

**Roundtable on Special Education Policies
for Students with Disabilities Testimony Guide
Committee of the Whole
Wednesday, February 2nd, 2022**

To: Chairman Mendelson, Committee of the Whole members, and staff

From: Tracy Barnes, Ward 5 PAVE (Parents Amplified Voices in Education) PLE Board Member

Date: February 2nd, 2022

Good Morning Chairman Mendelson and Committee of the Whole. My name is Tracy Barnes and I am a proud parent of 2 boys. They attend a private placement school in Montgomery County & Washington Leadership Academy in Ward 5. I am also a Ward 5 PLE board member with PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education). I would like to thank you for taking the time to participate in PAVE's Parent Voice & Choice Week last week. It was great talking with you about our parent priorities surrounding Out of School Time program expansion and School Based Mental Health Supports and I hope we can continue to do so. And I would like to thank you for allowing me to share my testimony today.

I believe DC needs to drastically improve the IEP system to make sure all students' needs are met and that it is accessible and easy to navigate for families. This is important for my family because I have two sons with IEPs and I have had many negative experiences with the IEP system within DCPS. I do not want other families to experience what I did. We need a better IEP system and an easier process for accessing and navigating through it.

My experiences with both sons have been drastically difficult in the beginning of their IEP processes. My oldest son has had an IEP shortly after he began school. The original process of early evaluation and diagnoses was very frustrating because at the time the DCPS school he

attended did not inform me that they wanted to start an IEP process. The teacher took it upon herself to diagnose him based on a training she had just taken. She had someone from one of the DC child agencies observing him, without my knowledge or consent, during school hours and as part of the process, this person popped up at my home one day to discuss next steps and options. I had no idea that this process was happening. This obviously made me livid and I felt extremely disrespected. Families should be informed immediately if teachers and/or other staff feel that students need any evaluation pertaining to their intellectual learning and/or social/emotional issues. Despite the lack of communication from the school, the DC evaluator instructed me how to move forward. I then took him to Early Stages where he was diagnosed with Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD).

The process of creating his IEP was, to say the least, confusing due to the required elements of an IEP. His classification was Learning Disability yet he was one of the few 4 year olds that was already at a much higher academic level than his peers. The IEP team had a difficult time creating a plan for him due to IEP regulations. His IEP was focused on academics when his need was social and emotional. That was a problem then and it is still a problem now. Years later, he still needs social and emotional support within the school environment to ensure he is academically successful. The IEP process should focus on specifically what that child needs at that moment. If it's more social emotional needs then focus on that rather than feeling pressured to make up academic goals where it may not be necessary.

In addition to the lack of concern for emotional and social support, another big problem is the categorization of specific disorders. He aged out of the Learning Disability classification and it became Autism because there is no classification specifically for SPD. Yet another problem – there needs to be a classification for Sensory Processing Disorder. Although his classification of Autism has worked out good for him, it has not worked out so well for his teachers. It confuses them & causes more work for all of us involved. They prepare themselves & their plans based on what they see on paper then oftentimes end up reworking it after meeting him & having more 1-on-1 meetings with me. I have been told numerous times that his plan does not accurately reflect who they see in class. The IEP classifications need to be updated to include more types of disorders and it needs to be specific to the diagnoses the child has.

My youngest son started school at 3 years old. He too was diagnosed with SPD. He had an IEP created and with the cooperation of the teachers asking for and listening to my advice on how to care for my child, the rest of the school year was much easier on everyone. The following school year was a different story. He became aggressive towards his teachers and any adult that he did not feel safe with. Although he had his IEP already in place & now a BIP (Behavioral Intervention Plan) created by the school psychologist, who identified Anxiety also, his coordination of care was nonexistent. One of his teachers was more than eager to do whatever she could to accommodate him while the other outright refused to even attempt to do just about anything on the list because she said “I was there”. I should mention that by this

time I was already a staple in the school building because I was there just about every day to assist my child. This went on from Pre-K4 through 1st grade.

In second grade we transferred to a charter school. This school's coordination of care was so much better that for the first time in 3 years my son did not ask me to go to school with him every morning. He looked forward to going to school & being a “big” boy. However, he reverted back to his old ways. This time only with a few select adults. Within 1 academic year, (now in 4th grade) with no social growth, they offered me & I accepted a private placement. My son is now in a private placement school with children that have various yet similar disabilities, an in-the-classroom therapist and is being taught social emotional lessons alongside the academics where he is finally flourishing. Question: why did a DCPS institution not offer me a private placement for my child after 3 years but a charter offered it within 1?! And why do I continue to hear stories that DCPS is still doing this? This is a serious problem that needs to be investigated.

Overall, the IEP system and the coordination of care between IEP teams and families needs to drastically improve in DCPS. Thank you for allowing me to testify and share what I want to see for our kids and our District. I hope you will consider the following suggested solutions which are listed below as well as within my written testimony.

Suggestions for Solutions:

IEP Reviews:

- a. Be more fluid. IEP's should update with student's needs and not only with the annual or 3-year review.

IEP Focus:

- a. Focus on specifically what that child needs at that moment. If it's more social emotional needs then focus on that rather than feeling pressured to make up academic goals where it may not be necessary.

IEP Classifications:

- a. Add more categories (ie Sensory Processing Disorder)
- b. Be specific (ie instead of only using ED [Emotional Disorder], specify what it is for that child. Anxiety - Social, General, etc.

Train General Education Teachers:

- a. to not solely focus on the IEP's classification.
- b. to collaborate with the parents, each other & service providers on how to care for that child
- c. to listen to the parents' expertise on their own child versus talking at the parents as if they know more about that child based solely on a classification and their general teaching experience.

Safe Spaces:

- a. Provide a safe consistent space/spaces for these children to receive the services they require.
- b. Provide a safe space for service providers to work. OT's, ST's, IEP teams & all other providers should have a permanent safe space to provide services.