

Tracy Barnes
All Education Agencies
Performance Oversight Hearing Testimony
Committee of the Whole
Wednesday, March 1st, 2023

Good Morning Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. My name is Tracy Barnes and I am a proud parent of 1 high-schooler that attends Washington Leadership Academy in Ward 5 and 1 middle-schooler that attends a private placement school in Montgomery County. I also serve with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) on the Ward 5 board.

First, thank you for

- ***\$3.8M in additional funding for the SBMH program***
- ***\$2.4M to increase grant sizes for CBO providers***
- ***\$150K for a comprehensive cost study to determine the true cost of the SBMH program now and in the future***

Those are important investments! I am testifying today because I want to see an expanded pipeline of mental health professionals and ensure all children have a mental health professional who is available to them. I have a question for all of the agencies present. Why does my son have to travel 34 miles to Gaithersburg, MD to receive the mental health supports that he needs to be emotionally and academically successful in school? Here's my answer -- because DC's public school system was and still is not equipped to do so.

My vision for SBMH in the city is for all kids to have access to great services and supports that my child receives at his private-placement school. Earlier I said a mental health professional who is AVAILABLE. By that I mean a full-time, clinically qualified staffer that is available to students that are not only in crisis mode or to a student that made an appointment but who is available at a moment's notice for a student that may need only 5 minutes to get something major or minor off of their mind & heart.

The therapist at my son's school has many roles:

- they are the caregivers main point of contact for everything SEL related.
- they conduct weekly group therapy in the classroom.

- they ensure all students get the services in their IEP and extra therapy appointments as needed.

Additionally, at my son's school, students inform the teachers that they need time with the therapist and if/when students have 'moments' in class they can immediately go see the therapist to 'process and prepare to return' not requiring a scheduled session, if they are available.

This matters to me because of how it has changed not only my son's school life, it has changed his entire life. Which has changed my entire household's life. This should matter to DC because if readily available SBMH has had such a profound effect on one family's life, imagine the effect it would have on the entire city if all students had access to this!

In order to address the issues of:

1. Students having to go so far away from home to get the needed mental health supports:

- DC leaders & agencies need to work together to figure out how to utilize these vacant, underused properties and land in and immediately around DC for private placement school buildings.
- Consider an overhaul of the OSSE & DCPS process to make sure DCPS offers this alternative to families. Students should not have to travel more than 30 miles away to get their needs met.

2. Students having readily available mental health professionals in all DC public & public charter schools, DC need to:

- Consider modeling & creating SBMH programs that I outlined above
- Improve school staff support to respond to the needs of ALL children by incorporating Social Emotional Learning into daily schedules at all schools.
- Provide resources and training to regularly assess student wellbeing with both formal and informal wellness checks by allowing students without IEPs to get therapy appointments as requested, needed or referred.
- Improve family engagement in school-based mental health care by simply allowing immediate interactions between MH professional and caregiver. (i.e. texting or calling a caregiver with a quick question or update versus going through legalities just to provide &/or obtain information.)
- Build and sustain a pipeline of diverse and competent mental health professionals by prioritizing recruitment and retention of mental health professionals that look like and come from the communities they will serve and ensuring these providers are trained to work specifically in traditional and specialized school settings.

Thank you for allowing me to testify and share what I want to see for our kids and our District. I hope you will work together to investigate and update the process of private-placement offerings with special attention to their locations.

Best,

Tracy Barnes
PAVE Ward 5 PLE Board