

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

To: DC Council Committee on Health, Committee on Health Chairman Vince Gray, Committee on Health Members, and Committee on Health Staff

From: Kerry Savage, Director of Policy at PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)

Date: January 24th, 2022

Good afternoon Chairman Gray, members of the Committee on Health, and Committee staff. My name is Kerry Savage, and I am the Director of Policy at PAVE. PAVE is also a member of the Strengthening Families Through Behavioral Health Coalition - a coalition committed to ensuring that DC children, youth, and families have access to a fully integrated behavioral health care system that meets the needs of the whole child.

PAVE parent leaders have been steadfastly advocating for school-based mental health since 2018. They have been tirelessly advocating for **their collective vision: an education system that prioritizes student mental health and wellness where all students and their families have readily accessible, high-quality school-based mental health services, supports, and education and is responsive to student needs.**

However, this is not our current reality. Our communities are in crisis. Experts have declared a national state of emergency in child and adolescent mental health, and parents/caregivers, educators, and mental health professionals alike are overwhelmed and on the verge of burnout. While there have been strong steps taken to improve access to mental health supports at school in DC, far too many families are not aware or able to receive the support that they need. Black, brown, and low-income residents are bearing the brunt on all fronts as all [data and research](#) points to a K-shaped recovery.

To address this, it will take all of us. Thank you to the Mayor, and the DC Council for the critical investments in school-based mental health last year. We now have enough funding to support at least one mental health professional or clinician in every school and the Coordinating Council has taken steps to focus on improving family engagement. Additionally, we thank you, Councilmember Gray, and your staff, for your recognition of the need to increase community-based organization grants.

Despite this progress, we have to be honest about our shortcomings. Many schools still do not have a clinician or professional placed in their school - and many parents are unaware if such support and services exist for their children.

In PAVE's Fall Back to School Survey [report](#), we found:

- Only one-half of respondents were aware of these crucial school-based mental health supports.
- Two in five parents reported that they are not sure if this support is available or not (42%).
- One in ten say their child has no access at all (9%).

There are clear areas for improvement, but we CAN do this! PAVE parent leaders came together in countless meetings to discuss what [policy solutions](#) are foundational to lasting, systemic change around school-based mental health and would address the biggest gaps and needs in our current system. Today, I want to amplify their top priorities:

1. Assess the mental health needs of DC school communities.

- This involves generating a comprehensive map of what mental health needs and supports currently exist in each school, including a corresponding gap analysis, and making it public to help create a comprehensive and long-term plan for the future. This should build off of existing data and information that we already gather from various surveys that LEAs and community partners use
- Provide at least \$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. Currently, provider compensation is based on 2016 rates - we must update our systems to reflect inflation and the increased needs of our caregivers and communities.
- Families should be included in the design of the needs assessment and plan to share it publicly.

2. Create a strong accountability system.

- 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 supports in schools in partnership with families and youth.
- At minimum, these accountability systems should create a process for individual schools, agencies, and community-based providers to:
 - Clearly show how much funding is spent on mental health supports, the impact/results of those investments, and the alignment of supports to the demonstrated need in different school communities.

- Evaluate how well agencies are coordinating with one another to enhance the quality and level of care in schools and implementing practices for engaging parents, families, and communities in the development of the school culture and the implementation of mental health supports.
- Demonstrate how a diversity of family, student, and stakeholder voices are included in the implementation and evaluation of mental health services, staff, systems, and funding - this is especially important as a recent DBH and Child Trends report revealed that only [2.9% of students](#) and [16.7% of families](#) are actively involved in a decision-making role for their school's mental health plan.

You'll hear more from PAVE parent leaders Maryam Oladipupo who shared about her GREAT experience with SBMH and how she wants to make sure EVERY family has that same level of support, as well as Russchelle Moore and Ana Rodriguez who bravely share about the impacts of when we *don't* get this right and how urgent the need is for a coordinated response and robust investments. I urge you to listen to their stories as they represent just some of the many experiences of parents around DC.

In sum, parents want to know what supports are available, how to access them, how money and resources are being allocated, and how well the work is being implemented. Parents, educators, advocates, and providers are all in this with you to come to the table to find a better way.

This upcoming budget and oversight season is an opportunity to show our values - that DC truly takes care of its people, especially when times get hard, and one that will courageously act to right the wrongs of historic injustice and step up with bold, innovative action to meet this unprecedented moment, with investments in our future, our children.

This work is only possible with leaders on the Council and in DBH who also believe in the power and promise of community voice. Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify today, I hope that we can count on your leadership.

In service,

Kerry Savage
Director of Policy
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