

**Testimony for the Committee of the Whole Re-Opening Round Table District of
Columbia Public Schools (DCPS)
January 21, 2021**

To: DC Council Committee of the Whole, Chairman Mendelson

From: Cassandra Matthews, Ward 8 PAVE Parent Leader in Education

Date: Friday, February 5th, 2021

My name is Cassandra Matthews. I am a Ward 8 resident and grandmother of four beautiful grandchildren. The two that are school aged attend DC Prep and Moten Elementary. I am writing as a concerned grandparent with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE). I am testifying today because my family has been affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic in every way you can imagine. This has been difficult for our family, but what is most heartbreaking for me and the reason I am testifying, is that I can see first hand how learning through the pandemic has been hard for my 5 year old grandson. My daughter, who has a 5 year old and 8 month old at home, caught COVID-19 in December; but even before that, she quit her job at FedEx to focus on meeting her son's virtual learning needs. He has a developmental disorder and can't seem to sit still for his classwork most of the time. He isn't able to get the same level of special education services that he did prior to the Pandemic and virtual learning at home can be frustrating for all of us. I want to make sure that when the kids return to school, that families like mine, from East of the River and with special education needs, aren't short changed or forgotten because we weren't a part of the decision making process.

I currently serve as President of the Atlantic Terrace Tenant Association and throughout the Pandemic I've been picking up free meals for people in my community to ensure that they had access (especially kids and seniors). To me, the most important part of the PAVE #DCSchoolsRcovery Statement of Beliefs (parent's statement on what needs to be done for an equitable return to school) is that the city should be meeting families basic needs. I believe DC has done a good job in supporting virtual learning in this way with the expansion of the city's P-EBT program (which my daughter enrolled in when she left her job) as well as the city's free Wi-Fi. Even though this is good, I know families in my community need so much more.

I am concerned about the future for all three of my grandkids (and for *all* of the kids East of the River who have fallen even more behind in the achievement gap since distance learning). But I'm most worried about reopening for my grandson because of his special education needs.

During distance learning, he isn't getting the services he was once getting in person and because of social distancing, he hasn't been able to spend time at his father's house like he used to. This has been a major disruption to his progress! To support families like ours, I am asking the city to invest in meeting the social and emotional learning needs of students whose lives have been in chaos for almost a year now. The city can do this by investing 10.8 million dollars to make sure all schools have the resources they need to provide high-quality, culturally-affirming and responsive, and evidence-based social emotional learning programs as well as trauma-informed training and restorative practices for all staff at each school.

Although I would love to send my grand kids back to in-person learning, after seeing DCPS go back and forth with their decision to reopen in November, I still don't feel comfortable making that decision and lots of people in my community feel the same way. That's why to improve the response to COVID-19 and plans for reopening, the city should work to build community trust in the plan by engaging *everyone* affected by the decisions in the planning- this means parents, grandparents, students, teachers, city agencies, council members and anyone else in the community who cares. This especially means improving citywide cross sector coordination, which is important for my family and many others who have kids in both the public and charter schools. Last, I think it's an issue that even when there *are* opportunities for parents to be a part of the decision making, like with the Reopen Community Corps, often we aren't hearing about it. Before I got the opportunity to submit testimony here, I had no idea about the program. The city must not only create these opportunities, but communicate consistently and widely about them.

I could go on forever about all the things the city should do in order to ensure a safe and equitable return to school in-person, but please take the time to read PAVE Parent's #DCSchoolsrecovery statements of beliefs for yourself. What I hope to leave you with is that to make this equitable return to in person learning a reality, DC needs to continue to support families in our basic needs like access to food and high quality wifi, as well as give kids the social emotional learning supports they will surely need to survive during and after this time. Our families need this and so much more, and you can ensure it happens in an equitable way by going even further in incorporating parents and grandparents as a part of the decision making.

Thank You!

Cassandra Matthews

Ward 8 PAVE Parent Leader