

**Shaniola Arowolaju**  
**Department of Behavioral Health**  
**Performance Oversight Hearing Testimony**  
**Committee on Health**  
**February 1, 2023**

Good morning, Councilmember Henderson and members of the Committee on Health. My name is Shaniola Arowolaju and I am a proud parent of 3 that attend KIPP DC Aim & Heights Academy at the Douglass Rd campus in in Ward 8 and also serve with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) on the Ward 5.

I would like to start my testimony by first thanking the council and the Mayor for your support of our school system in FY 2023. We are on the right track and moving in the right direction! Thank you for the 2.4M to increase grant sizes for community based organizations as well as the 150k for a comprehensive study to determine the true cost and needs of the SBMH program presently and in the future.

Those investments are important not only for our students, families and the school communities, they are important for the city as whole. I am testifying today because I want the stigma of mental health in schools to be eliminated and for the importance of school based mental health to be at the top 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.

In order to make this vision a reality and to address the issues around the lack of quality and the availability of school based mental health services, 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 increasing the UPSFF to adjust for inflation and then matching the UPSFF to the recommendations of the new adequacy standard in the upcoming study. This would afford LEAs the ability to manage expanding supports based on their specific school community needs.

Great organizations like Turnaround for Children and Restorative DC are already doing the important work to bolster DC schools' ability to respond to students' mental wellness needs. I urge the Council to increase these organizations' grants to expand to even more DC schools.

As a DC native and graduate of the DC public school system I have experienced and witnessed first hand what the lack of available mental health supports looks like. The Mayor and Council needs to prioritize building and sustain a pipeline of diverse and competent mental health

professionals. This includes additional funding and incentivizing mental health professionals to serve in our schools. This could include Incentivizing DMV graduates to come back and serve the community they lived and grew up in and passing 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 family engagement in school based mental health must be prioritized and improved. 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! 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 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 the many facets of our communities. 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 have to work twice as hard to figure out the best way to navigate this new normal. This is why the needs assessment is so important. This is why engaging parents, students, LEAs and the school communities is important. Who better than those of us on the front line, witnessing everyday the needs of our students and school community? The Council needs to work hard to ensure all stakeholders are a part of the development to ensure mental health supports in our schools are sufficient, high-quality, and equitable across all schools and all wards. Call on parents and school staff to provide insight! Call on students to state their needs and wants to help ensure their mental wellness is being addressed! 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!