

**Sherry McDaniel-Thomas
All Education Agencies
Performance Oversight Hearing Testimony
Committee of the Whole
Wednesday, March 1st, 2023**

Greetings Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. My name is Mrs. Sherry T. McDaniel-Thomas and I am the proud grandmother of Donovan Johnson, who attended Washington Global Public Charter School in Ward 6 and I also serve with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) on the PLE board representing Ward 4.

First, thank you for

- **\$3.8 million in additional funding for SBMH programs**
- **\$150K for a comprehensive cost study to determine the true cost of SBMH programs now and in the future**

These investments are of vital importance!

I am testifying today because I want each school to be equipped with the tools and manpower necessary to address the ever growing mental health challenges faced by children and staff in our city schools.

I have seen firsthand what happens when programs are in place to help a student in crisis. On one particularly challenging day, my grandson experienced a moment of crisis when anxiety and frustration overshadowed his day. Washington Global had the staff trained to assist him in this moment, to provide a space for him to gain clarity, feel safe and eventually be able to communicate with a team of professionals, that included his resource teacher, school counselor and Dean of Students, what had caused his anxiety. He was able to employ strategies reviewed by his team to help him understand why he was in crisis and then be able to move back into his class setting with his peers and continue his day of learning.

This eliminated the need for his parents to be called in, for him to have to leave for the day and it resulted in only a limited amount of missed time from his in person learning. The way he met his day, through the lenses of Autism was respected and acknowledged. Once he had settled back into his class, communication about this behavioral episode was relayed to his parents. We, as a family, were prepared to help him reflect upon his day once he returned home.

The critical part of this story is that trained staff was in place to address his immediate needs. **EVERY** child in the city should be so fortunate to have staff in place, who can collaborate in delivering coordinated care in their moment of crisis, to help them feel heard, safe, respected.

This, SBMH, is important to me because the need is **urgent**. If we are honest, the current mental health crisis in our schools was not created by the pandemic but it has been exacerbated by all the pressures and uncertainty that was experienced during that time with changed routines, no routine and stress shared by the entire family.

When schools create their SBMH programs, rooted in the expressed needs of students and families, staffed by trained clinicians and guided by cultural competence and research-based practices, they must have an understanding of how trauma impacts the social, emotional and physical welfare of children. Creating a school design that is centered on the well-being the child, and supports staff with regularly scheduled professional development on recognizing, identifying and reporting students who present mental challenges is obtainable. Schools working in partnership with community educational and health agencies should strive to be a link for families, providing strategies to help them guide their children through moments of anxiety and crisis while having additional knowledge of resources in the community that can assist them on their journey to wellness.

To make these solutions a reality, we call on DC policymakers and leaders to do the following:

- To improve school staff support to respond to the needs of ALL children, the Mayor and the DC Council should provide additional funding to expand teacher and staff training.
- Build and sustain a pipeline of diverse and competent mental health professionals by passing legislation to widen the network of potential service providers.
- The Mayor and DC Council should provide additional funding to incentivize mental health professionals to serve in our schools.
- Improve family engagement in school-based mental health, the DME, DBH, and OSSE should work together to ensure there are resources and accountability systems to implement parent leaders' solutions around improving family engagement in school-based mental health.
- Assess school community needs and provide adequate resources to address them.

Thank you for allowing me to testify and share what I want to see for our kids and our District. I hope you will

- Improve school staff support to respond to the needs of ALL children.
- Build and sustain a pipeline of diverse and competent mental health professionals.
- Improve family engagement in school-based mental health
- Assess school community needs and provide adequate resources to address them.
- Improve coordination of care.

Thank You.

Mrs. Sherry T. McDaniel-Thomas

PAVE

Ward 4 PLE