

**Kerry Savage**  
**Committee of the Whole**  
**OST Programs Hearing Testimony**  
**Wednesday, June 7th, 2023**

Good afternoon Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. My name is Kerry Savage and I am the Director of Policy and Advocacy at PAVE. PAVE is a part of the OST Coalition - a coalition of providers and community members, dedicated to expanding access to high-quality OST programs for every DC kid.

PAVE parent leaders have been steadfastly advocating for OST programs since 2018. Their collective vision is simple but powerful: every family, regardless of their income or where they live - should have access to a high-quality OST program for their children that supports their individual needs where they can explore their passions and enrich their learning.

Today, I want to amplify their voices and priorities for the current landscape and goals for the future of OST in the city, especially as it relates to inclusion for students with special needs.

**First, to best meet the needs of our students, DC needs to continue investing in expanding access to high-quality OST programs.**

- Thank you to the Mayor and Council for your increased investment of \$3.125M to OST grants in the FY24 budget. This increase in funding is an important first step to build upon previous investments.
  - We are especially grateful for the \$2.5 million investment in the OST budget to better serve students with disabilities and special needs through staff training, scholarships, and grant competitions to provide more seats.
  - Equitable access should include all student groups, especially for families who often feel like little programming exists for their kids' unique needs.
- Despite the increased investment, we need to continue to target our students in Wards 7 and 8 and students with special needs with strategic investments.
  - In their OST needs assessment, DC Policy Center found that the highest proportion of students with special needs are concentrated in Wards 7 and 8.
  - We need to make sure we don't just throw money blindly at a problem, but target it where it's most needed.
- We need to improve and expand access to scholarships and financial aid, including changing income qualifications for financial aid to better reflect the cost of living in DC and the size of families.

**Second, DC must continue to remove key barriers to participation in OST programs - the lack of accurate and available information and accessible engagement opportunities.**

- Information is power - that's why PAVE parent leaders are excited about the investment of about \$1.875 million to begin planning and implementing My Afterschool DC, which will serve as an online central hub for OST programs.
  - While the initial description of My AfterschoolDC described it as a central hub for OST programs, recent announcements from the OST office have described it as the "MyAfterSchoolDC Lottery " while the Learn24 program finder will be revised and will host program information.
  - We encourage the OST office to create one centralized hub for programs and not split families between multiple places to find information. For instance, it is unclear which entity will have which information. Will the lottery give program information? Will MyAfterSchool DC expand to include summer programs? Why continue to host a separate platform that parents have had issues with for years when you could put all the information in one place? And how will this be communicated effectively to parents and families?
- To ensure My Afterschool DC does not experience similar pitfalls as the Learn24 program finder, we urge the Council to provide oversight so that:
  - Program information is accurate and up to date - which requires working closely alongside program providers,
  - The website is built with extensive feedback and collaboration from parents and caregivers,
  - And that the launch of My Afterschool DC includes a productive and wide reaching communication campaign. Building a perfect website is only half the challenge - but making sure families know it exists and know where to access it is equally as important.
- We need strong community engagement in the development of the OST strategic plan and the MyAfterSchoolDC platform.
  - For instance, the OST office created working groups to help develop the MyAfterSchoolDC Platform, but the working groups were only publicly advertised through the Learn24 newsletter.
  - If you saw it, you had a day and a half to email stating your interest, and then after that had to email another employee at the OST office in a first-come first-serve process to get a spot in the working group.
  - That's not how community engagement should work. Community engagement should not be first-come first-serve and communicated through a newsletter.

**Third, DC must ensure equitable access to OST programming for students with special needs through clear and enforced program standards.**

- We have heard from PAVE parents for years about challenges with accessing OST programs for students with special needs.
  - Parents and their kids have been turned away from some OST programs as the programs are not able to accommodate their kids' needs.
  - Parents have struggled finding safe transportation to and from the program for their students.
  - Students' access to a free appropriate education should extend into afterschool and OST programming.
  - While many OST programs have done an amazing job accommodating students, we need clear standards and adequate resources to ensure programs provide access to ALL students with special needs.
- The Out of School Time Special Education Inclusion and Standards Amendment Act of 2023 is seeking to address a crucial and salient issue many DC families face.
  - This legislation was developed due to the experience of many parents, in particular through the leadership of PAVE parents Yolanda Corbett, LaJoy Johnson-Law, and Andrea Jones, highlighting challenges students with special needs have faced in accessing OST programs in the city.
- In their respective testimonies, both the DME and the OST office question the purpose of this legislation.
  - We understand their desire to have the most accurate landscape of access for students with special needs they spoke of in their respective testimonies.
  - We also respect the work the OST office has put into ensuring providers have training and resources to accommodate students with special needs.
  - However, this does not diminish the need to ensure there are clear standards for how programs should support students with special needs and help keep programs accountable.
  - In both testimonies, they addressed the constrained resources of the DME and the OST office, but there's no better use of our resources than ensuring ALL students with disabilities have access to OST programming.
  - We have programs that are doing a great job, both in and outside of DC. Examples exist for what a high-bar for inclusion for students with special needs can look like, but when we lack clear, quality standards, we don't set a bar for what high-quality programming can and should look like across the board.
  - We cannot promise inclusion for our students with special needs and their families without setting standards for programming.

We need DC to truly take care of its people, especially our kids with the highest needs, and courageously act to right the wrongs of historic injustice and step up with bold, innovative action with investments in our future and in our children. Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify today, I hope that we can count on your leadership. In service,



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