

Sharnetta Boone-Ruffin
Education Agencies
FY24 Budget Oversight Hearing Testimony
Wednesday, April 5, 2023

Good Afternoon Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole,

My name is Sharn Boone-Ruffin. I am a PAVE Citywide and Ward 8 Parent board member and a multiple generation Washingtonian. In fact Lawrence E. Boone Elementary School was named after my grandfather. I have 2 daughters that attend Jefferson Middle School Academy and Eagle Academy Public Charter School-Capitol Riverfront both in SW Ward 6.

We are in a Mental Health crisis all over the US, however here in the Nation's Capital we see and hear about killings and shootings multiple times a day, particularly in high poverty wards like Wards 7 and 8. Social Emotional Learning has been a huge focus since returning to in person learning after COVID. However, some neighboring school districts added social emotional learning to their P.B.I.S. or Positive Behavior Interventions and Support plan before COVID. By training teachers, staff, administration, and security personnel on the importance of tending to social emotional needs, it creates a positive mental health wraparound service to all students. Having SBMH is essential sadly due to a lot of students unknowingly living in DC with PTSD, Anxiety, or some other mental health disability. The everyday violence, lack of positive parental/ guardian guidance, stigma in the community forgetting mental health assistance. By receiving mental health services in school, students will be able to get the necessary mental health help they so desperately need.

SBMH also includes group therapy sessions that have been shown to be beneficial to groups of people who have differences and are able to work it out with a mediator and/or mental health therapist. Receiving services at school will also help the parents/guardians not feel overwhelmed with trying to find their child mental help. Having these available services in the schools gives the student time to embrace, reflect, and use what was learned during sessions. Studies have shown having school based mental health and counselors present in schools, reduced suspensions, expulsions, fights, absenteeism as well as truancies. Having these professionals in the schools also can positively assist administration, staff, security personnel with students who may become disruptive or have a "meltdown", without anybody getting

injured or worse. All kids are going through something in life whether it's visibly shown or hidden behind a smile, learning coping strategies and how to balance your own mental health should be top priority.

I believe Out of School Time programs could also assist with training school aged students with social emotional and mental health strategies. Group therapy can also be a part of an Out of School Program. By teaching school aged students about their mental health they will be able to stop the stigma in their own household and their community. Children are our future. However we must train them for a better, safer and well balanced tomorrow.

Thank you so much for this time. I am available for questioning.

I want to thank Councilmember Christina Henderson for her work on figuring out a way to do reciprocity with Maryland and hopefully in the future Virginia, as well. I would also like to thank Councilmembers Robert White, Kenyan McDuffie, Janeese Lewis George, Anita Bonds, Charles Allen, Vincent Gray, Brooke Pinto, Matthew Frumin, Zachary Parker, and Brianne Nadeau, for taking the first step towards getting more behavioral health degrees into the mental health field, by introducing The District's Pathways to Behavioral Health Degrees act of 2022 bill. This bill proposed that qualified applicants with bachelor's degrees would be given scholarships covering tuition and books, along with a monthly stipend for living expenses and transportation. Again this is a great first step, however more mental health professionals would be available to work in DC, if the criteria to get licensed to work in DC wasn't so tedious and expensive. Again reciprocity would be EXTREMELY helpful and will drastically close the Mental Health support gap.