



Testimony of Tyler Grigsby

Program Facilitator, One Common Unity

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Good afternoon, Office of Out of School Time Grants and Youth Outcomes and the OST Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. My name is Tyler Grigsby, I am a Program Facilitator at One Common Unity and a member of the DC Out-of-School Time Coalition and I am here to testify about the importance of in school and out-of-school time programming, and how we can improve performance from last year.

One Common Unity, a D.C. born and bred organization which for the past 20 years has been working to break cycles of violence and build healthy compassionate communities through the transformative power of music, arts, and peace education. Over our 20 year history we have focused increasing energy on transforming school cultures and climates to incorporate social-emotional literacy, restorative justice practices, conflict resolution, and the arts.

Our recently completed five-year impact study indicates that 84% of our students graduated from high school and 0% of our participants served time in juvenile detention, jail, or prison. 71.4% of our graduates reported holding the same job for more than six months and 83% reported taking on more leadership roles than they did before participating in the program.

I don't want you to take my word for it though, so I will share some words from a 14 year old student in our Fly By Light program at Stuart Hobson middle school, Rose:

"From my experience with Fly By Light, I've learned a lot about social justice and human rights. It opened up my eyes to everything going on in the world. I was a child who had anger issues and trauma in my life, Fly By Light helped me learn how to deal with it and take control of my emotions. It has impacted me because my emotions control how I act around people and towards people. My facial expressions show that, if I am going somewhere, where I need to control my emotions, it taught me how to deal with those emotions and carry myself in a more effective way; rather than letting my emotions control me. You need to take care of you so then you can take care of others if you want to add them to the equation. Fly By Light is a life changing experience and something that I wish everyone could be involved in. It does so much for a person. It helps you become a better person. The people you meet are so important and they eventually become like your family."

Young people like Rose and organizations like ours need supporting in funding what works. Even small budget cuts greatly impact the amount of students we are able to serve.



As the COVID-19 crisis continues, we are seeing disturbing trends in the most vulnerable communities — we are very concerned for the wellbeing of the students and broader school communities that we serve who are facing a staggering loss of income, provision, stability, and potentially their health. It is a priority that we create safe, brave spaces in schools for students to come together in community to express themselves through the arts and find healing modalities for the trauma they have suffered in the past year. The Fly By Light program offers a unique space for this self-awareness and self-reflection to take place in a supportive community.

Though necessary to prevent loss of life, these social distancing measures expose many people to situations that are linked to poor mental health outcomes, such as isolation and job loss. Additionally, feelings of anxiety are increasingly common, as people are fearful of themselves or loved ones falling ill and are uncertain of the pandemic's repercussions. At this time it is critical that OCU is able to not only maintain our consistent engagement with students and their families but also increase our support to communities in need. Many students are unequipped to overcome the community violence and trauma they have experienced: structural violence and racism, harmful housing policies, access to educational opportunities, and unequal distribution of resources all add additional hurdles to the lives of youth and their families. As one partner educator emphasizes, "Our kids aren't living, they're surviving."

Fly By Light offers students the space to do more than just survive, space check-in and share some of the issues they are facing personally, in their families and in the community, learn how to build meaningful relationships with students and how to create spaces for this essential community building.

While the full magnitude and effect of the COVID-19 pandemic are impossible to quantify, it is abundantly clear that this crisis will take an immense toll on people's mental health and wellbeing, particularly in children and youth. Young people are now facing a sudden reduced access to educational resources, loss of enrichment activities, and immense trauma.

Moreover, children are now experiencing compounding trauma connected to civil protests and associated police brutality and white supremacist violence. As the pandemic continues, we are becoming increasingly concerned about the mental wellbeing of the students we serve. Over 90% of the students that participate in our programming are Black or Latino, coming from low-income families. As disasters disproportionately affect marginalized communities, our students face an increased risk of experiencing heightened trauma. I personally have seen increases in the number of students who report symptoms of trauma, and have had an increase in interventions for mental health related incidents. I have lost count of how many of my students have claimed groups like ours are one of the only things getting them through this time.



We know programs like ours work. We want to thank the your office and Learn24 for the support we have received so far. We are grateful for this commitment to OST programming and are here to remind you programs like ours work, and will be needed more than ever in the challenges our communities face. The District has spent years investing in a robust out-of-school time network. While we greatly appreciate that funding was held relatively harmless last year, it is not enough for the year moving forward. We understand the Mayor is considering investing more in high dosage tutoring. It's critical that we not divert resources away from what we know works, and that we do not deny students the social emotional learning opportunities they deserve and need now more than ever. Every year there is more demand for OST programming than is funded. Let's increase those investments, break cycles of violence in our communities and give our young people the futures they deserve.

Thank you for your time and consideration. If you have any questions or matters you like to discuss I can be reached at the contact information below.

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