

Faith Gibson Hubbard
DMOI and WMATA
Performance Oversight Hearing Testimony
Friday, February 16th, 2024

To: DC Council Committee on Transportation and the Environment, Committee on Transportation and the Environment Chairperson Charles Allen, Committee on Transportation and the Environment Members, and Committee on Transportation and the Environment Staff

From: Faith Gibson Hubbard, Chief Strategy Officer at PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)

Date: February 16th, 2024

Good afternoon Chairperson Allen, members of the Committee on Transportation and the Environment, and Committee staff. My name is Faith Gibson Hubbard. I am a Ward 5 resident and the Chief Strategy Officer at PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education).

Today, I am testifying on the performance of the Deputy Mayor of Operations and Infrastructure (DMOI) and the Washington Metropolitan Transit Authority (WMATA) as it relates to Safe Passage for students.

For background, PAVE parent leaders are mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and other caregivers who share their stories, dig deeply into understanding education policy, and bring their voices to our city's leaders in order to impact the educational experience of all children in DC. Our parent leaders are overwhelmingly Black, many are native Washingtonians, and the majority live in neighborhoods that wrestle with community violence, food and housing insecurity, and a lack of excellent school options.

Each year, PAVE parent leaders come together at their annual PAVE Parent Policy Summit to choose which issues to prioritize for the next year. After roughly six years of focusing on school-based mental health and out-of-school time programs, PAVE parent leaders chose to anchor those issues as areas they will always engage around, but focus one of their advocacy campaigns on safe passage given the volume and severity of incidents youth witness or experience as they get to and from school. In their work to develop their safe passage policy solutions, PAVE and our parent leaders formed coalitions with school leaders, policy experts, community organizations, and students to ensure their statement truly reflected the needs and vision of communities across DC.

We know many students and parents rely on public transportation and both DMOI and WMATA play an integral role in ensuring they receive safe and reliable public transportation. Broadly, students in DC use a variety of transportation methods to get to school. In PAVE's Fall 2021 Back to School survey, we found that students are most frequently driven to school, though transportation methods do differ based on family income. Lower-income families are more likely to utilize public transit options to get their students to schools. Commute distance (and therefore time) also varies based on ward of residence. Students living in Ward 7 and Ward 8 have a much longer distance to travel to get to their schools. Students in those wards travel on average 3 miles for school compared to less than 2 miles for all other wards except Ward 5 (2.2 miles). Therefore, public transportation and these organizations are vital to ensuring kids get to school on time.

First, we will begin with our suggestions for WMATA.

- We've heard from so many parents how integral WMATA buses and trains are for getting their students to school, but often students (and even parents) do not feel safe on the metro because of interactions with other adults while riding or waiting to get on board. We've heard stories from parents of sexual harassment and violence when kids travel to school using WMATA. This is unacceptable.
- There are two solutions we believe will help address this issue.
- **First, WMATA should pilot youth-only WMATA metro cars** and station SPWs and WMATA PD on those routes during school arrival and dismissal times.
 - Students would feel safer if they are not sharing a bus or train car with other adults. Reserving one metro car per train during school commute hours that are staffed with trusted adults can help ensure students are safe during their commute.
- **Second, starting with high schools, create dedicated WMATA "youth to school" bus routes modeled after the existing WMATA bus route for students at Shepherd Park to Deal/Jackson Reed.**
 - SPWs and WMATA PD should be stationed on those routes during school arrival and dismissal times.
 - We need equitable sources of funding for program expansion across both sectors (DCPS and public charter) and a process for schools to opt into the program.
 - Right now, students in upper Northwest have access to what effectively functions as a WMATA-run youth-only metro bus that transports them to and from school. Yet not all students in the city have access to this, especially communities with the highest needs. This simply isn't fair.
 - WMATA should focus on piloting this across the city, not just in communities of privilege, to make sure more students have safe options to travel to school safely.

Second, we will discuss our suggestions for the Deputy Mayor of Operations and Infrastructure:

- The DMOI plays a key role in making sure students have safe and reliable transportation through bus driver recruitment and retention.
- We know bus driver recruitment and retention has been a problem throughout the District.
- Both the DC School Connect program and the OSSE Bus transportation program for students with IEPs have struggled to employ enough bus drivers to reliably transport students.
- When students do not have reliable transportation, they may miss school and valuable instruction time.
- This is especially catastrophic for our students with disabilities and their families who may have to find alternative transportation, miss significant school time, or completely miss the school day. Many PAVE parent leaders have said their students with disabilities are chronically absent solely because of issues with OSSE transportation.
- With high chronic absenteeism rates in the district (43% of all students and 60% of high schoolers), it's imperative that we do whatever we can to stabilize the bus driver workforce and help kids arrive at school on time.
- To address this, we are asking your office and DC Human Resources (DCHR) to work in partnership with respective executive agencies to address recruitment and retention of bus drivers in the OSSE bus program for students with disabilities, DC School Connect, and WMATA during school arrival and dismissal times.
- This is not a simple task and will take time, but it's important to kickstart new strategies as soon as possible to plan and properly prepare for the future.

Students deserve to feel safe as they travel to school. Both DMOI and WMATA have the chance to make bold steps by providing safe transportation options for youth with trusted adults to ensure they are able to learn, grow, and thrive at school. We hope to see our solutions implemented so all students can get what they deserve and need.

In service,

Faith Gibson Hubbard
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