

**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:** Letisha Vinson Ward, PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education) Ward 7 PLE Board Member and Citywide Board Member

**Date:** March 2, 2022

Good morning Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. My name is Letisha Vinson and I am a proud parent of two children who attend KIPP Shaw Campus in Ward 6. I also serve with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) on the City-wide board and as a representative on the Ward 7 board

First, thank you for last year's budget investments in fully funding the school based mental health expansion as well as your investment of \$22M in out-of-school time programs.

For me, advocating for families to have access to adequate School-Based Mental Health and Out of School Time programs means playing my part in creating equity in the District and access to an equal opportunity, especially for Black and Brown families who historically have faced immense barriers to the access we deserve! When I moved to DC in 2005, I was basically clueless about the school system. The reality of how challenging it was to find high-quality schools for my children hit me like a smack in the face. And so when choosing, I had to rely on other people in the city that I trusted; which is how I ended up with KIPP. As I talked to people, did my research and got more involved with education advocacy, I would hear so many stories about basic educational needs going unmet in schools- unacceptable building facilities, no access to OST or adequate mental health supports, and I constantly wondered *how is this even real or feasible?* This is why I'm here, not only advocating for increased OST funding (\$25M in recurring, local dollars) but also a strategic plan centering family voices, to make sure that the programs created are actually matching students' needs and interests. And in terms of SBMH, it's the reason why we are asking for The Deputy Mayor of Education (DME) and the Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) to develop clear, publicly transparent, and strong accountability systems for any agency/organization providing mental health supports in schools in partnership with families and youth.

When I think about the possible nomination of Ketanji Brown Jackson, the first Black woman to be called to the Supreme Court, I know it represents a world of possibilities for our Black and Brown kids in DC. Before her nomination to the Nation's highest court, Ms. Brown was seated in DC's Circuit court! It's my hope that the District not only continues setting symbolic positive trends in representation, but also moves toward being a nationwide trend setter in providing high quality education!

It's true that with increased funding for OST, we can help to give everybody the resources they need; But it won't matter if they don't know how to use those resources. A good example of this is how so many parents feel about the Learn 24 website. Sure, it exists, but people too often don't know about it and it's so hard to use even if you do. This site should be a gateway to accessing if there's tutoring service, sports, cultural explorations and drama, but it can't be if people don't even realize it's there! The issue of parents not knowing about available resources also rings true when it comes to mental health support. According to the [2021 PAVE Survey](#) [Back to School Survey](#), about 1 in 8 (12%) DC families struggle with having consistent access to mental health services and supports and only 49% of parents are even aware if mental health support for their children is available at their schools.

So many people are surviving at a deficit right now rather than thriving. It's a detriment to our city, and it's a detriment to our future generations! Stress and trauma affect children in the long term - people react to stress by producing adrenaline and cortisol; chronic and toxic stress leads to an overproduction of these hormones which have [significantly proven impacts on important learning regions of the brain](#) and the limbic system. This can affect children's brain development. When you eat right, sleep well and have a positive environment that emphasizes mental wellness, you will do much better overall in life! But regardless of your definition of success, you're just going to do better at whatever it is that you do. If you're an athlete you'll run better, you'll perform better. If you're a student, you'll study better, you'll do better in your exams and in schooling overall.

It's your duty as Council to invest in the future of the District! The Council would be investing in our futures by generating a comprehensive map of what mental health needs are among DC students and including o \$300,000 to fund a cost study to determine the true cost of expanding the school-based behavioral health program now and in the future. And you would be investing in our futures by providing both \$25M in OST funding and creating a strategic plan with families, educators, OST providers and community partners to ensure access to in-demand programs for all kids!

As a parent, the way you have to fight for affordability and access to OST and SBMH support isn't fair. It's an issue that's straight up about equity. It is a shame that we have to fight like crabs in a barrel during times like DPR summer registration to get things that are so necessary and



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beneficial to our kids. With your investments in these areas, we can do something to change this!

Thank you for your time!

Letisha Vinson

PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education) Ward 7 PLE Board Member and Citywide Board Member