

**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: Ms. Latonya Graham

Date: March 21, 2022

Good morning Councilmember Gray and members of the Committee on Health. My name is Ms. LaTonya Graham, I am a Ward 7 resident and school bus driver for OSSE/DOT. My daughter Asia attends Kipp College Prep in Ward 5. I advocate with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education.

Thank you to the Mayor for your \$ 3.8 M investment in school based behavioral health in the FY23 budget. I am testifying today because I want all kids, no matter what neighborhood they live in or what type of school they attend, charter or DCPS to have access to mental health support! The District can do this by committing \$300,000 for a cost analysis, as part of a needs assessment, to better understand how to maximize those investments.

My daughter has always been an exemplary student making excellent grades and testing extremely high on Parcc and ANet tests. At KIPP Valor Academy during my daughter's 8th grade year, I sought an IEP to protect her because the 504 plan I had in place wasn't properly carried out by the school. On the academic evaluation of the IEP which was finalized December 2019, she tested on college ready level. She was referred to attend The Learning Center, a KIPP school geared toward social and emotional support.

My daughter was diagnosed with depression in 2018. She had faced multiple traumas, starting at age 7 she was inappropriately touched by a 7 yr old boy in school. This boy also threatened to stab her which led to her conducting a forensic interview at Safe Shores while shortly after, she was scared to sleep alone, would wet the bed, had bad dreams and so on. She was traumatized and went through counseling at Safe Shores. In September 2015 at age 8, had her right fibula broken during school recess and in November 2015, she was hospitalized with a concussion for 4 days by a student throwing 3 large rocks at her each striking her one on the side and the other two in the back of her head. Due to trauma symptoms from the concussion, in January 2016 she had to go through Neuropsychotherapy and was cleared In July 2016. The ultimate betrayal was the abandonment from her father in July 2017. Just months later, the signs of depression were obvious.

The Learning Center worked really well for her because the teachers, clinicians and staff are geared to support your child. They didn't see behavior issues during her tenure at TLC. She was respectable and engaged. They had to give her extra work because she completed her work so fast in each class, they had to keep her challenged. At TLC, they treat your child with respect, genuine concern for their well being and assures that their social and emotional needs are met. I truly believe in "it takes a village", and TLC was that village. I felt at ease and confident that my daughter was in safe, concerned and professional hands. I thank the entire TLC staff for the assurance and guarantee of meeting my daughter's needs

Now that Asia attends KCP, she continues to perform very well academically and get all A's and B's. My daughter isn't a trouble maker nor is she a bad child, she's healing from past hurts. I'm testifying today because I believe that parts of the approach that makes TLC so successful should be available at all schools!

Investing in the mental health expansion so that there would be at least one clinician available, is a good start, but what parents and families who have students like mine need is consistency, assurances and equality of SBMH support regardless if they have an IEP or not.

Initially I pursued an IEP for my daughter because I felt that if she had an IEP I could protect her. Prior to the 8th grade year she had been getting sent home for behavior issues a lot, I would have to go to work late or take off work. I wasn't and am not a stay at home mom who can run to the school every phone request. I couldn't keep taking off of work to attend reentry meetings every time she was sent home from school. Although the IEP has been beneficial, schools need to support the very clear goals set out especially when it comes to school based mental health and access to the help she needs.

She does have some good people on her team at KCP, in fact, they tell me she's a rock star who's intelligent, engaged, assists other students and helps them with work, but how do we make sure that they're supported? It doesn't seem as if PCS schools are able to support kids with IEPs to the same level as DCPS schools and that's not right! We want to see increased partnerships with community based organizations like Mary's Center and Wise center made more available!.

Asia deserves to attend a school that can support our kids BOTH academically and in terms of SBMH. When the school year started, she was excited and prepared to take her honors classes. In fact, I was more excited than she was. Due to behavior issues, and the lack of behavioral support in the honors classes, she was allowed to take one honors class which was seminar and the remainder of her class were taken in the BSR located on the lower level. In October 2021, she got into an altercation with a male student who confronted her during lunch and in November 2021 it ended with a physical altercation. Those incidents set her back from transitioning to take all of her honors classes.

My daughter felt singled out in her seminar's honors class and completely withdrew from the honors program in mid February 2022. The decision not to pursue her academic goals was feeling like she was setting herself up for failure. Since then, she's been doing very well. Students shouldn't have to choose between their academics and SBMH.

We need there to be support for both DCPS and PCS. The majority of students who attend charters live in Ward 7 and Ward 8.. We need for there to be support for both!

I'm asking you today to assess the mental health needs of DC school communities. We can do this by generating a comprehensive map of what mental health needs and supports currently exist in each school, including a corresponding gap analysis, and make it public to help create a comprehensive and long-term plan for the future. This can be made possible by providing \$300,000 to fund a cost study to determine the trust cost of expanding the school-based mental health program now and in the future. We must also support our CBO clinicians to sustainably do this important work with our children. The Mayor's initial investments decrease CBO grants. To ensure our clinicians and professionals are able to most effectively work with our children, we are asking for at least \$80,000 grants for a total of \$2.4 million.

Parents should be involved in community meetings and focus groups to get a deeper understanding of what this really is like in our community. Where I live in Parkside and we especially need the support East of the River. Oftentimes we speak broadly in terms of Wards, but there are differences in experiences from individual neighborhood to individual neighborhood.

Thank you for allowing me to testify and share what I want to see for our kids and our District!

Ms. Latonya Graham
Parents Amplifying Voices in Education