

Sherry McDaniel-Thomas
State Board of Education
State Board of Education Meeting
April 26, 2023

Hello and greetings to President Thompson, Vice President O’Leary, and the State Board of Education members.

My name is Sherry McDaniel-Thomas and I live in Ward 4. My grandson attended Washington Global Public Charter School in Ward 6. I currently serve as a PAVE parent leader on the Ward 4 Board.

I want to thank you for your support and partnership in advocating for the needs of our students and schools.

I am testifying today because I want every child, building educator and staff member to feel that their school is a safe and nurturing environment that provides the resources to help them manage their day and supports their productivity. When they enter the school each day, they should be assured that a school based mental health team is in place to provide needed services and strategies to aid in their total development.

This matters to me because I have seen what happens when schools have a planned strategy for the delivery of services in place to address the needs of a student who is experiencing a challenging moment. Throughout his school years, my autistic grandson has experienced challenging moments brought on by anxiety, stress or frustration in not being able to fully communicate in a timely manner, what was causing his anxiousness. On such day in middle school, resulted in the need for him to be escorted from his classroom to a space that allowed him to feel safe in expressing his discomfort. His Resource teacher, in coordination with the school counselor, and the Dean of Students were all able to meet him at different stages of his crisis and help him find his way back to calm and eventually back into his classroom for continued learning.

He always knew that there were people in the building, a TEAM of adults, who would provide him with the strategies he needed to self-regulate his emotions and the behaviors that ensued. He also took comfort in the fact that staff acknowledged and respected him as an individual, he felt heard. Before the end of that same day, his parents were notified of his actions and the steps taken to help him. When he arrived at home, strategies continued with time given to allow him reflect on his day and how he might handle the situation differently should there be a

next time. This is the outcome when a school-based mental health team is in place and open lines of communication with a family have been established.

What stands out in this narrative, is the fact that the school was able to provide services, by trained staff, to support the needs of my grandson. There were multi-tiered layers of supports present when he had a crisis. Some of those included: training for educators, crisis response, mental health professionals, cultural competency, social-emotional learning, and family engagement. These along with community partnerships, wellness screenings/check ins, and a positive school climate are just some of the things that need to be in place to address the mental health needs of our students in the district. Supports would be determined by the number of students needing services. There are schools that already offer some of these supports but far too many do not. Without these services in the school, families who are challenged in navigating the healthcare system, would be forced to seek support in the private sector, which are often cost prohibitive have long wait times for appointments and exclude the very students and families who need the supports.

The DC Fiscal Year 2022 budget, which reflected the vigorous advocacy of PAVE parent leaders, included funding to add at least one clinician to all remaining DCPS and DCPCS. Even with this noted progress, PAVE parent surveys in 2021 and 2022 displayed gaps in our SBMH programs and reported that:

- About 1 in 8 (12%) DC families struggle with having consistent access to mental health services and supports.
- 41% of parents are not sure if their school has access to a mental health professional/clinician.
- 34% of parents are not aware if mental health supports for their children are available at their school.
- 55% of parents are satisfied with the mental health and social emotional support students' receive. *Satisfaction is lower among Black/African American parents at 47%, Parents of IEP students at 55% and low income parents at 45%.

Daily reports of impulsive, sometimes criminal and oftentimes harmful physical behaviors displayed by our children, negates the need for me to share more statistics. We know the need is URGENT and the time is NOW.

To bring about these improvements to our SBMH programs I ask for your support in advocating for expanded partnerships with organization like Transcend, Restorative DC, and Turnaround for Children as well as increased grants and partnerships with Community Based Organizations (CBOs) – to better support the needs of students in our schools.



Thank you for providing me the opportunity and time to share what I want to see for our children, their families and school staff. I hope you will:

- Improve SBMH services to respond to the needs of ALL children.
- Build and sustain a pipeline of diverse and competent mental health professionals.
- Improve family engagement in the development of SBMH services
- Access school community needs and provide adequate resources to address them.
- Improve the coordination of care within the SBMH services.

Thank You,

Mrs. Sherry McDaniel-Thomas

PAVE

Ward 4 PLE Member