



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

To: DC Council Committee on Health, Committee on Health Chairman Vince Gray, Committee on Health Members, and Committee on Health Staff

From: Kerry Savage, Director of Policy at PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)

Date: March 21, 2022

Good afternoon Chairman Gray, members of the Committee on Health, and Committee staff. My name is Kerry Savage, and I am the Director of Policy at PAVE. PAVE is also a member of the Strengthening Families Through Behavioral Health Coalition - a coalition committed to ensuring that DC children, youth, and families have access to a fully integrated behavioral health care system that meets the needs of the whole child.

PAVE parent leaders have been steadfastly advocating for school-based mental health since 2018. They have been tirelessly advocating for **their collective vision: an education system that prioritizes student mental health and wellness where all students and their families have readily accessible, high-quality school-based mental health services, supports, and education and is responsive to student needs.**

During this hearing, you'll hear from many PAVE parents - some who have been left in the dark on how to access mental health services and support for their children and some who have watched their child thrive at schools with the support of their CBO clinician. I urge you to listen to these stories today and take action to ensure this vital program is adequately and sustainably funded to support our students.

First, we want to thank the DC Council for providing enough funding in the Fiscal Year 2022 budget to provide at least one mental health clinician or professional in every DCPS and public charter school and finding the funds to provide CBO clinicians with stabilized grants for their work in schools this year.

We also want to thank the Mayor's initial investment of \$3.8 million in this current budget. Larger investments are crucial to continue the school-based mental health expansion program and to further spur DC's innovation around mental health for our students. The Mayor's investments include:

- **Funding additional clinicians** - which we welcome, but we must provide additional support and stabilized grants to our existing clinicians to ensure they can do their important work with our students.
- **Additional positions at DBH to support program infrastructure, data oversight, and program evaluation** - Parents, providers, and community members have advocated for data oversight and continuous program evaluation to ensure this model can meet the needs of our students. While we are excited about these positions to support oversight and evaluation, parents, students, and providers must be meaningfully included in these conversations.
- **Wraparound services to support 6-7 schools** - wraparound services are the backbone of a healthy school community, but we must ensure we are funding the professionals who are implementing these crucial services.
- **Strengthening the SBBH program workforce pipeline** - While we welcome the investment into the workforce pipeline, we cannot attract the talent our students need without adequate and stabilized grants to our CBO mental health clinicians and professionals.

We need to ensure our investments at a system level directly impact and improve on our students' and families' experiences with school-based mental health at the school-level and the Mayor's current investments miss the mark on what parents, providers, and community members have all collectively asked for. Currently, many schools have vacancies for a mental health clinician or professional and some schools have yet to even be matched with a community-based organization.

Still, we've learned that when this model is funded *well* and *implemented well*, it WORKS. However, the Mayor's current investments do not address many of our schools' and CBO's challenges and needs to implement this program WELL.

And that's what I have come to share today: how we can advance the school-based mental health program investments to ensure this program WORKS for every DC kid. In partnership with the Strengthening Schools through Behavioral Health Coalition, PAVE parents have identified the following three steps to support the mental wellness of all of our children.

1. **Right-size the grant amounts for our CBO clinicians with an investment of \$2.4 million.**
 - a. Thank you for advocating and leading the charge to increase grant sizes for CBO clinicians to \$78,000 in FY22's budget; however, in the Mayor's current budget, CBOs are experiencing cuts.
 - b. In the Mayor's current budget, our CBO clinicians are receiving grants from the 2016 estimate, which does not account for inflation nor does it account for our students' outsized need and increased costs of care for mental health services

the pandemic has caused. That’s why we are asking to increase grant sizes to at least \$80,000, for a total of \$2.4 million. Let’s keep the providers we have whole by stabilizing their funding so we do not ask them to do more with less.

- 2. Provide at least \$300,000 to fund a cost study to determine the correct cost of the school-based mental health program now and in the future to best support the crucial work of our clinicians.**
 - a. This includes determining how the needs of individual schools, providers, and communities impact program costs.
 - b. This is the epitome of a “work smarter not harder” strategy. It is well worth this investment so we can make targeted, high-impact, and long term investments and plans.
- 3. Create a strong accountability system**
 - a. The Deputy Mayor of Education (DME) and the Department of Behavioral Health (DBH) should develop clear, publicly transparent, and strong accountability systems for any agency/organization providing mental health supports in schools in partnership with families and youth.
 - b. This accountability system should be fostered and supported by the DC Council and the Committee on Health to ensure the DME and DBH do not continue to work in silos and in separate rooms from school leaders, parents, and students.

Our communities are in crisis. Experts have declared a national state of emergency in child and adolescent mental health, and parents/caregivers, educators, and mental health professionals alike are overwhelmed and on the verge of burnout. While there have been strong steps taken to improve access to mental health supports at school in DC, far too many families are not aware or able to receive the support that they need.

There has never been a more important time to have a laser focus on supporting students' mental health. These supports are foundational to their learning, to reaching their potential, and to achieving their dreams. It is essential to promote public safety, and to give young people the tools to cope and heal from the myriad of challenges and trauma they face.

This work is only possible with leaders on the Council and in DBH who also believe in the power and promise of community voice. Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify today, I hope that we can count on your leadership.

In service,

Kerry Savage
Director of Policy
PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)