



## Testimony Presented to the Philadelphia Board of Education

By Inella Ray, Director of Parent Advocacy & Engagement, Children First

January 25, 2024

Good Evening Board Members and Dr. Watlington:

My name is Inella Ray. I'm a **proud product** of the Philadelphia public school system, a **dedicated advocate** for children and youth, and a Philadelphia resident **deeply invested** in our youth's future. I had the honor of serving as the Camp Coordinator of Camp Akili Philly, where I witnessed a **beautiful unfolding** of what happens when we invest and center Black children's healing and our own. I stand here today to **urge** the board to make a **strong investment in the continuation of Camp Akili Philly and its expansion.**

Across the school year, **197,000 students** walk into their schools with backpacks, the **invisible kind, with their burdens.** Many of them carry very heavy loads that should never be carried by children or youth. Yet, the fact remains that they do. That load is disproportionately felt in communities that have been **divested from** and, in many instances, **abandoned**, making it all the more clear while our young people are in a state of crisis. Let's be honest: **those communities are overwhelmingly Black, and it's not because they are inherently misguided, deficient, or lazy. Instead, it is because, like many of us in this room, they need investment, the real kind that believes in their potential and fights to ensure they get what they need- holistically.** I **deeply** believe Camp Akili is a part of that equation.

At Camp Akili, I got to see the evolution of what happens when you create a space that is filled with commitment, love, and mutual accountability. And what unfolds is - **kids are given the space to be kids and are provided with a safe haven to exist.** Unfortunately, for Black children in this city, that is often not a reality.

Well, Camp Akili provided something different; it gave room to Black youth to learn about where they come from, the significance of their place and space in Philly, the importance of their leadership in connection to their community, and practical ways to steward their own healing and others.

Camp Akili Philly can support a new path that heals versus harm, supports versus suspends, and expand minds, as opposed to expelling them as a lost cause.

Thank you for providing me the space to speak, and I strongly encourage the board and Dr. Watlington to create a budget that reflects the deep investment in mental health supports that our students need, but most importantly, are owed.

**Inella Ray (she/her/hers)**

Director of Parent Advocacy & Engagement

Children First (formerly PCCY)

[inellar@childrenfirstpa.org](mailto:inellar@childrenfirstpa.org)