NYC Criminal Justice

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Committee on Public Safety, Committee on Education
and Subcommittee on Non-Public Schools

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Good morning, Chair Vanessa Gibson, Chair Daniel Dromm, Chair Chaim Deutsch and members of the Committee on Public Safety, the Committee on Education and the Subcommittee on Non-public Schools. I am Vincent Schiraldi, Senior Advisor to the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice and former Commissioner of Probation.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. The Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice advises the Mayor on public safety strategy and, together with partners inside and outside government, develops and implements policies aimed at achieving three main goals: reducing crime, reducing unnecessary arrests and incarceration and promoting fairness. In the realm of school climate policies, our office advises the Mayor on creating policies that ensure the safety of students and staff while reducing the likelihood that students will become involved in the criminal justice system.

Before discussing the school safety and climate reforms the Mayor announced in February, including the Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline, I'd like to give some background data on the school safety and discipline that show substantial improvements in several areas over the past two plus years. The data show what this Administration wholeheartedly believes and continues to strive for – that we can have both safer schools and fewer arrests and suspensions.

From School Year 11-12 to SY 13-14 there has been a substantial 55% decline in arrests and 67% decline in summonses issued by NYPD's School Safety Division which Chief Brian Conroy runs. During those same two years, there was a 23% decline in student suspensions.

That favorable trend has continued this school year. DOE's data shows that suspensions have declined by another 11% from July 1, 2014 through April 2, 2015. Likewise, data from NYPD show that from July 1 through April 5th, arrests and summonses in schools are down an additional 19% and 12% respectively, when compared to the same time period last year.

But the reduction in suspensions, arrests and summonses is only half the equation. The programs and policies we are undertaking aim to make schools less punitive and safer, and we are constantly keeping an eye on school safety while carefully trying to improve school climate and reduce punitive student discipline. That's why it is encouraging to note that, from School Year 11/12 to School Year 13/14, overall reported crime in schools fell by 24% and major crimes fell by 20%. That encouraging trend has also continued this year, with a 7% decline in overall crime through April 5.

National research shows that when kids are suspended, it makes being held back in school, dropping out, and juvenile justice system contact all more likely, even controlling for individual student characteristics and school makeup. That's why we're proud that we have declines in suspensions,

arrests, summonses and crime – because it means that more students are in school where they belong, rather than in a station house or juvenile detention.

In February, to build on this success, the Mayor announced a raft of School Climate reforms including $1.2 million for restorative practices training; $2.4 million to support educational planning and re-engagement for court-involved students; $1.5 million to provide Therapeutic Crisis Intervention training to 1,500 staff members over the next 3 years in high-need schools; and $432,000 for a SAGA Innovations math tutoring program, for a grand total of $5.4 million dedicated to school climate initiatives.

A major part of the Mayor's February announcement was the establishment of the Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline. The mission of this task force is to recommend ways to further improve the climate for learning and enhance the well-being and safety of students and staff by using more effective methods of addressing disciplinary challenges than suspensions, arrests and summonses in the City's public schools. The Leadership Team is a collaborative effort involving multiple stakeholders – including representation from the City Council, city agencies, community members, unions, researchers, teachers, principals, students, parents and service providers – that will convene for a total of 12 months. The Leadership Team is co-chaired by Ursulina Ramirez, Chief of Staff of the DOE, and me.

To fulfill its mission, the Leadership Team will produce recommendations on strategies and funding required to:

- Improve the use of data to assess the effectiveness of current policy and practice, and spread promising positive discipline innovations system-wide;
- Increase access to mental health and other community-based supports for high-need students;
- Reduce the frequency and duration of suspensions and minimize arrests and referrals to the justice system for school-based disciplinary offenses;
- Reduce race, gender and disability disparities in student discipline; and
- Update the Memorandum of Understanding between NYPD and DOE to align the use of school security personnel and security measures with supportive school climate goals.

As I stated earlier, the Leadership Team was announced in February, but the idea of creating a multi-stakeholder task force to improve our school's climate had been a long time effort of many advocates. In June of last year, my office and the DOE and NYPD convened a large group of advocates and students to discuss school climate reform recommendations. Advocates presented several recommendations, with their number one priority being the creation of the Leadership Team.

We carefully designed the structure and mission of this initiative in partnership with the advocacy community and in consultation with union representatives, principals, teachers, students and, of course, DOE and NYPD. The Leadership Team itself is comprised of a 30-person governing body that is charged with providing direction to the execution of the initiative's mission. In addition, five Working Groups, each led jointly by a government member and a non-governmental expert are currently working to produce policy recommendations that will later be reviewed by members of the Leadership Team. Technical assistance was generously supported by the Atlantic Philanthropies and we are hopeful that we'll receive support shortly from the Open Society Foundations.

Each Working Group is invested in developing recommendations to improve different aspects of student disciplinary policies.

- The School Climate Working Group is co-chaired by my co-panelist today, Lois Herrera, CEO of the Office of Safety and Youth Development and Kim Sweet, Executive Director of Advocates for Children. This group will produce recommendations to improve system-wide implementation of positive discipline strategies with a particular focus on high-priority schools.

- The Data and Research Working Group is co-chaired by Michele Sviridoff, Deputy Criminal Justice Coordinator at the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice and Edward Fergus, Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy at New York University. This group has created a methodology for selecting high-priority schools –or schools that could benefit from additional supports. Additionally the group is creating a descriptive analysis of school climate data and will offer recommendations to improve data collection, quality and use.

- The Resource Integration Working Group is co-chaired by Gladys Carrion, Commissioner of ACS, and Nancy Ginsburg, Director of Adolescent Intervention and Diversion Team at the Legal Aid Society. This group will produce recommendations for improving educator access to community and citywide resources and services.

- The School Safety Working Group is co-chaired by Chief Brian Conroy, Commanding Officer of the School Safety Division of the NYPD and Kathleen DeCataldo, Executive Director of the NYS Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children. This group is analyzing the effectiveness of current practices for improving school safety while continuing to reduce arrests and summonses. They will recommend training and other strategies to improve police-student relations and recommend updates to existing protocols for responding to non-emergency situations in schools, among other recommendations. The Legislative Counsel for City Council is a member of this working group as well as the Leadership Team.

- Lastly, the Principals' Working Group is co-chaired by Julie Zuckerman, principal of PS 513 Castle Bridge School in Washington Heights and Celeste Douglas-Wheeler, principal of MS 57 Ron Brown Academy in Bedford Stuyvesant. This is the only working group that has two governmental co-chairs. The Principals' Working Group will review and vet policy recommendations emerging from the other Working Groups and will produce its own recommendations to improve school climate assessment tools among other recommendations.

Each Working Group has met two times and will meet for a third time within the month. Meetings have been well attended and characterized by high degree of enthusiasm, candor and good will. Working Group co-chairs have expended considerable time preparing for and chairing meetings, with assistance from the Leadership Team's staff. Additionally, many Working Groups have formed multiple subcommittees that have met frequently to draft policy recommendations. At the request of principals, the last Principals Working Group meeting was 8 hours long! This high level of investment and commitment speaks volumes to the timeliness of this initiative and the concrete need that the Leadership Team is addressing.

The Leadership Team will review a set of preliminary policy recommendations this spring and will release an update to the Mayor, Council, Chancellor, Police Commissioner, relevant agencies and the public in the summer. The task force will then continue to review progress and finalize priority topics for discussion during the next phase of the initiative—which will begin in the fall. In approximately December, the Leadership Team will produce its final policy recommendations.

As you can see we have made much progress, but there is still much to do. Principals and teachers in some schools feel like they do not have the resources necessary to implement positive behavioral strategies. Suspensions, arrests and summonses are often concentrated in a small number of schools. Moreover, racial, ethnic and special education disparities persist with regard to suspensions, arrests and summonses. The Leadership Team, working collaboratively with the DOE, NYPD and MOCJ, teachers, principals, students and community members, will continue to strive to improve the climate for learning and reduce the need for suspensions, arrests, and summonses in our schools. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.