

Kerry Savage
OSSE, DCPS, and DME
Performance Oversight Hearing Testimony
Wednesday, February 28th, 2024

To: DC Council Committee of the Whole, Committee of the Whole Chairperson Phil Mendelson, Committee of the Whole committee members, and Committee of the whole staff

From: Kerry Savage, Senior Director of Policy and Advocacy at PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)

Date: February 28th, 2024

Good afternoon Chairperson Mendelson, members of the Committee of the Whole, and Committee staff. My name is Kerry Savage. I am a Ward 1 resident and the Senior Director of Policy and Advocacy at PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education).

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. Their other campaign will focus on specialized school programs and ensuring students have access to high-quality programs and the information they need to make informed decisions about schools. In their work to develop their safe passage and specialized school programs 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. Today, I will focus most of my time on specialized school programs as it includes our largest asks of both OSSE and the DME, and where we'd like them to work with DCPS and other education entities.

Specialized school programs, (i.e. dual language, dual enrollment, arts integration, STEM/STEAM, CTE, etc), provide students with unique learning opportunities that center their curriculums on a variety of topics and/or

approaches to learning. Depending on the school community’s needs and the nature of the programs, specialized school programming can be the focus of the entire school or be offered as specific pathways. Specialized school programs *are not* electives, specials, or other individual one-off classes, but rather are embedded in core academic classes. When done well, specialized school programs are more likely to prepare students for college and careers, as they often offer real-world experiences and application of their learning. They can lead to better engagement, excitement and passion for learning, better career options, and, eventually, higher pay.

Oftentimes, families must travel far distances to access the programs they are looking for, especially families living East of the River. Across the District, access to these programs is deeply inequitable. Based on the information publicly available, 26% of programs are East of the river, while 74% are West of the river¹. We can and must do more.

I’ll begin with our feedback for DCPS.

- We’ve had great engagement with specific departments or teams, i.e. elementary and secondary school support, dual language, school security, and engagement teams. We’re grateful for their willingness to share insights and work together on issues that matter to families, from school-based mental health, OST, and school programming.
- Unfortunately, it isn’t always easy to determine who is working on what, largely due to turnover in leadership positions and, subsequently, the chain of command isn’t always clear. It would be very helpful to have a “Where to Go in DCPS” resource for parents and community organizations like PAVE to use to identify who to go for specific questions, outside of just enrollment.

Next, I will outline areas we’d like to see OSSE lead.

- **We have a robust system of choice in DC. To make sure every parent understands what their choices are, you need three pieces.**
 1. You need data about how schools are doing, which we have and are proud that OSSE making bold revisions to the DC School Report Card.
 2. A way to access those choices equitably, We love the work that My School DC has done over the past ten years to streamline that process for families.
 3. You need a way to understand how to navigate those choices and how they serve families like yours. That would be a school navigator. Right now, this only exists for families with privilege who can afford to pay for consultants, which is deeply inequitable.

¹ <https://edscape.dc.gov/page/schools-specialized-programs-offered>

- To ensure we have a comprehensive set of supports for families, OSSE should provide grant funding for a school navigator program (~\$750,000) to help families with the highest needs (i.e families who qualify for the equitable access preference) identify the right fit for their child, understand the preferences they are eligible for in the My School DC lottery (i.e at-risk, sibling), and complete all enrollment processes.
 - While the DC School Report Card and My School DC provide incredibly valuable data points that help paint a picture of a school, it isn't the same as having someone who knows the system provide personalized guidance. Parents are looking for someone to say,
 - “Tell me about your child! What types of activities do they like? Let’s look at where there are programs that will spark their interests, and provide them the type of environment and support they need!”
 - And even to help families around the logistics, for example, “Tell me about your commute. If you plan on driving your kids, let’s make sure we’re looking at options where you can get them to school on time and you on time to work.”
 - Prior to COVID, the non-profit DC School Reform Now (DCSRN) played this role and was a *huge* help to families. They offered video site visits and helped walk families through the entire school choice and enrollment process. They closed not because the service wasn’t valuable and in demand, but because of challenges in fundraising.
 - Other cities’ Ed Navigator programs² are funded by employers, but we don’t currently have an industry like hospitality in New Orleans or healthcare in Boston that could apply. That’s why we’d like to see a relatively small grant from OSSE (\$750,000) go to a vendor to play this role.
- **Second, not all schools offer the programming they claim to provide.**
 - OSSE should develop a Specialized School Program (SSP) verification system in partnership with schools to build trust with families and ensure schools are implementing the specialized programs they claim to provide.
 - Our parents have told us that in some cases when a school says they offer a particular program, it doesn’t seem to match their lived experience. Some programs are more clear than others, like IB or dual enrollment. Other programs like arts integration, STEM, Montessori, etc. are not as specific or clear and look very different depending on the school.
 - We see this as distinct, but additive, to the course coding work that OSSE is currently taking on. A verification system can ensure that when families commit to a school, they have an accurate understanding of what the school provides.
 - We have also heard from many school leaders that they support this, as they see it as an

² <https://www.ednavigator.org/for-families>

important way to build trust with families. They want to work with OSSE to make sure the system isn't onerous and is reflective of the diversity of programs offered.

- **Last, we need to give educators more support in teaching specialized school programs.**
 - OSSE should build out more robust voluntary continuous education credit programs/micro-credentials for educators in all SSP areas (dual-language, dual-enrollment, STEM/STEAM, Arts Integration, Career Technical Education (CTE), supporting students with disabilities within the specialized program, etc.) to build specific expertise.
 - Our parent and school leaders have told us that while schools may offer certain specialized school programs, staff are not always trained to teach in the specialized model or approach.
 - We recognize that OSSE already provides many professional development (PD) options, but there is not much dedicated to instructional practices within specialized school programs. Providing PD, Continuous Education Credit programs, and/or microcredits around instruction in specialized programs helps build teachers' expertise, ultimately improving the quality of education kids receive.

Finally, we will turn to the DME.

- **First, we want to ensure equitable access to specialized school programs.**
 - The DME should restructure the 2024 Master Facilities Plan (MFP) and future MFPs to include a strategy across District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and public charter schools to increase seats and improve feeder patterns for high-demand SSP programs based on community input and with equity-centered focus (i.e. students with disabilities, geography, grade levels, demographics), on expanding programs.
 - We know that access to quality seats in high-demand specialized programs isn't equitable. The DME should use the MFP process, whether in this year or future years, to ensure that programs are distributed equitably.
 - The MFP works well as a vehicle for this planning as it is already required, and facilities are a necessary component to expanding program access. You can't have an arts program without a theatre, a STEM program without science labs, etc. So while we already look at facility conditions and utilization and cross reference that with enrollment trends for school planning, we should also include program options and demand in the same vein. Specialized school programs came up as a top priority in the last MFP community engagement process PAVE helped lead in 2018, so we know it is possible for it to be factored in. We just need to build on that previous work!
 - In between the 2024 and future MFPs, we encourage ongoing engagement and are ready to work with the DME in any way to support lifting up the voices of parents and communities around the types of school options they want most.

- **Second, parents want to know which programs in the District are effective.**
 - In partnership with other education and workforce agencies, the DME should ensure the upcoming databases on post-graduation outcomes includes analysis with a breakdown by student subgroups and specialized school programs. In particular, we want to see the database include:
 - Post-graduation outcomes (college AND employment) by elementary and secondary program type that includes disaggregated data such as race, income, Ward of residence, students with disabilities, etc.
 - An analysis on student academic outcomes in specialized school programs and how they connect to post-graduation outcomes and share the results publicly.
 - Parents want to know that schools have strong results - now and in the future. They are looking to see which schools and school types have led to college enrollment and completion, securing jobs in high-demand and well-paying fields, and what life outcomes look like for students once they graduate. Sharing this data transparently can help parents make informed decisions about what schools will best serve their children.
 - We thank the DME for beginning this work and look forward to seeing robust community and school leader engagement in developing this database.
 - We hope the Council protects the funding for this project!
- **Lastly, parents want to see OST programs prioritized.**
 - We want to see continued investments, a focus on quality, and for the MyAfterSchoolDC database to be designed in partnership with families, accurate and up-to-date, and launched in a timely manner.
 - OST programs also play a key role in our other parent priority - safe passage. When students have safe and productive places to go outside of school hours, they are less likely to engage in unsafe behaviors. In fact, after school programs offer a significant return on investment, with every \$1 invested saving at least \$3 through increasing youth's earning potential, improving their performance at school, and reducing crime and juvenile delinquency.
 - It is also important that the transportation options we typically think of only for to and from school incorporate OST programs. We've heard transportation is one of the biggest barriers for families - especially when students are leaving in the dark, so we should explore options like DC School Connect to take students both directly to/from school and the program but also key metro stops to help students get home safely.

This upcoming budget and oversight season is an opportunity to show our values - that DC truly takes care of its people, especially when times get hard, and one that will courageously act to right the wrongs of historic



injustice and step up with bold, innovative action to meet this unprecedented moment, with investments in our future, our children.

This work is only possible with leaders on the Council and our education agencies who also believe in the power and promise of community voice. Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify today, I hope that we can count on your leadership.

In service,

Faith Gibson Hubbard
Chief Strategy Officer
PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)