

**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: Maryam Oladipupo, PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education) Ward 5 parent leader

Date: January 24, 2022

Good afternoon Councilmember Gray and members of the Committee on Health. My name is Maryam Oladipupo. I am a Ward 5 mom, I serve with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) on the Ward 5 PLE Board. Thank you for all that you've done for the District's children! Thank you for fully funding the school based mental health expansion in FY21. And thank you for listening to our families' stories, which highlight why the District needs a deep assessment of the mental health needs of school communities in order to build on that work. An assessment which should begin with providing \$300,000 to fund a study to determine the trust cost of expanding the school-based mental health programming now and in the future.

Living in close quarters and social distancing for basically two years, means that my 11-year-old, for the first time in his life, has unfiltered access to his parents' very adult feelings and emotions. He experiences first-hand our disagreements when tensions are high, our gripes about work issues, our anxiety over limited resources and our fears over health concerns.

We do try, with smiles and positive words, to mitigate some of the effects of this exposure on him. We frequently sacrifice our emotional venting to protect our son's peace of

mind. But we have internalized so many emotions, and as much as we try to restrain ourselves in front of him, there have been many moments when the heaviness of social issues as well as decisions made by our nation's leaders while managing the pandemic, adversely affected the mood in our household. This in turn has caused our son to experience anxiety and stress in a way he has never felt before, and forced him to confront feelings that he wasn't prepared for. And to be quite honest, feelings that even we adults find challenging as well.

As I ruminate on these matters, I know my family is not alone. Every family needs access to some form of mental health support right now, regardless of socio-economic status, race, or background, all of us have been pushed into a hyper-emotional state, the manifestation of which is severely impacting the mental health of our kids. My son is blessed to attend a school with a robust mental health support system. As stated earlier, he has had a lot to process over the past couple of years and had a tough time reconciling all that he has been exposed to. His school counselor came up with a targeted plan to help him channel these complex emotions in a constructive way as well as provided me with resources to help me support him at home. I want ALL kids and their families in our city to feel supported and I want ALL schools to have the resources required to address their students' needs however those needs present themselves.

As city leaders make budgetary decisions on how to allocate funds, it is my hope that you assess the mental health needs of DC school communities, taking into account the shift to the "new normal" that has happened for everyone during these times. This specifically means

providing \$300,000 to fund a cost study to determine the true cost of expanding the school-based behavioral health program now and in the future!-- And making sure that families are included in the design of a needs assessment to identify gaps and unmet needs. We also need an accountability system to make sure the supports we do have in place are working, and if they aren't we have a plan to address that.

I know this is a big ask, but on behalf of all of the parents and caretakers working to hold their families together under trying conditions; on behalf of beleaguered teachers and school administrators putting in time to ensure our city's students stay the course academically; and finally on behalf of all our children who did not ask to be put in the position they are in and are having to bear the brunt of adult decisions, I beg you to give mental health supports the attention and funds they deserve!

Thank You!

Marayam Oladipupo

Ward 5 PAVE parent leader