

Erin Davies, Executive Director, Juvenile Justice Coalition
Testimony on SB 246
Senate Finance Committee
March 13, 2018

Chair Oelslager, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Skindell, and members of the Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on SB 246. The Juvenile Justice Coalition (JJC) is an organization that works to ensure that approaches to Ohio youth who are at-risk of involvement or involved in the juvenile court system are research-based and cost-effective. In addition, JJC engages youth leaders to get their perspective on what would be most effective for them and other youth across the state.

Each year in Ohio 36,000 suspensions and expulsions are given to students who are in grades pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade (age 9 or under). Unfortunately, the vast majority of these punishments are for disobedient and disruptive (not violent) behavior and over 90% are given to students who qualify as low-income. SB 246 is a clear step in the right direction to address students who act out in school by limiting the circumstances under which young children can be suspended and expelled from school and instead relying on positive behavior supports to keep students in school. In addition, the bill supports teachers and other school personnel in effectively implementing positive strategies, including teacher training, funding, connecting students with community mental health supports, and a phase in approach to adjust to the changes. Finally, the bill requires data collection and information sharing on best practices between schools.

The changes in SB 246 are clearly supported by both research and Ohio students:

- **Research support for SB 246:** Research clearly indicates that best practice involves moving away from suspension and expulsion and instead keeping students in school, which benefits not only those students, but the broader student body and the community as a whole. Suspending and expelling students removes them from an overall safe environment with positive, pro-social adult supports and increases the likelihood of juvenile court involvement. Students who are suspended and expelled must stay at home, which can be particularly problematic for young children who may be left unsupervised or whose parents may have to stay home from work to care for them, causing additional stress for the family. Although data is not available on the prevalence of trauma, many young students facing suspension and expulsion may also have been exposed to trauma, which can manifest in students having difficulty focusing or learning, acting out to gain attention, fearing adults, imitating the abuse or trauma they have endured (including verbal abuse), and showing irritability, sadness, and anxiety - signs that can easily be misinterpreted as misbehavior.
- **Student support for SB 246:** In addition to research, SB 246's approach is supported by students. The students with whom JJC works believe that out-of-school suspensions and expulsions create a hostile environment in the school and set students up for failure by sending them home without a plan or support to be safe and stay on task with school requirements. They have repeatedly expressed a need for more holistic, social-emotional, trauma-informed support – including increased access to social workers and mental health professionals – in their schools. In addition, the students have asked for better, more personal relationships with the adults in the school. Many students feel that school staff do not get to know them personally or their home situation, which can lead to misunderstandings and creating expectations or assumptions that certain students come in labeled with an automatic attitude.

All of the youth we work with want to succeed in school, but need help with various challenges and barriers they struggle to overcome. SB 246 would help to create an environment where schools move away from punitive measures and toward addressing the underlying issues students face to succeed. While we believe the bill would be stronger with fewer exceptions allowing students to be suspended and expelled and stronger language barring students from emergency removal from school, overall we support the bill and the approach it takes and hope it will eventually be applied to students in all grades. Thank you for the opportunity to testify and I welcome any questions you may have.