

Kerry Savage
Department of Behavioral Health Budget Oversight Hearing Testimony
Wednesday April 10th, 2024

To: DC Council Committee on Health, Committee on Health Chairperson Christina Henderson, Committee on Health Members, and Committee on Health Staff

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

Date: April 10th, 2024

Good afternoon Chairperson Henderson, members of the Committee on Health, and Committee staff. My name is Kerry Savage, and I am the Senior Director of Policy and Advocacy at PAVE. PAVE is also a member of the Strengthening Families through Behavioral Health Coalition - a coalition committed to ensuring that DC children, youth, and families have access to a fully integrated behavioral health care system that meets the needs of the whole child.

That last part - meeting the needs of the whole child - is what I want to emphasize today. Children and youth in DC deserve the opportunity to grow up, to grow up in a safe environment, and to grow into their full selves with limitless potential. Right now, there are too many statistics that show us we are not doing a good enough job. Too many kids have witnessed, experienced, or been involved in violent crime. Too many parents are consumed with anxiety worrying about what will happen to their children on the way to and from school. Too many students aren't attending school regularly, some because they don't feel like they have a trusted adult there, some because they are having challenges with their mental health, and/or some because they don't feel engaged in or successful in their learning. As we think about holistic support and what we need to ensure children can flourish, comprehensive school-based mental health services are absolutely vital. We have to meet this moment head-on with a flurry of resources, not roll back investments that we know work.

We are grateful to you, Councilmember Henderson, for prioritizing so many of the asks families have around behavioral health in your budget letter to the Mayor, especially in ensuring the behavioral rates study are published in a timely manner.

In coalition with our SFC partners, I'd like to highlight a few points that we believe will make meaningful progress for school-based behavioral health in the short and long term.

- **First, help sustain our current clinician workforce:**

- Additionally, in the proposed budget, CBO grants will only be \$80,819 - a full \$17,645 less than required. Therefore the Council needs \$6,155,587 to increase CBO grants for every school to the required \$98,465.
- Our clinicians are key to providing strong mental health services for students. PAVE parents have consistently spoken about the difference these providers make in students' lives. They help students process emotions, overcome challenges, and ensure they are able to show up as their whole selves in school, even improve attendance. Our clinicians should not be on the chopping block. We cannot afford to go backward, and especially not on the backs of our kids.
- **Second, protect the community of practice**
 - A community of practice helps ensure that school-based behavioral health providers and school teams learn effective methods to further student mental health from peers and colleagues.
 - This coordination can lead to stronger outcomes for students and a more effective utilization of resources, helping build capacity and maintain quality.
 - We need to restore this funding, in the amount of \$593,870.
- **Finally, restore investments in behavioral health instead of leaving money on the table.**
 - We were disappointed to see both the cuts of 10 full-time staff at DBH and the \$11.6 million funding reduction to DBH overall. When we consider federal Medicaid matching, this results in over a \$30 million reduction in spending power, which translates to roughly 300,000 clinical hours. This needs to be reversed to ensure students have access to clinicians and strong mental-health support.

In Conclusion

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 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 - and not allow those cuts to rest on the communities most in need. Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify today, I hope that we can count on your leadership.

In service,

Kerry Savage
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PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)