

Budget Oversight Hearing Testimony Committee of the Whole Friday, April 8, 2022

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

From: Karla Reid-Witt, PAVE Ward 7 City-wide Board Member

Date: April 8, 2022

Testimony for DC Council Committee of the Whole hearing on:

- Bill 24-714, Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Support Act of 2022
- Bill 24-715, Fiscal Year 2023 Federal Portion Budget Request Act of 2022
- Bill 24-716, Fiscal Year 2023 Local Budget Act of 2022
- Bill 24-717, Fiscal Year 2022 Revised Local Budget Emergency Adjustment Act of 2022
- Bill 24-719, Fiscal Year 2022 Second Revised Local Budget Emergency Act of 2022

Hello, I am Karla Reid-Witt. I am a native Washingtonian and a Ward 7 PLE & Citywide Board member for Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE). I have been an advocate for education, special education and disability justice for about 20 years and for the last 3 years I have been an active advocate for the right to read. However, today I am here to speak about school mental health. Over the last 20 years, I have contemplated adding mental health advocacy to my work. I shunned it because there was so much to be done in other areas but over and over, even to my untrained eye the intertwined and unavoidable intersection between school success and mental health was clear.

Over and over I observed kids struggling with mental health challenges and school challenges or mental health challenges caused by school challenges. I still held off adding mental health to my advocacy agenda until I did not have a choice. One of my own children faced a mental health crisis while still of compulsory school age. When I tried to access services I started at the school. I had no choice. My child was required to attend.

Our experience was horrible. The school did not have access to the appropriate expertise or understanding of what my child was experiencing, and not a clue how to teach a student under those circumstances. The focus was butt-in-seat, not the health or even the education of my child. I went to the school district. They were no help. I filed a complaint and had a hearing. I won but it was a hollow victory because my child had been severely traumatized by the experience and to add insult to injury the school mental health services and expertise still were not available. When we don't meet kids where they are and educate them. We actively cause harm to them. We are culpable parties to their trauma.

We can not continue to do this work ad hoc. So today, I am asking three things of the Council, that you provide funding to :

1. Assess the mental health needs of DC school communities to include:
 - Generate 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.
 - 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.
2. 2.4 million in CBO funding to bring the grant per school mental health provider to a more market competitive \$80,000.
3. Create a strong accountability system to monitor and assess the quality of what we are doing and whether it is working.
4. 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 support in schools in partnership with families and youth.

Students who are mentally healthy are open to learning and accessible to instruction. Now, with the pandemic, the need for anxiety, depression and grief support is widespread among children. Remember with or without your help today's students will grow into adults who live in this city. They will either be adults living out life outcomes the result of having their mental health needs met as children or they will be adults whose life outcomes were impacted by the lack of access to school mental health services and expertise. The question is: will we use today's funds to support student mental health needs of today or will we spend an exponentially greater future sum to support adults who did not get needed school mental health support as children.

Student mental health services and their impacts on the education of children cause a domino effect across all local issues presently and in the future. Committee of the Whole and the agencies under its oversight should prioritize school mental health because:

- Students who are not open to learning and accessible to instruction in school due to mental health challenges are **more likely to do poorly in school, drop out of school, and become adults in need of employment services for the formerly incarcerated, low education level workers or other specially designated and hard to serve subgroups.**
- Committee on Business and Economic Development and the agencies under its oversight should prioritize school mental health because:
 - **Businesses, organizations and the city's tax base need a pipeline of qualified employees and entrepreneurs.**
 - Committee on Government Operations and Facilities and the agencies under its oversight should prioritize school mental health because:
 - **Access to appropriate child and adult mental health services and appropriate education is a human right and impacts the full spectrum of intersectionality, including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning residents, as well as women, veterans and returning citizens.**
 - Committee on Health and the agencies under its oversight Should prioritize school mental health because:
 - **Treating adults with mental health needs is complex and more costly than treating children. Additionally, children with unmet mental health needs are more likely to become adults who suffer comorbid addiction.**
 - Committee on Housing and Executive Administration and the agencies under its oversight should prioritize school mental health because:
 - Students who are not open to learning and accessible to instruction in school are more likely to live in poverty and are at **greater risk of becoming adults who repeatedly need to access social services and are at increased risk of becoming houseless.**

- Committee on Human Services and the agencies under its oversight should prioritize school mental health because:
 - Students who are not open to learning and accessible to instruction in school because of unmet mental health needs are **more likely to become adults who live in poverty and are at greater risk of repeatedly needing to access social services and becoming houseless, as well as to creating families trapped in a generational cycle of high level need and support.**
- Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety and the agencies under its oversight should prioritize school mental health because:
 - Students who are not open to learning and accessible to instruction in school because of unmet mental health needs are **more likely to come in contact with the juvenile justice system as children and to become incarcerated as adults.**
- Committee on Labor and Workforce Development and the agencies under its oversight should prioritize school mental health because:
 - Students who are not open to learning and accessible to instruction in school because of unmet mental health needs are more likely to **become adults ill-prepared for the workforce, unable to gain employment that provides a living wage and to continually face unemployment.**
- Committee on Recreation, Libraries and Youth Affairs and the agencies under its oversight should prioritize school mental health because:
 - **Children are the recipients of direct services provided by many of the agencies overseen by this Committee. In order to fully receive the benefit of the funds we allocate to public libraries, youth affairs, public parks and recreation, as youth and eventually as adults, and to fully participate in services and information provided by the city regarding matters relating to Caribbean, Latino, African, African American, and Asian and Pacific Islander affairs, our residents need to be mentally healthy contributing citizens.**
- Committee on Transportation and the Environment And the agencies under its oversight should prioritize school mental health because:

- Students who are not open to learning and accessible to instruction in school due to unmet mental health needs are unlikely to receive the education necessary to **become the adults we desperately need to solve the immense transportation and environmental challenges that lie ahead for DC.**

BECAUSE TO DO OTHERWISE IS TO BE PENNY WISE AND POUND FOOLISH.

Karla Reid- Witt
Ward 7 PAVE City-wide Board Member