

Testimony to the Committee of the Whole: The Mayor's Proposed Fiscal Year 2021 Budget and accompanying legislation - June 17-18, 2020

Andrew Plemmons Pratt, Ward 6 resident

Thank you Chairman Mendelson and all of the Councilmembers. My name is Andrew Pratt and I am a resident of Ward 6 and I am the parent of two children, one in Pre-K4 and one in 1st grade, who attend Brent Elementary. I am also a volunteer with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education, or PAVE, and serve on the Ward 6 Parents Leaders in Education Board. I appreciate the opportunity to share this testimony asking that you make critical investments in mental health and trauma-informed supports in our public schools. The twin pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism threaten the bodily health and the mental wellbeing of so many students and families—particularly Black and Latinx Washingtonians. Now is the moment to continue shifting resources to support mental wellness in our schools. Black Lives Matter, and the mental health of Black students and families matters.

I was a middle school English teacher a decade ago. Some of my students came to school carrying trauma with them that made learning difficult. At the time, I did not know how to identify and handle that trauma. Instead, I absorbed it and I labeled some of my students' anxious behavior as “disruptive.” Labels like that made it easier to resort to exclusionary discipline that put them out of my class, which also made learning difficult, and did little to support their mental well-being. It was a terrible cycle.

I often think about how my students in Prince George's County did not get the social-emotional supports they deserved, and how I did not get the trauma-informed training that I needed. Trauma-informed training for teachers is particularly important to me *because* I didn't get it. My teaching—and my students—suffered for it. [A 2017 survey of 4,000 teachers](#) found that fully 58% of respondents said that their mental health was “not good.” Imagine what those stress levels are now, as teachers look ahead to a school year where many students will arrive with [significant learning loss](#) and trauma, where classrooms will be half empty to enable social distancing, and where they may be wondering about the safety and learning of their own children. To ensure supportive learning environments for students, we must ensure supportive environments for the teachers and staff that cultivate those environments.

But let me be clear: the source of my students' trauma, ten years ago, was the result of the grinding systems of oppression that sustain poverty and racism in our country. The pandemic of racism, with its systems of oppression, is at this moment magnified by the global COVID-19 pandemic, and by the national epidemic of state-sanctioned violence against Black bodies.

As a white man who comes to this work with a lot of privilege, I'm committed to bringing mental health supports and trauma-informed training to every DC school. Governments that believe in the health of their citizens must invest in the mental wellbeing of our children, particularly Black children.

In a finite budget constrained by the economic fallout of COVID-19, I'm sure you have hard choices to make. But I would like to emphasize powerful and equitable choices you can make in order to invest in the mental wellness of students, and in the training for educators to support students experiencing trauma.

First, I ask that you fully fund the At-Risk Weight in the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula to the recommended adequacy level. This should be based on the 2013 adequacy study (until the forthcoming DME study is available). The at-risk weight should be 0.37, or \$4,062 per student. The at-risk weight is currently set at 0.225, or \$2,437 per student—a gap of \$68.8 million.

Second, I ask that you fully fund the Department of Behavioral Health School-Based Mental Health Expansion, which needs \$16 million. At the moment, the \$1.5 million in federal funds allocated to this will merely supplant the local funding, instead of ensuring a solid foundation for future DBH work. Further, \$10.6 million is necessary to support schools all over the city through the School Climate and SEL program at DCPS and the School Safety and Positive School Culture Fund through OSSE.

The Mayor's proposal to increase by 3% the base UPSFF is a good start, and will provide additional funding that can potentially support student mental health across the board. I ask that you preserve that boost, increase it to 4% so that all schools have additional resources to provide Tier 1 supports to all students, and lay the groundwork for an additional 3% increase in the next fiscal year.

Given the \$700 million or more that has disappeared from this year's city revenue, these investments require tradeoffs. Fortunately, you have the opportunity to make transformational shifts in the way we spend District revenue. Continue investing in schools, health, and wellness by divesting from policing. The policing reforms you just enacted are an excellent foundation. Thank you for your bold and decisive action in response to the demands of local activists. But don't stop there.

Defunding the police allows you to simultaneously reduce the trauma policing can cause while increasing resources that allow for healing in the midst of our twin pandemics. Retracting the 3.3% increase in the MPD operating budget would net \$18.5 million alone to allocate for school-based mental health.

Despite dire predictions last year during the government shutdown, there was still a significant surplus. I am grateful for the Mayor's strategic allocation of those reserve funds. Please continue to use these reserves for human services first, as there is still more we can do.

Finally, you can enact an at-risk preference for next year's school lottery. Given all of the other concerns at the moment, it might seem counterintuitive to treat this as a priority. But not only is an equitable way to continue improving the lottery system, it is a very inexpensive way to do so. The impact of our pandemics on the families of at-risk students is disproportionate. Enabling those families to have a more equitable chance of their children getting into schools that effectively support at-risk students is a simple way of aligning resources and needs. It made sense as a proposal before the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the wake of the pandemic it makes even more sense.

When I try to imagine myself back in a middle school classroom, I think about what I would focus on. This fall, I would want nothing more than to ensure that my students were healthy, safe, and mentally whole. Not only is that what they deserve as humans, it is what is necessary in order to learn. Please ensure that all our students, particularly those enduring the twin pandemics, get the support for their mental health that we owe them. Thank you.