

Testimony for the Committee of the Whole
Roundtable on Reopening District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and District of Columbia
Public Charter Schools for School Year 2021-2022
Tuesday, September 21, 2021

To: Chairman Mendelson, Committee of the Whole Members, and Committee Staff
From: Maya Martin Cadogan, Founder and Executive Director of Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE)
Date: Tuesday, September 21, 2021

Good afternoon Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. My name is Maya Martin Cadogan and I am the founder and Executive Director of PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education). I have the honor and privilege of working alongside PAVE's parent leaders, including Tyesha Andrews and Renee Davis who just shared their stories with you. They are a truly awe-inspiring and diverse group of Washingtonians who have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic to advocate for their vision for a family-centered education-system and response to Coronavirus in DC.

In our conversations with families, we have heard some of the following about school reopening that we all have also heard today from the powerful families and students that testified today:

- **Reserved excitement** about kids returning to school in-person so they can be with their friends and learn with books, science labs, games, and art.
- **Anxiety** about the lack of fidelity to strong health and safety plans, including proper masking and social distancing, adequate filter and ventilation systems, thorough cleaning and sanitation procedures, and full vaccination requirements for all school staff.
- **Frustration** at the lack of clear communication of these plans. Frustration is especially high around lack of clarity when a student needs to be quarantined, including the testing and reporting protocol, how students will still receive quality instruction, and what these requirements look like for siblings in the same household.
- **Anger** at the position they've been put in: too often parents and caregivers are feeling like they have to choose between school and their families' safety.
- **Disappointment** that more has not been done over the last year and a half to mitigate health and safety issues, map plans with families at the center, and build authentic relationships.

With that said, it is not my job to fully speak to the depth and breadth of experiences of families in our city. Our parent leaders do that perfectly for themselves as each experience is unique, and therefore, any one method of engagement - for instance, a hearing during the day when many families are working *and* is publicized to be limited to only 50 people with an online sign-up page that can be difficult to access - isn't enough to do right by our community. I

appreciate the Council and the Mayor’s efforts but we need more leaders going out and listening to constituents in our communities, as well as welcoming constituents to their place of work.

Further, it cannot be overstated that this pandemic has taken an outside toll on people of color, especially Black residents. As of August, [96% of people](#) in DC who have died from COVID since May are Black. Black youth are [three times](#) more likely to be infected with COVID than their white counterparts.

We also know that distance learning has exacerbated long-standing racial inequities in our city. Black, Brown, and low-income families have been ignored, pushed out, and marginalized for generations. We did not disrupt that cycle last year. Instead, we further marginalized Black and Brown children when we had them learning at home with sub-par internet, concerns over basic resources, and lack of access to enrichment programs at the same time that white and wealthy families had the resources to pay for private tutoring, pods that allowed their kids to keep up social interaction with others, and reliable access to online learning. A [new study by Sonya Douglass Horsford from Columbia Teacher’s College](#) details the impact that the “triple pandemics of Covid-19, the pandemic recession, and racial violence” had on Black children and youth in 2020. While we made major investments in education in our last budget, it is not enough to stem the inequitable systemic tide that generations of our policymaking created and we are continuing this school year.

The delta variant has rightfully exacerbated concerns, but we *could* be in a different place and mitigated risk had we built a foundation of trust and collective commitment to do what’s necessary to keep our kids safe.

If we ground in science, transparently and consistently share information with families, center parents’ and caregivers’ experiences and feedback in planning, DC and schools CAN do this. PAVE’s network is made up of a majority Black and Brown parent leaders. Because our families trust us, we have been able to host in-person events (both inside and outside) with high attendance rates. Parents know we will *always* be upfront with them and that they know we are putting in the work to take all safety precautions, including:

- Requiring full vaccination and masking for any parent to attend in-person events,
- Having HEPA filters in meeting spaces and child care rooms,
- And clearly communicating all protocols and procedures. Over and over again.

Only seven out of 154 parents let us know they wouldn’t participate in in-person programs because of the vaccine requirement. Several parents decided to get the shot when we shared the mandate with the framing of wanting to protect the safety of kids and families. We address

all individual concerns with empathy, care, and information sharing, but never compromise on safety.

Here are my recommendations based on my lessons learned from leading this work:

- Invest time and resources in relationship and trust-building at every level of the system for every student, parent, and caregiver.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate.
- Ensure every student has access to high-quality instruction if they are not able to attend school in-person - and parents are aware of the plan for that.
- Start a culturally-responsive information sharing campaign about vaccinations for kids under 12 years old immediately, so that families - especially of color - have their questions answered and are more comfortable by the time it is approved by the FDA, which could be coming soon.

When we shut down our schools in March 2020, we thought we'd be closed for 2 weeks. 18 months and three FDA-approved vaccines for over 60% of the American population later, I think we have learned that COVID is going to be something that we will need to learn to effectively manage for our lifetimes. And the decisions we make today will have significant consequences for generations to come and have the promise to either close the gaps that existed before March 2020 or make them worse. Our system leaders have to profoundly change the way they do this work in order to address inequities across race and class in DC, or we will see a level of impact that we cannot yet fathom. As a sixth-generation Washingtonian whose heart lies with the people of DC, and who lived through a public health crisis that we didn't address in the 1980's and 1990's with the crack epidemic that pulled in my own father and irrevocably impacted my own childhood, I implore you to lead on this with urgency and conviction. You have the entire PAVE family ready to partner with you, let's do this together.

Sincerely,
Maya Martin Cadogan