

**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:** Maria Vanessa Magana Martinez PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education) Ward 1 PLE and Citywide Board Member

**Date:** March 2, 2022

Good morning Chairman Mendelson, Christina Henderson and members of the Committee of the Whole. My name is Maria Vanessa Magana Martinez. My son Alexis attends Harriet Tubman Elementary School in Ward 1. I also serve with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) as a Citywide PLE Board member .

Thank you for all you've done for families this year and especially thank you for the \$33M in the DCPS FY22 budget for learning and social emotional learning (SEL) recovery plans.

Last school year, my son Alexis was enrolled at Cleveland Elementary. Alexis has an IEP and had been attending Cleveland since Pre-K. When Alexis entered into the second grade he was assigned a new SPED support team and that was the beginning of the end for our family at Cleveland. Although he'd been at the school for almost 5 years, once his support team changed it felt like we no longer belonged in the Cleveland community. In fact, it felt like the more I advocated for my son and tried to be in direct communication with his SPED team, the more the school nurse would focus on his 'condition' to support sending Alexis home for minor and irrelevant reasons. Waiting 6 hours in the ER and being seen for just a few minutes, only to be told that he was obviously coughing because he recently had his tonsils removed was so frustrating!

The final straw for us and the conversation that made me decide to switch schools, was when Alexis's teacher made that recommendation that he should be moved to a smaller class because his knowledge was like that of a kindergartner. At that point I had been doing virtual learning with Alexis, and I knew he was capable of literacy and math skills beyond what his teacher said. However, I do trust in the teachers' expertise, so I asked "if Alexis wasn't ready to move past the first grade then why didn't you retain him?"

Although I didn't want my son to have to repeat a grade, if it was necessary for him to receive the best education, then our family would support him through it. But when the reason given was that he has an IEP, I felt that response was insufficient! Alexis deserves the same quality education as every other student in the District! It's not right to just continue to promote him if he was not actually meeting the standard.

Ultimately, before leaving Cleveland, an email was sent to the principal to resolve these issues. But they never responded. Our family moved schools and still no response! That's unacceptable. Now he's at Tubman and things are much better, but the transition between schools was so hard for our family.

It's important to know that Alexis was the only child diagnosed with Down Syndrome at Cleveland and now at Tubman, which makes me so proud that he has been able to accomplish so much and speaks to his capacity for learning and development! Sharing our story and advocating for Alexis is part of why I am here today, but I'm also here to advocate for students and families across the district to get the support they need from DCPS and the DME. Right now so many students are struggling, like Alexis after transitioning from virtual back to in-person learning! Many have experienced learning loss and in addition to the academic support they need the mental health support to help them to understand that it's not their fault! Even my friends' daughters, who are a little older than Alexis, get frustrated and internalize it when they can't remember things they feel like they're 'supposed to'.

The National Survey of Children (NSCH) reports that nearly [50% of children](#) in the US have experienced "at least one or more types of serious childhood trauma." The Pandemic has been going on for nearly 4 years now, but we can't forget how much of a traumatic experience it has been for us all! We don't even have an accurate picture of what the effect of this mass traumatic event has or will be on our kids. We need the Council to prioritize Assessing the mental health needs of DC school communities; a key part to this is Providing \$300,000 to fund a cost study to determine the true cost of expanding the school-based mental health program now and in the future.

Additionally I believe that DCPS should increase training for all school staff. The District should increase funding for schools so that all school staff (teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, etc.) are trained in the science of how brains develop and function and trauma-informed, restorative practices. Training should include how mental health can manifest in many different ways, especially across cultures and age-levels. This is important because each and every adult who interacts with a child at school helps them to understand and make sense of their world and this has to be done with sensitivity and expertise.

Finally, for SPED families we need you to help make the transition between schools and IEP teams easier and shorter. I initially reached out to the director of SPED at Cleveland to discuss Alexis's needs in September or October and we finally were able to meet before winter break. Alexis's first week at Tubman was in February. Right now he's in a class with two teachers and one special educator, and it works for him, but transitioning to getting the support he needed took almost 2 months.

Thank you for allowing me to testify and share what I want to see for our kids and our District. I hope you will make the needed investments for a mental health needs assessment, the \$300,000 cost analysis and increased training for school staff.

Maria Vanessa Magana Martinez

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