



**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: Ana Rodriguez, PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education) Advocacy Captain and Ward 5 PLE Board member

Date: January 24, 2022

Good morning Councilmember Gray and members of the Committee on Health. My name is Ms. Ana Rodriguez and I am a Single Mother of 2 daughters one of which attends Howard Middle School and we reside in Ward 5 and also serve with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) on the Ward 5 Parent Leader in Education (PLE) Board and as a Advocacy Captain. A shared priority of PAVE Parents is school-based mental health support, as mental health supports are essential to the growth of DC children and is even more important now due to the effects of COVID-19. Thank you to the Mayor and DC Council for your past work on mental health supports, including last year's investment including fully-funding 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. Those are important investments and are beyond important to support our children's wellbeing.

With this being said, I am testifying today because we are still in a mental health crisis. We are still dealing with major gaps with school-based mental health support and this is really affecting our children. Many schools still do not have the SBMH support and do not make time, space or train/hire staff to make sure that mental health is a priority. Without support we are creating mass destruction for our children's future. Many children are falling through the cracks due to an already lacking mental health infrastructure and there is a lack in diagnoses. I am here today to bring these implementation issues to your attention and to demand that there be a district wide mental health needs assessment plan to assess the needs and gaps that exist so that we can fix and actually have school-based mental health supports in every school that can accommodate every child.

I am currently dealing with my youngest daughter who has Epilepsy. She had an episode at school and nobody called me or reported that she had a seizure until the next day. Now she continues to have seizures during virtual learning. I still have to go to work and this has also put a toll on her learning because when I am not there she is not engaged. To remedy the situation, I had a friend pick her up but one day but she overslept and my daughter walked to her house. This was the first time my daughter had ever been out of the house alone and made such a conscious decision. Unfortunately, during the walk she was kidnapped by a stranger in my neighborhood. This situation was remedied and she is back to me and safe, but now she is traumatized and working through a very traumatic event, on top of not doing well physically.

To make matters worse, she has not been able to be diagnosed with a mental health disorder and she has not been able to see a counselor, due to the long waits in the district's overall mental health system. I have still not been able to reach any other form of mental health support despite her issues, the traumatic event and the clear need she presents. Due to not having a 504, she is simply not receiving the support she needs in her school, yet gets punished by her school for behavioral issues. All children need mental health support regardless of whether they have a diagnosis or not.

Both of these issues exist due to lack of assessment over where school-based mental health supports are needed and where gaps lie. As parents we are unaware of the issues or gaps in our schools mental health system until we need to access them. On top of that, the Department of Behavioral Health does not have a concrete need assessment plan to identify where there are gaps in the system and how we can better disperse funds to those who need the support most. This needs to change. **Thank you for allowing me to testify and share what I want to see for our children. I hope all children will be able to receive school based mental health support, regardless of diagnoses and 504 plan.**