

**Education Agencies  
Performance Oversight Hearing Testimony  
Committee of the Whole  
Wednesday, March 2, 2022**

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

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

Date: March 2, 2022

Good morning Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. 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.

I am testifying today because I want to make sure that every single student at every single school has equity when it comes to both academics and access to school based mental health supports. I don't want our options to be limited based on the zip code of where they live or go to school!

Before the pandemic my daughter Leana attended Inspired Teaching School. She could have attended ITS until the 8th grade, but the school was unable to meet our needs, in terms of school based mental health. Particularly, our need for a positive and culturally responsive school culture and climate. I was constantly being called into the school for incidents involving Leanna. This is why we then decided to transfer to Langley Elementary, which really worked well for her at the time! Being around more Black kids and teachers who looked like her, in a school environment that met her needs, the incidents ended. But at the point when schools

moved to virtual at the beginning of the pandemic , we could no longer access all of the best parts about being at Langley. So when she entered the 6th grade we applied to and were accepted by Howard University Middle School.

I believe that a parent shouldn't have to make a choice between academic versus mental health support in a school! When I first applied to the lotteries, I put academics first. Then, when I looked at schools, there were so many we were interested in that were great academically, but their tiers of available support didn't match what we were looking for. In the end we had to give up on some great academic opportunities in order to prioritize my daughters psychological and emotional needs.

Now that she's at Howard U. Middle, as an individual school Howard is doing it's best. But honestly, there is nothing that Howard Middle had for me to support her without making me do an assessment. Not all kids have 504's and IEP's but they still need support! The Dean of Students seems to be the only person around. This school year my daughter witnessed her friend being hit by a car which was a traumatic experience and I was surprised to see that the kids weren't offered support or or given the opportunity to speak to a clinician about it.

I share all of this to show exactly why we need the district to assess the mental health needs of DC school communities. Which can start with a comprehensive map of what mental health needs and supports currently exist in each school and where there are gaps! My testimony also shows why we need the District to invest in a stronger accountability system between agencies, to make sure that kids are getting the right implementation for the supports that already exist. As parents we are unaware of the issues or gaps in our schools mental health system until we need to access them. Last year, fully funding the School Based Mental Health Expansion was an amazing step in the right direction and this year I hope you continue to prioritize the mental health needs of our kids!

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.

Ana Rodriguez

PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education) Ward 5 PLE Board Member and Advocacy Captain

