

Andrea Jones
Committee of Transportation and the Environment
Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority
Friday, February 16th, 2024

Hello, Councilmember Allen and DC Council staff. My name is Andrea Jones. I am a PAVE Citywide member and Ward 8 resident. My children attend KIPP DC Learning Center, Miner Elementary, and Boone Elementary School.

Right now the District and our youth are experiencing many challenges, many that we are all familiar with. The one challenge I want to focus on today is the mental health of students and its correlation with Safe Passage and therefore, all of you. Mental health of youth in our city is something I am deeply passionate about and have committed my life's work trying to solve.

When we look at the data from DBH, we see that a lot of people, especially students, are suffering from a mental health crisis, which was exacerbated by the pandemic. Although the city is working towards fixing it, we aren't where we need to be. This mental health crisis is linked to increases in crime, bullying, and student absenteeism and truancy. All of these things are connected. I am here to raise some possible solutions that can help our children feel safe when traveling to and from school and to discuss how that is correlated with student mental health. We need to work together to develop solutions that aren't just punitive, but are proactive. Thankfully, many solutions already exist and with more communication, support, and partnership, I am confident that we can make it work.

WMATA should ensure their transit police, Safe Passage Workers, and MPD partner with organizations already working with students' mental health to collaborate and think outside the box on how to best intervene and de-escalate youth. WMATA PD needs more training on dealing with students experiencing a mental health crisis and should be equipped with restorative justice practices so that they can appropriately help our young residents.

I hear a lot of middle and high schoolers not wanting to go to school. On top of that, we are simultaneously seeing absenteeism and truancy run rampant in the city. These two issues go hand in hand. I was just talking to a friend in Ward 7 whose child goes to a school in Ward 5. She said that her daughter has repeatedly seen people targeting students who are traveling to and from school and is often scared herself to go to school in fear that she is next. When we are



thinking about the mental health of students and students not attending school, we cannot continue to overlook the role that students being robbed and witnessing acts of violence plays in these problems. The repeated crises that youth are experiencing is adding to the mental health issues, therefore, we have to prioritize solutions we know works like restorative practices and WMATA PD present along popular routes youth take to school. We need to stop blaming the kids for not wanting to go to school and start looking inward at the adults and leaders of this city so that we can figure out why they don't want to go to school. The broader absenteeism and safe passage conversation needs to consider the many kids who are scared to go to school because they don't have a safe and efficient way to get there.

Councilmembers, I ask that you work with WMATA PD, schools, and mental health organizations to create community, build trust between entities, and work collaboratively to help the mental health of our children and find ways for them to get to school safely because it can help decrease crime, student absenteeism and truancy, and more.

Sincerely,

Andrea Jones

Ward 7 Member, PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)