Good morning Chairman Grosso, members of the committee, and committee staff.

My name is Amber Rieke, and I am a Project Director at the DC Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, a non-profit research and advocacy organization in the District of Columbia focused on making the National Capital Area a better place to live and work. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the proposed Fiscal Year 2018 (FY18) budget for the Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE).

An effective education system serves residents through the lifespan, from infancy through adulthood. This means broadening the scope beyond the traditional K-12 classroom to include the issues I will speak to you about today: early care and education (ECE) for infants and toddlers, special education, and adult basic and secondary education.

Specifically, we request that the Council:
1. Fund the Mayor’s expansion efforts for child care facilities, but ensure that all families and providers – especially low-income children and those who serve them – have access to these opportunities;

2. Fund educational support for ECE professionals to attain the new credentials required under new licensure mandates;

3. Increase reimbursement rates for the Child Care Subsidy Program to ensure that providers can continue to serve low-income children and sustain their businesses;

4. Find mechanisms to ensure fair and livable wages for teachers of infants and toddlers;

5. Ensure reforms to special education required by law are adequately funded, including the Special Education Enhancement Fund; and

6. Expand the School Transit Subsidy program (“Kids Ride Free”) to all District residents enrolled in publicly-funded adult education programs.

The underlying tenet of what I will address today is equity; assuring that the most vulnerable families and students in the District have access to the best educational opportunities. Our recommendations aim to provide them what they need to learn and thrive.

**Early Care and Education**

As you know, DC Appleseed has studied the child care economy in D.C. for several years. We wrote our 2016 report, *Solid Footing: Reinforcing the Early Care and Education Economy for Infants and Toddlers in DC* with DC Fiscal Policy Institute. As part of the Bainum Family Foundation’s Birth-to-Three Policy Alliance, we have recently surveyed the child care workforce to find out more about their lived experiences and needs. Our research continues to uncover important information about the costs and experiences of delivering high-quality early care to
infants and toddlers. ECE providers operate in a difficult economic situation that threatens the supply of child care in D.C., the ability of the workforce to earn adequate wages, and, ultimately, essential learning environments for infants and toddlers. We also know that there is not enough capacity to serve all District children from ages 0-3 in licensed centers and homes. We are happy to see attention to the issue of child care in the Mayor’s proposed budget, but also note important investments which are missing.

Facility Expansion

One of the central challenges facing the ECE field and families in the District is the shortage of available spaces, or slots, in licensed child care programs. To ease this problem, the FY18 OSSE budget includes $13 million for grants to expand facilities and increase available slots.

There is also a promise to identify District-owned space for child care facilities, similar in concept to The District of Columbia Child Development Facilities Expansion Amendment Act of 2017 before Council right now. As we said in our testimony about that bill last month, we see the use of District buildings as a great opportunity for savings for providers and families. We recommended that some savings be funneled into higher staff wages, and that contracts for these facilities include a required salary scale to ensure adequate compensation for employees.

Notably, the criteria for the Mayor’s initiative is silent on the needs of low-income families. This leaves providers, policymakers and advocates with difficult questions. How can the District ensure that the new facilities benefit low-income families, not just middle-income families who can afford to pay market-rate tuition? How can we ensure that small, local providers have access to the new spaces, not just large corporations? This is not just a great opportunity to expand
access to childcare, but to grow local businesses and support highest risk children. How can we enshrine those goals in this initiative from the outset?

We certainly understand the pressure on middle-income families; their challenges are real. We are not asking policymakers to focus on one group to the exclusion of another, rather that we focus on how to assure equity in early care. We know from the latest science that nurturing, high quality environments do a great deal to set baselines for children, and any policy on early childhood must keep in mind the families with few other options to secure that, financially, for their children. Therefore, we ask that a lens for equity be applied in the initiatives to expand child care slots. When shaping the criteria for spaces in District buildings, we suggest that the definition of “need” that is assessed include low-income families. For example, OSSE may consider waitlists at nearby programs, but also economic diversity or vulnerability when choosing a location. For grants, OSSE could consider weighting proposals from providers who have or currently do participate in the subsidy program.

**Education Support for ECE Workforce**

In pursuit of high quality ECE programming across the board, the District has instituted new credential requirements for teachers as part of licensure. Teachers need support to earn these degrees. We know that post-secondary education takes a lot of time and money. We also know that working with infants and toddlers all day takes a lot of energy, that many teachers have to work second or third jobs in their off-time to supplement their low wages, and, further, we know that their earning potential post-degree doesn’t necessarily justify the investment. So, there is fear that teachers are likely to leave the field instead, or once they earn their credentials.
The Mayor’s budget includes $750,000 to support 150 current childcare workers with scholarships, mentoring and tutoring supports to pursue their Associates or Bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood Education. OSSE will also expand its grant program to offer CDA credential courses in the evening or on weekends through community-based organizations. OSSE also has $440,000 in the proposed budget for the First Step program to support 150 high school students earn their CDA while pursuing their high school diploma.

This is a great start. It is not clear, however, how far the allotted money will go in supporting the education advancement required across the workforce. We have not been able to ascertain how many teachers are required to go back to school to keep their jobs, or if local institutions have the necessary capacity to accommodate the need. We are especially concerned that there do not seem to be any programs in the region that have the required programs in languages other than English. Given the timeline for new requirements, it seems late to still have these unanswered questions. We are encouraged that OSSE officials state they are in communication with institutions, and hope more will be shared publicly about their plans.

**Child Care Subsidy Program Reimbursement Rates**

There are a few specific investments that we do not see in the Mayor’s proposed FY18 budget that we feel are necessary to support the ECE field to sustain providers and expand access. In particular, we recommend adding funding to increase Child Care Subsidy Program reimbursement rates. This committee was able to add $1.8 million last year that was very much needed and very much appreciated.
The $13 million for child care in the Mayor’s FY18 budget is a great starting point to increase District-wide access to childcare. We need $13 million more to increase subsidy rates to ensure the current needs of providers are met. Our research found that there is a $38 million gap, at least, between the reimbursements gold-level providers currently receive to care for low-income children and the actual costs of that care. As we try to add new slots to meet increasing demand, we have to reinforce the supply of high quality slots currently available.

The District has set a high bar, and licensing standards continue to go up, for the education of infants and toddlers. An increase of at least $13 million to the subsidy program in FY18 is required to meet current standards.

**ECE Teacher Compensation**

Finally, the District must continue to consider deliberate strategies to raise compensation for ECE teachers. We know that raising reimbursement rates alone will guarantee higher wages because rates continue to be too low to cover existing costs.

Generally speaking, teachers don’t get the respect they deserve in our culture. We still see ECE teachers referred to as “babysitters,” despite their difficult and essential work. Increased wages and benefits not only signal respect, but also recognize a teacher’s essential contribution to the long-term academic success of students and the District’s economy. In order to attract and retain best teachers for infants and toddlers, and meet the District’s quality standards, we need to find mechanisms to ensure adequate wages. One possibility, mentioned above, is to incorporate a salary scale in government contracts, alongside commensurate funding.
Further, the District needs to support community-based organizations (CBOs) in particular to ensure their vital, long-term sustainability in the District. They not only care for and educate infants and toddlers, but also serve many three- and four-year olds through Pre-K and year-round services. Yet CBO teachers are paid less than public school teachers. Increasing reimbursement rates and bolstering compensation standards would go a long way to bring ECE teachers and CBOs into parity with their Pre-K and K-12 counterparts.

In conclusion, quality early education is a smart investment in the future success of young children, particularly low-income infants and toddlers. This Committee has shown leadership on this issue, and we are enthusiastic about the energy and thoughtfulness given to the matter. Accordingly, we ask for strategic increases to the ECE budget through OSSE’s Department of Early Learning for FY18.

**Special Education**

DC Appleseed has been monitoring the District’s ability to meet Special Education needs for students since the early 2000s. In 2012, we were appointed by the special master in the *Petties v. District of Columbia* case to work with other advocates to address ongoing difficulties experienced by families returning to public schools from non-public placements. We have noted several improvements in the capacity and actions of District public schools. However, we have also noted many deficiencies. We focused on the matter of transitions between placements in our 2016 report, *A Place for Every Student: Managing Movement Along the Special Education Continuum in D.C.*

**Pending Reforms**
Across special education issues, from IEP compliance to academic performance, we have seen how early interventions could prevent students from falling behind or failing to progress. Accordingly, we were pleased to learn that OSSE intends to fund the pending reforms required in *The Enhanced Special Education Services Act of 2014* in FY18. This was such significant legislation for children with special needs and their families; we thank the policymakers, advocates and families who worked on this. We are glad to see its reforms finally on track to implementation, including:

1. Expanded eligibility for Strong Start/DC Early Intervention Program (DCEIP) services, so that infants and toddlers who exhibit a lower level of delay can benefit from the specialized attention before falling behind in later grades;

2. A change in the deadline for intervention from 120 to 60 days, aligning the District with national best practice; and

3. Beginning post-secondary transition planning for students with special needs at age 14 instead of 16, allowing eighth graders the chance to thoughtfully engage in planning for high school, in addition to planning for independent living, employment, and/or post-secondary education.

However, while OSSE has spoken to plans for bringing the reforms online, we do not see increased funding specifically designated in the Mayor’s FY18 budget proposal. We ask the Committee to ensure that sufficient funds are designated for these important reforms.

*Special Education Enhancement Fund*
Further, The Special Education Quality Improvement Act of 2014 created the Special Education Enhancement Fund to address the “state of crisis” in special education in the District. OSSE intends to release $3.7 million from the Fund to support LEAs implementing the new requirements, while approximately $1.5 million will be directed to a competitive grant process for further enhancements. We are concerned that the bulk of the Fund is being used for basic compliance with District law. That is not an “enhancement,” that is meeting a baseline. We believe most of the funds should be explicitly directed to increasing quality for students, not just for the system to meet its deadlines. We thank the Committee for its continued pursuit of excellent special education services, including compliance with this important 2014 legislation.

**Adult Basic and Secondary Education**

We believe our discussions about educational quality and access, as well as in conversations about D.C.’s workforce and economic future, must include basic adult education and post-secondary education. As with our child care workers as we have discussed above, this includes any adult who wants to attain a certification, GED or equivalent, or make a change in their professional specialization. The District is home to approximately 60,000 residents without a high school credential, and OSSE serves only one-eighth of those. We noted no increase in mayor’s FY18 budget to expand capacity or support for adult learners.

**Extending Kids Ride Free to Adult Learners**

Many adult learners are low-income, in part because they have not yet attained a high school credential or college degree in a competitive market. They face many barriers to achieving their educational goals, including reliable and affordable transportation. The Deputy Mayor for
Education’s Transportation Working Group surveyed 1,000 adult learners across the District on the topic last year. They found that 52% of respondents used Metrobus and 10% relied on Metrorail as their primary mode of transportation to school. Over a third reported that cost is their biggest concern about their commute.

Therefore, we join other advocates in recommending the expansion of the School Transit Subsidy program (“Kids Ride Free”) to all District residents enrolled in publicly-funded adult education programs. We thank Councilmembers Silverman, Todd, Evans, Grosso, R. White, Nadeau, Bonds and Allen for introducing The Adult Learners Transit Subsidy Amendment Act of 2017 in February. We know that some Councilmember also asked the Mayor to fund the Kids Ride Free expansion in their formal budget requests. However, the Mayor’s proposed budget fails to fund the program. The estimated cost is $1.5–2 million per year. This is a modest investment that would allow learners to reliably get to class. The District’s current investment in adult learners is over $80 million in local and federal dollars; transportation support would build a bridge to that investment.

We acknowledge that this is a transportation request and not an OSSE budget item. However, the Chairman and members of the Committee have been leaders in this effort. We wanted to take the opportunity to thank you, and ask to you pursue the matter to ensure the expansion is included in the FY18 budget.

**Conclusion**

We thank this Committee for its attention to the needs of the most vulnerable students across the educational continuum, from low-income infants and their teachers, to students with special
needs in K-12, to adult learners striving to achieve a high school credential or beyond. We are particularly concerned that the District’s low-income children are at risk at falling behind in the persistent achievement gap; while those providing critical services to these children are falling behind themselves. As we look at how we can bolster the K-12 system, opportunities for leverage exist in early childhood education and two-generation strategies for escaping poverty. We believe specific and effective strategies to achieving equity in education include: increasing access to child care, reinforcing funding for the child care subsidy program, raising wages for the ECE workforce, reforming and enhancing special education in District schools, and enabling adults to access basic and post-secondary education.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am always happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.