

**Testimony for School Reopening and Academic Recovery: Hearing from Experts
May 24th, 2021**

To: Chairman Mendelson, members of the Committee of the Whole, and Council staff

From: Maya Martin Cadogan, Executive Director of PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)

Date: May 24th, 2021

Good afternoon Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. My name is Maya Martin Cadogan and I serve as the Executive Director of PAVE. Thank you for the invitation to testify today.

I want to start by sharing that all of what I am offering here is based on the conversations that we have had with our parent leaders at PAVE and do not represent the views of every family in DC. The parent leaders of PAVE are diverse in their views, lived experiences, and perspectives, just like the parents of DC – they are Black, White, Latino, and Asian; they are native Washingtonians and residents who are new to our four quadrants; they are in six-figure households and they are in households that our system has kept farthest from economic opportunity; they own their homes and they feel the struggles of transience in our rapidly gentrifying communities; they are excited for a return to in-person learning and they are wary of what that means given the history of inequity in our schools. And while my testimony will be an attempt to aggregate what we've heard from each of them in our monthly board meetings, in testimonies, and in one-to-ones with our team, they are just SOME of the voices that should be represented in our work to provide each child in DC an excellent education.

You will hear from many PAVE parent leaders about their vision for #DCSchoolsRecovery, which includes a safe and equitable reopening, in hearings this week and next, and I urge you to listen to them. Too often, the people who are closest to the pain of not only DC's but our federal government's policy decisions are furthest from these rooms of power. And our system would be stronger if we did a better job of not just creating space for them to share but going to them. Which I do want to thank Chairman Mendelson and his staff for doing in March. I hope that every Councilmember on this body who is making decisions for families will do the same – and do so regularly.

All of that said, I will use my time today to lift up concerns we've heard from families and the solutions that system leaders and DC Council can take to make that vision a reality.

Concerns about returning to school in-person

- **Poor communication:** Despite the relaxed health guidance stemming from the availability and effectiveness of vaccines and lower COVID rates, hesitation remains for many families, especially Black and Brown families. In many cases, schools have evolved into a place of fear, as a result of mixed messages about what is versus what is not safe. This increased fear has also been a result of the lack of clear communication about changes in health guidance, why those changes are taking place, and what investments and action steps will be taken to ensure ongoing safety.
- **Lack of trust:** Overall, too many parents have felt that school was not working for their family even *before* the pandemic. This has especially been true for families of children with disabilities and Black and Brown families who often feel that the system has overpromised and underdelivered and presented incomplete information to them and their communities. Without clear plans and communication about what will be improved or changed, parents do not trust that the system will get their kids and families the resources, support, and education they need and deserve, especially in light of health concerns.
- **Hesitancy based on child age/grade-level:** We have heard from many early childhood parent leaders at PAVE that they are more ready to return in-person, citing the importance of socialization with peers at a pivotal developmental moment. However, we also know that overall applications for PreK 3 and 4 are [significantly down this year \(1,298 and 529 respectively\)](#). DC saw major gains from the expansion to universal PreK, especially in not only increasing language fluency that carried over into our later grades but also for women's workforce participation – of all ages, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds. We risk going backward if we do not begin to target engagement with families to increase participation. Additionally, despite voiced concerns about college and career readiness during virtual learning, we've heard from Black and Brown parents of high school kids, and the students themselves, that they are often more hesitant to have their students return to in-person learning.
- **Disparate impacts East of the River:** Many families that have been furthest from opportunity and most impacted by the pandemic, in particular those in Wards 7 and 8, have expressed the greatest hesitancy to return to school in-person. This largely stems from outsized COVID rates of cases and deaths in their communities, often having less

access to resources like health care, food, or out-of-school time (OST) programs, stable housing, and deeper mistrust of the system as a result of historic injustice and discrimination.

- **Unclear process for exemptions for in-person learning:** After learning about the medical exemption requirement for DCPS schools, and many charters moving to all in-person models, some parents were upset they would not be given the *option* - even if they themselves are comfortable with sending their kids to school. Currently, there is no definition of which medical certifications would make a student eligible to learn remotely. The lack of clear communication and process for families to navigate, further fuels confusion, frustration, and mistrust.
- **Lack of access to 21st-century learning:** The pandemic made internet at home a necessity that the system had to respond to for students and their families. But in the 21st century, equity of high-speed access should have been and should be a given – and not just because we’re responding to an emergency. While Comcast’s Internet Essentials and other free and low-cost options have been helpful, they are insufficient. Often, providers are throttling multiple households together and [even high school students up I-95 in Baltimore have highlighted that these services don’t provide the bandwidth necessary for online classes, platforms, and assessments](#).

What can DC leaders do?

Develop comprehensive, clear guidance for health and safety centered in kids and families.

- **Parents are looking for systems and schools to effectively share clear plans** based on ongoing updates from the CDC and the DC Department of Health. Much of the reopening plans and subsequent guidance has been centered on single adults - i.e. reopening of bars, restaurants, gyms, etc. We must put that *same* emphasis on kids and families and on the supports THEY need and deserve, like schools, OST programs, and child care and how to rebuild a healthy and strong community.
- **Transportation has been a key concern for many families**, and not only due to COVID. Many fear their children may witness or experience violence on the way to and from school. In a system of choice, especially for families East of the River, [travel time can be over an hour each way](#) to and from school. LEAs must work closely with other

government agencies and community partners to provide safe, accessible transportation options to school.

- **Families need clear and consistent communication about updates to school buildings,** particularly around HVAC systems, windows, bathrooms, and other essential components for a safe return. While DC has made significant updates to school buildings, many parents have not been made aware and therefore their concerns and questions remain. Concerns about school and program facilities existed long before the pandemic, so trust has already eroded. Information-sharing about this needs to be much stronger as we look ahead to reopening full-time in the fall.
- **Parents are calling for schools to more meaningfully incorporate mental health and social emotional learning into reopening plans.** All students have faced unprecedented trauma, and many students have not been in a school building in over a year. School leaders must reimagine their school culture that includes planning for a trauma-informed welcome back to school with age-appropriate plans to re-introduce students back into the building and school routines. Many parents felt school culture and mental health support weren't done well before the pandemic, increasing their concerns to return to full-time when the stakes are much higher.

Ensure full funding for necessary resources and supports.

- **We can only ensure all of this work is possible by *fully funding* our education system - for kids of all ages, at all hours of the day, at school, and at home.** This includes fully funding the UPSFF, at-risk weight, mental health supports in schools and in communities, OST programs, and child care. And includes addressing digital equity needs like those that the Council proposed through the [Internet Equity Amendment Act](#) and organizations like [New York City's Industrial Areas Foundation are pushing through high-speed mesh wifi networks in low-income housing developments](#).
- **With additional funding, schools and child care centers can scaffold and incentivize opportunities to engage in-person and build (or rebuild) relationships. This includes:**
 - Using the last few weeks of this school year and summer as **stepping stones** to get families comfortable and feel prepared for the fall.
 - Expanding OST programs, especially program deserts in Ward 5, 7, and 8.

- Offering food, materials for learning, and/or bringing in other resources families are looking for like mobile physicals/vaccinations, etc.
- **Education lies at the intersection of many different issues. We need coordinated, equity-centered investments to support kids' and families' basic needs.** We must invest in food, housing, utility, internet, health care, and violence prevention so every family can thrive.

Do this work WITH families, not for them.

- Parents are calling for system leaders to **leverage existing structures to engage students, parents, teachers, and school staff, with the use of surveys, feedback sessions, town halls, etc. in the plans for reopening and how to use federal funds.** This should be done at the **system** (Mayor, Council), **LEA**, and **school** level.
- Leaders **ALSO** must explicitly share with families what they heard and HOW their feedback has been incorporated into those plans so they can understand how their voice is included in decision-making.
- In particular, we need to develop an engagement plan that includes more opportunities for trusted leaders and experts to be able to address families' individual questions about school and/or vaccines.

In sum, our elected officials were chosen by the people of DC to listen, lead, and hold the system accountable. Now is an opportunity to show that we are a city that prioritizes our District's children and the voices and experiences of families in order to create a brighter future for every Washingtonian. This work is only possible with leaders in our education system who believe in the power and promise of parent voice and leadership. I hope you will hear their call and I hope you will ask each resident that you represent what they want for the schools that their children attend. Thank you so much again for the opportunity to testify today.

Sincerely,

[Maya Martin Cadogan](#)

Executive Director

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