

**Department of Behavioral Health
Budget Oversight Hearing Testimony
Committee on Health
Monday, March 21, 2022**

To: Committee on Health, Councilmember Vincent Gray, Committee on Health members, and Committee on Health staff

From: Tyesha Andrews

Date: March 21, 2022

Good morning Councilmember Gray and members of the Committee on Health. My name is Tyesha Andrews. I am a Ward 8 resident and proud parent of a Kindergartener at Plummer Elementary School and a Seventh grader at Jefferson Middle Academy. I am also a Ward 8 PLE board member for PAVE.

I am testifying today to advocate for SBMH program funding. My advocacy for School-Based Mental Health (SBMH) supports stems from personal experience. Growing up, I felt high levels of stress and anxiousness, especially when I was in the classroom. Despite these feelings being so visually apparent, my family, teachers, and schools did nothing to help. This is why I fight for kids in the District as a PAVE parent leader; I want all our kids to receive the mental health support that I never did.

My advocacy only grew stronger following my oldest son's high-functioning autism diagnosis. When he was first diagnosed, specialists explained that he was reaching all his developmental milestones, but aspects of his behavior needed to be addressed with the help of mental health professionals. Approximately seven years later, I was told, yet again, that my second son also was a high-functioning autistic. While I'm fortunate that my husband and I are working alongside both my sons' teachers and school staff to manage their behaviors, the resources to do so are limited.

Mental health supports come in a wide variety of ways and all children's mental health issues are different which means that their reactions to similar situations would be different as well.

There are children that have lost parents and guardians due to COVID. Black and brown people, in general, have higher stressors due to our current situation in the U.S. #BlackLivesMatter. Those two things are separate mental health issues within themselves. In addition, some children are with mental health issues are looked at as troublemakers instead of children that need extra help.

As of now, both of my children's schools do not have enough mental health clinicians or support to meet my children's needs, and my sons are two of *many* students in their respective schools with a learning disability and an IEP. The SBMH supports my son's needs are WAY beyond what many of our schools can provide. This is why we need a change. One of the solutions to this that PAVE parents identified, is creating and distributing a citywide needs assessment that will help determine what mental health needs and supports currently exist in each school and what needs must be met. The design and implementation of this assessment, of course, must include the voices and support of parents and families. A needs assessment would help us learn directly from those whose voices are often lost or ignored in discussions about SBMH support.

Additionally, to support the future of this program, we are asking for at least \$300,000 for a cost study to determine the true cost of the program now and in the future is important. In addition, we need \$2.4M ub grants for CBO providers, for a total of \$3.8M in additional funding. This past Saturday, at the PAVE Budget Forum, we learned that \$18M has been secured for D.C. Schools for the next two fiscal years. However, this funding is to be spit evenly amongst the D.C. public and D.C. Charter schools. This is unreasonable due to the fact that Charter schools also receive private funding. D.C. Public schools need the funding for more and better resources to compete with D.C. Charter schools. Our current funding levels are not addressing the impacts of the pandemic and our children's outsized mental health needs. We need to support our clinicians - the backbone of this program - and ensure we are funding their important work well.

From the results of our [2021 Fall Back to School Survey](#), I learned that 55% of parents with students with an IEP are not satisfied with the mental health and social-emotional supports they receive at school. I haven't seen many other surveys that ask about my son's IEPs with



them receiving SBMH support. This is why an assessment created WITH parents' input, just as we did in the PAVE survey, can ensure this representation is top of mind.

I want to know all the answers instead of wondering *how* I can provide my children SBMH support. This means knowing *where* I can find these supports in every school, being able to name *who* is providing these supports, and determining *what* supports will best serve them both. Parent leaders are ready to move forward and take steps towards real change. To our District leaders: I'm here to tell you that our hands are out – in this budget season and the next. Prioritize our solutions and take the step to walk with us.

Thank you for allowing me to share my vision for students and families in our District.

Tyesha Andrews
Ward 8 Parent Leader in Education Board Member