

**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: Zulma Barrera, PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education) Ward 5 PLE Board member

Date: January 24, 2022

Good morning Councilmember Gray and members of the Committee on Health. My name is Zulma Barrera. I have lived in Ward 5, Washington DC since 2012. I have three daughters and they go to school at Inspired Teaching and Paul International HS Charter schools. I want to say thanks for the opportunity to testify today. The reason why I am testifying right now is because I am an immigrant parent that is working hard to help my kids. My first difficulty was the language. The second was the knowledge about the education system. But now, thanks to Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE), I have learned English and learned a lot about the education system. PAVE has empowered me to use my voice to change the education system and make it better for all children.

I believe there are two strong issues that need to be improved in the education system. One of those is mental health and that is what I am here to talk to you about today. Mental health needs to be a top priority. Thank you for all the support that you give us with this important topic. I am really proud about the investments the District has made in school-based mental health 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.

I am testifying today because I want to let you know the importance of mental health in the school system. My kids need to have a strong mental health every day to start their days with the most open mind. So they can be ready to receive the new information at their school level. A few years ago, I had struggles with my second daughter. She has a hard time with bullying and her learning difficulties. My daughter started to doubt herself and stress herself out due to the constant struggles with learning and the bullying at her school. Thankfully, she was able to receive an IEP and is now feeling better, but this is not the case for my younger daughter.

Right now I have some problems with my little one, who is in kindergarten. This pandemic has affected her in many ways and has caused extreme anxiety for my daughter. For example, she doesn't want to go to school, she is sad most of the time, and the problem now is escalating. She now is experiencing difficulty breathing, vomiting and difficulty sleeping. But when I let her doctor know about it, she explained to me that we are going to be on a waitlist for mental health support due to lack of appointments. I already talked with the special education coordinator in the school. We have the next appointment on February 11. But what am I supposed to do during this time? There is no mental health support that she can receive from either the school or the doctor - it is a never ending fight to get her the support she needs.

In conclusion, there needs to be more readily available access to school based mental health support. In this new lifestyle during this pandemic we need to make some changes. The education system needs to have more staff for mental health in the schools. Each school needs an effective team with all the knowledge and capacity to help direct our children through their schooling. You can imagine how this support makes an impact in the DC families. Thanks so much for listening to me and for all your consideration