mean
16 the other 1300 licensed child care
17 centers?

18 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Yes,
19 sir.

20 MR. PERKINS: The vast
21 majority?

22 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
23 Absolutely.

24 MR. PERKINS: Yeah. So

1 the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
2 has a department called the Office
3 of Childhood Development and Early
4 Learning. They are situated
5 between both state DHS and
6 Pennsylvania Department --

7 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Say
8 that office one more time. We're
9 taking notes. We're learning from
10 you.

11 MR. PERKINS: Yeah. The
12 Office of Childhood Development and
13 Early Learning. Actually,
14 Assistant Superintendent helped
15 actually create that office --

16 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
17 Congratulations.

18 MR. PERKINS: It was
19 groundbreaking actually in our
20 country's history. There was no
21 state that had ever said, we're
22 going to create an Office of Early
23 Learning at the time when Assistant
24 Superintendent Castelbuono was over

1 there. And they said, we need an
2 Office of Early Learning at the
3 state level. So Pennsylvania was
4 one of the first in the nation that
5 actually did this and then said,
6 okay, what do we do to help all of
7 our license centers.

8 I think one of the one
9 of the centers that testified
10 earlier mentioned that the PA Key
11 exists or the Early Learning
12 Resource Centers. Those are places
13 that the state contracts with to
14 say, we need to deliver those
15 services to our child care centers
16 that exist all across any region.
17 I think there's 19 regions across
18 Pennsylvania and we're one region
19 isolated for ourselves.

20 They are under the
21 purview to answer you,
22 Councilmember Thomas, Committee
23 Chairman Thomas, the state's Office
24 of Child Development and Early

1 Learning is the first place that
2 gets looked at.

3 MS. CASTELBUONO: And
4 let me add to that. The early
5 intervention is a state
6 responsibility by law in
7 Pennsylvania. For the Philadelphia
8 County, the state contracts that
9 early intervention work to Elwyn.
10 Elwyn is the early intervention
11 provider. And so, the early
12 intervention money that flows to
13 Philadelphia County for children
14 with special needs flows to Elwyn.

15 And so, we would all
16 reach out to Elwyn. And I'm not
17 sure that all PreK providers have
18 that or child care providers have
19 the ability to do that. And I
20 think that's one of the things
21 that's being raised in this
22 hearing, is that very smaller,
23 independently operated providers
24 don't always know where to go. And

1 I think that's a very fair
2 criticism that we can try to
3 address moving forward, is making
4 sure that even the providers who
5 are not under our purview and we
6 don't work --

7 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

8 For smaller child care providers,
9 what resources or how can we set it
10 up? And if it's not addressed in
11 early childhood in PreK, it's
12 becoming a kindergarten problem.
13 This still is not addressed. So
14 the services that you're talking
15 about, I currently have two
16 kindergartners that are under my
17 care that these systems aren't
18 being met, that we get called every
19 day at a school district program to
20 come pick him up, which is
21 unacceptable. So I need for us
22 to -- and I'm a Councilmember with
23 the resources that can call the
24 people.

1 What resources are we
2 providing for families that have
3 children within the spectrum or
4 whatever behavioral challenges to
5 really address the needs, because a
6 lot of parents can't just leave
7 work? This is what child care is
8 for. This is what school is for.
9 We have to create a system to
10 support the parents. Because you
11 expel my child for a week, I still
12 got to go to work. What am I
13 supposed to do?

14 And then on the flip
15 side as the provider, if I don't
16 have the resources, it takes months
17 for these services to be set up,
18 wraparound, TSS, medication,
19 behavioral support, psychology,
20 psychiatry. All of these services
21 parents have to navigate when the
22 provider, who the city or state is
23 paying for, can resolve themselves
24 from the whole thing.

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1 And then I'm hearing you
2 guys say it's a system, and I'm
3 saying the system is not working.
4 And I'm saying it -- he talks as
5 the parent and I'm the grandparent.
6 I have nine grandchildren. Two of
7 them are currently in kindergarten
8 that we adopted that are in the
9 system right now where I get calls,
10 hearing Council to come pick them
11 up from camp.

12 What are parents
13 supposed to do? What resources can
14 we create as city services, as
15 state services to mend or to bring
16 that together? Because the purpose
17 of this hearing is saying what are
18 we going to do. We have to leave
19 out of here with some results,
20 because I'm fed up. I can't
21 imagine what the parents are going
22 through. And I can't leave here
23 without a solution or working
24 towards a solution to mitigate that

1 gap. Because just saying the kids
2 are expelled is, oh, well.

3 What resources can we
4 really put our minds together to
5 make sure these systems are talking
6 to each other?

7 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: And
8 if we don't have them currently,
9 tell us what to do, right. We're
10 passionate because we're in this
11 space as it relates to our lived
12 experiences, but we also represent
13 the entire City of Philadelphia,
14 all three of us. And these are our
15 constituents. We know we've done
16 some things in the past that's been
17 both good and bad, but this problem
18 is very, very unique and help us
19 figure out what should we be doing
20 and how should we be thinking about
21 it.

22 MS. CASTELBUONO: So
23 Council President Kenyatta Johnson
24 has created a Special Subcommittee

1 on Early Childhood Education. It
2 really has just started. But most
3 of the players I would say are
4 sitting around that table, and this
5 is one of the top issues that is
6 facing them, is how do we create a
7 system.

8 Across the nation is a
9 highly decentralized, complicated
10 bureaucratic system of child care,
11 right. So you have child care
12 providers and they don't all report
13 through one entity, but there is a
14 responsibility and a need for us to
15 create a system. I think the city
16 and the school district have joined
17 hands to try to merge our two
18 systems at least so we're not no
19 longer at odds. And now, I think
20 the next stage of that is how do we
21 create a county-wide system.

22 And I will say we are at
23 that -- it is a little bit slow
24 going, but I do think the current

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1 subcommittee might be a way into
2 helping push that work more finely.

3 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

4 Thank you. Dr. Ahmad.

5 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

6 Thank you for having that vision to
7 say there are the gaps, we need to
8 overlap all of this and have a
9 system. But for the parents, it
10 has to be seamless. They don't
11 know if it's state or city or
12 PHLpreK. The child should
13 experience it as a child without
14 having to understand all these
15 demarcations. But this is the
16 bureaucracy we face everywhere, the
17 silos we face everywhere.

18 To use Council
19 President's PreK Committee, I'm on
20 it and I forget the name of it, but
21 how do we expedite this? I mean,
22 we're articulating the problem as
23 the Mayor likes to say, but moving
24 it from that articulation to the

1 next step needs to be much more
2 emergent. It should be an
3 emergency, right. But of course,
4 in emergency we make mistakes so I
5 understand the caution of getting
6 enough data to understand it.

7 But the mother who
8 testified, her child doesn't have
9 that time, right. So while we are
10 putting the final structure
11 together, we need to have some
12 interim measures, right. We need
13 to have some -- our Department of
14 Behavioral Health and Intellectual
15 Disabilities, in my opinion, should
16 be mobilized in this space while
17 we've come to a final structure,
18 right.

19 So as the Chairman said
20 here, we have to think outside the
21 box and creatively. And to
22 Councilmember Kendra Brooks' point,
23 she can't leave here without being
24 able to say something. So we have

1 an emergency situation in my
2 opinion if even one child is being
3 pushed out because they don't have
4 the right supports, right. So we
5 don't have time to have slow
6 process of, you know, three months
7 we'll get a report. I don't think
8 we have time.

9 If we want Philadelphia
10 to thrive and we have these
11 children ready to go to school, we
12 don't have time to do that. So I
13 would love this entire space to
14 sort of have the freedom to have
15 everybody's ideas come in, right.
16 Some people know much more than I
17 do sitting right here. So have a
18 forum of sorts where you can
19 collect and then have a timeline.
20 Like we need to hold ourselves
21 accountable by creating the
22 timeline. We can. And then that's
23 when we start reacting, right, when
24 we have the deadline coming up in

1 front of us. So I would highly
2 recommend that the, the PreK
3 committee, working with our
4 education committee, with the
5 school and the state. Look at the
6 gap remediation while the final
7 structure is put out, and call it
8 something so that people can come
9 to it, offer their solutions, and
10 then come up with some, and then we
11 have the data to know where are
12 these problems happening, right?
13 It's not everywhere. It's specific
14 spaces. So let's tailor the
15 responses, the gap measured
16 responses to those places. Let's
17 use our data analysis properly and
18 in a responsive manner, this sort
19 of a statement of saying we need to
20 move expeditiously, right.

21 So thank you very much
22 for all the testimony because the
23 clarification of the systems in
24 place does clarify for us that it's

1 not just you who can wave a magic
2 wand, but we do need a magic wand
3 for everybody to come together and
4 say the children are our primary
5 constituents and that's who we're
6 responding to. Put in Behavioral
7 Health, Pennsylvania Human
8 Services. There's lots of
9 resources we have, but they don't
10 seem to come together to meet that
11 one mother's request, what am I
12 going to do.

13 We should not have
14 anybody in a first-world country,
15 the richest country in the world.
16 She has done her homework. She's
17 been an engaged parent. We say,
18 oh, parents are not doing -- no, we
19 have engaged parents and she still
20 doesn't know what to do in the
21 sixth largest city in the country.
22 That is unacceptable for all of us.

23 I mean, I'm holding
24 myself accountable as I'm saying

1 this, that we cannot just say, oh,
2 we just had a hearing and then
3 three months later, maybe we'll
4 come up with something, what is she
5 going to do.

6 So, Council Chair, I
7 think to your point we really need
8 to have a brainstorm response to
9 mitigate these gaps while we're
10 having a final structure to be put
11 in place. Thank you so much.

12 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
13 Thank you, Doc. I appreciate it.
14 Last question and then we'll move
15 on to the next panel, unless other
16 members of the committee have
17 questions.

18 In the midst of my young
19 folks doing this work, and I want
20 to give a huge shout-out to all of
21 the interns in my office and I'll
22 do that a little later because
23 they've been running point on this
24 hearing and preparing for this

1 conversation all summer.

2 The research basically
3 suggests that this type of behavior
4 with PreK students in PreK pushout
5 reflects on Black and Brown
6 children being targeted
7 disproportionately compared to
8 their White counterparts. Help me
9 understand why Black and Brown
10 children are more victims to this
11 issue than their White
12 counterparts.

13 MR. PERKINS: I would
14 say I think there's a couple of
15 things at play here. The first
16 thing is, I think historical and
17 cultural disproportionate
18 approaches to policies and funding
19 that exist in our country and our
20 communities are things that we are
21 working hard to dismantle. I think
22 that we are still watching that
23 play out, but I remain vigilant
24 about dismantling those. But I

1 think that some of those still
2 exist.

3 I also think that we
4 have a larger number of Black and
5 Brown children who are in our
6 programs and that does not excuse
7 it. I actually think it should not
8 be. But I do think that there are,
9 again, historical and cultural
10 disproportionalities. And so,
11 cultural competencies that have not
12 been provided.

13 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: And
14 your umbrella of organizations that
15 you said adds up to a little less
16 than 400, you say you have more
17 Black and Brown children than
18 anything else in that demographic?

19 MR. PERKINS: Yeah, I
20 think it's like 70 or 80%.

21 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
22 Okay. So from the data that's been
23 told to us, it's not necessarily
24 like a total amount. It's more of

1 a percentage thing. So based on
2 looking at your data, clearly if
3 you serve more Black and Brown
4 children, you're going to see more
5 pushout to that demographic. But
6 from a percentage perspective, if
7 you're serving 70% Black and Brown
8 children, are they making up 99% of
9 the pushout?

10 MR. PERKINS: So
11 between -- we don't allow
12 preschool. I think what we might
13 be missing is between the city and
14 the school district, it's a
15 non-permissible act. You're not
16 permitted to actually remove a
17 child. We actually have measures
18 in place to catch that in case of a
19 family is reporting I wasn't put in
20 there or I'm now --

21 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: So
22 let's take a step back because I
23 understand what you're doing. So
24 in the paragraph right here it says

1 there, There are, however, limited
2 situations in which temporary
3 exclusion from PreK classroom may
4 occur. These situations are not
5 disciplinary in nature, but they
6 are intended to remove the child,
7 blasé, blasé, blasé. This is your
8 testimony. All right.

9 MS. CASTELBUONO: That
10 is my testimony.

11 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: I'm
12 sorry, your testimony. So --

13 MS. CASTELBUONO: Let me
14 speak to that because I think I
15 understand where you're going --

16 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: No,
17 we understand what you're saying.
18 So what I'm saying --

19 MS. CASTELBUONO: Let me
20 give you the data. I have the
21 data.

22 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Go
23 ahead.

24 MS. CASTELBUONO: So the

1 School District of Philadelphia
2 looks at what's called a
3 persistence rate. We look at that
4 and that's historically how the
5 Feds define it, persistence. And
6 persistence rate means the number
7 of children who start PreK at one
8 center and persist until the end of
9 the year. And that's our proxy
10 measure, right, for looking at do
11 we have disproportionate impact.

12 And so, when we look at
13 the persistence rate just of the
14 children we serve, again, I don't
15 have that data for all 1300
16 centers. But the data for the
17 School District of Philadelphia
18 affiliated centers doesn't suggest
19 that there is disproportionate
20 impact among those we serve. So if
21 you look at the data by race and
22 income, about 94% of children with
23 IEPs, we have a 94% persistence
24 rate. What I like that to be is

1 100% of course, right.

2 But 94% overall

3 population in PreK for the school

4 district is 91%. So special ed.

5 students, children with

6 disabilities in the school district

7 programs tend to have a higher

8 persistence rate. That does not

9 negate or dismiss any individual

10 experience of any individual

11 family. We know that mistakes are

12 made, but generally speaking, the

13 overall data does not suggest

14 disproportionate impact for

15 children with disabilities versus

16 children without disabilities.

17 On race, again the

18 overall persistence rate is 91% for

19 African American children. I

20 believe it's 98%. I can pull this

21 data and put it on the record for

22 you as well. So again, the overall

23 data, but that does, I would

24 imagine, mask probably some serious

1 issues. And so, I do think it is a
2 fair question that we have to do a
3 much better job at parsing this
4 data and committing to actually
5 looking at complete numbers site-
6 by-site.

7 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

8 Yeah. I'm going to let
9 Dr. Phillips close out this panel,
10 but I'm just going to say this, and
11 I hope you guys hang a little bit.
12 I'm having deja vu right now. I
13 was literally in this moment
14 before. And as you're
15 communicating, I'm just looking at
16 the experts that are behind you.
17 And I think that they're going to
18 offer a different perspective when
19 they come to testify as it relates
20 to how Black and Brown people are
21 disproportionately affected by this
22 particular issue and why that's the
23 case.

24 So I'm hoping that you

1 hang around a little bit just so
2 you can hear other perspectives,
3 because for me I'm facilitating the
4 dialogue, but I'm also gathering
5 information and learning, and the
6 teacher in me pays attention to
7 facial expressions and tonal
8 semantics and a lot of things that
9 happen when people are talking.
10 And so, I'm just hoping that when
11 folks offer a different perspective
12 as it relates to the question that
13 I just asked, that we're all able
14 to brainstorm what do we do and
15 listen to one another's
16 perspective.

17 Dr. Phillips, I'm sorry.
18 Just one more thing real quick. So
19 do we see -- I think about child
20 care providers who are for-profit
21 organizations compared to child
22 care providers who are nonprofit
23 organizations and being the person
24 who's not necessarily as educated

1 and informed as it relates to the
2 practice and the business side of
3 PreK, I hoping first we would
4 acknowledge that we
5 disproportionately impact people of
6 color. I was hoping we would
7 acknowledge that, but we'll go to
8 that later in the conversation.

9 But if we were to
10 acknowledge that, I wonder is there
11 an appetite to examine if the
12 entity, a child care provider has
13 an impact on the services they're
14 able to provide. And so, based on
15 the work that I've done around the
16 BIRT tax and how we have mishandled
17 the BIRT tax as a city, that really
18 put me in a position to recognize
19 how many child care providers are
20 actually for-profit LLCs.

21 I'm wondering if there
22 was a movement to educate, inform
23 and push for-profit LLCs to go to
24 nonprofit, and then resources being

1 provided to nonprofit organizations
2 to help offset some of the issues
3 that they're facing with young
4 people who might be struggling. Do
5 we see any correlation between
6 child care providers who are
7 struggling? And as it relates to
8 providing quality services and
9 resources and the type of entity
10 they have, is there a correlation
11 there?

12 MR. PERKINS: We should
13 dig into that. That's a really
14 good question. Yeah, let me dig
15 into that. We can look that up.

16 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: I'll
17 pass it to Dr. Phillips to close us
18 out. But I was just listening and
19 wondering how we could be more
20 supportive of these entities,
21 Dr. Phillips. And then we'll move
22 on to the next panel.

23 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS: I
24 just want to say thank you so much,

1 Chairman Thomas, for convening this
2 important meeting. But also just
3 thank you to all the panelists who
4 came out today. It's an
5 opportunity for us to better
6 understand how we can ensure that
7 we have better processes going
8 forward so that every child and,
9 you know, with their educational
10 journey has the support that they
11 need.

12 So I have two questions.
13 How can we better support families
14 so they understand the process and
15 feel like true partners in their
16 child's education? And then the
17 second question is what steps can
18 we take to intervene earlier so
19 that children receive support
20 before exclusion is ever
21 considered, right? So what steps
22 can the city take, the school
23 district take to make sure that
24 earlier exclusion is not

1 considered? And the other question
2 was how can we better support
3 families so they understand the
4 process and feel like true partners
5 in their child's education?

6 MR. PERKINS: I'll try
7 the first one. The first thing is
8 building trust, having open forms
9 of communication and meeting with
10 families where they are that's most
11 convenient for them. I think a lot
12 of times we put out surveys or we
13 put out a QR code and say, please
14 click on this link and tell us your
15 experience, which is what we do and
16 I think that that's important to do
17 that. But it's also to do the
18 harder work, which is finding times
19 that work best for families,
20 especially our working families,
21 maybe they're hourly employees
22 where their time is actually money
23 out of the paycheck. So finding
24 those places and spaces where they

1 can meet and have those engagement
2 sessions, which is again what we do
3 under our small purview. But
4 that's the commitment that we make.

5 The other thing is to
6 rely on our providers as well.
7 They're beacons of our community.
8 They're the ones who are with
9 children and families and with the
10 resource providers, resource
11 agencies every day. And this is
12 the work that they are doing. So
13 we are constantly working with
14 those providers and engaging with
15 them. But I think that needs to be
16 expanded. It needs to be greatly
17 expanded in order to capture the
18 voices of those that we intend to
19 serve.

20 But again, I think it's
21 meeting them where they are, but
22 also working with the providers who
23 are those centralized agencies who
24 are doing the work every day in the

1 classrooms, at pickup, at drop-off,
2 calling Elwyn, calling CBH, calling
3 us, calling the school district.
4 They know very well what is going
5 on in the child's life as well.

6 And I'm sorry. The
7 second question was about how do we
8 get family or how do we get?

9 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
10 Understand the process and feel
11 like true partners in their child's
12 education.

13 MR. PERKINS: Yeah, I
14 think the same thing, that's
15 building trust to make sure that
16 people feel like they are heard and
17 that there is an environment under
18 which they can provide feedback and
19 opportunity are critical. Because
20 if you don't, then no one's going
21 to give you the information you
22 need to get to the child.

23 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS: I
24 have a suggestion for both the

1 school district and the city, Sean,
2 and thank you for the work that you
3 do. Why don't we just have every
4 provider receive a mandatory if
5 you're going to get these PHLpreK
6 slots, maybe some sort of meeting
7 that they have to come to during
8 the summer or something like that
9 to go over what are the
10 ramifications and rules and
11 expectations of this.

12 And then not only that,
13 if you want to avoid kids getting
14 kicked out, you also have to say
15 you have to sign off with all your
16 families to let them understand
17 that they understand that maybe as
18 a document each sign says that you
19 cannot be expelled or removed from
20 a program because of X, Y, Z
21 reasons, and then make sure all the
22 providers understand all the
23 resources that are available to
24 help these kids and get direct

1 alliance to do that. Maybe that's
2 a new way to do things to avoid
3 this going on in the future.

4 MR. PERKINS: So happy
5 to report under the PreK program we
6 do that. We have three trainings
7 that happen before the school year
8 starts. Some of them virtual, some
9 of them inperson as well. We offer
10 a variety of ways to do that. But
11 in particular around parents'
12 rights, we do a review. Every
13 single center that we contract with
14 has to submit its parent policy
15 handbook. And in that parent
16 policy handbook, we explicitly
17 state you need to show us what your
18 policies are on removing a child or
19 suspension or expulsion or any
20 terminology you want to use and we
21 review that.

22 We then back it up with
23 a quality support center for our
24 new providers. Our providers that

1 are not Star 1 or 2, they're not
2 high quality yet, we provide
3 additional resources that are
4 mandatory to them. But again,
5 these are 235 of them. We do use a
6 lot of those methods. I think we
7 could do more, absolutely. And
8 absolutely committed to doing more
9 of signing more waivers, signing
10 more paperwork.

11 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

12 Yeah. I just want to be helpful
13 because even in the -- I mean, we
14 had a good provider for my stepson,
15 but we didn't have to sign off that
16 we received the parent handbook and
17 we read the parent handbook, I
18 believe. I don't recall that, but
19 if it's not required for families
20 to have read the handbook and your
21 document and sign off on it, it
22 doesn't really, you know, they can
23 have the policy, but they don't
24 necessarily know it exists.

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1 MR. PERKINS: I think
2 that's part of the thing we need to
3 do better on, I think a lot of
4 parents, myself included, I don't
5 really remember that that's the key
6 phrase here. I think a lot of
7 parents are rushed to just sign the
8 thing, get the child in there and
9 then deal with the issue later. I
10 do think we need to do a better job
11 of being really clear, eye to eye
12 at the same table and say, look, I
13 need you to be aware that we have a
14 zero-tolerance policy on your child
15 being removed here. If you are
16 aware of any instances where you
17 might be getting pushed out, please
18 report. I think that could be
19 bolstered a little bit.

20 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS: Or
21 better yet maybe for all PreK
22 students that get this resource,
23 now that you see that there's an
24 alarming problem, you could just

1 highlight this in an email that you
2 send. We've noticed over the past
3 several years that this has become
4 a problem, if you see this, just
5 know to hear your rights. And also
6 for providers, if you know that you
7 have troubles with these children,
8 here's Elwyn, here's this, here's
9 that and the third. So it's a
10 balanced situation where you're
11 helping them. So it's not become
12 an evolving issue. So it's just
13 one way to be helpful.

14 MS. CASTELBUONO: I
15 think that's a very good
16 suggestion, very fair suggestion.
17 We are continually challenged to
18 make sure that families and
19 providers are aware of their rights
20 and responsibilities, and to make
21 sure that they're aware of the
22 supports that are out there. I
23 will say we are also challenged
24 that sometimes there are not enough

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1 supports out there. And so, that's
2 the second part of the problem.

3 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

4 And y'all have a lot to tackle
5 within this world. I mean, 1700
6 providers, 370 you're -- that's a
7 lot. A lot of them are hard to
8 find, I bet. All right. Thank
9 you.

10 Thank you, Chairman.

11 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

12 Thank you. Madam Clerk, will you
13 please call the next panel.

14 THE CLERK: Rose Wehrman
15 and Dr. Stephanie Blake.

16 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Call
17 both panels. We'll do both panels
18 at the same time. Call both.

19 THE CLERK: Shandell
20 Cromwell and Andrea Leon.

21 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
22 Let's give them some chairs. We'll
23 just share the mics.

24 THE CLERK: And Miriam

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1 Brown.

2 (Witnesses approached
3 witness table.)

4 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

5 Please state your name for the
6 record and you may begin with your
7 testimony. What we're going to do
8 is we're going to allow -- can I
9 get a fifth chair? All right.
10 We're going to allow you all to
11 provide your testimony first. And
12 then after everybody's provided
13 their testimony, we're going to
14 open it up to questions from
15 members of the committee.

16 All right. So whoever
17 wants to go first, please go first
18 and let's jump right into it.

19 DR. BLAKE: Stephanie
20 Blake. Good morning,
21 Councilmembers. Thank you for the
22 opportunity to testify today. My
23 name is Dr. Stephanie Blake, Senior
24 Vice-President of Field Operations

1 at Brightside Academy. I oversee
2 31 early childhood programs across
3 Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. I'm
4 also a contributing author on the
5 Supporting All Young Learners to
6 Thrive, a statewide research report
7 on exclusionary discipline in early
8 childhood education.

9 I'm here to talk about
10 preschool pushout, young children
11 being suspended, expelled or
12 informally pushed out of child care
13 and PreK programs. It's a crisis
14 hiding in plain sight, and it's
15 happening right here in
16 Philadelphia. So our research,
17 which included direct observations
18 of 22 Philadelphia classrooms,
19 found that more than half of the
20 families surveyed were asked to
21 disenroll their child while they
22 were actively trying to get help
23 and support. This does not affect
24 all children equally. As you

1 shared before, Black and Brown
2 children, children with
3 disabilities are removed at
4 disproportionate rates, reflecting
5 adult biases and structural
6 inequity, not children's behavior.

7 Much of this never shows
8 up on an official report, early
9 pickups and quietly reduced hours.
10 Pennsylvania has no requirement to
11 track these informal removals, so
12 the true scope stays invisible to
13 policymakers. But the report also
14 points out to a solution. Through
15 our Supporting All Young Learners
16 to Thrive Pilot, we provided
17 sustained, trauma-informed
18 professional development to
19 Philadelphia classrooms and we saw
20 some gains.

21 I also want to lift up
22 our Parents Growing Together model
23 from Children First and First Up, a
24 peer-to-peer program where parent

1 leaders created spaces that help
2 families build resilience, reduce
3 stress and strengthen their ability
4 to support their children. The
5 report's own roadmap points to
6 clear term priorities.

7 So I urge the Council to
8 support required programs to
9 document exclusionary discipline
10 decisions and pair them with
11 reentry plans, track suspension and
12 expulsion for data statewide,
13 expand our infant early childhood
14 mental health consultation and
15 require it before a child is
16 excluded. Provide add-on payments
17 for programs serving children with
18 documented diagnoses, the
19 Individual Education Plans or the
20 Individual Family Service Plans so
21 programs can hire additional staff
22 and needed resources, and
23 incentivize sustained coach
24 professional development for

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1 educators, building on models like
2 Parents Growing Together and
3 supporting all young learners to
4 thrive.

5 Every child deserves a
6 stable early learning environment.
7 We know where the gaps are and we
8 know what works. What's needed is
9 the will and the resources to scale
10 it. Thank you.

11 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
12 Thank you, Doc. Thank you for your
13 testimony.

14 Please state your name
15 for the record and you may begin
16 your testimony.

17 MS. WEHRMAN: Good
18 morning, Chairman Thomas and
19 members of the committee. My name
20 is Rose Wehrman, and I am an
21 attorney at Education Law Center.
22 We're grateful for your partnership
23 and we're especially grateful to
24 the parent advocates who are here

1 today and have been working with
2 your office for months to bring
3 this important issue to light.

4 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: And
5 just as a point of personal
6 privilege, I want to say thank you
7 and your entire team for making us
8 aware of this issue and pushing us
9 to have this hearing. So thank you
10 for that. Please proceed with your
11 testimony.

12 MS. WEHRMAN:
13 Absolutely. Thank you for your
14 partnership. ELC's mission is to
15 ensure access to a quality public
16 education for all children in
17 Pennsylvania, including our
18 youngest learners with a focus on
19 underserved children. ELC has a
20 long history of supporting the
21 needs of young learners and I have
22 spent the last two years dedicated
23 to the issue of preschool pushout.
24 Specifically, I represent families

1 whose young children have been
2 suspended and expelled from
3 preschool in Philadelphia.

4 Over the last five
5 years, ELC has worked with hundreds
6 of families who have experienced or
7 been at risk of exclusion in
8 Philadelphia preschools. These
9 exclusions are rooted in
10 discrimination and are both harmful
11 to children's development and are
12 developmentally inappropriate for
13 all children, as recognized by the
14 American Academy of Pediatrics, and
15 I've included that statement in
16 your folder.

17 Preschool exclusions are
18 the result of adult assumptions and
19 adult decisions made by adults, not
20 about 2-, 3-, and 4-year-old
21 children's behavior. We have
22 documented examples of preschool
23 pushout in PreK programs, PreK
24 Counts programs, District PreK

1 programs, District community
2 partner programs, programs that
3 receive state subsidies and other
4 early childhood education programs.
5 Our internal data indicates that
6 pushout is happening in all types
7 of preschool programs across the
8 city and at very high volumes.

9 This practice is not
10 reserved for extraordinary
11 circumstances that are already
12 contemplated by the federal Head
13 Start policy. Pushout instead is
14 often used in response to
15 developmentally appropriate
16 behaviors, behaviors that don't
17 require intensive behavioral
18 support and completely unrelated
19 reasons. For example, a child's
20 allergy or a child not using nice
21 words.

22 The experiences in a
23 child's first five years of life
24 are critical for brain development,

1 and the benefits of high-quality
2 early education for all children
3 are robust, intergenerational and
4 long-lasting. They include
5 increased graduation rates,
6 increased financial independence,
7 increased employment rates and they
8 span generations.

9 When children are
10 instead suspended and expelled from
11 preschool, they're denied the
12 opportunity to access those
13 important benefits, but they're
14 also taken away from support
15 systems, and the likelihood that
16 these children will later
17 experience additional school
18 exclusion and as well become
19 involved in the criminal justice
20 system is increased significantly
21 and represents the very real
22 preschool-to-prison pipeline.

23 Despite this, in
24 Philadelphia and across the

1 country, preschools suspend and
2 expel our youngest learners at a
3 rate three times higher than K
4 through 12 programs. In cases I've
5 represented on, while there might
6 not be one single reason told to a
7 parent for why their child is being
8 excluded, I have seen young
9 children suspended for a day,
10 suspended for multiple days or
11 expelled for reasons that include
12 using a fork unsafely when a child
13 hugged her teacher while holding a
14 fork, not sitting still, saying no,
15 not using nice words, not
16 participating, throwing a toy or
17 yelling.

18 I have seen cases where
19 parents are told that their child
20 can only come to school if the
21 family procures their own full-time
22 one-to-one aide for the child,
23 something that's very inaccessible
24 for most Philadelphia families to

1 do or that their child can only
2 come to school until noon because
3 their child has a disability.

4 I have cases in which an
5 18-month-old with a sensory
6 processing disorder was suspended
7 for not keeping his hands to
8 himself as he sought to explore the
9 world around him, and which a
10 4-year-old Black girl was told that
11 she could no longer come to school
12 because she had a dairy allergy,
13 and which a 5-year-old Latino child
14 with autism and a speech delay who
15 had been deprived of speech
16 services he was entitled to for
17 over a year and learned to
18 communicate non-verbally in the
19 absence of any supports, was
20 suspended for those communication
21 efforts, but never given any tools
22 to learn how to communicate
23 appropriately. These exclusions do
24 not affect all children equally.

1 Preschools exclude Black
2 children at a rate estimated to be
3 as high as 3.6 times higher than
4 White children, despite no
5 differences in behavior.
6 Nationally, preschools expel
7 approximately 250 children per day,
8 and statistically 125 of them will
9 be Black boys. Preschools exclude
10 children with developmental delays
11 or disabilities at a rate 14.5
12 times higher than typically
13 developing peers, often in
14 violation of federal law. And
15 children who have experienced
16 adverse childhood experiences such
17 as homelessness, neglect, poverty
18 are ten times more likely to be
19 excluded than their peers.

20 Many of the children
21 that I work with every day, and
22 families you'll hear from today
23 live at the intersection of these
24 identities. Families are told that

1 these exclusions are permissible
2 but they're not, which is exactly
3 why Philadelphia needs explicit
4 policies upholding children's
5 educational rights.

6 The Americans with
7 Disabilities Act, Pennsylvania
8 Human Relations Act and
9 Pennsylvania child care licensing
10 laws all mandate that early
11 childhood education settings,
12 whether public or private, must not
13 exclude children based on race or
14 on disability, with extremely
15 narrow exceptions and that
16 preschools instead should support
17 children.

18 Pushout occurs across
19 the board in both public and
20 private preschool programs in
21 Philadelphia and is not the result
22 of any single provider's actions.
23 The preschool push out crisis in
24 Philadelphia is compounded by

1 failures across multiple systems,
2 and additional funding and training
3 is needed to fully support young
4 children to access education.

5 But one thing is clear,
6 suspensions and expulsions are not
7 an appropriate response by adults
8 to young children's behaviors.
9 They do not teach positive behavior
10 or skills, but they take children
11 away from support and teach our
12 youngest Philadelphians, especially
13 our Black and Brown children and
14 our children with disabilities or
15 delays, that they do not belong in
16 our schools.

17 In our city and
18 statewide policy memos in your
19 folders, we've outlined actionable
20 steps that the Council, PHLpreK and
21 the district can take to both
22 strengthen their existing policies
23 and develop new ones.
24 Fundamentally, that starts with

1 clear, explicit policies
2 prohibiting suspension and
3 expulsion in programs with city and
4 district oversight. In fact, the
5 district has a great model in its
6 existing K through 2 exclusion ban.

7 Additionally, Head Start
8 programs, which are federally
9 funded and subject to Headstart's
10 narrow limits on suspension and its
11 ban on expulsion, can be applied
12 across the board by policy
13 adjustments within programs under
14 city and district oversight. While
15 exclusion continues to happen in
16 preschool settings, we see that
17 strong protections such as the Head
18 Start policy make a real
19 difference. Both the city and the
20 district are important partners in
21 this work, and ELC is committed to
22 continuing to work with both to
23 implement what we believe is our
24 shared vision to eliminate this

1 harmful practice.

2 Further, there are clear
3 and urgent funding needs as well as
4 training and support needs for
5 providers and systems. Neither
6 families nor providers should have
7 to navigate these complex systems
8 on their own. That will require
9 collaboration and funding. A ban
10 on preschool exclusion is necessary
11 to uphold the civil rights of our
12 youngest learners and ensure they
13 have the opportunity to access
14 education.

15 But just like the
16 district did when it prohibited the
17 exclusion of kindergarten through
18 2nd grade students in 2018,
19 decisive action must be taken now.
20 Like the district recognized in
21 2018 when they affirmed that
22 students in Grades K through 2
23 needed immediate relief from this
24 harmful practice, this prohibition

1 must explicitly apply to our
2 preschool programs across the
3 board. Any solution that does not
4 prohibit exclusionary discipline
5 for our youngest learners will not
6 fully address this injustice.
7 Thank you.

8 MS. CROMWELL: Hi. Good
9 morning. My name is Shandell
10 Cromwell, and I want to thank
11 Councilmember Thomas and the other
12 members of Council for your
13 attention to this issue. It means
14 a lot that you have taken our
15 concerns seriously and have been
16 vocal about your commitment to
17 addressing this huge issue.

18 My son Romaine is 6
19 years old and he is an incredible
20 child. He has taught himself
21 multiple languages such as Spanish,
22 Portuguese and Arabic. He loves
23 music, the solar system and he is
24 currently learning how to play the

1 piano. As parents, we want to
2 nurture every part of who our
3 children are. I want Romaine to
4 grow, to thrive and to have
5 everything he needs and deserves.
6 But for many children with
7 disabilities, and particularly many
8 African American boys with
9 disabilities, this is something we
10 as parents have to fight way too
11 hard for.

12 After Romaine's autism
13 diagnosis, he began receiving early
14 intervention services and those
15 supports had made a really big
16 difference. Romaine's preschool
17 experience started at a wonderful
18 early childhood education program.
19 However, when our family needed to
20 relocate, everything changed. We
21 found a new center and I met with
22 the director. I shared Romaine's
23 strengths, his interests, his
24 personality and I shared his

1 intellectual disability.

2 I wanted the center
3 providers to truly see who Romaine
4 is. The director reassured me that
5 everything would be fine. Shortly
6 after Romaine started, I was called
7 in and I was told he was no longer
8 a good fit. There were no
9 solutions offered, no supports
10 discussed, no conversation about
11 what could be done differently.
12 Despite our efforts to advocate for
13 Romaine to remain in the program,
14 we were told that the decision was
15 final. Romaine was not allowed to
16 return and that was something I now
17 understand was discriminatory.

18 I carried a lot of
19 guilt. I questioned whether I had
20 placed my son in an environment
21 where he was not safe, understood
22 or valued. It felt like our only
23 option was to keep him home again.
24 After his third birthday, I began

1 searching for a place that would
2 truly welcome him. That is when we
3 found a new preschool. And from
4 the very first conversation,
5 everything felt different.

6 They not only welcomed
7 Romaine and supported him, but they
8 made space for him to be himself
9 for the first time outside of his
10 family and support team. Romaine
11 truly felt safe and seen. With the
12 right supports in place, he began
13 to thrive. His confidence grew and
14 his personality blossomed. I am
15 proud to share that Romaine
16 graduated kindergarten in June of
17 this year. But the impacts of this
18 traumatic experience linger for
19 both Romaine and our family. I am
20 grateful for the opportunity to
21 share our story. I joined the
22 parents here today and other
23 families because we should not have
24 to fight this hard for basic

1 inclusion.

2 No child should be
3 pushed out because they learn
4 differently. No parent should have
5 to question whether their child
6 will be accepted or rejected. We
7 can do better and our children
8 deserve better. Thank you. I
9 would also like to add sometimes we
10 don't recognize answered prayers
11 because they arrive disguised as an
12 invitation.

13 I don't know where
14 today's hearing will lead. Maybe
15 it becomes legislation. Maybe it
16 changes district policy. Maybe
17 another mother hears this testimony
18 and for the first time she feels
19 seen and fathers as well. Maybe a
20 preschool director leaves this room
21 and decides to treat the next child
22 with autism differently. We rarely
23 get to see all the ripples our
24 courage creates. But courage

1 creates ripples nonetheless, and
2 that is extraordinary.

3 In closing, I will say
4 it reminds me of a verse that has
5 been on my heart and it's from the
6 book of Proverbs, Chapter 31 Verse
7 8, and it says, Speak up for those
8 who cannot speak for themselves.
9 Ensure justice for those being
10 crushed. Today that is exactly
11 what I have tried to do, not just
12 for Romaine, but for every child
13 who deserves to be welcomed instead
14 of excluded. My hope is that when
15 this hearing ends, our voices
16 won't. Today's conversation
17 becomes tomorrow's action because
18 every child deserves the
19 opportunity to learn, to belong and
20 to thrive. Thank you.

21 MS. LEON: Good morning,
22 Councilmember Thomas and committee
23 members. My name is Andrea Leon.
24 I'm so proud of my son Otto, who

1 graduated from kindergarten in June
2 and was awarded the Biggest Heart
3 award. Otto has always had the
4 biggest heart and he is always
5 happy. He loves playing in the
6 park with his sister, loves his
7 tablet, loves to eat and is very
8 crafty. He is 6 years old and he
9 is autistic.

10 Every day he is now
11 learning and growing and that is
12 because he has the resources he
13 needs. But it was not always this
14 way. I believe he was unfairly
15 treated not just due to his
16 disability, but also due to his
17 race. Let me tell you a little bit
18 about experience getting to where
19 we are today.

20 When it was time for
21 Otto to start preschool, I choose a
22 center because it seems to be
23 structured and it was close to my
24 house. On the first day of school,

1 I took a picture of Otto outside
2 the center and I brought him in and
3 dropped him off. I still had the
4 picture showing him ready to go
5 into school for the first time. By
6 the time I came back to pick him
7 up, the director wanted to meet him
8 and I didn't know why.

9 The preschool director
10 said that Otto was having sensory
11 overload and overstimulation and
12 they didn't have the resources to
13 take care of him, but that she
14 should recommend another place that
15 can support him. I was so scared.
16 I talked with the school a few more
17 times. I was devastated. I was
18 crying. I begged the director.
19 The school refused my offer of
20 support and my ideas for how to
21 best support my child and racism
22 playing a part in my experience.

23 I have to start all over
24 and visit PreK centers near me and

1 almost everything was full, but I
2 finally found a place that told us
3 they will accept my son gladly.
4 Everything was beautiful. They
5 needed Otto's IEP from the
6 preschool center, but the center
7 never sent it and soon the school
8 was full and I had to start all
9 over again.

10 Many months went by when
11 we enrolled into a preschool near
12 my new home. Otto was there with
13 his two teachers and we started to
14 see the light. Both teachers took
15 my kid with love, kindness, and
16 determination to support him in all
17 ways. I'm grateful to them along
18 the way. We have met many people
19 that have supported us, but parents
20 need more information and support.
21 Parents need support and guidance
22 to know what to do when children
23 are not getting the support they
24 are entitled to. We are also happy

1 that he is improving.

2 I'm here today because
3 what our family went through should
4 not happen to anyone else. I'm
5 speaking now because I know how
6 wrong preschool is and I hope that
7 hearing from parents today helps
8 Council understand how serious of
9 an issue this is. Thank you for
10 your time.

11 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
12 Thank you for your testimony.
13 Thank you both for your testimony
14 and sharing your story and being so
15 vulnerable. I think we have one
16 more person for this panel; is that
17 correct?

18 THE CLERK: Yes.

19 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
20 Please state your name for the
21 record and begin with your
22 testimony.

23 PASTOR BROWN: Good
24 morning, Councilman Thomas and

Committee on Education

1 Councilman Phillips and all the
2 people here. My name is Miriam
3 Brown, Pastor Marion Brown. I'm
4 the owner of JTIB Jr.'s Arrow at
5 the Gate Child Care Center.

6 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Hold
7 on. I'm sorry. A little better
8 into the mic because we couldn't
9 hear you when you put your head
10 down and started reading. We can't
11 hear you.

12 PASTOR BROWN: Oh, okay.

13 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: So
14 we didn't hear what you're the
15 owner of.

16 PASTOR BROWN: Oh, I'm
17 the owner of JTIB Jr.'s Arrow at
18 the Gate Child Care Center. We
19 stand for Jesus In The building
20 after Psalm 127. Can you guys hear
21 me? I just want to make sure.
22 Today we have more than 100
23 children, about 40 staff members
24 across two centers. Most recently

1 as a provider, we have noticed the
2 increase of children requiring
3 special needs services.

4 Without additional
5 support from the city, our
6 (inaudible) has a specific
7 requirement about exclusion policy,
8 but we are not giving support to
9 handle certain behavioral
10 situations before it gets to the
11 point of exclusion. PHLpreK tried
12 to help with the problem by working
13 with Elwyn. But students, teachers
14 and parents still face issues.

15 When children require
16 services, parents are referred to
17 Elwyn. The overall experience has
18 not been positive. Too often
19 parents are frustrated by the lack
20 of communication from Elwyn and
21 centers face challenges with having
22 to find a way to support with
23 children, an additional need and
24 the rest of the classroom based on

1 the standard ratio requirement.

2 Finally, there are
3 little resources for providers to
4 meet the need of their students and
5 staff. I have to hire an
6 additional staff beyond our budget
7 to try to overcompensate for
8 children who may need closer
9 attention. We do not receive any
10 additional resource for training
11 staff or how to teach children with
12 special needs from the city or from
13 (inaudible), so we must find our
14 own source.

15 We are also not giving
16 any support for the safety of the
17 teachers in the classroom. Centers
18 like ours work hard to provide
19 quality supervision, but teachers
20 are often dealt with circumstances
21 beyond their control, like behavior
22 challenges with limited support.
23 And as a nonprofit, we go through a
24 lot and I just have to spend more

1 money beyond what I receive as an
2 income do we receive from a subsidy
3 because if we need help for the
4 children not to quit on us.

5 A lot of my staff quit
6 because they can't handle children
7 with special needs because they get
8 through -- one of my staff as an
9 example, a child throw a toy at her
10 eyes and they had to rush her to
11 the hospital. And we're not
12 getting any help from company, from
13 Oakdale(ph). They sent us to a PD
14 registry, which we have to pay for
15 those trainings, and we don't have
16 the budget to continue to pay and
17 accommodate all those trainings for
18 our staff.

19 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

20 Thank you. You good to go?

21 PASTOR BROWN: Yes.

22 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

23 Thank you. One or two questions.

24 We have about 17 people signed up

1 for public comment and we want to
2 make sure that everybody who's
3 signed up for public comment get a
4 chance to communicate their stuff
5 on the record.

6 In the earlier panel, we
7 were talking a little bit about how
8 this disproportionately impacts
9 Black and Brown people and I was
10 watching a lot of the faces and
11 some of those faces are now on this
12 panel right now. Talk to me a
13 little bit about what you heard as
14 it relates to this issue impacting
15 Black and Brown young people more
16 than any other demographic. And
17 tell us not only what your opinion
18 is, but what we should do about it.
19 I would like you to go first, if
20 that's okay. Thank you.

21 And everybody doesn't
22 have to answer the question. If
23 you don't want to, you don't have
24 to. But I would love to hear your

1 thoughts first and foremost.

2 MS. WEHRMAN: Yes.

3 That's something that the research
4 is extremely clear about. There
5 are many studies, many of which are
6 included in the report in your
7 folder, that make extremely clear
8 that this is not an exclusionary
9 discipline problem that affects all
10 children equally. We know that
11 there is a primary effect on Black
12 and Brown children. We know that
13 this is due to structural racism,
14 implicit bias and also chronic
15 underfunding and lack of resources
16 for programs that lead to this
17 program or it leads to this
18 problem.

19 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: That
20 was actually similar to what was
21 said. And so, earlier when I
22 talked about the different types of
23 entities that organizations have,
24 from your perspective does the type

1 of entity matter as it relates to
2 the resources they're able to
3 provide? So are nonprofit child
4 care providers able to raise money
5 from different places and be
6 eligible for grants that put them
7 in a position where for-profits
8 can't do that or, Councilman, you
9 don't know what you're talking
10 about?

11 MS. WEHRMAN: Yeah. So
12 first off, it's difficult to say
13 because we rely on this national
14 data that makes clear that this is
15 primarily a problem for Black and
16 Brown children, because there isn't
17 city or state data that we can
18 point to because there is no
19 requirement to keep track or report
20 any data on exclusionary
21 discipline. So it's difficult to
22 say exactly what is happening, at
23 what extent, in which program.

24 What we do have at ELC

1 is parents who call our helpline.
2 We know that that's not a
3 representative sample because not
4 every family is made aware of that
5 resource. But the families that
6 come to us are primarily Black and
7 Brown and this is affecting their
8 children. Many of their children
9 have been excluded from multiple
10 programs because the problem is
11 never addressed. It's just moved
12 down the line.

13 But one thing that we do
14 know is that programs that have
15 more resources and support have
16 resources and support that they can
17 put toward this problem. So it's
18 difficult to say exactly where it
19 is happening, but it may be the
20 type of program can make a
21 difference.

22 DR. BLAKE: Also, I want
23 to drive the point home. So when a
24 child has a documented diagnosis in

1 a preschool classroom, they do not
2 get any additional funding
3 regardless of the program. If
4 they're in a school district
5 program, there's a little more
6 resources available. But if
7 they're in a child care program --

8 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

9 Wait, time out. Help me
10 understand.

11 DR. BLAKE: So if a
12 child gets a documented diagnosis,
13 so they have an IEP or an IFSP,
14 they do not get additional funding
15 to service those children. All you
16 get is documentation and the
17 provider has to figure it out with
18 the same amount of funding. So
19 that's the biggest piece. So it
20 can be they just need an additional
21 teacher coming into their
22 classroom, additional materials.
23 But providers can't afford that
24 because there's no additional money

1 to really support that child.

2 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: And
3 just to provide context, the reason
4 that's why that's alarming to me,
5 and I'm looking in the back and
6 folks are nodding their heads
7 confirming that's true, I'm a
8 teacher myself, so I think about
9 when I work in a traditional school
10 setting, a child is diagnosed with
11 some type of disorder, IEP or
12 whatever it is, the school gives
13 more money per pupil to the point
14 where those folks get a little
15 concerned that we overdiagnose our
16 young people just for the revenue.
17 So that is alarming and eye-opening
18 to hear that a child can be
19 diagnosed with a specific disorder
20 and no more subsidies be provided
21 to the providers who are
22 responsible for educating that
23 child. That's a homework
24 assignment right there.

1 Chair recognizes Vice-
2 Chair Phillips.

3 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

4 Chairman, thank you for that.
5 Great question. I just want to
6 follow up because it's clear that
7 providers do not mind educating all
8 children. The problem is I was
9 hoping the Education Law Center can
10 help us with this, is how do you
11 help them educate all children?
12 Because it can be a challenge if
13 their teachers are not certified or
14 trained to work with those children
15 and then they are already underpaid
16 and then they're not getting the
17 resources available, so it becomes
18 a problem.

19 So I just think that if
20 you want this as the Education Law
21 Center, you also have to help us
22 figure out how to make sure that
23 they have the resources to be great
24 at their job. How do you do that?

1 MS. WEHRMAN: Yeah,
2 absolutely. So first, I would set
3 some frameworks. So the law is
4 clear that children with extremely
5 intensive behavioral needs who
6 cannot thrive in an inclusive
7 classroom should be in a classroom
8 where they can make progress. The
9 law does not require that children
10 who cannot learn in an inclusive
11 classroom should be in an inclusive
12 classroom. The Head Start policy
13 recognizes that. The law
14 recognizes that. We recognize
15 that.

16 But what we do know is
17 that for the vast majority of
18 children, that's not the case. And
19 the vast majority of children can
20 be educated in an inclusive
21 classroom alongside their peers,
22 sometimes with simple supports.
23 Sometimes those simple supports are
24 not related to special education

1 needs. It might be a child not
2 using nice words, even if that
3 might be a developmentally
4 appropriate process for being a
5 2-year-old who does not have a
6 disability. It might be that
7 4-year-old child I mentioned who
8 had a dairy allergy, and the
9 accommodation that we would be
10 asking preschools to implement them
11 is not feeding the child dairy, and
12 we do not believe that's an
13 appropriate basis for an expulsion
14 for a preschooler, a kindergartner
15 or so forth.

16 There certainly needs to
17 be training and resources to help
18 providers to manage these children
19 who may have a disability or need a
20 small amount of support to access
21 that education. That might be
22 flexible seating. It might be more
23 breaks throughout the day. It
24 might be adjusting circle time from

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1 the 45-minute time period that we
2 often ask 2-year-olds to sit still
3 for, to something like 30 minutes
4 or incorporating movement into
5 that. This can require training
6 and we think that there is a place
7 for that training, for funding, for
8 resources, but that doesn't
9 undercut the law and the fact that
10 these children can be educated in
11 this program.

12 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

13 And I think that's what probably
14 needs to happen. Because if there
15 are 1700 providers, I know Sean is
16 still in the room as well as the
17 School District of Philadelphia --

18 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

19 Thank you for staying as well. We
20 appreciate it.

21 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

22 Yes. I think what could happen is
23 that if it's training around how to
24 deal with children with special

1 accommodations, that needs to
2 happen during the summertime or
3 weekends, whatever that may be, for
4 those teachers to feel a lot more
5 comfortable and supported to know,
6 hey, as part of your position, this
7 comes with it, but we're providing
8 you with this ample amount of
9 resources that right now it looks
10 like all the providers have to make
11 phone calls and look for these
12 resources as opposed to there being
13 a central space where they know
14 every year they could just go to
15 this training to learn how to work
16 with all children, right, and their
17 needs. And I think that's where
18 the school district and the city
19 can help along with our partners in
20 Education Law Center, you as well
21 can help to.

22 DR. BLAKE: Can I chime
23 in on that as well? But it's not
24 just the trainings too. It's also

1 coaching and they need that
2 targeted support. So sometimes we
3 have these trainings, we check a
4 box that we want, but what happens
5 throughout the year. So we have to
6 make sure it's very targeted. And
7 we have to make sure the supports
8 are spread out through the year.
9 As you know, this industry is high
10 turnover.

11 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS: So
12 the question is who can lead that?
13 Is it going to be you leading that
14 with the school district, working
15 with them? Is it going to be the
16 Education Law Center? Someone has
17 to lead that so those trainings can
18 happen throughout the year and that
19 can happen so we could turn this
20 resolution that we have for a
21 hearing into something that could
22 become decent.

23 I don't hear any of the
24 providers saying that they don't

1 want to educate all the children.
2 They just don't want the ability to
3 not have the -- they don't want to
4 fail. If they don't have the
5 ability, it's hard for -- there's
6 some bigger centers that are here
7 today. You'll hear from them.
8 They have those abilities. Some of
9 them don't. So that's the problem.

10 So if you can work with
11 Sean Perkins as well as Christina
12 from the school district. I mean,
13 make it actionable because they
14 need it. Our children need it.
15 Don't just forget about it. Just
16 let's do this, you know. All
17 right. That's all I have to say.

18 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

19 Thank you, Dr. Phillips.

20 MS. CROMWELL: I would
21 like to add something please.

22 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

23 Sure. Go ahead please, yes.

24 MS. CROMWELL: Okay. I

1 know that for me I'm very proactive
2 when it comes to my child. And I
3 would just like to add because
4 every little bit helps. If you can
5 go on Google and you Google the
6 free 40-hour training for RBT,
7 that's the registered behavioral
8 technician. It is a free training
9 that is on the website. And I
10 believe the website name is
11 Autism -- it's like the Autism
12 Foundation. But if you just type
13 in the free 40-hour RBT training,
14 it will be at least one of the
15 first several links that pop up.
16 You go on there, you do your
17 40-hour training. It has a lot of
18 good and useful information on that
19 website.

20 I am currently also
21 doing that 40-hour training, so
22 that way I can be able to better
23 navigate these challenges with my
24 son as well. Because even though,

1 yes, us as parents, we do depend on
2 the early childhood educational
3 centers and the school district and
4 the beautiful people that decided
5 to take this career path to become
6 teachers to educate, shape and mold
7 these young minds, I do believe
8 that it starts at home first. And
9 you don't know what you don't know.

10 However, once the
11 information is out there, now you
12 can be able to help yourself and
13 help your child and also to become
14 a better advocate for your child as
15 well. And that's the steps that I
16 have taken. And again, like I
17 said, if you don't know, you don't
18 know. So I'm not trying to be rude
19 or mean or anything. But with me
20 now putting that information out
21 there, that free resource, free
22 40-hour RBT training. If you
23 Google it, it will come up.

24 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

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1 Have you heard of that one before
2 as a provider?

3 PASTOR BROWN: No, sir.
4 But can I just -- I never heard
5 that before.

6 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS: I
7 just want to point that out, right.
8 So other providers it could be
9 useful. There's things that people
10 could be using. What are the best
11 ones, right? These are the things
12 that help us solve problems, right.

13 I would say, and it
14 would be advantageous but, oh, yeah
15 all of us are going to go ahead and
16 lead this. Our job is to convene
17 people to kind of do the work
18 that's important because that's
19 what we're trying to do here, help
20 us solve the problems because
21 there's 2000 issues in the city. I
22 wish we can lead them all. But
23 yes?

24 PASTOR BROWN: And one

1 of the problems, they have all
2 these programs and everything to do
3 with mentioning today. But when we
4 reach out to them, they don't help.
5 That's one of the biggest problems
6 child care has. We don't receive
7 the help immediately. And then by
8 the time we receive the help, the
9 child is ready to go to
10 kindergarten. So now we have the
11 child with PreK for two years,
12 which has been calling, trying to
13 get help. Parents are frustrated,
14 we are frustrated and we're not
15 receiving the help to the
16 children's needs. And when they
17 sent a one-on-one, most of the time
18 they are not qualified to deal with
19 the behavior. So now, the one-on-
20 one's sitting there looking at us
21 like, oh, and then the first thing
22 they say, but would they provide a
23 one-on-one, but you provide a
24 one-on-one with no experience.

1 They should send -- oh, I'm not
2 touching the child. I'm just here
3 to note. There's still no help.

4 And I'm a nonprofit.

5 And I hire a lot of staff just to
6 help my teachers because I have
7 good qualified teachers who love
8 their job. I don't want them to
9 quit and just leave in all centers
10 because they don't have no support.
11 So there, I would really love to --
12 when they send a one-on-one, that
13 they are qualified and they study
14 the child before they even come
15 into the facility. I know how to
16 work with this and I know how to
17 handle this baby.

18 MS. WEHRMAN: And I
19 would just like to respond to the
20 last thing that you said. Solving
21 this problem is going to take
22 collaboration. It's going to take
23 creativity, investment and
24 providers, resources for families.

1 But one thing that we have done in
2 your policy memos is outline
3 actionable steps that can be taken
4 by the city. And I also agree that
5 the city's role is partially to
6 bring people together. And this is
7 the first step of that, but the
8 conversation has to continue.

9 We believe that the
10 city's commitment, that
11 exclusionary discipline is not
12 appropriate in city programs is a
13 good first start to getting
14 everyone on the same page so that
15 we can identify the resources that
16 need to be distributed.

17 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: 30
18 seconds, give us either the easiest
19 thing for the city to do right now,
20 the thing that's easiest for us to
21 get done or the thing that's most
22 important for us to act on based on
23 your report.

24 MS. WEHRMAN: Yeah. The

1 things that should be focused on
2 are one clear rule across the city,
3 that Philadelphia programs do not
4 allow exclusionary discipline for
5 young children. Currently, there
6 are many programs that apply to
7 different programs down the hall
8 and some are basis for expulsion,
9 some aren't. None of this can be
10 accomplished with integrity without
11 the funding and collaboration and
12 investment to support the teachers
13 to ensure that discrimination does
14 not continue to happen for our 2-,
15 3- and 4-year-old children. So one
16 clear rule and investment.

17 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

18 There you go. Thank you. I want
19 to say thank you to everybody on
20 this panel for your presentation.
21 I want to especially say thank you
22 to the parents who made yourself
23 vulnerable by telling us your
24 story. We know it's extremely

1 emotional and not necessarily easy.
2 And so, we appreciate you doing
3 that because if you don't do it, we
4 won't know. And we have to hear
5 these stories.

6 I also want to take a
7 moment to thank Ms. Brown, who is
8 the mother of Faith. Faith, you
9 want to stand up?

10 (Applause.)

11 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

12 Faith is one of the interns who
13 help set up our hearing today. And
14 it's not just Faith. Can all eight
15 of the interns who are leading our
16 hearings today stand up. All eight
17 interns please stand up.

18 (Applause.)

19 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

20 These young people are both in high
21 school and in college and they've
22 spent their entire summer putting
23 together this hearing. So that's
24 why when y'all say such-and-such

1 called me from your office and I'm
2 like, what, who. I play too much.
3 They've done a great job as it
4 relates to today. They've helped
5 put together the witness list.
6 They've done all the research. And
7 as you can see, we even have one of
8 our amazing interns who's clerking
9 today.

10 And so, when we're
11 talking about investing in young
12 people, clearly we're talking about
13 kindergarten. We're about to
14 transition to 8th grade. But even
15 after they graduate from
16 traditional K through 12 settings
17 and transitioned into higher
18 academia, you can see that it's
19 still a priority for myself as well
20 as other members of City Council.

21 So you're seeing what my
22 office has done, but I'm sitting
23 next to two phenomenal
24 Councilmembers whose offices do the

1 exact same thing as it relates to
2 making sure young people have the
3 opportunity to serve, work and lead
4 when it comes to their city
5 government. So can we give them a
6 round of applause please.

7 (Applause.)

8 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: And
9 so, with that being said, Madam
10 Clerk, if we could thank this panel
11 and we could begin to move into
12 public testimony. And this is how
13 public comment is going to work.
14 Traditionally we try to limit
15 public comment to about three
16 minutes. And so, we're going to
17 try to stick with that today.
18 Please try to limit your comment to
19 three minutes.

20 Remember, this is one of
21 my interns. So don't force my
22 intern to have to tell you to wrap
23 it up. All right. We don't want
24 to put her in that position. And

1 so, with that being said -- and
2 also please give us a little grace.
3 If someone messes up someone's name
4 or their organization that they
5 represent, I want to go ahead and
6 apologize in advance for any error
7 that might be made in that
8 capacity.

9 Madam Clerk.

10 THE CLERK: Robin
11 Reilly, Ebony Baggett, Zena Cahill.

12 (Witnesses approached
13 witness table.)

14 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: If
15 you all can come on up, state your
16 name for the record. We're going
17 to try to do this and not time you.
18 But if it feels like folks are
19 getting a little too lengthy, we're
20 going to have to add a timer
21 because we want to make sure that
22 everybody gets an opportunity for
23 their voice to be heard.

24 MS. REILLY: Good

Committee on Education

1 afternoon, Education Chair Isaiah
2 Thomas and members of the Education
3 Committee. My name is Robin Reilly
4 and I am a proud mother of four
5 children and a resident of the 2nd
6 Councilmanic District. Thank you
7 for convening this important
8 hearing on PreK Pushout Education.

9 Chair Thomas, you may
10 not remember this, but you knew my
11 son when he was in the 3rd Grade,
12 Sankofa Freedom Academy. I want to
13 begin by thanking you for the
14 encouragement and the support you
15 showed us during this time. It
16 meant more to our family than you
17 probably realized. I am here today
18 because I want to share my son's
19 story. I hope it illustrates why
20 we need stronger connections
21 between public health, early
22 intervention and early childhood
23 education so that children receive
24 the timely, high-quality supports

1 they need before they are pushed
2 out of the learning environments.

3 When my son was 3 years
4 old, he was diagnosed with lead
5 poisoning. He was already
6 receiving early intervention
7 services at that time, and I
8 believed he was getting the help
9 needed. What I didn't know and
10 what no one explained to me was how
11 lead poisoning can affect the
12 child's developing brain. I wasn't
13 told that lead exposure can impact
14 the child's ability to regulate
15 emotions, control impulses, pay
16 attention or manage behavior.

17 I also wasn't connected
18 to specialized services that could
19 address those developmental and
20 behavioral impacts. Instead, the
21 services we receive focus primarily
22 on academic and cognitive
23 milestones. My son could recite
24 the ABCs, identify numbers and

1 learn quickly. His challenge was
2 never his ability to learn. His
3 challenge was that lead exposure
4 affected his behavior.

5 He was impulsive,
6 energetic, and had difficulty
7 staying seated. And sometimes he
8 struggled to regulate his emotions.
9 Looking back, I now understand the
10 many behaviors adults viewed as
11 challenging were likely connected
12 to the neurological effects of lead
13 poisoning. When he entered PreK,
14 instead of asking what supports
15 does this child need to succeed,
16 the response was that he was too
17 difficult to manage. It became
18 clear that my son wasn't being
19 supported. He was being pushed
20 out. That moment changed the
21 trajectory of both of our lives.

22 When my son lost access
23 to PreK, he lost the consistency to
24 learning environments and supports

1 that he needed during one of the
2 most important periods of his
3 development. I lost the stability
4 that allowed me to work and
5 continue my education. I
6 eventually lost my job, fell behind
7 on rent, moved into my sister's and
8 had to put my classes at Community
9 College of Philadelphia on hold.
10 But the hardest part was watching
11 the pattern repeat itself.

12 My son was pushed out
13 again in 3rd grade, 4th grade and
14 6th grade before eventually being
15 placed in a disciplinarian school.
16 Today my son is 21 years old. He
17 works with Philadelphia Parks and
18 Recreation. He is still the
19 bright, hard-working young man I
20 always knew he could be and I
21 couldn't be prouder of him.

22 But I often wonder how
23 different his educational journey
24 could have been if our family had

1 the understanding, if our family
2 had understood the developmental
3 impacts of lead poisoning earlier.
4 If we had been connected to
5 specialized supports and if his
6 teachers had been equipped with the
7 resources to support him instead of
8 excluding him. I respectfully urge
9 City Council to strengthen
10 coordination between lead poisoning
11 and response, early intervention,
12 and the early childhood education
13 by investing in timely, high-
14 quality early intervention services
15 that address children's development
16 and behavioral needs, provide
17 education, but provide educators
18 with the training, coaching and
19 behavioral health supports they
20 need to support all children and
21 expand family navigation services
22 so parents don't have to navigate
23 these systems alone.
24 My son's story taught me

1 that PreK pushout is rarely a
2 single event. It is often the
3 beginning of a pattern, a pattern
4 of exclusion that follows children
5 throughout their educational
6 journey. Every child deserves to
7 be understood before they are
8 excluded, supported before they are
9 disciplined and given every
10 opportunity to thrive. Thank you
11 for listening to my story and for
12 your commitment to the Philadelphia
13 children and families. Thank you.

14 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
15 Point of personal privilege.
16 What's your son's name?

17 MS. REILLY: Ramir
18 Martin.

19 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: No
20 way.

21 MS. REILLY: You had him
22 for 1st, 2nd, 3rd at the Boys and
23 Girls Club for basketball.

24 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Yep.

1 Thank you. I appreciate that.
2 Thank you for sharing your story.
3 Please state your name for the
4 record and if you can hold on
5 before you go.

6 Madam Clerk, can you
7 call the next three people so they
8 can prepare. And then after the
9 Clerk calls the next three people
10 so they know they're next, you can
11 state your name for the record and
12 begin with your testimony, and you
13 can go immediately after.

14 THE CLERK: Jessica
15 Evans, Kelly Brown.

16 (Witnesses approached
17 witness table.)

18 MS. BAGGETT: My name is
19 Ebony Baggett. Good afternoon,
20 Council President and members of
21 the Philadelphia City Council. My
22 name is Ebony Baggett. I am the
23 owner and CEO of Bright Minds
24 Bright Beginnings Early Learning

1 Center, as a PreK provider serving
2 children and families in the
3 Huntington Park community. I am
4 also a doctoral candidate at
5 Gwynedd Mercy University, where my
6 research focuses on improving
7 outcomes for young children and
8 families.

9 Today I want to speak
10 not only as an educator, but as
11 someone who has witnessed firsthand
12 what happens when we choose support
13 over exclusion. At Bright Minds
14 Bright Beginnings, we serve
15 children with a wide range of
16 social and emotional behavior
17 needs. Like many early childhood
18 programs, we operate with limited
19 funding. Yet we made the decision
20 to invest in our children instead
21 of pushing them out, we saved
22 ourselves.

23 We hired a behavioral
24 health specialist and therapeutic

1 support staff to support directly
2 alongside our educators, helping
3 them to manage challenging
4 behaviors, strengthening classroom
5 practices and ensuring children
6 receive the support they need to
7 remain successful and be included
8 in the classrooms.

9 Those investments have
10 made a tremendous difference. Our
11 educators feel more confident and
12 supported. Our families know they
13 have partners who will not give up
14 on their children. Most
15 importantly, our children are
16 learning, growing, thriving because
17 they are receiving the
18 interventions they need rather than
19 being excluded from early learning
20 opportunities.

21 PreK has been a
22 gamechanger to our program. Their
23 investment has allowed us to
24 strengthen our workforce, implement

1 meaningful supports, create a
2 culture where every child belongs.
3 Because of this partnership, we
4 have been able to reduce barriers,
5 strengthen family engagement and
6 respond to children's needs with
7 compassion instead of punishment.
8 Preschool pushout is not simply a
9 discipline issue. It is an
10 equality issue.

11 Every child deserves an
12 opportunity to learn in an
13 environment where they are
14 understood, supported and given
15 every chance to succeed. I
16 encourage the City Council to
17 continue investing in the resources
18 that help programs like mine and
19 many others and support children in
20 classrooms, empower educators and
21 support families. Thank you for
22 your continued commitment on
23 Philadelphia's youngest learners
24 and for allowing me to share my

1 story.

2 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

3 Just for clarity, you said you have
4 an onsite behavior support team?

5 MS. BAGGETT: Yes, we
6 have one behavior -- we have one
7 onstaff behavior health specialist
8 on staff every day. And we have
9 therapeutic support staff in the
10 classroom. So in addition to our
11 lead teacher, assistant teachers,
12 there's a TSS in the classroom.

13 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

14 Wow, that's amazing. I thought
15 that's what I heard. Great job.
16 That's essential.

17 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

18 Great. Thank you. Madam Clerk --
19 I mean, I'm sorry. Next.

20 MS. CAHILL: Thank you.

21 Good afternoon, members of City
22 Council. My name is Zena Cahill
23 and I am the Early Childhood
24 Education Policy Director at

1 Children First. I'm a resident of
2 Philadelphia's Council District 1,
3 a former child care teacher,
4 administrator and coach. And I'm
5 the parent of a 4-year-old child.

6 I want to thank
7 Councilman Thomas for convening a
8 hearing on preschool pushout to
9 explore solutions to mitigate this
10 practice in Philadelphia. We know
11 that access to quality early
12 childhood education or ECE ensures
13 that kids have a strong foundation
14 for K-12 and beyond. Kids who have
15 access to this service are more
16 likely to graduate high school,
17 attain well-paying jobs and to pass
18 these benefits onto their own
19 children. But we also know that
20 access to ECE is limited for some
21 children and their families through
22 practices that promote pushout,
23 suspension and expulsion and
24 informal methods of exclusion of

1 our city's youngest leaders even if
2 the explicit data documenting these
3 occurrences is not available.

4 At the same time, we
5 know that the ECE sector is
6 experiencing dire challenges,
7 limiting providers' ability to
8 support all young learners to
9 thrive. This includes limited
10 financial resources and
11 increasingly high costs in an
12 already fragile sector, thereby
13 inhibiting staff wages and the
14 ability to recruit and retain
15 qualified educators, the inability
16 to consistently and equitably
17 access professional development
18 resources aimed at ongoing support
19 of children's developmental and
20 mental health needs, and a lack of
21 cross-systems coordination and
22 supports to ensure that children
23 are referred, evaluated and when
24 qualified, able to receive the

1 developmental and mental health
2 services and supports necessary
3 within appropriate timelines.

4 These barriers undermine
5 the effective inclusion of all
6 children in ECE spaces.

7 Exclusionary practices disrupt
8 learning during children's most
9 critical years of development.
10 Preschool-age children spend about
11 40% of the most significant time of
12 brain development ages 0 to 5 in
13 ECE programming.

14 As such, Philadelphia
15 must explore strategies to support
16 a move away from these practices
17 and promote reforms that support
18 the ECE workforce and families
19 alike. This past fall Children
20 First released Supporting All Young
21 Learners to Thrive, a report on
22 three years of research with
23 parents and providers on suspension
24 and expulsion in early childhood

1 education. It included
2 recommendations like creating
3 reporting and technical assistance
4 protocols to document exclusionary
5 disciplinary decisions and to
6 support providers in family-
7 inclusive planning that promotes
8 effective re-entry to ECE
9 programming for our youngest
10 learners.

11 It also included a
12 recommendation for funding
13 allocated to child care providers
14 to specifically offset the
15 additional costs of effectively
16 serving young children with
17 disabilities and mental health
18 needs, akin to the add-on payments
19 that children with IEPs receive in
20 the K-12 sector. It included a
21 recommendation on coordinated
22 cross-systems communication to more
23 efficiently and effectively support
24 families and providers with swift

1 and timely access to both early
2 intervention and mental health
3 services.

4 This would include an
5 increase in funding for early
6 childhood mental health consultants
7 and family navigators across
8 Philadelphia's sector regardless of
9 funding stream. And finally,
10 access to incentivized, ongoing
11 research-based professional
12 development and --

13 THE CLERK: Please
14 conclude your testimony.

15 MS. CAHILL: -- coaching
16 for all child care providers across
17 the city, regardless of funding
18 stream. Again, I applaud the
19 Council for prioritizing this issue
20 for children, families and
21 providers across Philadelphia, and
22 I look forward to moving adequate
23 supports forward to mitigate this
24 practice in our city. Thank you.

Committee on Education

1 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

2 Thank you so much for your
3 testimony. All three of you
4 provided some very informative
5 information. Thank you.

6 Clerk, can you please
7 call the next individuals for
8 public comment.

9 THE CLERK: Inella Ray,
10 Jessica Evans, Kelly Brown.

11 (Witnesses approached
12 witness table.)

13 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

14 Thank you.

15 MS. RAY: May I yield to
16 the impacted parents to speak
17 before me? They're right here.

18 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS: Oh,
19 yes. Oh, I'm so sorry.

20 Absolutely. Thank you so much.

21 Can you please state your name for
22 the record and proceed with your
23 testimony.

24 MS. EVANS: Sure. My

Committee on Education

1 name is Jess Evans. Good
2 afternoon, Education Chair Isaiah
3 Thomas, Vice-Chair Anthony Phillips
4 and members of the Education
5 Committee. Thank you for convening
6 this important hearing on PreK
7 pushout. I was born and raised in
8 Port Richmond, am a proud resident
9 of the 1st Councilmanic District
10 and am now raising my 5-year-old
11 son here in Philadelphia.

12 I'm here today because
13 my family's experience shows why
14 Philadelphia must strengthen access
15 to timely, high-quality preschool
16 early intervention services, better
17 support early childhood educators,
18 and ensure families have trusted
19 navigation and advocacy supports.
20 When these systems don't work
21 together, children are too often
22 excluded before they even have a
23 chance to succeed.

24 My son is bright, joyful

1 and full of curiosity. At 18
2 months old, he began receiving
3 early intervention services through
4 Philadelphia's birth to 3 system,
5 and those services made an
6 incredible difference in his
7 development. But when he
8 transitioned into preschool early
9 intervention, everything changed.
10 We experienced delays, waitlists,
11 inconsistent providers and
12 challenges accessing the services
13 he was entitled to receive.

14 Instead of focusing on
15 helping my son grow during one of
16 the most important stages of his
17 development, I found myself
18 fighting to navigate a system that
19 just wasn't working for families.
20 Then as we searched for a PreK
21 program, I was told before my son
22 had even stepped into a classroom
23 that the program could not support
24 his needs.

1 As a parent, I had done
2 everything I was supposed to do. I
3 sought evaluations early, secured
4 services, attended every meeting
5 and advocated for my son. Yet
6 instead of finding a system ready
7 to support him, we actually
8 encountered barriers that limited
9 his opportunity to learn alongside
10 his peers.

11 Our story isn't unique.
12 It reveals a structural problem
13 when children can't access timely,
14 high-quality preschool. Early
15 intervention services and early
16 learning programs don't have the
17 supports they need to include all
18 children. Exclusion becomes
19 predictable and that exclusion
20 doesn't end in PreK. It follows
21 children into kindergarten and
22 beyond.

23 I urge City Council to
24 invest in timely, high-quality

1 preschool early intervention
2 services, strengthen professional
3 development coaching and technical
4 assistance for early childhood
5 educators and expand family
6 navigation supports so parents
7 don't have to navigate these
8 systems alone. Every child
9 deserves to be welcomed, supported
10 and given the opportunity to
11 thrive. Thank you for listening to
12 my family's story and for your
13 commitment to Philadelphia's
14 children and families.

15 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

16 Thank you so much for your
17 testimony. I applaud the work that
18 you did as a parent. Thank you.

19 Please state your name
20 for the record and proceed.

21 MS. BROWN: Hi. My name
22 is Kelly Brown.

23 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

24 Proceed with your testimony please.

Committee on Education

1 Okay. Thank you.

2 MS. BROWN: Hello,
3 everyone. My name is Kelly Brown.
4 First, I want to give honor to God
5 who is first and foremost in my
6 life. I want to say thank you to
7 my colleagues at Children First for
8 the invitation here today. And I
9 also want to say thank you to the
10 members of this Council for your
11 attention to this matter.

12 My name is Kelly Brown.
13 I am the Executive Director of
14 Brilliant Philadelphia, which is a
15 new nonprofit that exists within
16 your Council District,
17 Councilmember Phillips. Thank you
18 for the warm welcome. I'm also
19 here with my colleague Jeff Jones,
20 who is our inaugural community
21 engagement manager. I have a
22 Master's degree in clinical and
23 counseling psychology from Chestnut
24 Hill College. I have a Bachelor's

1 in early childhood education from
2 Howard University in Washington,
3 D.C.

4 In my career since 2000,
5 I've had the opportunity to serve
6 Philadelphia's youngest children
7 through my work as a preschool
8 teacher, a Head Start
9 administrator, a clinical therapist
10 and a grant maker. Today I am here
11 to represent a young man by the
12 name of David Lyons. Y'all get to
13 see him too. I just want you to
14 take about five seconds to look at
15 that picture of David. And please,
16 in your mind or on your notepad,
17 jot down the first word that comes
18 to mind. This is a tale of two
19 districts at the age of 3 to 5.

20 David lived in a
21 two-parent household with a loving
22 family. In PreK, he exhibited
23 behaviors and high-quality
24 preschool settings that included

1 eloping from the building. His
2 parent would get a phone call that
3 he was in the parking lot. He
4 would hit his peers, his teachers
5 and tantrum. Despite his parents'
6 efforts to provide direct support
7 to seek additional support for
8 David, he was suspended and
9 expelled repeatedly.

10 David moved into
11 kindergarten at Dobson Elementary
12 School where he was suspended
13 typically on a Monday, returned on
14 a Wednesday and suspended again on
15 a Thursday. Thanks to Philadelphia
16 Citizens for Children and Youth at
17 the time, now Children First, the
18 Child Watch Hotline gave David's
19 parents the opportunity to have
20 guidance to access to services.
21 The parents needed access to
22 Medicaid for behavioral health
23 services to exist within his home
24 setting and school setting. They

1 were denied as middle-income
2 families.

3 David received a
4 dedicated therapeutic support
5 staff, behavioral support and
6 mobile therapists. His family even
7 received an attorney pro bono, more
8 than likely from the Education Law
9 Center that helped him to receive
10 an IEP. David was suspended nearly
11 ten times with a goal of not
12 returning to the academic setting
13 and being excused to a room or a
14 program where he would be
15 considered learning disabled.

16 THE CLERK: Please
17 conclude your testimony.

18 MS. BROWN: What you see
19 before you is David Kelly Lyons, my
20 son, who is now on a full academic
21 scholarship at Penn State's main
22 campus, where he is studying
23 cybersecurity. David couldn't be
24 with us today, so I brought the

1 biggest picture I could. He right
2 now is in Morristown, New Jersey,
3 serving his internship. I can't
4 even believe it. You said it, at
5 Lockheed Martin. This is a picture
6 of my son who a year ago went to an
7 event where he learned about this
8 opportunity to just do an
9 internship if he could. And now he
10 happened to be standing in that
11 picture in front of where he's
12 serving today, where we hope he
13 gets a return offer. Thank you.

14 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

15 Thank you. I know you're a proud
16 mother and thank you for being so
17 resourceful for David during his
18 time growing up. I so appreciate
19 it. He's going to do well.

20 All right. Please state
21 your name for the testimony and
22 proceed.

23 MS. RAY: Inella Ray.

24 So good afternoon, Education Chair

Committee on Education

1 Thomas, Vice-Chair Anthony Phillips
2 and also the other members of the
3 Education Committee. My name is
4 Inella Ray and I serve as the
5 Director of Parent Advocacy and
6 Engagement at Children First. I
7 would like to begin by thanking
8 Education Chair Thomas for bringing
9 this important and yet often
10 invisible issue into public view.

11 For far too long, PreK
12 has operated in the shadows.
13 Families often don't realize their
14 child has been suspended or
15 expelled because it rarely comes in
16 the form of a formal disciplinary
17 action. Instead, they hear we
18 can't meet your child's needs or
19 they're having a difficult day so
20 you'll need to pick them up. These
21 experiences often go unrecognized,
22 unreported, making it difficult to
23 activate the policies, supports and
24 intervention designed to prevent

1 exclusion.

2 From 2022 to 2025, I had
3 the privilege of co-leading
4 Supporting All Young Learners to
5 Thrive alongside my colleague
6 Dr. Stephanie Blake. We partnered
7 with parents, caregivers,
8 educators, providers and community
9 leaders to understand why pushout
10 happens and what it would take to
11 build a early learning system where
12 every child has opportunity to
13 thrive.

14 What emerged was a clear
15 consensus PreK pushout is not a
16 result of a single child's behavior
17 or a single educator's decision.
18 It is a predictable outcome of
19 fragmented systems that leave
20 families without support, educators
21 without resources that they deserve
22 and children without timely access
23 to services they need. This means
24 the solution cannot rest on

1 educators alone. It requires
2 system change.

3 The good news? We have
4 solutions. First, we must invest
5 in sustainable family navigation
6 and rapid response support so
7 families have somewhere to turn
8 before challenges become crisis.
9 Both of these programs are
10 currently grant-funded and they
11 need public dollars to be sustained
12 and to be universal.

13 Second, we must invest
14 in early child workforce through
15 coaching, infant, toddler and
16 childhood mental health, behavioral
17 supports and high-quality
18 professional learning. Supporting
19 educators is one of the most
20 effective ways to support children.
21 Finally, Philadelphia has the
22 opportunity to build a truly
23 coordinated system of care for
24 young children and families.

1 Children don't arrive at preschool
2 with separate developmental,
3 health, educational and family
4 needs. They arrive as whole
5 children.

6 Yet too often we ask
7 families to navigate fragmented
8 systems that were never designed to
9 work together. Philadelphia has an
10 opportunity to build something
11 different, a coordinated care
12 infrastructure that connects
13 developmental screening, lead
14 testing, infinite early childhood
15 mental health, early intervention,
16 family navigation, behavioral
17 health, and high-quality early
18 learning before unmet needs becomes
19 barriers to learning, belonging and
20 thriving.

21 Today's hearing gives us
22 an opportunity to move from this
23 invisible to impossible to ignore.
24 The question before us is not

1 whether we know enough to act. We
2 do. The question is whether we are
3 willing to move beyond managing the
4 consequences of pushout and instead
5 building an early childhood system
6 intentionally designed to prevent
7 it, because every child deserves to
8 enter a classroom knowing they
9 belong, every family deserves a
10 system that responds with support
11 instead of exclusion and every
12 educator deserves the resources and
13 partnerships to help every child
14 thrive. I look forward to working
15 on this with you all.

16 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

17 Thank you. I appreciate your
18 comments on what investments need
19 to be made, and thanks a lot for
20 all of your testimony today.

21 MS. RAY: Thank you.

22 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: I
23 have a quick question before you
24 go.

1 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

2 The Chair recognizes Councilwoman
3 Dr. Nina Ahmad.

4 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

5 Very, very quick. First of all,
6 thank you to all of you for your
7 amazing stories. Please tell your
8 son we are very excited for him.
9 So you said from the beginning to
10 now there were a lot of
11 impediments, in spite of which he
12 persevered, you persevered. What
13 were those things that worked?
14 What happened exactly? Because if
15 you're going to do a systems
16 change, we need to know stories
17 like this, what exactly worked?

18 MS. BROWN: Well, for
19 starters it took a village. I
20 cannot say that there were formal
21 supports that were set up in a way
22 that were easy to navigate. But
23 one thing that definitely did help
24 is that he received a therapeutic

1 support staff person who was
2 skilled. The gentleman came on a
3 regular basis.

4 When David graduated
5 from high school from North Penn
6 School District, he was there at
7 his graduation dinner to salute
8 him. So that type of consistency
9 is necessary.

10 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: You
11 mentioned North Penn, not here?

12 MS. BROWN: Yes, ma'am.
13 That was the other solution that
14 we --

15 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
16 That answered my question.

17 MS. BROWN: Before he
18 could be suspended a 10th time, I
19 begged the principal at Dobson to
20 allow me to take my son out of the
21 district. When we moved to North
22 Penn School District, he got
23 exactly what he needed and
24 graduated with honors.

1 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: So
2 if Montgomery County can do it, if
3 Montgomery County right next door
4 can do it, we should be able to do
5 it. So we need you all engaged,
6 particularly, you know, children.
7 First, I have to thank all of you
8 for always coming with the
9 information, the data, all of it.
10 So helpful because we have a myriad
11 of things in front of us. Getting
12 this kind of navigation tools for
13 us is really important.

14 MS. BROWN: Can I tell
15 you one more thing that worked.
16 Unfortunately, my son was a
17 kindergartner when he was 302'd
18 from Dobson Elementary. He was
19 escorted in a police car with his
20 TSS where he was in placement
21 inpatient at Fairmount Behavioral
22 Health, the youngest on his unit at
23 the age of 5. Unfortunately, we
24 can say that that helped because it

1 gave him access to a higher level
2 of care.

3 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: So
4 without having to 302 him, he
5 should get that help.

6 MS. BROWN: Without the
7 crisis, prior to the crisis.

8 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
9 That trauma has not left you I am
10 sure.

11 MS. BROWN: Yes, ma'am.

12 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
13 Thank you so much for all of your
14 testimony.

15 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
16 Thank you, Councilwoman, and thank
17 you all again.

18 Clerk, can you please
19 call the names of the next
20 individuals ready to testify for
21 public comment.

22 THE CLERK: Lisa Brown,
23 Tiffany Chavez, Margaret DiSanto.

24 (Witnesses approached

Committee on Education

1 witness table.)

2 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

3 Tiffany Chavous. Thank you so much
4 for joining us today. Can you
5 please state your name for the
6 record and begin with your
7 testimony. If anyone would like to
8 go first.

9 MS. DiSANTO: Good
10 morning. My name is Margaret
11 DiSanto. I'm a proud mother and
12 grandmother and a long-time
13 resident of Philadelphia Cobbs
14 Creek neighborhood in the 3rd
15 Councilmanic District, a committee
16 person in the 3rd Ward and 6th
17 Division, and a former educator who
18 has worked across both the early
19 childhood and K through 12 systems.

20 I would like to begin by
21 expressing my sincere appreciation
22 to Education Chair Isaiah Thomas
23 for his leadership in convening
24 this hearing and for his commitment

1 to advancing this important
2 conversation. I am here today
3 because I believe every young child
4 deserves to be welcomed, supported
5 and given every opportunity to
6 thrive in an early learning
7 environment that is prepared to
8 meet their individual needs, not
9 excluded or pushed out during one
10 of the most important periods of
11 their development.

12 As both an educator and
13 a parent advocate, I've had the
14 opportunity to see this issue from
15 two perspectives. In the
16 classroom, I saw children who were
17 curious, capable and eager to
18 learn, but who also needed
19 additional developmental behavior
20 or emotional support. Too often
21 these needs were viewed through the
22 lens of behavior instead of child
23 development.

24 I also saw dedicated

1 educators doing everything they
2 could with limited resources. They
3 were expected to support children
4 with increasingly complex needs,
5 but often without access to
6 coaching, behavior health supports
7 or the specialized training needed
8 to respond effectively. That isn't
9 fair to children and it isn't fair
10 to educators. That's why I don't
11 believe PreK pushout begins with
12 children behavior.

13 It begins when
14 children's needs outpace the
15 supports available to the adults
16 responsible for helping them to
17 see. My experience working in both
18 PreK and K-12 also showed me
19 another important reality. The
20 educators entrusted with our
21 youngest learners are among the
22 lowest-paid professionals in
23 education despite carrying some of
24 the greatest responsibility.

1 They are expected to
2 identify developmental concerns,
3 build strong relationships with
4 families, create nurturing learning
5 environments and prepare children
6 for kindergarten, all while earning
7 wages that make it difficult for
8 the field to recruit, retain and
9 support a stable, experienced
10 workforce.

11 When we underinvest in
12 early childhood educators, we
13 underinvest in children. If we
14 want to reduce PreK pushout, we
15 must address its root causes. That
16 means investing in competitive
17 compensation, ongoing professional
18 development and coaching classroom-
19 based behavior and mental health
20 supports, and the resources
21 educators need to respond to
22 children's developmental needs with
23 confidence and compassion.

24 The families you heard

1 from today are not asking for
2 special treatment. They're asking
3 for a system that is prepared to
4 support every child and every
5 educator. When we invest in early
6 childhood workforce, we strengthen
7 classrooms. When we strengthen
8 classrooms, more children remain
9 engaged in learning. And when more
10 children stay in learning
11 environments where they are welcome
12 and supported, all of Philadelphia
13 benefits. Thank you for your time
14 and your commitment to
15 Philadelphia's children, families,
16 and educators.

17 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

18 Thank you so much for that
19 testimony. We are looking in
20 different ways for the city, how we
21 can support educators and resources
22 for funding for their teaching. So
23 it's a topic that the state is
24 supposed to be doing, but it's not

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1 happening. So we're going to try
2 to do our best to. Thank you.

3 Please state your name.

4 MS. CHAVOUS: Thank you
5 for convening, City Councilmembers,
6 this very important topic. My name
7 is Tiffany Chavous. I am the CEO
8 at Somerset Academy, an early
9 childhood program serving children
10 and families, one of the programs
11 fortunate enough to have fully PreK
12 and PreK Counts. I've been
13 actively engaged in early childhood
14 advocacy at both the city and state
15 level and really appreciate again
16 this convening of this hearing. We
17 are all here at different
18 capacities to talk about the one
19 major issue.

20 Providers are seeing
21 more children enter early learning
22 programs with developmental,
23 behavioral, social, emotional and
24 sensory needs. National data

1 continues to show an increase in
2 the number of children identified
3 as autistic, highlighting the need
4 for stronger systems of support for
5 children, families and early
6 learning providers.

7 When children exhibit
8 challenging behaviors, the
9 conversation often focuses on
10 whether providers are pushing
11 children out. However, most
12 providers, as we all here, want to
13 support every child but lack the
14 funding, staffing, behavioral
15 health resources, training and
16 timely access to evaluations and
17 services needed to do so
18 successfully.

19 Families, as you've
20 heard, often face month-long waits
21 for developmental and behavioral
22 health services. Some specialized
23 evaluations can take 6 to 15 months
24 to access. During that time,

1 children are still showing up to
2 school every day. The expectations
3 however are that providers have
4 increased dramatically -- have
5 increased the expectations on
6 providers, but sadly the resources
7 available to meet those
8 expectations have not kept pace.

9 Somerset, like one of
10 the other providers who spoke
11 earlier, experience has shown that
12 when providers have access to
13 behavioral specialists, one which
14 we have at Somerset, therapist
15 partnerships, RBT training that we
16 heard of that all of our staff must
17 take at Somerset, staff training,
18 such as sensory supports and other
19 whole child interventions, children
20 are more likely to remain engaged
21 and learning successfully to
22 transition to kindergarten.

23 We see how such services
24 have positively impacted our unique

1 learners. Parents have shared that
2 their children were able to receive
3 such services, accommodations and
4 encouragement they need rather than
5 be suspended, expelled or excluded.
6 As a result, our unique learners
7 have developed stronger
8 communication skills, greater
9 independence, improved self-
10 regulation and the confidence
11 needed to succeed.

12 If we want fewer
13 children to be excluded from early
14 learning programs, we must invest
15 in the systems that keep children
16 in classrooms. That includes
17 increased funding for behavioral
18 and mental health supports, faster
19 access to evaluations and
20 intervention services, workforce
21 development and resources that
22 enable providers to create truly
23 inclusive environments --

24 THE CLERK: Please

1 conclude your testimony.

2 MS. CHAVOUS: Somerset
3 has intentionally invested, like
4 others, in supports that many
5 providers simply cannot afford.
6 Without additional funding, these
7 investments include a behavioral
8 specialist and other things
9 mentioned. Inclusion is not simply
10 about asking providers not to push
11 children out. Inclusion requires
12 investment. When providers have
13 the support they need, children
14 stay in classrooms, families stay
15 connected and communities grow
16 stronger. Every child deserves
17 that opportunity. Thank you so
18 much for having this hearing.

19 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
20 Thank you for your testimony and
21 thank you for all you do. We
22 appreciate you. Thank you.

23 MS. BROWN: Good
24 afternoon, Education Chair Isaiah

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1 Thomas and members of the Education
2 Committee. My name is Lisa Brown
3 and I serve as the Director of
4 Early Learning and Equity
5 Advancement at First Up. For
6 nearly 60 years, First Up has
7 worked to create an equitable early
8 childhood education system across
9 the Southeastern Pennsylvania
10 region.

11 Each year we support
12 approximately 9000 early childhood
13 professionals and we reach more
14 than 50,000 young children by
15 investing in the educators,
16 providers and families who make
17 high-quality early learning
18 possible. I was also recently
19 appointed to Pennsylvania State
20 Advisory Council on Early Childhood
21 Education and Care, where I look
22 forward to working alongside
23 colleagues from across the
24 Commonwealth to strengthen our

1 early childhood system. While that
2 role gives me a statewide
3 perspective, today I am here to
4 talk about what we are seeing right
5 here in our beloved City of
6 Philadelphia.

7 I come to this work not
8 only as an early childhood leader,
9 but also as the proud mother of two
10 brilliant Black boys that I'm
11 raising in Philadelphia, one of
12 whom is in preschool and receives
13 early intervention services. Like
14 many families, I know firsthand
15 what it feels like to wait more
16 than a year for services that my
17 child needs during one of the most
18 critical periods of his
19 development.

20 That experience has
21 deepened my understanding of what
22 we hear from educators and the
23 families that we serve every day.
24 At First Up, we have the distinct

1 pleasure of working directly
2 alongside early childhood
3 educators, providers, systems
4 partners and families across our
5 region.

6 What we hear
7 consistently is this: Educators
8 are deeply committed to the
9 children in their care, but they
10 are being asked to meet
11 increasingly complex developmental,
12 behavioral and mental health needs
13 without the coordinated supports
14 they need to be successful. When a
15 young child is suspended, expelled
16 or informally pushed out of an
17 early learning program, it is
18 rarely because an educator does not
19 care or want that child to succeed.

20 More often it is a sign
21 that the system surrounding the
22 child, the family and the educators
23 have not responded early enough in
24 order for us to give the children

1 what they need to be successful.

2 Just yesterday an educator shared
3 something with me that I have not
4 been able to stop thinking about.

5 She said, Lisa, three of
6 the six children in my classroom
7 are currently waiting for early
8 intervention services. I'm doing
9 everything I can, but I don't know
10 how much longer I can continue
11 without the supports these children
12 need. Her experience unfortunately
13 is not unique, as we've heard here
14 today. It reflects what we hear
15 from educators across Philadelphia.

16 The encouraging thing is
17 that we also know what does work.
18 At First Up, we have a body of work
19 titled Positive Racial Identity
20 Development, which reminds us that
21 supporting children means that we
22 need to support the adults that are
23 around them, which means we must
24 invest in helping educators and

1 systems partners to understand how
2 race, identity, culture and
3 belonging shape young children's
4 experiences and how we engage these
5 Black and Brown children that we've
6 been talking about in our city.

7 Please consider this First Up
8 invitation to be a support and a
9 partner in this ecosystem.

10 At First Up, our coaches
11 partner with educators to
12 strengthen social-emotional
13 development. Positive behavior
14 supports trauma-informed practice
15 and culturally responsive teaching.
16 But we know that coaching alone is
17 not enough. Educators are more
18 successful when they're surrounded
19 by a coordinated network of
20 supports that includes early
21 intervention, rapid response,
22 mental health consultation, family
23 navigation and strong community
24 partnerships.

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1 When those systems work
2 together, educators are better-
3 equipped to meet children's needs.
4 Families receive support before
5 challenges become crises --

6 THE CLERK: Please
7 conclude your testimony.

8 MS. BROWN: Thank you so
9 much for your time today.

10 THE CLERK: Next we will
11 have Kimberly Nelson, Bridget Hicks
12 and Latrice Johnson.

13 (Witnesses approached
14 witness table.)

15 MS. NELSON: Good
16 afternoon, blessed afternoon.
17 Thank you, City Council for the
18 invitation, for being here today to
19 advocate for disabled children as
20 well as early education. Good
21 afternoon, Isaiah Thomas,
22 Councilman.

23 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
24 Please state --

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1 MS. NELSON: Say my
2 name? My name is Kimberly Nelson,
3 and I'm here to advocate for
4 disabled children as well as early
5 education. Good afternoon. This
6 is my daughter Kennedy Nelson. We
7 have been in City Council for the
8 last few years advocating for
9 accessibility inside of our schools
10 from education as well as having
11 accessibility inside of the
12 schools, the bathrooms and
13 facilities.

14 So I'm here this morning
15 to inform you that I've been a part
16 of the executive order for Head
17 Start program. My daughter was one
18 of those children that was inside
19 of that program since she was 4
20 years old to 5, and I traveled the
21 nation as an Executive Treasurer
22 for the Head Start Policy Council
23 from one part of the nation to the
24 next to help parents understand how

1 important it is to have their
2 children inside of Head Start, so
3 understanding how you have to have
4 the safety for the children as well
5 as the education and giving them a
6 little bit more understanding of
7 how it would be a little bit better
8 for them to have their children
9 inside of school because they'll be
10 nesting and learning from each
11 other.

12 But as an educator for
13 the last few years, I've been
14 noticing more parents are having
15 issues with their children being
16 inside of PreK or any type of early
17 education where they have been
18 having a lot of behavior issues and
19 not getting the necessary needs and
20 resources to help them. My
21 personal experience is one of my
22 nephews has been going through it
23 for over a year. He's been getting
24 suspended because of the resources

1 that are not available for my
2 sister to get the support she needs
3 for her son, and being an advocate
4 and finding ways to get the support
5 is very challenging.

6 So I'm asking City
7 Council to support the bills that
8 will help to create more funding
9 and find more resources for
10 children that are in early
11 education. Again, my daughter is
12 one of those children that now I'm
13 going to be challenged even more
14 because of the fact that the
15 facilities are not prepared for her
16 to go back to school because she's
17 in a wheelchair and she'll be in a
18 wheelchair past the beginning of
19 the time for school to start in a
20 few weeks. So now, I'm going to be
21 back down here to fight for
22 facilities accessibility again
23 because of the challenges that we
24 are going through.

1 And as a parent that has
2 been living this life and traveling
3 back and forth to try to get the
4 necessary needs to support our
5 children, we're asking for more
6 assistance. We need more help. We
7 need easy access to find resources.
8 And I'm just asking for you guys to
9 make that happen. Thank you so
10 much.

11 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
12 Excuse me. What grade is your
13 daughter in?

14 MS. NELSON: I'm sorry?

15 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
16 What grade is she going to?

17 MS. NELSON: My daughter
18 is in the 9th grade. She's going
19 into the 10th grade and she attends
20 Overbrook High School.

21 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
22 And you also have children in
23 kindergarten?

24 MS. NELSON: I only have

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1 one child, and I have a nephew
2 that's in kindergarten now --

3 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

4 Okay.

5 MS. NELSON: -- in Head
6 Start and in kindergarten. And the
7 one that's in kindergarten has been
8 having behavior issues. And he's
9 been suspended multiple times
10 because of that. So I've been
11 advocating on his behalf --

12 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

13 Okay.

14 MS. NELSON: -- to find
15 the resources that are necessary.

16 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

17 Okay. Now, I see. It's two
18 separate things.

19 MS. NELSON: Two
20 separate incidents, two separate
21 cases, yes.

22 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:

23 Thank you.

24 MS. NELSON: Thank you.

1 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

2 Thank you for your testimony.
3 We're running a little short on
4 time, so if we can try to keep it
5 to 2 to 3 minutes that will
6 definitely help us. Please state
7 your name for the record.

8 MS. JOHNSON: Good
9 afternoon. My name is Natasha
10 Johnson and I am the owner of and
11 director of Candie's Kids Learning
12 Academy in the North Philadelphia
13 and Kensington section. We have
14 two high-quality child care centers
15 in Philadelphia. We are a proud
16 partner with PHLpreK, PreK Counts
17 and Early Head Start.

18 I come before you today
19 not only as a child care provider,
20 but also as a certified special
21 education teacher, a Star 4
22 provider and a PhD candidate
23 dissertation focusing on preventing
24 strategies to reduce preschool

1 suspension and expulsion among
2 Black boys in early childhood
3 education. So this is near and
4 dear to my heart.

5 I am writing to bring
6 urgent attention to the growing,
7 challenges facing early childhood
8 education and exclusive PreK
9 classrooms. I want to be clear,
10 this is not to request to remove
11 children from settings or challenge
12 the importance of inclusion. Every
13 child deserves access to a safe,
14 nurturing and high-quality learning
15 environment.

16 However, successful
17 inclusion requires the appropriate
18 resources, staffing and specialized
19 supports in early childhood
20 education. And educators like
21 myself and others that are here
22 today, we need help. The concern
23 is not isolated to one classroom
24 nor one program. National data

1 demonstrates that preschool
2 suspension and expulsion remain
3 highly rated for our Black boys in
4 preschool and also our Hispanic
5 boys as well.

6 Black boys and children
7 are disproportionately rated and
8 suspended nationally. Nationally,
9 18% of Black boys are enrolled in
10 preschool, 38% are expelled, 33%
11 are suspended every year. Over the
12 last past two years in my preschool
13 classroom, I had ten children in
14 each class. Eight of them had
15 special needs. In a preschool
16 class, the ratio is 1 to 10. I was
17 the only teacher in that classroom
18 with eight special needs children.

19 Because of my moral
20 consent and making sure that no
21 child is left behind, no child is
22 suspended, no child is expelled, I
23 did not suspend nor expel none of
24 these children. And in response to

1 that, I was extremely stressed. I
2 was extremely burnt out and I was
3 extremely not getting any help from
4 anyone --

5 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

6 Ma'am, we need you to give us a
7 brief synopsis because you're over
8 your three minutes.

9 MS. JOHNSON: Oh, I am.
10 Okay.

11 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Over
12 three minutes.

13 MS. JOHNSON: Oh, I'm
14 sorry. So I'm just here today just
15 to let you know that educators need
16 help with these children with
17 special needs. We don't want to
18 expel them. We don't want to
19 suspend them, but we need help
20 supports so we can be able to
21 maintain them in our classrooms.

22 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Can
23 you make sure that written
24 testimony that you read gets over

1 to our team over here so it can get
2 added to the record if there's
3 anything that you didn't get to
4 say. We'll make sure that it gets
5 reviewed.

6 And before our next
7 witness testify, can you call up
8 the last four witnesses please,
9 Madam Clerk.

10 THE CLERK: Leslie
11 Spina, Medina Rashid, Brad Wilson,
12 Thomas Crane.

13 (Witnesses approached
14 witness table.)

15 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: All
16 those folks can come sit in the
17 back. And as soon as your turn
18 comes up, you can jump right in.
19 State your name for the record,
20 ma'am. You may begin with your
21 testimony.

22 MS. HICKS: My --

23 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
24 Speak into the mic.

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1 MS. HICKS: I'm sorry.
2 Bridget Hicks.

3 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: We
4 can't hear you.

5 MS. HICKS: My name is
6 Bridget Hicks.

7 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Can
8 everyone hear her?

9 (Yes.)

10 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: All
11 right. Thank you. Yep. Good to
12 go.

13 MS. HICKS: Okay. My
14 name is Bridget Hicks. I'm an
15 early childhood educator and a
16 special instructor. I work with
17 children, families and early
18 learning programs in Philadelphia.
19 I am speaking today from a personal
20 and professional experience and not
21 on behalf of my employer. I'm also
22 a grandmother of a 4-year-old who,
23 in his short life, has already been
24 expelled from four early learning

1 centers.

2 I want to make two
3 central points today. First,
4 families and early learning
5 programs are both struggling.
6 Programs are being asked to support
7 children with increasingly complex
8 developmental, behavioral and
9 emotional needs. Yet they lack
10 sufficient staffing, training,
11 funding, behavioral consultation
12 and timely access to specialists.
13 Families face long waits for
14 evaluations and services, confusing
15 systems, missed work, financial
16 strain and constant fear that
17 another program will say it can no
18 longer care for their child.

19 My second point is that
20 preschool expulsion can be
21 traumatic for the child and affects
22 reach the entire family. Each time
23 my grandson was expelled, he lost
24 familiar teachers, classmates,

1 routines and another place where he
2 was supposed to feel safe and be
3 accepted. At 4 years old, he could
4 not understand staffing shortages,
5 service delays, decisions being
6 made by adults.

7 What he experienced was
8 rejection. Repeated rejection can
9 affect a young child's ability to
10 trust, form relationships, regulate
11 emotions, and develop a sense of
12 belonging. No 4-year-old should
13 begin to believe that he is the
14 problem. Families and educators
15 should not be placed against one
16 another. We should be supported as
17 partners.

18 I respectfully ask the
19 city to invest in timely
20 evaluations, intervention services,
21 behavior consultation, appropriate
22 staffing, trauma-informed
23 professional development, and
24 meaningful protection against

1 formal and informal preschool
2 pushout. Let us make that this
3 lesson one of acceptance, support
4 and hope. Thank you.

5 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

6 Thank you for your testimony. Very
7 much appreciated. We definitely
8 have work to do, so thank you. The
9 next witness to testify. If you
10 can come on up, please state your
11 name for the record and you may
12 begin with your testimony.

13 MS. SPINA: My name is
14 Leslie Spina. I'm here as a
15 32-year veteran of the early
16 childhood environment. I'm a
17 provider, but I'm also a member of
18 the Voice of an Advocacy Group.
19 Before I begin, I want you to look
20 at this picture. I don't know if
21 we can send that up there to you.
22 This is a picture from a classroom.
23 Before I tell you about
24 preschool pushout, I want you to

1 look and see what happens before
2 the child ever leaves the
3 classroom. This happened in a
4 classroom, one of my classrooms.
5 This is an early childhood
6 classroom. After one preschool
7 child overwhelmed by severe
8 behavioral dysregulation destroyed
9 the room. During the incident, our
10 teachers had only one option,
11 remove the other 19 children from
12 the classroom to keep them safe.
13 This is not a rare event. This is
14 happening in early childhood
15 programs across Philadelphia every
16 day.

17 That day that teacher
18 left in tears, promptly left the
19 field never to return. We lost a
20 great teacher. When people hear
21 the term preschool pushout, they
22 often imagine providers who are
23 unwilling to support children with
24 challenging behaviors. I

1 understand why families feel that
2 way.

3 If I were a parent whose
4 child had lost their child care
5 placement, I would be devastated.
6 But I want to ask you to consider
7 something important. Preschool
8 pushout is not the problem.
9 Preschool pushout is a symptom of a
10 much deeper problem. The deeper
11 problem is a system that is failing
12 children, families and providers
13 long before a child ever enters a
14 learning classroom.

15 Early childhood
16 educators do not enter the
17 profession because they want to
18 turn children away. We dedicate
19 our lives to helping children
20 learn, grow, and succeed. Asking a
21 family to leave the program is the
22 most painful decision a provider
23 makes. But we also have a
24 responsibility to every other child

1 in our care. We have a
2 responsibility to the children
3 experiencing significant behavioral
4 challenges who deserve timely
5 evaluations, appropriate
6 interventions and coordinated
7 support.

8 We also have a
9 responsibility to the other 19
10 preschool children who deserve a
11 safe, nurturing environment where
12 they can learn and we have a
13 responsibility to the educators who
14 walk into these classrooms every
15 day determined to help children
16 succeed across our city. Talented,
17 experienced teachers are leaving
18 the profession at an alarming rate.

19 This workforce crisis is
20 driven by many factors, but one of
21 the most significant is the growing
22 intensity of children's unmet
23 behavioral and developmental needs.
24 Without corresponding supports,

1 master teachers tell us they are no
2 longer able to teach to the high
3 standard they have spent years
4 developing because much of the day
5 is spent managing crisis. Instead
6 of engaging children in literacy,
7 language development, science
8 exploration and social-emotional
9 learning, classrooms are in
10 survival mode all day, every day.

11 A teacher is often
12 assigned to support a single child
13 in crisis, while the other is left
14 to care for the remaining 18 or 19
15 children. This is not what high-
16 quality environments look like.
17 Our teachers did not choose this
18 profession to spend every day
19 responding to emergency. They
20 chose it because they wanted to
21 inspire curiosity, nurture
22 relationships and build strong
23 foundations that children need for
24 lifelong success.

1 Families face an
2 incredibly difficult system to
3 navigate. Providers face an
4 equally difficult system. I should
5 mention here that I should be
6 really great at this, but I still
7 can't manage it. Eight months is
8 the typical amount of time it takes
9 for a child to receive services.
10 Over 20% of the life of a 3-year-
11 old, providers spend hours working
12 on this. Let's invest in earlier
13 identification of developmental and
14 behavioral concerns.

15 We need faster access to
16 evaluations and behavioral health
17 services. We need stronger
18 coordination, coordination in early
19 intervention and every child
20 deserves to thrive in our programs.
21 We are putting money in the system.
22 We need to re-evaluate how we put
23 that money, where we put that money
24 and make sure that it's supporting

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1 children. So this classroom is not
2 what we do every day.

3 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

4 Thank you. Thank you for your
5 testimony. Final public comment.

6 MS. RASHID: Good
7 afternoon, Councilmember Isaiah
8 Thomas and the members of the
9 committee. I want to thank you for
10 the opportunity to speak today. I
11 am Medina Rashid. I'm the founder
12 and head of School of Mecca Child
13 Care, a Philadelphia early
14 childhood education program and
15 PreK provider. We are in the
16 northwest area of the city and we
17 are a Star 4 program.

18 We serve infants,
19 toddlers and preschool-aged
20 children, including children with
21 developmental delays and children
22 who sometimes communicate their
23 needs through challenging or
24 reactive behaviors. We have 136

1 children enrolled and that includes
2 70 preschool children. I want to
3 begin by saying something very
4 clearly. We believe children
5 belong at Mecca. We work hard to
6 create an environment where
7 children are not pushed out simply
8 because their behavior is difficult
9 or because they have developmental
10 or behavioral needs that require
11 additional support.

12 We partner with
13 families, we work with specialists
14 we know and look at what the child
15 is communicating through their
16 behavior. We make accommodations.
17 We adjust our environment. We
18 provide additional guidance to
19 teachers and try to understand what
20 is underneath the behavior rather
21 than simply responding to the
22 behavior itself. PHLpreK has
23 invested in the family navigators
24 and early childhood mental health

1 consultants and they have been
2 helpful.

3 We believe that
4 inclusion is not just about
5 allowing a child to remain
6 enrolled. True inclusion means
7 creating the conditions that would
8 allow a child to participate,
9 learn, develop and feel like they
10 belong at Mecca. We have at least
11 20% or more of our children in each
12 of our classrooms with special
13 needs. We're doing it, but we are
14 struggling and that is where I
15 believe we need to have an honest
16 conversation.

17 Inclusion requires
18 resources. As an early childhood
19 provider, safety is always our
20 first concern. We have a
21 responsibility to keep the child
22 who is struggling safe. But we
23 also have a responsibility to keep
24 the other children and the adults

1 in the learning environment safe.
2 And we have another responsibility.
3 Our teachers have to be able to
4 teach.

5 There are times when a
6 child is experiencing significant
7 reactive behaviors and classrooms
8 do not have the appropriate
9 support. A teacher may spend a
10 large portion of the day managing
11 one child's behavior instead of
12 guiding the entire classroom,
13 delivering lessons, supporting
14 children's social-emotional
15 development or maintaining the
16 learning environment. It's not
17 fair to the child who needs the
18 additional support. It's not fair
19 to the other children and it's not
20 fair to the teacher.

21 So when we talk about
22 preschool and suspension/expulsion,
23 I would encourage us not to make
24 this simply a conversation about

1 whether providers should exclude
2 children. We need to ask providers
3 what they need to successfully
4 include them. Families should not
5 have to fight to get services.
6 Teachers should not have to feel
7 like they are failing a child
8 because they don't have the
9 resources to meet that child's
10 need, and providers should not have
11 to choose between maintaining a
12 safe, productive classroom and
13 keeping a child enrolled. We
14 should be able to do both at Mecca.

15 We want to be the kind
16 of program where a child with
17 developmental delays or reactive
18 behaviors can stay, grow and
19 thrive. But inclusion cannot rest
20 solely on the goodwill, creativity
21 and determination of individual
22 providers and teachers. I also
23 want to recognize that families
24 whose children have experienced

1 suspension, expulsion or informal
2 exclusion when a child is told
3 directly or indirectly that they
4 cannot remain in their learning
5 environment, it can be devastating
6 for the child and the family.

7 We have to listen to
8 those experiences and do better.
9 We need a system where the
10 expectation is not simply don't
11 exclude the child. The expectation
12 should be here are the resources,
13 the staffing, the expertise and the
14 support you need to include the
15 child.

16 THE CLERK: Successfully
17 conclude your testimony.

18 MS. RASHID: Thank you.
19 That is the system I believe
20 Philadelphia's children and
21 families deserve. And I want to
22 thank you again for allowing me to
23 share our experience and
24 perspective today.

1 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

2 Thank you. Thank you for your
3 testimony. All right, folks.
4 We're behind as it relates to our
5 schedule, but we want to move on to
6 the next part of our hearing.

7 So, Madam Clerk, just as
8 a refresher, if you can read the
9 resolution title for the next part
10 of our hearing, that will be
11 helpful.

12 THE CLERK: Mr. Chair,
13 that concludes this hearing
14 resolution. We will now change
15 Clerks and have the new Clerk read
16 the second hearing resolution and
17 proceed on this legislative matter.

18 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: All
19 right. Thank you. Second Clerk.

20 THE CLERK: Thank you,
21 Chair Thomas. Resolution 260647
22 states, authorizing the Committee
23 on Education to hold meetings
24 examining the accessibility and

Committee on Education

1 equity of Algebra education
2 curriculum in Philadelphia high
3 schools.

4 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Read
5 it again. Get a little closer to
6 the mic.

7 THE CLERK: Okay.

8 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: There
9 you go.

10 THE CLERK: Resolution
11 260647 states, authorizing the
12 Committee on Education to hold
13 hearings examining the
14 accessibility and equity of Algebra
15 education curriculum in
16 Philadelphia schools, and the
17 impact that has on accessibility to
18 special admission high schools.

19 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: And
20 we can call up the first panel,
21 Mr. Clerk.

22 THE CLERK: Dr. Brenda
23 Elliott.

24 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

Committee on Education

1 Good afternoon. Please state your
2 name and begin your testimony.

3 DR. ELLIOTT: Good
4 afternoon. My name is Brenda
5 Elliott and I serve as the Deputy
6 Superintendent for Academic
7 Services for the School District of
8 Philadelphia. Good afternoon,
9 Chair Thomas, members of the
10 committee and members of the
11 public. My name is Dr. Brenda
12 Elliott and I serve as the Deputy
13 Superintendent of Academics for the
14 School District of Philadelphia,
15 and I'm pleased to present the
16 district's testimony and will
17 assure that any questions regarding
18 additional information are followed
19 up promptly.

20 Superintendent Tony
21 Watlington regrets that he's unable
22 to attend today's hearing. The
23 school district is committed to
24 ensuring that all eligible 8th

1 grade students have access to
2 eligible Algebra 1 by 2027-2028
3 school year.

4 The School District of
5 Philadelphia currently provides two
6 primary pathways for eligible 8th
7 grade students to access Algebra 1,
8 a traditional school-based model
9 and a cross-school learning model.
10 During the 2025-26 school year, the
11 district operated 125 schools
12 serving 8th grade students. In the
13 upcoming 2026-27 school year, that
14 number will increase to 126 with
15 the return of Memphis Street
16 Academy.

17 We continue to make
18 meaningful progress toward our
19 commitment that every eligible 8th
20 grade student will have access to
21 Algebra 1 by the 2027-28 school
22 year. Last year 65 schools,
23 approximately 53% of our 8th grade
24 schools offered Algebra 1. This

1 year that number will increase to
2 75 schools or 60%.

3 By the following school
4 year, we expect to provide access
5 to every district-operating school
6 serving 8th grade students.
7 Currently 42 district schools offer
8 Algebra 1 directly to eligible 8th
9 grade students, and that is an
10 increase from 40 schools last year.
11 As staffing and school schedules
12 continue to be finalized, the
13 number may increase further beyond
14 the school year begins.

15 Students qualify for
16 inschool Algebra 1 based on their
17 6th grade math performance. The
18 district uses a rigorous,
19 compressed curriculum that
20 integrates 8th grade mathematics
21 standards with Algebra 1 standards,
22 ensuring students receive
23 instructions on nearly all 8th
24 grade content while completing the

1 full Algebra 1 curriculum before
2 taking the Keystones Algebra
3 assessment.

4 All participating
5 students take the Keystone Algebra
6 exam, and teachers receive
7 specialized professional
8 development to support
9 implementation. For schools that
10 are not yet able to offer an
11 inperson Algebra course, the
12 district provides access through
13 our cross-school learning model.
14 This hybrid program provides
15 inperson and virtual instruction
16 with the same certified teacher
17 throughout the week.

18 The program has expanded
19 steadily from serving just three
20 schools and School Year '22-23 to
21 25 schools last school year. This
22 year eight additional schools will
23 participate, bringing the total to
24 33 schools. Students are selected

1 based on 8th grade Math PSSA
2 results to ensure they are prepared
3 for accelerated coursework.
4 Supportive services assistance
5 provide additional support during
6 virtual instruction.

7 The program was
8 developed in partnership with the
9 Philadelphia Federation of Teachers
10 and is incorporated in the
11 district's collective bargaining
12 agreement. Most importantly, the
13 cross-school learning model is
14 producing strong academic outcomes
15 on the 2024-25 Keystone Algebra
16 assessment. Nearly 80% of cross-
17 school learning students scored
18 proficient or advanced,
19 significantly outperforming the
20 district-wide average for Algebra
21 students.

22 The school district will
23 have full access to Algebra 1 for
24 all eligible 8th grade students

1 beginning in School Year 27-28.
2 The District Office of Teaching and
3 Learning, the Cross School Learning
4 Team, the Office of Student Life
5 and School Organization, and the
6 Office of Research and
7 Accountability are currently
8 planning for Algebra 1 access at
9 all schools not offering Algebra 1
10 access in preparation for the 2028
11 school year.

12 The district will do the
13 following and that plan is mapped
14 out in detail here: It indicates
15 steps that will take place in fall
16 of 2026 and then in the spring,
17 where we will bring our teaching
18 staff together to ensure that we
19 have enough staff to provide
20 Algebra 1 courses and access for
21 all eligible students. And then in
22 the summer, finalizing that plan
23 and then implementing it in the
24 fall of 2027.

1 Questions have also been
2 raised regarding admission
3 requirements at the district's
4 criteria-based schools. The school
5 district currently operates 22
6 criteria-based schools and only
7 Julia R. Masterman school requires
8 Algebra 1 for admission to the 9th
9 grade, and that requirement has
10 been in place for at least a
11 decade.

12 Importantly, 21 of the
13 district's 22 tier-based schools,
14 including nationally recognized
15 schools such as Central High School
16 and the Academy at Palumbo, do not
17 require Algebra 1 for admission.
18 For context, the Charter School
19 Office reports that 23 of the
20 district's 68 charter schools
21 serving 8th grade students offer
22 Algebra 1 during the most recent
23 school year. Because each charter
24 school operates as an independent

1 local education agency, LEA,
2 curriculum and course offerings are
3 determined by each individual
4 charter school rather than by the
5 school district.

6 The school district
7 remains committed to expanding
8 equitable access to rigorous
9 mathematics instruction. We have
10 made significant progress
11 increasing the number of schools
12 offering Algebra 1 while continuing
13 to scale successful models such as
14 cross-school learning.

15 The careful planning
16 over the coming year, we are
17 confident we will meet our
18 commitment to ensuring every
19 eligible 8th grade student has
20 access to Algebra 1 for the 2027-28
21 school year. Thank you for the
22 opportunity to testify today and
23 I'm happy to take the committee's
24 questions and ensure that any

1 questions requiring additional
2 information are followed up on
3 promptly.

4 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

5 Thank you for your testimony. I
6 have a question. You just piqued
7 my interest when you said that the
8 cross-school learning model
9 actually did better than the
10 district-wide Algebra students.
11 Could you explain or at least
12 intimate why that is? And then why
13 is that something we should have
14 everywhere?

15 DR. ELLIOTT: Well, one
16 reason we think it is, is smaller
17 class sizes. So the way that
18 program is structured over the 25
19 schools that have access to it is
20 that each teacher is assigned to
21 five schools, but that teacher has
22 a total class size. If you think
23 that there's 250 kids over 25
24 schools with 5, they each have

1 about 50 students.

2 So one of the reasons we
3 believe we are pushing faster
4 outcomes is that there is only 50
5 students per teacher that they are
6 managing across their entire course
7 enrollment. So there is
8 opportunities for more
9 individualized instruction and
10 support.

11 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: I
12 have to tell you, your
13 Superintendent told us that smaller
14 class sizes did not demonstrate
15 better achievement, which I
16 strenuously disagreed with him.
17 And your own data is telling me
18 that this kind of individualized
19 attention due to small class size
20 actually works.

21 So make sure you share
22 this with him because it's contrary
23 to what he told us about scaling
24 our schools down, right. So that's

1 number one.

2 Number two is, it seems
3 to have some discrepancy in numbers
4 of -- addition to the table you
5 provided indicated that in the
6 School Year 2026 to 2027 will be
7 operating a total of 75 schools
8 offering Algebra. Let me see your
9 data actually. 75 schools, yeah.
10 And we have seen other data
11 indicating only 46 schools offer
12 Algebra. So is that because you're
13 rolling in the cross learning in
14 the 75 number?

15 DR. ELLIOTT: Yes. That
16 includes the 33 schools where we
17 offer the cross learning.

18 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
19 Going back to my original question,
20 the small class size improved the
21 outcome for the cross learning.
22 How is the cross learning different
23 from the classroom Algebra in terms
24 of the content? Just briefly. You

1 don't have to go into detail.

2 DR. ELLIOTT: The
3 content isn't different. It's
4 still the Algebra 1 content. What
5 is different is that in cross-
6 school learning, we offer two
7 models. One is a full virtual
8 instruction. So the teacher is
9 serving five schools. Those
10 students are learning virtually
11 from that teacher with special
12 assistance in the classroom while
13 those students are learning. So
14 for instance, we have some schools
15 that only have five students who
16 are eligible based on their 6th
17 grade PSSA. And so, they are in a
18 classroom with students and the
19 other five schools learning
20 virtually. But the content is the
21 same. The second model is a hybrid
22 model where the teacher over a
23 10-day period is in person at the
24 school five days and then virtual

1 for five days.

2 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: Do
3 you see a difference between the
4 two?

5 DR. ELLIOTT: We have
6 not seen a significant difference
7 between those two models. And one
8 other thing I may say that we're
9 hearing anecdotally that is
10 contributing to the higher outcomes
11 is that for the cross-school model,
12 you know, it's really selective.
13 So students who are performing
14 advanced or proficient on the 6th
15 grade essay and in other schools,
16 they open up the pool for more
17 students to attend so that they
18 have a higher --

19 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
20 Yeah, so that's part of being more
21 selective in who you have in the
22 cross-school model versus the
23 Algebra 1 in the classroom. The
24 reason I ask this is because by

1 2028, you want everybody to be
2 offering Algebra. Is there going
3 to be Algebra in the Algebra 1
4 model or the cross learning, which
5 clearly seems to be more
6 beneficial?

7 DR. ELLIOTT: Sure.

8 It'll be a combination of the two.
9 Currently, when we look at our data
10 for the remaining 84 schools that
11 don't have an inperson Algebra 1
12 teacher, there are only two schools
13 that have more than 15 students
14 that are eligible, right. So we
15 anticipate those schools that have
16 a higher number of students
17 considering this being a section
18 that a math teacher teaches at
19 their school, but we have many
20 schools that have four or less
21 students that are eligible based on
22 their 8th grade, their 6th grade
23 PSSA. And so, those schools, it
24 makes more sense for them to use

1 cross-school learning where we're
2 combining students from several
3 schools to make a class.

4 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: One
5 last question before I go to my
6 colleagues. In terms of the
7 equitable distribution of who
8 actually qualifies, you're using
9 scissors to say who could take
10 Algebra. That will still continue
11 to be the same case when you go to
12 all schools offering Algebra,
13 correct?

14 DR. ELLIOTT: Yes,
15 ma'am.

16 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: So
17 the question becomes who actually
18 is eligible to get -- who
19 qualifies. Meaning, how do we
20 improve that outcome. Because it
21 seems in 2021-2022 school year,
22 only 24% of Black students and 33%
23 of Hispanic students attended
24 schools with Algebra compared to

1 the 71% White students. So this is
2 even before being qualified to take
3 Algebra. Why was there a
4 discrepancy in how Algebra was
5 offered?

6 DR. ELLIOTT: I am not
7 sure. I can get that information
8 and come back to you, yes.

9 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
10 Because if you're really looking
11 for equity, we have to know the
12 reason why from the get-go 71% of
13 the schools had more access. And
14 then came the layer of who actually
15 qualified with the PSSA scores,
16 which is a whole other issue of how
17 do we make more children get a
18 sufficient PSSA score, which is,
19 you know, a whole ball of wax we
20 have to address. Because if we
21 don't do it, then we're really,
22 truly not letting our children have
23 a quality education at these
24 schools, special admit schools,

1 which changes their trajectory in
2 life, right.

3 So I mean, I think every
4 school should have that across the
5 board. But I understand there's a
6 lot of nuance in that space. So it
7 is really important to know why
8 that allocation was so disparate
9 between the demographic description
10 of these schools. And then we can
11 go to understand, was that a policy
12 decision, was that based on some
13 metric that we don't know because
14 on the surface it looks racially
15 biased. That's just how it looks
16 to us.

17 DR. ELLIOTT: Okay.
18 Happy to do some research and get
19 back to you on it. I will say the
20 way that we have expanded cross-
21 school learning has been schools
22 that have had the greatest need,
23 students that are ready for the
24 Algebra 1, those are the ones that

1 we first provided the intervention.
2 And so, we only have, like I said,
3 two schools now that have more than
4 15 schools -- I mean, students that
5 qualify. The vast majority of
6 those schools in fact, 49 of the
7 schools of the 51 that we have,
8 have four or less students.

9 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: We
10 need to increase that number. We
11 would want those children --

12 DR. ELLIOTT: Yes,
13 absolutely.

14 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:
15 Basically, we should be giving
16 algebra to everybody because
17 everybody qualifies.

18 DR. ELLIOTT: In 27-28,
19 we'll be able to expand to every
20 school that serves 8th graders.

21 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD: But
22 it will still be based on the PSSA
23 qualification in every -- even
24 though you're offering it in every

1 school, there's a test score that
2 will allow them to actually take
3 that class. So my global point I
4 want to make is we need to not --
5 we need all children to be eligible
6 to take PSSA. I know that's a
7 separate thing. It's about
8 children being ready and scoring
9 well enough on the PSSA. We need
10 them all to be scoring well. So
11 thank you for your testimony. Our
12 Chair is back. Okay.

13 Thank you, Chair.

14 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

15 Thank you.

16 Chair recognizes

17 Councilmember Brooks.

18 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

19 Thank you so much for your
20 testimony. I have a few. I'm
21 going to start off with the PSSA
22 thing. So absent PSSA, you're not
23 eligible for Algebra?

24 DR. ELLIOTT: Yes.

1 Typically the 8th grade students
2 are taking 8th grade math. But we
3 offer Algebra 1 as an advanced
4 course in the 8th grade. So
5 instead of taking regular 8th grade
6 math, they go directly into Algebra
7 1, which is typically offered in
8 the high schools.

9 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

10 Well, suppose parents that opt out
11 of PSSA testing, does that
12 eliminate their children's ability
13 to be able to go into Algebra 1?
14 Because PSSA is not the only
15 determinant of a child's
16 eligibility for anything.

17 DR. ELLIOTT: Correct,
18 that is our predetermination that
19 we use for access to Algebra 1.
20 But I can do some research and get
21 back to you to see if there's
22 another way we determine a
23 student's eligibility, particularly
24 if a student is coming to us and

1 does not have a PSSA score for 6th
2 grade, like maybe they've come from
3 another state. I can research and
4 get back with you how we respond to
5 that.

6 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:

7 And then to that question, my next
8 question is what would it take to
9 scale up Algebra 1 access citywide
10 and what supports exist for 5th and
11 6th graders to prepare students for
12 Algebra 1? And are they equitably
13 available? So this is back to the
14 absence of PSSA. Okay, you don't
15 do well. People don't test well.
16 For whatever reason, you don't do
17 well. What else is in play for
18 students in 5th and 6th grade to be
19 prepared for the testing to even
20 possibly get them into Algebra 1 to
21 prepare for college, especially
22 with traditional neighborhood high
23 schools -- I mean K to 8 into high
24 school?

1 DR. ELLIOTT: Sure. I
2 want to make sure I'm answering the
3 question that you're asking. So we
4 are working really hard to increase
5 the rigor of our math curriculum
6 and instruction beginning 3rd grade
7 on up. So two years ago, we
8 started with the implementation of
9 green-rated curriculum, a
10 standards-based curriculum. We
11 have provided additional
12 professional development and
13 support.

14 We have launched an
15 Algebra 1 fellowship with the
16 University of Pennsylvania, really
17 focused on building math
18 proficiency skills for our
19 teachers. Part of that includes
20 dedicated professional development
21 in the summer. It also includes
22 professional development once a
23 month during the school year in
24 coaching.

1 So one of the things is
2 really building up our teachers
3 proficiency. In K -- as you can
4 imagine, in 3rd grade through 6th
5 grade, folks aren't just certified
6 in math, they have a general
7 certification. And so, we are
8 doing additional professional
9 development to really build up the
10 skills of our educators so that
11 they are able to really support our
12 students in becoming very skilled
13 in mathematics at the earlier
14 grade, so for your first question
15 about what are we doing in addition
16 to support students.

17 Another lever that we
18 are offering for students that are
19 scoring early in math in basic or
20 below basic is to provide high-
21 impact tutoring in the classroom,
22 so in their classroom additional
23 tutoring to fill those gaps so they
24 start to get into the proficiency

1 range hopefully in the next grade
2 level or definitely within the next
3 two grade levels. So trying to use
4 levers on both ends, building
5 teacher proficiencies, but also
6 supporting students in building
7 their gaps.

8 Again, typically many
9 states offer Algebra 1. That's the
10 9th grade math. We only have one
11 criteria-based school that requires
12 it for admission. But we want
13 young people who are ready for
14 advanced courses to have that
15 access. And so, cross-school
16 learning is one of the mechanisms
17 that we're using to do that.

18 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS:
19 Can you explain a little bit in
20 detail what's this cross-school
21 learning model? Is it an online
22 version? I'm trying to figure out
23 exactly what that is for.

24 DR. ELLIOTT: Yeah. So

1 we have actually dedicated teachers
2 that they teach either -- we have a
3 virtual model and then we have a
4 hybrid model. So each of those
5 teachers have five schools that
6 they are assigned, currently, five
7 schools that they are assigned to
8 that they provide instruction to.
9 Some of the schools, again we have
10 schools that may have only two,
11 three, four students that are
12 eligible and enrolled in the
13 Algebra 1.

14 In those cases, many of
15 those students are accessing that
16 instruction in the virtual model.
17 And again, we're seeing above-
18 average performance for our
19 students, whether it's the virtual
20 model or the hybrid. For students
21 that are accessing cross-school
22 learning in the hybrid model, they
23 see the teacher in person over a
24 two-week period, five days. So the

1 first week some schools see them
2 Monday, Wednesday, Friday. The
3 next week they would see them
4 Tuesday, Thursday and then they
5 have a separate rotation of
6 schools. And so, the teachers are
7 seeing the student part-time in
8 person and then part-time
9 virtually. So that is the model
10 that we've used to be able to
11 expand. That's allowed us to
12 provide Algebra 1 access to 25
13 schools only using five teachers,
14 so 25 schools across the district
15 for five teachers.

16 We are adding one
17 teacher to cross-school learning.
18 And that's allowing us to go up to
19 serve 33 schools. And so, we're
20 mapping that out. So next year
21 either by inperson teachers or
22 cross-school learning, we're able
23 to serve the remaining schools that
24 don't have inperson teachers.

1 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS: So
2 is there a plan to scale that up
3 with the closure of middle schools
4 and schools combining for the K to
5 8 model? Would that increase the
6 number of educators that are
7 available for such program if other
8 children are prepared to enter
9 this? Because some of the middle
10 schools are closing, going into a
11 larger sum --

12 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Not
13 some. We've been told that the
14 school district wants to fade out
15 the middle school model. So I
16 think what the Councilmember is
17 asking is if we're deviating away
18 from the middle school model in
19 general and we're going more K
20 through 8 and 6 through 12, will we
21 see an improvement?

22 DR. ELLIOTT: So I don't
23 have the information to respond to
24 that question, but happy to take

1 that as a homework assignment.

2 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

3 Before I -- did you want to finish?

4 COUNCILWOMAN BROOKS: No,
5 that's it.

6 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: So
7 let me just provide some context.
8 Dr. Watlington always attends these
9 hearings. He reached out to me
10 early to say that he was
11 unavailable to attend. When
12 Dr. Watlington isn't available,
13 it's normally Deputy Superintendent
14 Colonel Hill who comes. And if you
15 don't know, Colonel Hill lost his
16 father. And so, it's pretty much
17 out there. I just wanted to make
18 sure that folks understood and
19 we've offered condolences to him.

20 And so, we do want to
21 thank you for being here. We
22 understand that your position and
23 your role is very important in the
24 district. And we know that there

1 will be things that you kind of
2 have to take back for a homework
3 assignment and we're not going to
4 charge that to your head or your
5 heart for today's conversation. So
6 I apologize.

7 I had to step out for a
8 second, so I was unable to provide
9 that context prior to the start of
10 your hearing. But know that there
11 may be other assignments. And I
12 see Laurel back there as well too.
13 Laurel, thank you for your work as
14 well. There may be other homework
15 assignments that we ask you to take
16 based on other questions that we
17 may ask as well as things that may
18 come from other panel experts.

19 And so, if I could just
20 provide another point of clarity.
21 So my son is in 8th grade right
22 now. Both of my sons are really
23 mathematically gifted, right. My
24 8th grade son has never gotten

1 anything below a 95 in math from
2 kindergarten all the way through.

3 My father's a math
4 teacher. I was always good in
5 numbers. I remember being in like
6 the 24 citywide competition as a
7 kid. And the craziest thing is
8 that my 6-year-old, 5-year-old who
9 will be 6, who's going into PreK,
10 which was relevant to the last
11 hearing, he's actually better than
12 all of us, right. That kid can do
13 double-digit multiplication in his
14 mind right now at 5, so he's super
15 special.

16 With that being said, as
17 gifted as my sons are and as
18 influential as their father is as
19 it relates to public education in
20 the City of Philadelphia, we were
21 not eligible for my son to go to
22 Masterman. And he wasn't eligible
23 to go to Masterman because I never
24 knew that there were requirements

1 to get into special admission
2 schools as it relates to courses.

3 Now, of course we knew
4 there was an attendance
5 requirement. Of course, you have
6 to have a certain GPA and do a
7 certain amount of community
8 service, but this practice is
9 discriminatory. And so, what I
10 would ask, and I know you can't
11 make this decision right now, but
12 what we've been advocating for as
13 it relates to City Council is
14 anything that's in a special
15 admissions policy that everyone
16 can't have access to, let's just
17 take it out until everyone gets
18 access to it, right.

19 Because if you look at
20 where we are right now, the data
21 would suggest that the people who
22 have limited access to Algebra 1 in
23 middle school are Black and Brown
24 children. And so, when we look at

1 what we did a couple years ago as
2 it relates to changing the criteria
3 for special admission schools, the
4 target of that conversation was
5 Masterman. I remember it vividly.

6 And at the time, the
7 Superintendent was Dr. Hite. And
8 his biggest thing was we needed to
9 make Masterman more inclusive.
10 Well, since we've changed the
11 criteria as it relates to special
12 admissions schools, Masterman has
13 not gotten more inclusive, right.
14 So what appetite does the district
15 have to revisit the special
16 admission criteria and have a
17 criteria that gives all children
18 access to all special admission
19 schools. No child should not be
20 able to apply to a special
21 admission school because of a
22 course that their current school
23 didn't offer, right. And that's
24 one part.

1 Let me tell you the
2 other part I hate. I hate with a
3 passion the process, right. So
4 when my son goes to apply for a
5 high school, he can only pick five
6 schools. Now, we never wanted him
7 to go to Masterman, but I was
8 curious to see if he would get in
9 or not. Now, once we pick
10 Masterman and he was ineligible for
11 Masterman, now I'm down to four
12 schools.

13 And here's the worst
14 part about it. You have to rank
15 the schools. So if I say my number
16 one school for my son was
17 Masterman -- and you know that's
18 off the list because he didn't take
19 Algebra in 8th grade -- my number
20 two school for him is Central. All
21 right. So I would have to reject
22 Central's offer to find out if my
23 child got into the other three
24 schools. And if I picked schools

1 that my child was never eligible to
2 get accepted in, I just lost out
3 because the school district only
4 limits me to five.

5 I think the worst thing
6 about the special admission
7 criteria outside of these
8 prerequisites that some children
9 don't get access to is the fact
10 that you only get to pick five
11 schools. And so, I know you can't
12 answer this right now, but I'm
13 hoping that the school district has
14 an appetite to revisit the special
15 admission criteria. First and
16 foremost, to be able to say that if
17 my school doesn't offer a course,
18 it should not prevent me from
19 applying to another school. That's
20 the first thing because it's not my
21 fault.

22 But the second thing, we
23 have to move away from this idea of
24 people only applying to five

1 schools. It is killing the smaller
2 special admission schools, the
3 Lankenaus, the Paul Robesons, the
4 Parkway Northwests. It's killing
5 them. I would bet if you did a
6 survey or if you go back and look,
7 because everybody could only pick
8 five, I would bet that the five
9 schools that people pick, I'll bet
10 that they are overwhelmingly the
11 same five schools, Central,
12 Masterman, Girls' High, Engineering
13 and Science. I don't know. What
14 y'all think the fifth is, I don't
15 know. But these are the ones
16 that --

17 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER:

18 SLA.

19 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

20 Maybe SLA, that's a good one.
21 That's the one we pick. Those are
22 the ones that are the ones you hear
23 about and see the most. But it
24 doesn't necessarily mean that the

1 Parkway Northwests, the Lankenau
2 and some of our other special
3 admissions schools, Bodine, that
4 they're not doing their job.

5 And so, I think for us
6 part of the reason why we wanted to
7 have this conversation is because
8 we're concerned about Algebra and
9 access to Algebra, because it puts
10 you on a trajectory to be extremely
11 successful academically. But then
12 the other side of the conversation
13 is that we create these barriers
14 that discriminate against young
15 people who deserve to be in these
16 special admission schools, but will
17 never be able to walk foot in
18 because of practices that we set
19 up. And we set them up in the name
20 of trying to get them in the
21 schools. And the same people we
22 try to get in the schools are the
23 ones that's locked out.

24 So I know you can't give

1 me a direct answer, but I do want
2 to at least allow you the
3 opportunity to respond to that.

4 DR. ELLIOTT: Yes, I
5 definitely will need to do some
6 research to get you a very clear
7 response to that. I think you
8 brought up some really good points.
9 And whenever we move to a best
10 single offer, the goal was to
11 create a system in which students
12 got into the school that they had
13 the strongest desire to get into,
14 but no system is perfect.

15 And so, sometimes it
16 does not result in those outcomes.
17 And we're certainly willing to
18 review the system and to provide
19 some data around what those
20 outcomes look like and continue the
21 conversation.

22 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: I
23 think when you listen to that
24 focus, I think the problem is, is

1 people don't know what school they
2 want to go to, right. So if that
3 works, if you know what school you
4 want to go to, if my niece who is
5 an amazing performer, she belongs
6 on someone's stage every day, all
7 day. She may be in what, 6th
8 grade. We know we want her to go
9 to KAPPA. We're 100% sure, right.

10 So when you talk about a
11 situation like hers, that objective
12 makes sense. But when you talk
13 about somebody like my son, right,
14 that objective doesn't make sense
15 because it's August and we're still
16 on the fence and don't know what to
17 do. And when you have these type
18 of situations, the more options,
19 the better. And what our system
20 does is it limits the options for
21 parents and children and in turn,
22 the people who are suffering the
23 most are the ones who go to those
24 special admission schools that's

1 not the top-branded ones, because
2 now we're trying to close them and
3 that doesn't make any sense.

4 With that being said,
5 Mr. Clerk, can you please call the
6 next panel. Thank you so much for
7 being here. Thank you for your
8 representation for the school
9 district. I know you will continue
10 today's robust conversation and
11 hope that some of the things that
12 the other panelists say get taken
13 back to the district as we continue
14 to deliberate, to provide the best
15 service to our children. So thank
16 you all.

17 Next panel.

18 THE CLERK: Next up is
19 Diana.

20 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: We
21 can't hear you, Mr. Clerk. You got
22 to speak into the mic.

23 THE CLERK: There we go.
24 Diana Lievano and Symbol Lai.

Committee on Education

1 (Witnesses approached
2 witness table.)

3 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
4 Please state your name for the
5 record and you may begin with your
6 testimony.

7 MS. LIEVANO: Good
8 morning, Chair Thomas.

9 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Good
10 morning -- good afternoon.

11 MS. LIEVANO: Good
12 afternoon, yes.

13 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: It's
14 been a long day.

15 MS. LIEVANO: Thank you.
16 Good afternoon, Chair Thomas and
17 members of the Education Committee.
18 Thank you for the opportunity to
19 testify today. My name is Diana
20 Lievano. I am the Executive
21 Director of the Philadelphia STEM
22 Equity Collective or PSEC. And
23 today I'm presenting the
24 Collective's statement on Algebra

1 access in Philadelphia public
2 schools as a gateway to STEM
3 opportunity and economic mobility
4 piece that comes to this
5 conversation as a partner and with
6 a deep sense of possibility for the
7 Greater Philadelphia region.

8 Our efforts at PSEC did
9 not start with Algebra. They began
10 exploring a broader question about
11 what prevents too many
12 Philadelphians from accessing
13 educational and workforce pathways
14 that lead them to high opportunity
15 STEM careers and economic mobility.
16 Through conversations with cross-
17 system stakeholders, we found that
18 access to Algebra continuously
19 emerged as a critical inflection
20 point. They identified Algebra as
21 a foundational gateway to advanced
22 math, college readiness and future
23 career opportunities.

24 Missing that gateway

1 does not automatically close a
2 student's future opportunities, but
3 it makes the path harder to
4 navigate. A student may hope to
5 attend a particular high school,
6 like your son, or take an AP course
7 sequence or pursue a STEM major,
8 only to learn that a critical
9 milestone could be reached years
10 earlier. By that point, the issue
11 is no longer awareness. It's lost
12 time, and that makes this an equity
13 issue.

14 While Algebra is still
15 at a national flashpoint,
16 Philadelphia has made progress and
17 has been trialing solutions to this
18 barrier. We just heard from the
19 school district. I particularly
20 want to share the story of three
21 students at Nebinger Elementary.
22 The story was published in 2023 in
23 The Philadelphia Inquirer.

24 Nebinger is a K through

1 8 school in South Philadelphia that
2 at the time did not offer Algebra
3 in the 8th grade. Three students
4 Rahim Gardner, Jordan Simmons and
5 Kristen White understood what that
6 meant for their high school
7 opportunities and future careers.
8 So they brought the issue directly
9 to the Board of Education with a
10 clear message: Students should not
11 have different futures available to
12 them simply because they attend
13 different schools.

14 Their advocacy seemingly
15 had good impact and poised the
16 district to expand their Algebra 1
17 access through a shared resource
18 pilot we just heard so much about.
19 This shows that unequal access is
20 real, but is not inevitable. For
21 PSEC, that is the lesson worth
22 amplifying. Algebra can be a lever
23 by which we can change the
24 narrative from inequity to

1 collective action, students,
2 families, educators, community
3 partners and institutions working
4 together to expand opportunity.

5 We also want to
6 recognize that the School District
7 of Philadelphia has made important
8 investments, including new math
9 curriculum, expanded tutoring
10 efforts, accelerated tracks in the
11 6th and 7th grades and work to
12 strengthen educator capacity. We
13 also heard about that in the prior
14 testimony. And in 2026, reports
15 indicate that students math scores
16 have reached their highest level in
17 nearly a decade, while also
18 acknowledging that work is still
19 required to meet the math
20 proficiency goal.

21 These efforts are not
22 only valuable. They can really
23 help Philadelphia move from problem
24 identification to sustained

1 progress, because this work is
2 complex. Expanding access to
3 Algebra 1 cannot simply mean adding
4 more seats, more students to a
5 course without preparation and
6 support.

7 Research on large scale
8 8th grade Algebra expansion has
9 shown that increasing enrollment
10 without sufficient readiness and
11 instructional support can
12 perpetuate or even deepen uneven
13 outcomes. So the goal must be
14 access, yes, but also awareness,
15 preparation and success. That is
16 where the broader ecosystem has an
17 important role to play. And we
18 have identified three opportunities
19 that help build on the ongoing
20 efforts.

21 Firstly, we can support
22 efforts to strengthen educator
23 capacity and self-efficacy.
24 Increasing Algebra 1 access and

1 success depends on educators who
2 are prepared and supported to
3 teach. This includes Algebra 1
4 teachers, but also includes
5 educators in earlier grades,
6 Councilmember Ahmad to your point,
7 that help build students'
8 foundational skills to ensure they
9 succeed in later grades.

10 PSEC can of course serve
11 as a convener and connector,
12 helping educators connect
13 mathematics to STEM careers and
14 supporting educators' community of
15 practice regionally. Second, we
16 can help shift the culture and
17 messaging around mathematics. Too
18 many students internalize the
19 message that some people are math
20 people and some others are not. We
21 do not accept that.

22 Numeracy is not a gift
23 reserved for a select few. It is a
24 foundational capability that can be

1 developed, strengthened and
2 supported. Students and families
3 need clear, accessible information
4 about why strong math preparation
5 matters, but they also need to see
6 this communicated through people
7 that look like them. PSEC can
8 support math awareness and identity
9 campaigns.

10 Third, we can help
11 expand meaningful math
12 opportunities beyond the
13 traditional classroom, and that
14 includes all experiences outside
15 the classroom and in the community
16 that helps students build
17 confidence and skill before they
18 reach a placement decision.

19 Philadelphia's future
20 competitiveness depends on
21 developing talent capable of
22 succeeding in an increasingly STEM-
23 oriented economy. Not every
24 student has to choose a STEM

1 career, but the skills associated
2 with algebraic thinking, including
3 quantitative reasoning,
4 problemsolving and analytical
5 thinking are increasingly valuable
6 across all professions and
7 industries. That's why we welcome
8 this hearing and the leadership of
9 this committee.

10 We see this moment as an
11 opportunity to build a broader
12 coalition around math access, STEM
13 opportunity and economic mobility.
14 Philadelphia students have talent.
15 They have ambition. What they need
16 is information preparation and
17 support to open doors. PSEC stands
18 ready to work with this committee
19 and the school district and
20 partners across the city to make
21 that possible. Thank you.

22 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
23 Thank you for your testimony. You
24 listened to some of my remarks

1 earlier as it relates to the
2 district and my concerns around not
3 just Algebra access. You also
4 listened to some of Dr. Ahmad's
5 concerns around Algebra access.
6 Based on some of the things that
7 we've communicated in our concerns,
8 talk to us about your thoughts on
9 some of the questions that we've
10 asked, the response that we got
11 from the district and the direction
12 that the city should be going in?

13 MS. LAI: Can you repeat
14 the question?

15 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: So
16 when I asked the district about
17 what -- my concern was around 8th
18 grade Algebra, it was twofold. It
19 was the academic side as it
20 specifically relates to young
21 people getting on the trajectory to
22 receive a quality education.
23 That's one side. But then the
24 other side is, that it's a big

1 pillar as it relates to the
2 criteria to get admitted into
3 certain special admission schools.

4 And so, what I asked for
5 was, number one -- and maybe it was
6 Councilmember Brooks or
7 Dr. Ahmad -- one of them talked
8 about the fact that we're closing
9 schools and moving away from the
10 middle school model. And so, since
11 we're moving away from the middle
12 school model, the question is will
13 we have more access to Algebra for
14 young people or less?

15 Then the other side of
16 it, outside of the academic
17 concerns was special admission
18 schools. And so, the push on my
19 end was for us to get rid of any
20 requirement for special admission
21 schools that all students don't
22 have an opportunity to have access
23 to complete. So we'd love to hear
24 your thoughts on those issues as

1 well as other things that was
2 discussed by the administration --
3 I mean by the school district.

4 MS. LIEVANO: Yeah. I
5 think just to double-down on the
6 point I was trying to make, access
7 needs to be matched with support.
8 So I think the problem of access to
9 Algebra and I think the intentions
10 of the school district to ensure
11 that all 8th graders have access to
12 some form of Algebra is something
13 we should be impressed, be proud
14 of. But it needs to also come
15 alongside a lot of support,
16 building the structures for
17 students, but also helping
18 educators be prepared.

19 One of the biggest
20 surprises out of the conversations
21 we had was to really correlate a
22 teacher's self-efficacy with
23 student outcomes. We thought
24 fixing the pathway for students

1 meant focusing on students. But we
2 heard from professionals and
3 experts and SMEs in this matter,
4 that if a teacher does not identify
5 as a math person themselves, they
6 can hardly have an impact and pass
7 this message along to their
8 students. So supporting educators
9 is a big piece of the component.

10 Now, as it pertains to
11 the enrollment for Masterman, I
12 think, Council Chair, your request
13 makes sense to me. If Algebra is
14 not available for everybody, it
15 should not be a requirement. I'll
16 pass it over to you.

17 MS. LAI: Hi. My name
18 is Symbol Lai with Children First.
19 I think to echo Diana, your point
20 if there is a support that's
21 removed, that work has to go some
22 place, right. And so, it's really
23 important that if we're trying to
24 get everyone, all the students

1 access to Algebra and to increase
2 math access throughout the city,
3 that if the school district is
4 making any sort of big changes,
5 that they examine the supports,
6 they fill the gaps and make sure
7 that it's a seamless transition.

8 And in terms of the
9 special enrollment, I think there
10 should be consideration in terms
11 of -- until there is full access
12 across the city around Algebra,
13 something has to be done to make
14 sure that students are not falling
15 behind because or not lack, you
16 know, losing out on more
17 opportunities because the pipeline
18 hasn't been built yet.

19 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

20 Chair recognizes Dr. Ahmad.

21 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

22 Thank you, Chair.

23 A quick question and I
24 don't know if either of you can

1 answer best practices in other
2 counties in Pennsylvania with
3 respect to Algebra. Is this the
4 same method everywhere else or is
5 this specific to Philadelphia
6 school district?

7 MS. LIEVANO:

8 Surrounding counties do not have
9 admission high schools as far as --

10 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

11 Closer.

12 MS. LIEVANO: The
13 admissions high schools issue is
14 particular to Philadelphia. But
15 surrounding counties have similar
16 issues delivering or ensuring
17 access to Algebra to all 8th
18 graders. So I think you'll see
19 regionally there is a mixture of
20 Algebra being available in the 7th,
21 8th and 9th grade.

22 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

23 Yeah. I just asked that because if
24 you're looking for solutions, maybe

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1 somebody figured this out somewhere
2 else within Pennsylvania. And the
3 state can actually make some
4 changes in all the counties with
5 respect to this.

6 Thank you, Chairman.

7 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: I'm
8 sorry if I got (inaudible).
9 Thanks, Doc. I appreciate you.

10 Please state your name
11 for the record and begin your
12 testimony.

13 MS. LAI: My name is
14 Symbol Lai. I'm with Children
15 First. Thank you for convening the
16 Committee on Education over the
17 summer. So I understand that this
18 hearing was called as a result of
19 students being denied access to the
20 city's top schools because they
21 lacked the requisite Algebra
22 coursework. While this is one
23 consequence, I want to encourage
24 Councilmembers to think a little

1 bit more broadly about this issue.

2 In a city where
3 medicine, pharmaceuticals, tech and
4 even our trades dominate, the fact
5 that not all students are able to
6 take Algebra in their school,
7 hinders their ability to connect to
8 good jobs, stable careers and
9 opportunities in their own local
10 economy. Expanding Algebra access
11 is an equitable education issue.
12 It's a workforce development issue.
13 It's also an equitable economic
14 development issue.

15 So I want to direct
16 Councilmembers to Children First's
17 brief to highlight two points that
18 we found in our early research
19 around Algebra access. So the
20 first is Algebra access is a
21 citywide problem. So you'll see
22 from our research that only 46 of
23 the 180 schools, district and
24 charter, offer Algebra in the 7th

1 and 8th grade, and only a third of
2 7th and 8th graders are enrolled.
3 That by itself speaks to the
4 citywide gap in Algebra access.

5 So you might have kids
6 that are interested in Algebra but
7 can't take the course because their
8 school doesn't offer it or students
9 who might be interested but don't
10 think they're qualified, they're
11 self-selecting out of this
12 opportunity. When we look at the
13 data, we see that the lack of
14 citywide access impacted about 400
15 8th graders whose PSSA scores
16 proved that they could have
17 succeeded in Algebra but didn't
18 have the opportunity because the
19 school simply didn't offer the
20 course. And then we found another
21 1100 students who scored basic on
22 the PSSAs, but can be ready with
23 adequate support. So these are
24 students that with a little push

1 they are, you know, this is part of
2 the pipeline, right. They can
3 succeed in Algebra if we had
4 adequate resources for them to
5 access. So the point here that I
6 want to make is that the lack of
7 Algebra access affects all Philly
8 students.

9 A second point I want to
10 make is that the lack of citywide
11 access to Algebra
12 disproportionately affects
13 low-income Black and Brown
14 students. We found that among 7th
15 and 8th graders, Black and Latino
16 students are less likely to have
17 access to Algebra, and only a third
18 of students from low-income
19 families attend a school that
20 offers Algebra 1.

21 So if you're more a
22 visual person like myself, there is
23 a map that we were able to make on
24 the first page of the brief. So

1 you can see geographically what
2 Algebra access looks like across
3 Philadelphia. You'll see large
4 gaps across Southwest Philly, West
5 Philly, North Philly, Olney, Logan
6 I believe, and the Lower Northeast.

7 So, City Councilmembers,
8 I think you know this map well
9 because this is the same map that
10 shows deep poverty in Philadelphia,
11 lack of access for other basic
12 needs, affordable housing across
13 Philadelphia. And so, the point I
14 want to make here is that this is a
15 matter of inequity across the city.
16 And if invested properly, this can
17 be a way to break cycles of
18 generational poverty.

19 So on the second page of
20 the brief, I want to point to some
21 possible solutions that we can look
22 towards as we're digging deeper
23 into what to do about this problem.
24 The main point that I want to make

1 is that this is a fixable problem.
2 And some of these policies that
3 we've recommended are, one, working
4 with the School District of
5 Philadelphia to pass policies that
6 ensure all students access to
7 Algebra 1 by 8th grade.

8 Today's testimony by the
9 district says that they're working
10 towards that for next year. And I
11 encourage Council to work closely
12 with the district to make sure that
13 they meet that goal. The second
14 recommendation we have is to work
15 with the school district to
16 implement a universal screening for
17 Algebra access. This is because
18 some students might self-select
19 out, right. They might lack
20 confidence, you know, in doing
21 math. They might not think they're
22 a math person. And so, they might
23 not go towards that path and stuff.
24 And so, something like a

1 screening tool can kind of take
2 subjective measures out of it. It
3 could also, you know, you never
4 know what's happening in a
5 student's life in a school, right.
6 They might just -- they might not
7 thrive in the environment or what
8 have you and stuff. And so, having
9 a screening measure that
10 automatically enrolls or identifies
11 students that are ready for Algebra
12 1 can make sure that all students
13 have access to this opportunity.

14 The third recommendation
15 we have is working with the city
16 and the district to expand supports
17 in and out of math classrooms so
18 that 8th graders can be more ready
19 for Algebra. And this includes
20 things like tutoring and Algebra-
21 focused OST programs. And I
22 believe I have one more -- no,
23 those are the three.

24 So, Councilmember

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1 Thomas, members of the Education
2 Committee, thank you for convening
3 this hearing and for your attention
4 on the lack of Algebra access
5 across the city. Again, this
6 problem comes up because students
7 reported not being able to attend
8 top-tier schools because they
9 didn't meet the requirement. But
10 this is only one missed opportunity
11 of many others. Access to Algebra
12 can link students, especially
13 low-income students and Black and
14 Brown students to good schools,
15 good jobs and industries that are
16 right here on their doorstep in
17 Philadelphia. This problem has big
18 implications and most importantly,
19 it can be fixed. Thank you for
20 your time.

21 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

22 Thank you for your testimony.

23 Chair recognizes

24 Dr. Ahmad.

1 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

2 Thank you both for your testimony.
3 So I can see best practices
4 elsewhere, outside of Pennsylvania
5 that is doing this. In order to
6 have access to Algebra, they have
7 to pass the PSSA with a certain
8 score, right. So the culture shift
9 that we need around math itself
10 that you refer to has to happen
11 before that right.

12 And I'm just wondering
13 if you have noticed any gender-
14 based preference in our Algebra
15 classes or not? That's one. And
16 two, Algebra should be everywhere,
17 not just because they had a PSSA
18 score -- well, everybody should be
19 scoring well on PSSA in order to be
20 getting this. So that's the goal,
21 right.

22 How do we do the culture
23 shift around math in general that
24 you mentioned? You know, you have

1 to be a math person or something.
2 And I experienced that as a child,
3 was told you have to be a certain
4 kind of person to be able to do
5 mental math or something like that.
6 I'm a scientist with a PhD. I
7 said, nope, I'm not listening to
8 that. But math is still not my
9 strong suit. I was imprinted very
10 early on as a child about how I
11 view myself and my capabilities
12 because somebody else told me that.

13 So I just wanted to know
14 the culture shift that needs to
15 happen, which is not necessarily
16 something we can legislate as such,
17 but maybe there could be a paradigm
18 shift in how our educators are
19 approaching that. So this is a
20 philosophical kind of question.
21 But if we are going to have our
22 children have access to the jobs
23 that are available that pay a
24 living wage, we need them to know

1 how to do math, period, across the
2 board.

3 So if you could just
4 give us some thoughts as to how
5 would we have that culture shift?
6 And the school district is the best
7 place to do it because that's where
8 children are eight hours out of the
9 day.

10 MS. LIEVANO: Yeah, I'm
11 happy to take that first. I've
12 been thinking about this as it
13 pertains to Algebra specifically,
14 but thinking about it as well. And
15 you asked about girls specifically
16 because it overlaps with the
17 development of STEM identity, which
18 includes math identity, right.

19 The critical years for
20 development of identity are in
21 elementary school, in the years
22 that we are telling our students
23 they are or aren't good enough to
24 be taking Algebra in the 8th grade.

1 And so, I don't have the numbers in
2 front of me for preference for
3 Algebra in the 8th grade. But I
4 can tell you that after that
5 elementary period is when we see
6 decline in girls feeling like they
7 identify as scientists or STEM
8 people. As much as we have a good
9 question, I haven't seen a lot of
10 data around this, whether or not
11 the narrative that we're imparting
12 on our children in elementary has
13 an impact on whether or not they
14 are able to select Algebra in the
15 8th grade because they believe in
16 themselves as capable and they
17 perform well in PSSAs and then they
18 go on to be selected for early or
19 8th grade Algebra.

20 So I think the question
21 is absolutely worth exploring to
22 develop some identity. Just to
23 wrap up this idea, you need three
24 factors, three components

1 performance, which is positive
2 experiences, and they don't
3 necessarily have to be successful
4 experiences. They just have to be
5 positive. You have to be able to
6 abstract and learn something from
7 it.

8 The second factor is
9 knowledge and competence. This is
10 the personal belief that you have
11 knowledge and that you can succeed
12 in this field. And the third one
13 is recognition. And I think for a
14 lot of our students that part is
15 really lacking, especially I think
16 there's some socioeconomic biases
17 that would also underline this data
18 about having good mentors outside
19 of their families or inside of
20 their families. But often it
21 requires someone outside of your
22 family to tell you that you are
23 capable and to be able to develop
24 that self-belief to pursue and

1 persist.

2 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

3 Thank you. Symbol, do you have
4 anything?

5 MS. LAI: Yes. So in
6 regards to your question around the
7 bias, I think that's where the
8 universal screening tool comes in,
9 because that takes some of the bias
10 out of it. If you have at that
11 point in your life, you know, if
12 you are ready for Algebra 1, you
13 can get screened for it and have
14 the option of taking it.

15 The other thing that I
16 thought about was, you know, I
17 think this is a policy lever, I
18 mean, this might be a really good
19 place to invest in OST programming,
20 right. Because I think even
21 outside of the, you know, you need
22 more supports and everything,
23 every -- Councilmember Thomas, you
24 know this. You need more support

1 than you know beyond the school
2 classroom to cultivate to kind of
3 get a culture shift, right. And
4 the more OST programs that we have
5 that can target, you know, changing
6 these kinds of gender-based biases
7 of women in STEM or girls in math
8 and stuff like that, right, that
9 can really help.

10 And I do believe that
11 there are working models of this in
12 Philadelphia. I know Elevate 215
13 has a really good pilot just to
14 build up confidence of 6th graders,
15 middle schoolers in taking math,
16 right. And so, they believe that
17 they can do Algebra, right. And
18 so, bolstering this kind of
19 ecosystem that we already have
20 existent with more funding and
21 support from the city and more
22 partnerships I think can target and
23 change some of the culture.

24 The last thing I would

1 say is a lot of our
2 recommendations, these are early in
3 development. Children First is
4 really interested in this topic.
5 So we'll have more recommendations
6 coming out. But one of the things
7 that we really identified as an
8 office is that there probably needs
9 to be a lot more attention towards
10 like families and parents and how
11 they consider, you know, do they
12 see themselves as a math family,
13 are they scared of numbers. And
14 how does that how do you shift
15 that, right, so that it's something
16 that is more a norm, like we're a
17 family that do math, right, and not
18 something that is really scary
19 because then that can really impact
20 whether or not a kid feels that
21 their math-ready.

22 COUNCILWOMAN AHMAD:

23 Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

24 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

1 Thank you. Thank you to this panel
2 for your testimony. We very much
3 appreciate it. Is there anything
4 else you would like to add?
5 Anything you think we need to think
6 about as it relates to this issue,
7 anything you want to put on the
8 record?

9 (No response.)

10 MS. LAI: Thank you so
11 much.

12 MS. LEIVANO: Thank you.

13 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

14 Thank you. And thank you to both
15 of your organizations as well. We
16 appreciate you as well as the work
17 that your organizations do. So
18 thank you.

19 Mr. Clerk, can you
20 please call up our final panel for
21 today.

22 THE CLERK: Up next is
23 Carla Hill and Dr. Chad Womack.

24 (Witnesses approached

1 witness table.)

2 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

3 Please state your name for the
4 record and you may begin with your
5 testimony.

6 MS. HILL: Thank you.

7 Carla Hill. Good morning, Chair
8 and distinguished members of the
9 Committee on Education. My name is
10 Carla Hill. I come before you
11 today as a long-term Philadelphia
12 resident, a former parent of
13 students in the School District of
14 Philadelphia and a retired
15 municipal leader with 35 years of
16 HR experience across the city, from
17 Portfolio Manager in Central HR to
18 Deputy Director for the Department
19 of Planning and Development.

20 Today I serve as
21 National Education Committee Chair
22 for the National Association of
23 Black Women in Construction,
24 NABWIC, and co-founder and Chief

1 Navigation Officer at GPS Career
2 and Business Strategies.
3 Throughout my 35 years in city
4 leadership, I managed talent across
5 diverse municipal portfolios,
6 including Public Health, Behavioral
7 Health and Fleet Management.

8 I loved working for the
9 City of Philadelphia because
10 virtually every occupation exists
11 within our city government. But
12 across those decades, I observed
13 one consistent tragedy. 90% of
14 career exits are not due to a lack
15 of skill, but a lack of alignment.
16 When we fail to align a student's
17 foundational education with high-
18 demand career pathways early on, we
19 effectively lock them out before
20 they even reach the starting line.
21 As local community leaders and
22 entrepreneurship partners like the
23 Business Center point out, this is
24 more than an educational challenge.

1 It is a direct economic development
2 issue, a workforce issue and an
3 equity issue.

4 Right now the School
5 District of Philadelphia, roughly
6 three-quarters of K through 8
7 schools do not offer 8th grade
8 Algebra 1. This structural barrier
9 directly impacts 76% of our Black
10 7th and 8th graders and 67% of our
11 Hispanic students compared to just
12 29% of White students.

13 When middle-schoolers
14 lack access to 8th grade Algebra,
15 we are actively eliminating career
16 pathways for them before they even
17 reach high school. And those
18 statistics were from the
19 Philadelphia School District
20 website in terms of the access
21 reports and their internal reports.

22 We aren't just missing
23 an opportunity. We are cutting off
24 options. Algebra is not just a

1 math class. It is the
2 non-negotiable gateway. Every year
3 Philadelphia employers struggle to
4 fill positions in skilled trades,
5 advanced manufacturing,
6 engineering, cybersecurity,
7 artificial intelligence, health
8 care and construction management.

9 When our children are
10 denied foundational mathematical
11 reasoning in middle school, entire
12 high-wage industries are instantly
13 removed from their future. By the
14 time these individuals reach young
15 adulthood or seek mid-career
16 transitions, the door to technical
17 careers is already locked. When
18 young people entering the workforce
19 and adults looking to pivot arrive
20 without foundational math skills,
21 employers and training centers
22 cannot focus on career advancement.
23 They are forced to stall progress
24 for basic remediation. We see this

1 directly in the classroom data and
2 worksite observation shared by
3 vocational educators, like one of
4 my partners, George Jenkins at
5 YouthBuild Philly, where young
6 adults trained to earn nationally-
7 recognized construction
8 credentials.

9 I have some quotes from
10 Mr. Jenkins. Currently, students
11 show up in my classroom
12 understanding basic addition,
13 subtraction and multiplication.
14 This is outstanding if we want to
15 give them an opportunity on being
16 average. As leaders, we all know
17 if you're shooting for average, on
18 average you will reach just levels
19 below that.

20 Mr. Jenkins's experience
21 on the ground captures the core
22 issue. When young people arrive at
23 vocational training with only basic
24 arithmetic, we have already limited

1 their ceiling. But as Mr. Jenkins
2 notes, by giving students a
3 baseline of early STEM education,
4 we allow a critical foundation of
5 achievement. So when they get to
6 my high school classroom, I will be
7 able to easily excite them about
8 mathematics instead of running away
9 from mathematics. They will lean
10 into it when I give a hands-on
11 project and show them how to build
12 a wheel, how great the wheel was to
13 the development of mankind, you
14 start to understand the power of
15 that math.

16 When you prime a young
17 mind with excitement and a high
18 level of knowledge, you are not
19 only developing a young mind, you
20 are developing a highly fluid
21 thinker for the future to achieve
22 the best they can be at any job
23 they get or business that they
24 establish. This creates a strong-

1 minded student who can critically
2 think through problems and move
3 forward economic development across
4 all our communities.

5 This perspective is
6 reinforced across national industry
7 leadership. Dr. Egheosa Igbinoba,
8 National President of National
9 Association of Black Women in
10 Construction and a former teacher
11 of Business Administration,
12 Entrepreneurship and Microsoft
13 Office applications, emphasizes how
14 early education aligns directly
15 with industry advancement,
16 technical certifications and
17 business ownership.

18 NABWIC's mission is to
19 train and empower the next
20 generation of Black women and
21 underrepresented leaders in
22 construction and technical trades.
23 But that mission begins long before
24 a student reaches a job site or

1 starts a business. Having taught
2 business administration, software
3 certification and entrepreneurship,
4 I know that real-world success
5 requires a solid foundation in
6 computational thinking.

7 Without early access to
8 middle school math and STEM, our
9 youth are systematically locked out
10 of critical industry
11 certifications, advanced trades and
12 business ownership long before they
13 entered the workforce. According
14 to the National Workforce data from
15 the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
16 and Pew Research Center, Black
17 adults make up 11% of the total
18 national workforce, but hold only
19 9% of STEM jobs and a critical 5%
20 of engineering and architecture
21 roles. Hispanic workers comprise
22 17% of the overall workforce, yet
23 account for just 8% of STEM
24 professionals.

1 We see this disparity
2 play out directly in Philadelphia's
3 economic landscape. Mathematics
4 becomes meaningful when students
5 see its direct connection to the
6 real world. How Algebra powers
7 electrical systems, geometry guides
8 architecture, statistics informs
9 business decisions and chemistry
10 drives product development.
11 Without early exposure to algebraic
12 thinking, our students don't just
13 fall behind. They are
14 systematically disqualified from
15 entering high-growth fields that
16 provide family-sustaining wages,
17 economic mobility and generational
18 wealth.

19 As a workforce
20 practitioner and National Education
21 Chair who works daily, both with
22 young people starting out and adult
23 workers seeking to pivot into
24 better opportunities, I know that

1 we cannot wait until an adult is
2 facing economic instability to
3 offer a solution. We must champion
4 a multi-pronged economic approach
5 that balances early youth
6 development with support for adult
7 career transitions.

8 One, architecting
9 early -- building early entries.
10 We must expand access to
11 pre-Algebra and Algebra
12 instruction, starting in middle
13 school and introduce curricula
14 designed to cultivate student --
15 I'm almost done, sorry -- student
16 learning based on their unique
17 individual design. That means
18 equipping middle-school educators
19 with the training and resources to
20 teach Algebra effectively and
21 support struggling students,
22 pathways across high-demand
23 sectors.

24 We must strengthen

1 partnerships between schools,
2 parent organizations, vocational
3 programs like YouthBuild Philly,
4 industry associations like NABWIC
5 and industry to build intentional
6 pipelines into technical trades,
7 construction, AI and science
8 fields, ensuring every young person
9 leaves school with a written career
10 blueprint.

11 Intentional retraining
12 and pivoting. For our adult Black
13 and Brown workforce who were denied
14 these early pathways, we must
15 provide specialized assessment
16 tools, makerspaces and targeted
17 retraining resources to
18 successfully pivot them into an
19 existing municipal and private
20 sector vacancies.

21 If we want a thriving,
22 equitable economy in Philadelphia,
23 we must stop managing bad exits and
24 start architecting good entries.

1 Access to early mathematics and
2 science education is an economic
3 imperative to reduce poverty,
4 increase workforce competitiveness,
5 and create pathways to generational
6 wealth.

7 I urge this committee to
8 treat middle-school math access as
9 a critical long-term workforce
10 investment for the future of our
11 city. Thank you for your time
12 today.

13 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
14 Thank you for your testimony. We
15 appreciate it. We appreciate your
16 expert experience. Please state
17 your name for the record -- and the
18 historical context and the impact
19 on Black and Brown people, because
20 it seems like that's been something
21 folks are afraid to say, and your
22 testimony directly speaks to that,
23 so thank you.

24 Please state your name

1 for the record, sir. You may begin
2 with your testimony.

3 DR. WOMACK: Yeah. Good
4 afternoon. My name is Dr. Chad
5 Womack, and I'm coming here
6 representing iRISE PHL as its
7 founder and Managing Director. I'm
8 a Philly native and I'm a life
9 scientist by training. I spent my
10 whole entire life in science and
11 technology. I'm going to deviate
12 from the written testimony because
13 I want to react to some of the
14 things that have been said, which I
15 think are all positive but need to
16 be accentuated and some other
17 aspects of it brought out.

18 iRISE PHL is an early
19 stage nonprofit that is serving as
20 a backbone organization for
21 community-based organizations,
22 including neighborhood
23 associations, CDCs, churches,
24 mosques, temples and so forth. We

1 are decidedly focused on building
2 the infrastructure and capacity for
3 STEM inside of the community. I
4 want to acknowledge some of my
5 colleagues that have spoken and
6 some that have not that are in the
7 audience.

8 Dr. Idris Stovall, who's
9 a co-founder and a PhD
10 mathematician; Mr. Jonathan Lee,
11 North Philly native who's been
12 working on STEM in North Philly and
13 Philadelphia citywide for over 20
14 years. And I want to also
15 acknowledge the fact that there's a
16 lot of work that's going on around
17 STEM, including mathematics
18 education with other organizations,
19 including Philadelphia Fund,
20 Philadelphia STEM Equity Collective
21 and others.

22 The data and the
23 statistics that people have
24 discussed today, I won't repeat.

1 I'll just add to one statistic that
2 is important, which is downstream
3 from middle school or high school
4 Algebra, access and performance are
5 STEM outcomes, post-secondary
6 outcomes.

7 Where do our children
8 who graduate from high schools in
9 the city of Philadelphia land? And
10 we did this study in partnership
11 and collaboration with the school
12 district over ten years ago. It
13 needs to be repeated, but I can
14 guarantee you that the results
15 probably will not change all that
16 much.

17 Overall, the STEM yield
18 for the City of Philadelphia is
19 around 4% to 5%, meaning 4% to 5%
20 of high school graduates from the
21 City of Philadelphia go on to earn
22 a Bachelor's degree in four to six
23 years, four to five. For African
24 Americans, that number drops down

1 to 1% or less, which means that 99%
2 do not.

3 To my colleague to my
4 left's point, this is an economic
5 issue, something we call STEM
6 mobility science and tech-driven
7 economic mobility. Without the
8 core skills of STEM, our students
9 and our young folks, our families
10 and our communities are essentially
11 locked out of the innovation and
12 tech economy.

13 As it was mentioned
14 before, Philadelphia and the
15 Greater Philadelphia region is a
16 major hub, now the third largest in
17 this country for life sciences and
18 the biopharmaceutical industry.
19 Yet we represent, African Americans
20 that is, less than 5% of the
21 workforce, not in sales and
22 marketing, but in the R&D side.

23 We represent less than
24 2% of the biotech entrepreneurs who

1 actually launch companies and hire
2 people and build equity in this
3 space. So when we think about what
4 this is about, it is absolutely
5 about Algebra readiness, access,
6 performance. But we broaden the
7 frame a bit to include
8 computational and design thinking,
9 which I think has been mentioned
10 before, but we also include the
11 ability to apply those skills to
12 solve real-world problems. That is
13 the frame that iRISE is
14 promulgating, and we call that
15 computational readiness.

16 So as we're discussing
17 the much-needed topic of Algebra
18 readiness, all of the previous
19 speakers have done a great job so I
20 won't repeat that. We are saying
21 that that needs to be broadened a
22 bit. And we also need to focus on
23 building that infrastructure and
24 capacity within our communities.

1 To Dr. Nina Ahmad,
2 Councilwoman Ahmad's point about
3 how do we move this needle in our
4 communities, our answer to that is
5 rather straightforward. We need to
6 actually go into our communities to
7 build that infrastructure and
8 capacity. I grew up in this city
9 in East Mt. Airy and Germantown.
10 My mother grew up in North Philly,
11 and I had an absolutely wonderful
12 childhood that was surrounded by
13 Black teachers, most of whom
14 graduated from Cheyney, Lincoln or
15 Howard.

16 I am a very proud
17 graduate of Morehouse College and
18 Morehouse School of Medicine. I'm
19 bringing this up because one of the
20 things that is missing in this
21 conversation is the need for young
22 Black and Brown kids to see
23 themselves in their future. There
24 is nothing but opportunity for us

1 to connect the dots between our
2 kids and our communities, STEM
3 professionals who look like them,
4 who sound like them, not
5 exclusively, but certainly have an
6 opportunity to showcase that there
7 are STEM professionals, even
8 mathematicians like Dr. Stovall,
9 who look like them so that they can
10 decode the fact that they are
11 capable of performing in math and
12 Algebra, calculus and everything
13 else in between.

14 This is a particular
15 point of our organization's
16 mission. We are happy to say that
17 we're working with stakeholders and
18 organizations like the Philadelphia
19 Fund, like PSEC to have
20 Philadelphia's first STEM Festival
21 and Expo next year, May 8, 2027,
22 where we intend to put on full
23 display what Philly has to offer,
24 which is quite a bit.

1 We want every community,
2 every child, every family to be
3 able to access and see why this
4 stuff is important. A lot of us
5 throw numbers and statistics and
6 all of them may be correct, but we
7 fail sometimes to showcase why it's
8 important that Algebra math, which
9 is the language of STEM, means that
10 you have the opportunity to have a
11 wonderful career, that you have the
12 opportunity not to just get jobs,
13 but to create them too.

14 So we are
15 extraordinarily happy, Councilman
16 Thomas, that you are having this
17 hearing. We appreciate your
18 leadership, the leadership of other
19 City Councilmembers as well. We
20 welcome the opportunity to join you
21 in this discussion and our
22 colleagues. We think this is a
23 very, very important moment in
24 Philadelphia's history to really

1 reflect on how we can invest in our
2 young folks and our families and
3 our communities. So thank you.

4 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

5 Thank you for your comments. I
6 think the perspective that you all
7 offered as it relates to showing
8 the relationship between Algebra,
9 because when we're thinking about
10 it, we're thinking about special
11 schools and the trajectory for
12 their academic career, the
13 perspective you provided around
14 post-academia and into the
15 professional world, and why we see
16 a lack of Black people in certain
17 spaces and in certain professions
18 that's being tied back to the work
19 that is being done in the middle
20 school level, I think is alarming,
21 but it's enlightening to listen to
22 your perspective and to know that
23 we're on the right trajectory in
24 having this conversation. But we

1 have to figure out what do we do to
2 make sure all of our young people
3 get access.

4 So thank you, thank you,
5 thank you. Thank you for being
6 here. And thank you for the work
7 that you do.

8 COUNCILMAN PHILLIPS:
9 Thank you.

10 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
11 Mr. Clerk, can you please call our
12 next panel or set of witnesses to
13 testify.

14 THE CLERK: There's none
15 at this time -- hold on. We have
16 one. Priyanka Reyes-Kaurana.
17 Sorry if I pronounced your name
18 wrong.

19 MS. REYES-KAURA: All
20 good. Hi. Good afternoon. I'm
21 Priyanka Reyes-Kaura and I live in
22 the 2nd District. I'm the K-to-12
23 Education Policy Director at
24 Children First, so joining my

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1 colleague Symbol. Thank you --

2 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

3 Thank you to everybody at
4 Children's First. You guys, we
5 appreciate your support throughout
6 the course of this process. And we
7 appreciate you staying for both
8 hearings. And we appreciate all of
9 your energy and your advocacy as it
10 relates to our young people. So to
11 the entire organization, thank you
12 all. Go ahead. Please proceed
13 with your testimony.

14 MS. REYES-KAURA: And
15 thank you so much for ensuring that
16 Council directs attention to this
17 important topic of Algebra access.
18 And for the members of Council who
19 have been here throughout, thank
20 you for your attention. I'm a
21 former teacher myself and I care
22 deeply about Algebra access for all
23 students who are ready to take it.

24 And as I was preparing

1 for this hearing, I did a little
2 bit of history research and I
3 learned that Philadelphia has a
4 really deep history of working
5 towards Algebra access. And you're
6 likely already aware of this, but I
7 learned about a project called the
8 Philadelphia Algebra Project that
9 started many decades ago. This was
10 a Civil Rights initiative --

11 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: I
12 remember that. Go ahead. Keep
13 going.

14 MS. REYES-KAURA: Yeah.
15 And a lot of the things they were
16 working on are the same things
17 we're working on today, which is
18 good to hear and also shows that --

19 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: You
20 got a year for that?

21 MS. REYES-KAURA: What's
22 that?

23 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: You
24 got a year for that?

1 MS. REYES-KAURA: The
2 year, it was the 1980s and '90s.
3 1989, I think is when it started in
4 Philly.

5 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
6 Ashley, you cheating back there?
7 That sounds like some Freedom
8 Schools -- okay. All right. Go
9 ahead. Proceed with your
10 testimony.

11 MS. REYES-KAURA: Yeah.
12 No worries. So that project, you
13 know, the spirit of it continues on
14 as we continue working towards
15 Algebra and STEM access today.
16 Meanwhile, in the suburbs access to
17 middle school Algebra has been and
18 continues to be taken for granted.
19 And this is a big part of the
20 equity issues.

21 Twenty years ago I was a
22 middle-schooler in the suburbs at a
23 well-funded school in Chester
24 County. And I took pre-Algebra in

1 6th grade. I took Algebra in 7th
2 grade. I didn't pass Algebra in
3 7th grade so I got to take it again
4 in 8th grade, at which point it all
5 clicked and it made sense for me.
6 So I got to take Algebra twice by
7 8th grade.

8 Twenty years later and
9 just 15 miles away here in Philly,
10 there's hundreds of 7th and 8th
11 graders who are ready for Algebra,
12 but they still can't take it
13 because their school doesn't offer
14 it. And as you know, Masterman
15 requires Algebra for admission.
16 There are hundreds of our own
17 middle-schoolers who are locked out
18 because of that. I want middle
19 school access to Algebra high-
20 quality, equitable Algebra learning
21 to be taken for granted in
22 Philadelphia, not just in the
23 suburbs.

24 Children First applauds

1 the school district for sharing
2 earlier today that they have a plan
3 to ensure 8th grade Algebra access.
4 So that will soon be a reality.
5 But making it available to all 8th
6 graders is just one step. We also
7 have to ensure that students have
8 quality supports in their
9 classrooms so that when they do
10 enroll, they'll do well. And so,
11 they have multiple chances to do
12 well.

13 I also wanted to
14 highlight one of the things that
15 the school district shared today,
16 which is that they're switching the
17 admissions criteria for Algebra
18 from the PSSAs to the Star
19 Assessment. I think that was just
20 a small point in their testimony,
21 but that's a really big deal,
22 because 6th grade PSSA is a pretty
23 high-stakes test. You know, kids
24 get nervous when they take that

1 test. Not everyone does their very
2 best on standardized tests, whereas
3 the Star Assessment is an adaptive
4 computer test that you can take it
5 multiple times and it's a much
6 better way to ensure more kids get
7 access.

8 So what gives me hope is
9 that there's change possible today.
10 There's clearly citywide commitment
11 to supporting that progress. And
12 we at Children First will stay with
13 this mission throughout. We want
14 to see every 8th grader have access
15 and we want that access to be high
16 quality for all middle schoolers
17 much before 8th grade. Thanks
18 again for your time and we look
19 forward to continuing working on
20 this topic.

21 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
22 Thank you for your testimony. And
23 again, thank you to the work of the
24 organization. And we're hoping

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1 that you stay lockstep in with
2 this. It's been a lot of
3 information that we've collected
4 today on both subjects. And we
5 know we have a lot of work to do,
6 but we also know we can't do it
7 alone because we wouldn't even be
8 having this conversation if it
9 wasn't for the organizations
10 letting us know that these problems
11 exist and making sure that we do
12 something about them. So thank
13 you.

14 MS. REYES-KAURA:
15 Absolutely. Thank you so much.

16 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:
17 Mr. Clerk.

18 THE CLERK: We have no
19 other panels or public comment.

20 COUNCILMAN THOMAS: Thank
21 you, Mr. Clerk.

22 Are there any other
23 questions or comments from members
24 of this committee?

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1 (No response.)

2 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

3 Seeing none, there being no further
4 questions or comments from members
5 of the committee and no witnesses
6 to testify, I will ask that if
7 there is anyone else present in
8 this hearing whose name we failed
9 to call and that wishes to offer
10 testimony on the resolutions being
11 considered today?

12 (No response.)

13 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

14 Hearing none, I want to say thank
15 you to all the panelists, witnesses
16 for your participation today. We
17 value your opinion. I also want to
18 say thank you to all of my staff as
19 well as my amazing interns. You
20 guys stand up. Can we give y'all
21 another round of applause?

22 (Applause.)

23 COUNCILMAN THOMAS:

24 Great job leading today's hearing

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1 today. This is what
2 intergenerational leadership looks
3 like. And we love that in City
4 Council. And this also concludes
5 the business of the committee. We
6 would like to thank you all for
7 being here. And this hearing is
8 called to an end. Thank you.

9 - - -

10 Committee on Education
11 concluded at 2:25 p.m.)

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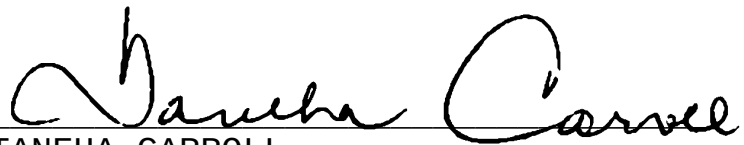
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C E R T I F I C A T I O N

I, hereby certify that the proceedings
and evidence noted are contained fully and
accurately in the stenographic notes taken
by me in the foregoing matter, and that
this is a correct transcript of the same.



TANEHA CARROLL
Court Reporter - Notary Public

(The foregoing certification of this
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supervision of the certifying reporter.)

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