

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

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

From: Marquis Cotton, Ward 8 PAVE PLE Board Member

Date: April 8, 2022

Good afternoon Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. My name is Marquis Cotton and I am a proud parent of two children who attend schools in Ward 8 and I serve with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) on the Ward 8 Parent Leader in Education Board.

Thank you to the Mayor for your investments in OST in this year's budget! Today I am here to share with you my story of why OST programs are an important pathway to success for kids in our community, and why I want to see an updated needs assessment so that we can get more high-quality programs, especially for kids East of the River.

This story begins in 2005 when my prison sentence was overturned. I was released from incarceration, and, by faith, my wife and I were blessed with our son, Prince Tariq Nasir Cotton. Being a father is one of the most important roles in my life and when I accepted a position with the Washington Nationals Youth Baseball Academy, this put me in a better place financially, and I was on a new path of life – one that was opposite from the path that led to my incarceration.

Being able to work with Nats Youth baseball allowed me to see the positive effects sports can have on kids. It helps them to focus, gain mentors and remain active after school and in Summers, so that they can stay out of trouble. My job supported the education and development of kids across the District, a role I was called to do. I am happy to know that the Mayor will expand DPR seats this summer, but as an OST worker myself, I know How important it is to have a plan to hire people that know what they're doing and really care. I hope to see the District develop a sustainable workforce pipeline to meet the increased program availability.

In 2007, Allah answered my prayers, and my wife and I were blessed with a daughter, Amina. Watching my children grow has been a humbling experience for many reasons. But one of the best aspects is watching them fall in love with learning – especially through their participation in Out-of-School Time (OST) programs.

Since she was young, my daughter has always been interested in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects. She has learned to code through her participation with the Girls in Technology programs which has only strengthened her mind and supported her school work.

My other two kids also both attended the Nationals Youth Baseball Academy as Scholar-Athletes. While they participated in the program, they always shared about all the activities they did, making friends with other scholars, their love for the program, and how well it served them.

My kids are fortunate to participate in these OST programs, but I know this is not the reality for all DC families. We need to create a strategic plan that includes all stakeholders in OST programming – especially parents. That includes providing a citywide needs assessment and defining what a high-quality OST program looks like so all our kids can participate in a program that supports their academics and their interests.

OST programs have shaped my kids' education for the better. But OST programs have also shaped me. Because of OST programming, my kids fell in love with learning. And watching them fall in love with learning made me fall back in love with it too. So much so that I decided to return to school, and this past year, I graduated with my Bachelor's degree from Full Sail University.

I am proud of where I am today, but my life could have been different. The school-to-prison pipeline is real; I was a product of it. But we can end the pipeline by investing in our kids, investing in their education, and investing in OST programs.

We have a job to do and that is to serve our kids. Let's get it done.

Marquis Cotton
Ward 8 PLE Board Member