

**Department of Behavioral Health  
Performance Oversight Hearing Testimony  
Committee on Health  
Monday, January 24, 2022**

**To:** Committee on Health, Councilmember Vincent Gray, Committee on Health members, and Committee on Health staff

**From:** LaKeshia Battle-Crim, PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education) Citywide PLE Board member and Ward 5 PLE Board member

**Date:** January 24, 2022

Good morning Councilmember Gray and members of the Committee on Health. My name is LaKeshia Battle-Crim and I am a proud parent of 3 children one of which attends Rocketship Legacy Prep. I live in Ward 5 and also serve with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) on the Ward 5 and Citywide Parent leadership boards.

At PAVE, one of our values is that *All parents deserve to have the resources they need to support the success of their children at home and in school.* We know you are working towards this and appreciate the funding for school-based mental health supports in the last fiscal year, which included the Mayor's investment of **\$8M** for school-based mental health and the Council finding an **additional \$1.9M** in one-time funding for community-based organizations (CBO) grant increases and to ensure ALL schools are covered under the expansion. With this being said, families and parents are still having trouble accessing the support they need for their children and the actual implementation of these programs is much different from school to school.

My child went through a traumatic 2019/2020 school year. She, like many other children, had a hard time dealing with Covid-19 and it has had a lot of effects on her emotional and mental health. She started to show signs of depression, anxiety and anger through behavior issues and needed mental health support. I tried to get her mental health support through the school, however after asking for the support from leadership, I found out that they had no mental health professional at the school. On top of this, There was no mental health professional and no recommendations or resources provided to my child or me. I was forced to do my own research and get outside support from the Community of Hope. Now she's receiving one-on-one therapy sessions and family therapy -thanks to my health insurance- to help her cope with everyday life and changes from COVID-19. However, this is still out of school support and over zoom which is not as effective as if she was getting her therapy in school and in person.

The implementation of the School-based Mental Health System is not doing well and the Deputy Mayor of Education, Department of Behavioral Health, and the Council do not have a coordinated accountability system to address implementation issues of the School-based Mental Health System. There are inconsistencies in access to mental health supports, lack of mental health professionals, trained teachers and staff and lack of coordination between departments and within individual school staff. On top of these major issues, there is also a lack of transparency in what is specifically provided at each school, how the budget is being spent at

each school, and where there is lack of services. This is leading to children being overlooked, having to suffer for too long, and children acting out due to lack of Mental Health Supports.

As mentioned before, my daughter has not been able to receive support in her school's mental health system and I know she is not the only student. Many children in her 4th grade class are having emotional and behavioral issues and there is simply not enough access to school-based mental health support. There is lack of access for several reasons such as lack of mental health professionals, lack of financial support, and lack of available spots. However, every school is different and this is why an accountability system needs to be in place to assess how each school is doing and what they are or aren't able to provide.

While we increased funding for school-based mental health supports schools, I am still not seeing sufficient mental health professionals. Her teachers are having to deal with so many behavioral issues in the classroom and don't have a therapist to rely on. This leads to the teacher not being able to sufficiently teach and give academic support. On top of this, not all teachers are fully trained in trauma-informed care and social, emotional learning skills. These behavioral issues and lack of trained teachers lead to children not being identified as needing help, but instead punished for their issues. Oftentimes students are not sent to the school counselor, but instead they are sent to detention. This only worsens the behavioral and emotional issues that a child may have instead of addressing the root cause of the issue which is trauma and adverse experiences. This also causes more issues for every student in the classroom and can negatively impact other children's emotions and academics in the short and

long term. We need to figure out how we can better support teachers and aid so that they can teach better. This takes a better and consistent approach to behavioral issues and a strong school-based mental health support staff to identify and handle students struggling.

Currently, I see a lot of inconsistencies at Rocketship Legacy Prep. There is a lack of communication with parents and I did not know that there was no mental health support at the school until my child needed help. If there are no mental health counselors and/or if the counselor quits or resigns, all families in the school should be notified immediately. On a school level, more communication is needed and I have been advocating for this as a member of the charter school board. I don't know what the process is at my school for hiring a new mental health professional and that's an issue. But in order for communication and implementation of mental health supports to be in place, the leadership and departments above the school need to be more vigilant in leading the example.

The Department of Behavioral Health also needs to do a better job at communicating to families transparently where the budget is being spent, gaps in the system, and how many children are actually being served at each school. Coordination between schools, the department, and the DME should also be in place. The Department should be notified and able to coordinate with the school to make sure families are given an interim therapist or counselor until another professional is hired. The retention rates at each school needs to be tracked and reported so that all parents can know and make informed decisions about where they want their child to attend. Also, the retention rates need to be tracked so that we can figure out what

schools may need additional support. Lastly, the loss of mental health professionals and changes can have a huge impact on children's progress and I have seen this with my child's experience as she has had to switch therapists twice. Parents and families don't know your plan for making sure that the promises outlined in the budget are implemented. There should be a document and process for all schools that details the hiring process for replacing mental health professionals/partnering with community providers that is given to all families so that we know the plan and can trust the system.

We really need to do better when it comes to making sure our leadership is held accountable for providing the mental health supports that are promised. I feel as though the leadership at my child's school tried to hide and not address the problem head on. I feel like they thought they could do this because of the DBH's lack of accountability system. By not having an accountability system, not only is the district potentially harming children, but we are also letting down children who are most at-risk and need the support most, such as those that live in low-income communities and those going through extremely traumatic experiences due to their environment. Stop letting our children down. The Deputy Mayor of Education (DME) and the Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) should develop clear, publicly transparent, and strong accountability systems for any agency/organization providing mental health support in schools in partnership with families and youth. Thank you for letting me testify today and advocate for more accountability so that all children living in DC have access to the mental health support they need.