

Tracy Barnes
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: Tracy Barnes, Ward 5 PLE Board member, and PAVE Parent Leader
Date: February 28th, 2024

Good afternoon Chairperson Mendelson, members of the Committee of the Whole, and Committee staff. My name is Tracy Barnes. I am a Ward 5 resident and PAVE Ward 5 PLE Board member. I am also the mother of a child who relies on OSSE bus transportation to get to and from school. My testimony will center on that.

We have had multiple poor experiences since my son began taking OSSE bus transportation in 2020 to his private placement school. Within a few weeks of his starting, they left him at the school. They never accepted responsibility nor apologized for this mistake.

I consistently get automated calls from the Parent Resource Center (PRC). Sometimes these calls are not necessary. They are also randomly spread out and sometimes are not accurate and definitely not specific enough. Sometimes they come while he's on the bus telling me the bus will arrive in 30 minutes to pick him up even though he's already on it. These kinds of calls are terrifying as a parent as you worry your student got on the wrong bus and is in an unsafe situation. Sometimes they call multiple times in the morning as much as 3-4 times in a row like a spam call. Sometimes I get them when there is no school (telling me the bus is going to be early or late). The automated communication has been a consistent problem with the PRC.

For example, our bus attendant reported that my son was going home alone to an empty house. I was home and was always home. Instead of going to me or my son to verify this, the attendant reported to her superiors at OSSE and they reported to the principal that my son was going home to an empty home. The attendant never came to the door to meet me, never waved back at me when I was in my window waving at her as he exited and entered the bus, and barely spoke to my son while he was on the bus. OSSE never contacted me to verify this either, but expected me to sign a form that he was arriving at an empty home each day. I refused to sign it. This speaks to both the personal communication problem with OSSE, but also to the need for better employee training.

The communication from OSSE does not provide enough information for parents and school staff to plan or know how to accommodate schedule shifts. For instance, the other week, I got an automated message at 2:59 pm stating the bus was delayed 40 minutes. The message did not let me know if that was 40 minutes late to drop him off at home, or 40 minutes late to pick him up from school. I had to call his school to get clarification and they were confused too. If buses are late, we need better communication and more specifics so parents and school staff can plan and adjust their schedules.

I know many other families, along with myself, have struggled to have consistent bus drivers and bus driver attendants. We understand that there are lots of reasons for this, but PAVE parent leaders firmly believe OSSE needs to partner with the Department of Operations and Infrastructure and DC HR to ensure they can hire an adequate number of bus drivers and address issues with recruitment, retention, and training.

Students with disabilities are entitled to an equal education under the law. But when students consistently miss school or are late to school because of inadequate transportation, that affects their equal access to an adequate education. Fixing these issues with transportation is a major safe passage issue, but also an issue of education equality. This needs to be a major priority. Thank you so much for the time to testify and I will be around if you have any questions.

Best,

Tracy Barnes
Ward 5 PLE board member
PAVE parent Leader