

Testimony for the Committee of the Whole Budget Oversight Hearing Thursday June 3, 2021

To: DC Council Committee of the Whole, Chairman Phil Mendelson, Committee of the Whole Members, and Committee of the Whole Staff

From: Katrice Whitaker, Ward 6 PAVE Parent Leader

Date: June 3rd, 2021

Good morning Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. My name is Katrice Whitaker and I am the Chief of Student and Family Engagement at Monument Academy Public Charter School, a proud Ward 6 representative & Community Fellow of the mighty purple wave that is PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education); but most importantly, I am a mom to 5 PHENOMENAL BLACK BOYS - an uprising high schooler named Jaylen (DPA), two middle schoolers Tyrell & Justin (Statesmen), and two toddlers Devin (Miner Elem) & Karter (1).

I wish to begin by simply saying thank you. Thank you for expressing your support, along with Mayor Bowser, for increasing the Uniform Per Student Funding Formula (UPSFF). I hope the Council will prioritize fully funding the UPSFF to the level recommended by the 2013 Adequacy Study. Thank you, as well, for recognizing the need for SEL programming and trauma-informed training in all schools as we recover from COVID-19; we need your support to ensure \$10.8 million for these priorities makes it into the final budget. I also want to appreciate the Mayor for specifying the sub-population of students who we must prioritize in her new supplemental at-risk weight. With “at-risk youth” being a major priority of mine, I must admit that these increases made me hopeful yet determined more than ever to ensure that we as a city, consider and accomplish more to manifest success to our most deserving babies.

Navigating through this pandemic, or as my 11 year old son with autism calls it “The Covapocalypse”, has led me to explore what technically classifies a student as at-risk. With the impending achievement gaps we all should expect to see across LEAs, the social-emotional deficits our students will experience after being practically isolated for 15 months, the grief and loss, various traumas and financial hardships families have experienced, I believe it is safe to say that ALL of our students AND school staff are at-risk! When I think of what makes one “at-risk”, I think of my 11 year old, who had just made strides in socialization through his related services prior to the pandemic who now must start over. I think of my budding 9th grader who is matriculating into a new, very large atmosphere without the proper closure from what should have been the remainder of his middle school experience. I think of my 10 year old who’s first year of middle school was at home, a safe space which he has NO interest in leaving anytime soon. I consider the challenges my 3 year old may face, entering the school system for the first time without the daycare exposure he probably needed. I think of my students, all of Mama Fuller’s bonus babies who prior to this pandemic already faced several hardships such as housing instability, financial & food insecurities, intergenerational traumas and more.

I think of the parents I coach and counsel whose defeated tears I have collected as they simply do the best they can with what they've got. Lastly, I think of my colleagues... my staff who have carried the burdens of the many vicarious traumas we have accrued while caring for our students & supporting one another while managing our own grief and anxieties. WE ARE ALL AT-RISK and that's why I'm advocating that the DC Council allocate \$10.8 million for social emotional learning curricula and trauma-informed training for all staff in schools across DC to ensure that they are equipped to educate students carrying the mental burden of this traumatic pandemic. This is how we can give all DC kids a "FairShot"!

I am here testifying today to explicitly advocate for access and equity as we fully delve into school recovery. To create equity, we must look at communities, families & students as individual entities to properly assess their needs and eliminate the necessary barriers to allow for them to properly engage in each child's educational experience. To grant access, we must have programming and tools in place to assist families in navigating through the city's various systems to get what they need. I know that monetary resources must be dispersed across different citywide initiatives beyond education, but if I may plead, please consider allocating more funding to fully fund the at-risk weight. We are still in need of an additional \$78.5 million to meet that very important goal. Additionally, our students and staff are returning to school buildings emotionally unarmed. We need to allocate more funding to expand school-based mental health services, social-emotional learning curricula and trauma informed practices in schools. Mental health transcends into physical health - to ensure healthy schools, we must make giving our community the proper tools a priority. To me, Mayor Bowser is showing real recognition for this priority in this budget, by committing to fully fund the school-based behavioral health expansion and ensuring that all schools will have access to at least one clinician, adding \$13 million for DBH to provide increased supports to residents with substance abuse and mental health issues, and \$1.9 million for trauma-informed mental health services. I hope the DC Council will also highly prioritize keeping these funds in the budget. Ultimately, adequate equity and access will take deep empathy, overt transparency, proper family engagement, intentional citywide collaboration among agencies, and accountability across all levels of citywide hierarchy.

I too will end by saying thank you. Thank you for allowing me to testify today. I truly appreciate the opportunity to be heard. While distant, and not physically present with you as we round out this "Covapocalypse", I hope that my words are, if nothing else, a small motivating force to the catalyst that I know will evoke the changes needed for all children. I hope that my words demonstrate my willingness to serve. Chairman Mendelson and the Committee of the Whole, know that you have an army ready to do the work our babies deserve waiting for you outside when life opens up again. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Katrice Whitaker

Ward 6 PAVE Parent Leader