

**Shaniola Arowolaju**  
**State Board of Education**  
**State Board of Education Meeting**  
**March 15, 2023**

Good evening, President Thompson, Vice President O’Leary, and State Board of Education Members. My name is Shaniola Arowolaju, and I am a proud parent of 3 students that attend KIPP DC Aim & Heights Academy at the Douglass Rd campus in in Ward 8, and I also serve with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) on the Ward 5 Parent Leaders in Education Board.

I would like to start my testimony by first acknowledging the support that the Council and the Mayor have shown for our school system in FY 2023. We are on the right track and moving in the right direction!

Investing in school based mental health is important not only for our students, families and the school communities, it is also important for the city as whole. I am testifying today because I want the stigma of mental health in the schools to be eliminated and for the importance of school based mental health to be on the front of everyone’s mind. I would like all kids, teachers, and school staff to have access to quality mental health supports regardless of their background.

To make my dreams a reality and to address the issues around the lack of quality and the availability of school based mental health, DC should prioritize both providing and improving the support given to the schools’ staff to equip them with the ability to respond to the needs of ALL DC children. While I know that is a loaded statement, some ways to accomplish this is by allotting additional funding to expand teacher and staff training. This includes adjusting funding for programs to match the recommendations of the Department of Behavioral Health’s cost study and providing more grants to expand partnerships with community-based organizations like Turnaround for Children and restorative DC. . This would afford LEAs the ability to manage expanding supports based on their specific school community needs.

As a DC native and graduate of the DC public school system I have experienced and witnessed firsthand what the lack of available mental health supports looks like. We need the council to work to build and sustain a pipeline of diverse and competent mental health professionals. We need the mayor and council to provide additional funding and incentivize mental health professionals to serve in our schools. Incentivize DMV graduates to come back and serve the

community they lived and grew up in. Pass legislation to widen the network of potential service providers in DC schools to accept MD & VA licensure and certification.

And in my humble opinion, most importantly improve family engagement in school based mental health. It is not enough to make these services available if the community isn't aware of them or feel they are put in place for them or don't see the necessity of them! The city can leverage websites that are already utilized and frequently visited by parents to share information on SBMH for example, My school DC. We need to empower schools with resources and manpower to be able to meet families where they are and build a line of open communication surrounding the needs and wants of our students and school staff! DBH should share the results of the SBMH cost study publicly and make it easily accessible. The Mayor & Council should provide funding to match the findings of the cost study and work to implement these recommendations in all schools!

These are just a couple of ways we can work together as a community and as a city to ensure our future leaders grow up to be well rounded citizens! These priorities are especially important to me after watching the world live through COVID 19! COVID wasn't something any of us asked for, but it highlighted the inequities that exist in many facets of our community. Especially mental health. We all suffered trauma! Trauma that each and every one of us needs support to help work through. The most vulnerable being our children. We adults had and are still having a hard time navigating this new normal after COVID.

We must work twice as hard to figure out the best way to navigate this new normal. Therefore engaging parents, students, LEAs and the school communities is important. Who better than those of us on the front line, witnessing every day the needs of our students and school community. Call on parents and school staff to provide insight! Call on students to state their needs and wants to help ensure their mentality is healthy! Call on community leaders & community organizations to work as partners to make these necessities a reality.

Thank you for your time, attention and providing me the opportunity to share what I would like to see for our kids and city!

Sincerely,  
Shaniola Arowolaju  
PAVE Ward 5 PLE Board Member