

**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: Tawanda Clemons, Ward 8 PLE Board Member

Date: April 8, 2022

Good afternoon Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. My name is Tawanda Clemons and I have four children. Two of them are school aged and attend Friendship Tech Prep and South East Campus in Ward 8 . I also serve with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) on the Ward 8 PLE Board.

Thank you to Mayor Bowser and the Council for your investments in School based health in the FY23 budget, including \$3.8M to support the SBMH expansion. I am testifying today because we need mental health to continue to be a priority!

When my oldest daughter was in elementary school, she told one of her friends that she wanted to commit suicide because she was being bullied by a boy in her class. Before this incident, I was aware of the bullying and I worked with the school dean and counselors who were supportive. Although the harassment stopped for a while, it eventually flared back up. That's when my daughter told her friend about her thoughts, and the friend told the school counselor. As a parent, I didn't know what to do or how to handle the situation, but I knew I had to protect my daughter! My first thought was to call MPD and their response was that they take bullying seriously as assault. They clarified the steps they could take to stop the bullying, but the first thing I had to do was go to the school to get support and see if we could work it out there.

At the school the principal set up a meeting with me and a mental health professional and we sat down to discuss the issue at hand. They were willing to help my daughter, the victim of bullying, but they also attempted to help the boy through the challenges was facing to his own mental wellness. The mother declined the help and the school eventually ended up expelling him.

I think this is an excellent example of how having access to mental health clinicians in schools, through the expansion, can promote restorative justice. But in school, clinicians are not enough! This young man was apparently in an abusive home, he was hungry, and he wasn't getting the support he needed. We believe the mother declined any help because she didn't want anyone to see what was happening at home. The District needs more wraparound services for students and families and that means that we also need to create a strong accountability system. We need the Deputy Mayor of Education and the Department of Behavioral Health to develop strong accountability systems for any agency or organization providing mental health support in schools in partnership with families and youth. When agencies and service providers are in communication, we can identify when things are going wrong for kids faster.

My daughter's story with bullying and how it affected her mental health ended well. Over time her confidence grew and she even wrote a book of poems about it. Her school hosted a book signing and everything! This is a positive outcome, but that's not what happens to so many kids. We need to change how we look at mental health schools and how bullying is affecting children. We need to put things in place before these things happen. That is why I am also asking you to assess the mental health needs of DC school communities, so that there is a clear understanding of what the mental health needs of students are, and what supports already exist. And also why we need you to invest \$300,000 in a cost study, so that once we know both the needs and where the gaps are, we can determine the true cost of addressing them for our students. Thank you for allowing me to testify and share what I want to see for our kids and our District!

Tawanda Clemons
Ward 8 PLE Board Member