

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

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

From: Shaniola Arowolaju, Ward 5 PAVE Policy Captain

Date: March 28, 2022

Good morning Chairman Mendelson and members of the Council. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Shani Arowolaju, and I am a proud Native Washingtonian, Ward 5 resident, PAVE PLE Board member/Policy Captain and most importantly the mom to three wonderful children all of whom attend KIPP DC Discover, Heights & Aim Academies at the Douglass Rd Campus in SE.

I first want to thank the Mayor and the Council for their efforts and investments thus far in supporting Mental Health Supports in DC schools. We are on the right track with \$3.8M .I am testifying today because while the aforementioned investments are great, I believe there is a tremendous need to ensure the funds are put to use in the areas where school communities need them most and more importantly that there is an accountability system put in place to ensure they get where they need to be. The question still remains: How is the Mayor determining the true cost of the SBMH program without a cost study?

As a DC public school graduate who matriculated totally through the DCPS system, Park View Elementary, Shaw JHS and Eastern SHS and now a mother of 3 native Washingtonians who are matriculating through the DC Public Charter School system, I believe I bring a very unique experience to this conversation.

My mother was an immigrant, and I was raised by her mom, my grandmother, who eventually joined my mom in the States when I was about 3 years old. The DC of the 80's and 90's that I grew up in is equally the same and different from the DC of today that I am now raising my kids in with regards to the needs of mental health support for students.

I would like to take my time to speak on my personal journey growing up in DC and the journey my children are navigating in the DC of today. I want to touch on the need for us to do more to ensure our kids, all the kids of DC have the necessary supports to be mentally ready for the world they are currently living in and the world ahead of them!

Throughout my schooling, all done in the DC public school system, there were several occasions where I KNOW I could have benefited tremendously from Mental Health Supports at school. I came from humble beginnings, 1 of 4 children growing up we struggled and didn't have much. I was raised by my grandma (an elderly immigrant) so many things were taboo or just were not discussed in our home at all. The one experience I vividly remember in elementary school, what I know now, to be a very traumatic experience, was the death of a friend.

One of my elementary school friends lost her life due to gun violence. At the time, at around 9 or 10 years old. I really couldn't comprehend fully what that meant. All I know is I went to school one day, and this friend wasn't in class. Then the next day she still was not in class. Then one day the class was told that our classmate was no longer with us. She had passed away, and that was all that was said about that. Maybe the teachers didn't know what else to say, or weren't trained to handle providing such traumatic news to little kids. Processing that information as a 9 year old who, prior to this never experienced a death of anyone, now dealing with the violent death of a school friend, was strange and complicated. I don't think I fully grasped what it meant to be dead. But if my school teacher and staff were equipped to handle providing such news to students and if the school had mental health professionals in house, maybe I could have been provided with some support in processing what I was just told. I sure wasn't going to go home and tell my mom or my grandma what I just learned. That was for sure!

This would be my first experience with death. I didn't share the news of my friend's death with my grandma, because I knew my friend had gotten shot and my grandma, as I, was terrified of guns. I didn't know what her reaction would be, so I just thought it was best to keep it to myself. While I don't remember the details of what happened in the days leading up to her funeral service, my memory clears up totally at the funeral. I attended my friend's funeral, not with my parent or my grandma but with 3 other friends of mine. Now, I don't know how I was able to convince my strict grandma to let me out of the house, but I know for a fact I didn't tell her I was going to a funeral. I am unsure if the funeral was during the school day, if so, I know I surely

skipped school then. Either way, there I am, with 3 of my friends standing in front of the casket of one of our friends. People are crying everywhere! Her mom everyone. There was a lot going on in that moment, so much so, that I couldn't stay as it was just too much for me to handle. So while the other two girls I was with stayed at the service, I got a program and left. That was it!

As I progressed through my schooling and eventually my matriculation from the illustrious Eastern SHS, I bore witness to many friends and associates losing their lives to gun violence. I didn't attend any more funerals because I just couldn't handle it. The trauma of seeing my elementary school friend laying in that casket lifeless was just something I wasn't prepared to do again.

Now fast forward to today. I am realizing my children are experiencing some of the same community trauma that I did as a student in DC. Shootings, stabbings, robberies, and the worldwide trauma of COVID/COVID deaths and the stress have exacerbated the need for specific and targeted mental health supports in our schools.

Our children are fighting daily to deal with COVID, community trauma, the lasting effects of virtual learning and the depression that came with it. They're now learning how to reacclimate to in person learning while navigating COVID testing and the fear of getting placed in quarantine. My youngest child asks almost weekly is COVID gone yet.

In order to ensure our students are getting the targeted mental health support they need, I would love for the District to assess the mental health needs of DC school communities. We can do this by generating a comprehensive map of what mental health needs and supports currently exist in each school, including a corresponding gap analysis, and make it public to help create a comprehensive and long-term plan for the future. Additionally, I would like the Council to provide \$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. Most importantly, I believe the Deputy Mayor for Education and the Department of Behavioral Health should develop a clear, publicly transparent and strong accountability system for any agency/organization providing mental health supports in schools in partnership with parents and youth.

Our children deserve to grow up in a city that will support their overall health and that includes their mental health. As you are aware, school aged children spend the majority of their day at

school with their teachers and classmates. In DC and the U.S. as a whole our children are faced with traumatic events almost every day. Some big, some small. While thankfully, my children have experienced the death of a close friend, they do deal with stresses that didn't exist during my time.

I just want the council to know that our children NEED specific, targeted mental health supports and deserve a system that will hold those in charge accountable. I greatly appreciate the Council and the Mayor's efforts thus far in the area of mental health, but if there is anything that you all can do to assist in getting our school communities those targeted mental health supports and the accountability to ensure it is properly and adequately delivered, please help us. Let us parents and the community at large know how we can work together to make these requests a reality! Our children need this, our communities need this!

Thanks for the opportunity to testify.

Shaniola Aworolaju

Ward 5 Policy Captain, Parents Amplifying Voices in Education