

Maya Martin Cadogan
OSSE Budget Oversight Hearing Testimony
Thursday, April 4th, 2024

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

From: Maya Martin Cadogan, Founder and Executive Director at PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)

Date: April 4th, 2024

Good afternoon Chairman Mendelson, members of the Committee of the Whole, and Committee staff. My name is Maya Martin Cadogan. I am a Ward 4 resident and the Founder and Executive Director of PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education), and a parent of a 15-month old Black boy - a seventh-generation Washingtonian!

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.

I want to start by saying thank you to the Mayor for the 12.4% UPSFF increase and the 0.6 increase to the at-risk weight. As pandemic recovery dollars disappear, these local increases will help to cover staffing costs and other critical investments originally funded by recovery dollars. We are also glad to see further investments that support student learning, like \$4.8 million for High-Impact Tutoring, \$5 million for reimagining high school, \$2 million for high-quality instructional materials to support literacy, and more. We know that this is a tight fiscal year, so we are encouraged by the executive's decision to make education a priority. Given the District's record-high chronic absenteeism, that the vast majority of our kids aren't reading or doing math on grade level, and the increase in youth violence, we need to be doing whatever we can to keep students safe by ensuring they are in school every day and excited about learning!

Today, my colleague Kerry will cover DCPS and the DME, while I will focus on OSSE. I want to thank the OSSE team and Dr. Grant for their consistent engagement with PAVE parents regarding our solutions for specialized school programs and for incorporating PAVE parent leaders' feedback on the [State Report Card revisions](#) earlier this year. We appreciate that you are responsive to families, and we hope to continue to work together.

Overall, we are very proud of our system of choice here in DC. It's a core value of PAVE and why we host our own DC-version of National School Choice Week, "DC Parent Voice and Choice Week" each year. As I've always said, you cannot have **choice** without **voice** - meaning true power and agency to make decisions from a set of **good** choices. In the context of families making decisions about schools, there are three pieces needed to ensure that every parent has a true choice, not just a set of options that are not actually accessible to them.

1. **Objective information about schools:** You need data about school performance and offerings, which we have. We are proud that OSSE is making bold revisions to the DC School Report Card, and we appreciate that My School DC offers information about schools in one place.
2. **Equitable access:** Parents need a way to access those choices equitably, which again comes through My School DC, a centralized enrollment system and the preferences in the lottery. During the boundary process, our parents on the Student Assignment Advisory Committee [pushed to ensure](#) equitable access preferences were expanded in the DME's recommendations.
3. **A school navigator to help parents make informed choices:** parents need a way to understand how to navigate those choices and how they serve families like theirs. Right now, this only exists for families with privilege who can afford to pay for consultants, which is deeply inequitable. Parents are clear in their [statement of beliefs](#) and in their [recommendations for the student assignment committee](#): if we want to really move towards equitable access, we can't just have access to information and preferences; we also need personalized guidance.

With that, we are calling on the Council to add \$750,000 for a school navigator to the Mayor’s proposed budget, because DC is currently missing #3. A navigator can answer questions that My School DC and the report card cannot like:

- “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 school tours 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’ with robust school choice have school navigator programs¹ that are funded by employers, but we don’t currently have an industry like hospitality in New Orleans or healthcare in Boston that could fill that role. That’s why we’d like to see a relatively small grant from OSSE (\$750,000) go to a vendor to play this role.

Importantly, this service is very different from MySchoolDC. My School DC needs to remain a neutral party, as it was built by getting schools to opt-in, and it works because My School DC remains agnostic when sharing information with parents about schools. They do not promote any one school. If you call their hotline, they will answer factual questions about school locations or schools’ self-professed offerings, but they do not provide subjective information about what might be best for your family or your child. And My School DC is open to everyone - families in all parts of the city and of all income levels, but the navigator would prioritize families furthest from economic opportunity (by geography, family income, etc).

Research has shown that when kids don’t find the right school fit, it can have detrimental effects on their learning outcomes. Students who switch schools outside of normal transition years (meaning outside of the switch between elementary, middle, and high school) are more likely to have academic difficulty, behavioral problems, and are less likely to graduate from high school², and they are most often Black students and low-income students.³ When families are not able to determine the right school fit and have to move, it deeply affects their long-term well-being, and a school navigator can help mitigate that and limit school moves outside of grade-level transitions.

¹ <https://www.ednavigator.org/for-families>

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4279956/>

³ <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/student-mobility-how-it-affects-learning/2016/08>

For all of these reasons, let's make the relatively small investment in a school navigator. We need to use every tool in our toolbox to get kids excited about going to a school that sparks their passions and supports their learning - each and every day.

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 and our children. We know funding is tight, but we need to make sure we continue to prioritize kids - our most precious resource - in this budget and not allow those cuts to rest on the communities most in need.

This work is only possible with leaders on the Council and at OSSE 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,

Maya Martin Cadogan
Founder and Executive Director
PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)