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Title: Authorizing the Committee on Children and Youth and the Committee on Education to conduct hearings exploring the creation of a School District of Philadelphia “community connector” position to further enhance connections between families, caregivers, and school communities.

Sponsors: Councilmember Gym, Councilmember Blackwell, Councilmember Jones, Councilmember Greenlee, Councilmember Parker, Councilmember Henon

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Authorizing the Committee on Children and Youth and the Committee on Education to conduct hearings exploring the creation of a School District of Philadelphia “community connector” position to further enhance connections between families, caregivers, and school communities.

WHEREAS, School communities are the heartbeat of our neighborhoods. Families and caregivers must be listened to, responded to, supported, valued, and centered. Schools must always be welcoming, and never be threatening; and

WHEREAS, Approximately 37 percent of Philadelphia public school students live in poverty, while 12 percent of School District students are English Language Learners, and 16 percent require special education supports. The families that support these students face significant barriers and challenges that can be addressed through strong partnerships between schools and families; and

WHEREAS, Family and community involvement in schools has, time and time again, been shown to boost student performance, behavior, and attendance. Caregiver involvement builds and sustains public support for schools and can even rebuild investment with families that have had prior negative experiences in navigating the school system; and

WHEREAS, Currently, there is no consistent, school-based, direct point of contact for caregivers and families when they need to engage with their schools regarding a specific issue or concern; and

WHEREAS, Each month, the Board of Education hears from countless parents and guardians during public testimony about individualized concerns, thus showcasing a need for families to have a direct point of contact at the school level; and

WHEREAS, The FY 2020 School District of Philadelphia budget will be the first considered by the newly appointed Board of Education. As public budgets reflect public policy priorities, any further investment in family and community engagement will demonstrate that the Board of Education is taking a step towards responsiveness and accountability to families and caregivers; and

WHEREAS, The City of Philadelphia is committed to a community schools model, which has successfully facilitated strong connections between life in the community and life inside of our schools; and

WHEREAS, Under Title I, the School District is required to implement programs that ensure that parents and family members are reached at home, in the community, and at school; and

WHEREAS, The School District of Philadelphia has made a concerted effort to bolster opportunities for family engagement. The Office of Family and Community Engagement (FACE) provides support to School Advisory Councils, and its Family Engagement Liaisons work with families to identify ways they can become further involved in their schools. Caregivers are able to use FACE's District Call and Information Center to connect with services, and the Family Academy offers workshops that provide families with tools to increase student achievement. An expansion of these programs to ensure that caregivers and families can troubleshoot at the school-level with an individual who understands the complexities of individual schools and their surrounding communities may even further improve family engagement; and

WHEREAS, Historically, the School District of Philadelphia has ensured that there is school staff whose sole responsibility is to strengthen connections between families, schools, and communities; and

WHEREAS, School District resources have also been used to curb truancy. In 2002, the District implemented the Attendance and Truancy Intervention and Prevention Support (ATIPS) system. In an effort to work alongside families to improve attendance and curb truancy, 260 Parent Truancy Officers (PTOs) were hired. This program was dismantled in 2008 in the face of budget cuts. A study of this program showed that in schools with PTOs, there was an 11 percent reduction in unexcused absences; and

WHEREAS, The School District launched the parent ombudsman program in 2008, which instituted parent ambassadors in schools to provide a direct point of contact for school information and to serve as a liaison between families, school communities, and central office staff. Through a case management model, ombudsmen met with members of their school's leadership team to identify ways that schools could be more family-friendly. Caregivers often shared information they would not otherwise share with school staff in hopes of getting the support that their families and children needed. This program ended in 2011 due to budget cuts, another example of slashing family engagement efforts in times of austerity; and

WHEREAS, Evaluations of parent and caregiver liaison programs have overwhelmingly demonstrated positive effects on school culture and student success. Research clearly shows that the implementation of family liaisons has improved educational outcomes and reduced dropout rates; and

WHEREAS, Each day, office secretaries, teachers, and administrators go above and beyond their job duties to support families on a case-by-case basis. The creation of a concrete community connector position in each school to manage individualized concerns will enable school staff to complete their primary teaching, organizational, and managerial duties; and

WHEREAS, Each day, community members dedicate time, energy, and passion to filling the gaps and ensuring that schools can best serve families. Nevertheless, volunteerism, while much appreciated, is not as impactful nor sustainable as additional resources. Moreover, a dedicated, school-based family engagement position can facilitate relationships with volunteer groups and community-based organizations; and

WHEREAS, A community connector will assist caregivers and community members in accessing information and assistance so that they may support children at home and at school. Such a position would also help families navigate the school system, be advocates for their children, and resolve problems, complaints, conflicts, and other school-related issues. A community connector will also broaden teacher and staff understanding of students, and arrange meetings to address individual student and schoolwide concerns; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, THAT THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, Authorizes the Committee on Children and Youth and the Committee on Education to conduct hearings exploring the creation of a School District of Philadelphia “community connector” position to further enhance connections between families, caregivers, and school communities.