

**Kisha Clark**  
**State Board of Education**  
**State Board of Education Meeting**  
**February 15, 2023**

Greetings President Eboni-Rose Thompson and the DC State Board of Education,

My name is Kisha Clark and I live in Ward 6. My daughter attends Eastern High School. I currently serve as a PAVE parent leader on the Citywide and Ward 6 board.

I want to thank the State Board of Education for your partnership and leadership on critical education issues that impact all students in schools.

Today, I'm testifying because mental health has always been an important issue to me. But now, after experiences with my own children that I detailed in the [Washington Post](#), and experiences in my own community, I see more clearly how critical school-based mental health resources are. Mental health plays a crucial role in how students show up to school, and show up in life. It encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Mental health influences cognition, perception, and behavior. It also determines how an individual handles stress, interpersonal relationships, and decision-making.

Even adults can have a hard time addressing their mental health needs, so one can imagine that it might be even harder for our children to do so, particularly in schools that lack the adequate staffing or resources to support them.

Children may know something is wrong, may notice they are feeling different, but oftentimes cannot figure out how to say it, describe it, or understand what is happening. Because of this challenge, mental health struggles may show up as poor behavior choices at home and at school. A student may become withdrawn, grades may slip, outbursts may become the norm. These behaviors can lead to in-school consequences like detention, suspension, or being labeled as a "bad student". These consequences do nothing to address underlying mental health needs, and only lead to increased time away from the classroom and subsequent learning-loss.

None of us think we have "bad" children, because we do not. The reality is that our children may be making poor choices because of mental health needs that are being overlooked or ignored. If no one takes the time to understand the root causes behind behaviors, we miss opportunities to resolve the bigger issue.

PAVE parent advocacy on [school-based mental health supports](#) is vital because it gives voice and agency to DC students and families. Our students deserve a world-class education; an equitable one that holistically meets their diverse academic and mental health needs. It is important that we hold legislators and policy-makers accountable for providing access to mental health supports in our schools. We cannot expect our students to excel academically when we have not met their mental health needs first. This is why [School-Based Mental Health](#) has been one of our [PAVE #ParentPriorities](#) for 5 years in a row!

My work as a Ward 6 Citywide PLE Board member has empowered me to collaborate with community partners and policymakers on decisions that impact our children's mental health. I know first-hand that when we harness the power within us by sharing our stories around school-based mental health, elected officials and policy-makers will hear us and make the needed systemic changes to create an environment that best meets our students' mental health needs.

Our children's healthy development depends on US, their parents—and other caregivers who act in the role of parents—to serve as their first sources of support in becoming independent and leading healthy and successful lives. It's important that we talk about mental health at the dinner table, or in the family group chat. How we talk about it impacts how our children view mental health and communicate.

I want the DC State Board of Education to continue to support PAVE's push for adequate funding for school-based behavioral health services, specifically for Black and Brown students across the district. I want integrated comprehensive services and support throughout every grade level. Further, I hope that mental health needs are assessed through universal, selective, and targeted interventions.

To get us close to my desired outcome, each school must have a full-time psychiatrist and therapist available on-site all school year. Additionally, I want the stigma and embarrassment of mental health to be eliminated through positive messaging. I wholeheartedly believe that [PAVE parent leader advocacy](#) will transform how students and families view mental health challenges and seek resources to address them.

Remember understanding mental health needs can be challenging for a child, it's up to US (parent leaders) to AMPLIFY our voices and ensure that students in the district receive the services they deserve.

I also want to share the importance of out of school time programs and their intersection with school based mental health. OST programs complement mental health supports in a significant

way. I believe that OST programs benefit our children's mental, spiritual, and emotional health. Research proves that sports-centered OST programs improve mental health by:

- Supporting students' academic achievement that ultimately reduces health disparities (including mental health issues);
- Improving personal and social skills, leading to more confidence; and
- Reducing anxiety, increasing resilience, and ultimately improving a child's well-being

These facts don't lie, and our current reality only makes the need for these OST programs even more crucial. Nationwide, one in five children and adolescents experience a mental health problem during their school years. And among the 3.8 million teens who reported a major depressive episode in the past year, nearly 60% did not receive any treatment. Even here in DC, we have a problem we need to fix. According to the PAVE 2021 Fall Back to School Survey, only 49% of families reported knowing where to look for and receive school based mental health support for their kids in need.

But what if OST programs could provide the mental health supports that families need? If we reimagine the way we look at OST programs, especially sports-specific programs, we can meet our families where they wouldn't need to take extra steps to find them.

If we want to make this a reality for our families, we need to make steps towards change. Luckily, parent leaders like me already have the answers to make it happen. We believe that every family should have access (regardless of income level or where they live) to high-quality OST programs that support their children's individual needs, their passions, and enriches their learning. OST programs could be one of the supports or interventions to help students dealing with mental health challenges. OST programs provide our kids with enriching activities, safe places, and connect them to caring adults when out of school, but they play an integral role in improving mental health outcomes. We're awaiting the results of the \$300,000 cost study to determine the true costs of expanding the school-based mental health programs through a needs assessment that will shine a light on the mental health supports that are available or needed across the city. We expect a detailed review of the findings in March 2023. We hope the city fully funds not just positions for mental health staff and incorporates family engagement, information sharing, and coordination of care. It should address that and estimate the cost.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my testimony. I appreciate the DC State Board of Education's time and partnership.

Best,  
Kisha Clark  
Citywide/Ward 6 Board Member