

Education Agencies
Budget Oversight Hearing Testimony
Committee of the Whole
March 28, 2022

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

From: Tracy Barnes, Ward 5 PLE Board Member

Date: March 28, 2022

Good Morning Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. My name is Tracy Barnes and my son Dontre' attends The Foundations School of Montgomery County. I also serve with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) on the Ward 5 PLE Board. Thank you to Mayor Bowser for investing \$3.8M to support initiatives for the SBMH expansion program, including:

- SBMH support
- school wrap-around services
- Strengthening the workforce pipeline for school-based clinicians
- Infrastructure development

These investments will be good for kids throughout the District, but I am asking you all to take it a step further by assessing the mental health needs of DC school communities, generating a comprehensive map of what mental health needs and supports currently exist in each school as well as where there are gaps, and provide \$300,000 for a cost study to identify how much it will really take to meet needs now and in the future I believe there are especially gaps in support for students with special needs and IEPs; and I'd like to share my child's story with you today.

My son Dontre' started school at 3 years old. At first I thought he was adjusting wonderfully

because he was always extremely happy to see me and share stories of his day with me after school. It wasn't until a parent-teacher conference that I found out about his crying all day long, screaming "No! I want my mommy!" and outright refusal to participate in anything with the class, even nap time unless the teacher held him. Although I'm no stranger to early intervention, since he was only 3 years old and only went to child care for a few months, I did not immediately take him to get diagnosed. I wanted to give him time to acclimate to his new life. By the second part of the school year when he was having an even more difficult time being in school & away from me, I took him to Early Stages. He too was diagnosed with Sensory Processing Disorder. He had an IEP created and with the cooperation of the teachers asking for and listening to my advice on how to care for my child, the rest of the school year was much easier on everyone.

The following school year was a different story. He became aggressive towards his teachers and any adult that he did not feel safe with. He hit, screamed at, threw things at and ran away from them. I, along with his service providers, were totally shocked at the stories we heard about the sweet, quiet, finger-sucking little boy who loved to give out hugs to whomever will hug him back. Although he had his IEP already in place & now a BIP (Behavioral Intervention Plan) created by the school psychologist, his coordination of care was nonexistent. I had one of his teachers refuse to even attempt to do just about anything on the list, while the other teacher was more than eager to do whatever she could to accommodate him according to that list. I should mention that by this time I was already a staple in the school building because I was there just about every day to care for my child. This went on from Kindergarten through 1st Grade. In the 2nd grade we went to a charter school. This school's coordination of care was so much better, that for the first time in 2 years my son did not ask me to go to school with him every morning. He actually looked forward to going to school.

Despite his progress, he eventually reverted back to his old ways; but this time only with a few

select adults. Within 1 academic year with no social growth, they offered me a private placement. I refused & demanded that they did more for my son. I gave them a list of demands and they meant every one of them which included multiple evaluations. The results from these evaluations were eye-opening & instrumental in determining our next steps. It showed that my son has multiple anxieties in addition to his SPD. It became clear that the school could not support his mental health needs. This time when they offered a private placement, I immediately accepted. My son is now in a private placement school with children that have various yet similar disabilities; no more than 10 students per classroom; an assigned in-the-classroom, always available (even to parents) therapist and is being taught social emotional lessons (in the form of group therapy) alongside the academics where he is finally flourishing.

Private placement offering should be an across-the-board, transparent and equitable process for all families across all schools! Why is it that a DCPS institution did not offer me a private placement for my child after 4 years of struggle but a charter offered it within 1 year?! This is a story I hear from many other parents. I believe if we used the inventory of vacant buildings and shuttered school buildings, we could have the space to house some private placement options for families in the District! Primary Care Pediatric doctors are an important part of this process to help families get the help needed immediately, whether that child has an IEP or not. My son's doctor has shared that during the pandemic there has been even more need for pathways for partnership with doctors, clinicians, CBO's and agencies like DBH, OSSE and other SBMH related government agencies.

Thank you for allowing me to testify and share what I want to see for our kids and our District. I hope you will assess the mental health needs of DC school communities and generate a comprehensive map of what mental health needs and supports currently exist in each school - Which will help support all kids in the district.



Thank You!

Tracy Barnes

Ward 5 PLE Board Member