Thank you Committee Chairman Catania and members of the Committee on Education for the opportunity to address the Council as it considers the DC Promise Establishment Act of 2013. My name is Bonnie O’Keefe, and I am a senior policy analyst with DC Action for Children.

DC Action for Children (“DC Action”) provides data-based analysis and policy leadership on critical issues facing DC children and youth, to promote policies and actions that optimize child and family well-being.

DC Action is the home of DC KIDS COUNT, which tracks key indicators of child and youth well-being in the DC neighborhoods where children live, learn and grow. We work closely with city agencies, the school system and service providers to share the most accurate and timely data along with clear and accessible analysis. Our advocacy agenda is based on these critical data.

In this testimony, I will share DC Action’s recommendations on how the DC Promise program could help encourage DC youth to attend and successfully graduate from post-secondary education. DC Action sees this proposed program as an important component of the comprehensive “cradle to career” system of supports our city should strive to provide for all DC children.

According to the latest Census data analyzed by DC KIDS COUNT, 46 percent of children under 18 in DC live in households where income is below 200 percent of poverty, a total of 50,000 children. For children born into low income households, higher education is a vital path to economic prosperity in adulthood.

- **College degrees greatly increase economic mobility.** Children born into low income families who go on to earn college degrees are 84 percent likely to earn substantially more than their parents did and 19 percent likely to join the top 20 percent of earners nationally.\(^{ii}\)

- **In DC, college educated residents earn more than double what residents with only a high school diploma do.** The difference in median annual income for a DC resident with a college degree vs. a high school degree is over $30,000.\(^{iii}\)

Children from low income families stand to benefit the most from the DC Promise program, but DC as a whole will benefit even more in the long term from their success in education and the
workforce. For that reason, we support the targeted tuition assistance that the DC Promise program would provide.

Recently, college costs have expanded tremendously at both public and private institutions of higher education, placing a higher financial burden on low and middle income families. Nationally, the average college student from a low income family must pay $11,000 a year for college after taking grant aid into account.\(^iv\) That is nearly half the annual income of a family of four living on the poverty line.\(^v\)

Once low-income students enter college, they need sustained support to help them graduate. Low-income, first-generation college students are four times more likely than their peers to leave post-secondary education after one year. This is often attributed to the financial and academic stress of trying to work and attend school simultaneously.\(^vi\) Exiting higher education without a degree can leave students with a large amount of debt, but without the earning ability to pay it back.\(^vii\)

To make sure the DC Promise program continues to achieve its goal of making higher education more affordable and attainable for DC students and families, we recommend this bill include a mechanism for periodically studying the adequacy of grant amounts in comparison to college costs and financial aid trends and adjusting maximum grant amounts as the landscape of higher education continues to evolve.

We want to particularly highlight the importance of this bill’s provision to provide additional support for youth in DC’s foster care system. In 2012, nearly 600 DC youth over age 16 were served by foster care. Foster youth who graduate high school and go on to college have already overcome the odds against them: 71 percent of DC foster youth graduate high school, and less than 40 percent of 20 year old foster youth were employed or in post-secondary education.\(^viii\) Given all the barriers foster youth have already faced in their lives, college costs should not be one of them.

DC Action sees this bill as one important step towards a comprehensive system where children and youth who are most in need of health, education, safety and financial well-being receive quality services to support their development and ensure they thrive. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony and for your continued commitment to improving educational opportunities for all children and youth in DC. I am happy to answer any follow-up questions.

\(^i\) DC KIDS COUNT from the 2012 American Community Survey 1-year estimates.
\(^iii\) 2012 American Community Survey 1-year estimates.
\(^v\) DC KIDS COUNT. Median Family Income for Families with Children in Washington DC from the 2006-2010 American Community Survey.