

**Kerry Savage**  
**State Board of Education Testimony**  
**Wednesday, April 17th, 2024**

**To:** State Board of Education members and SBOE Staff

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

**Date:** April 17th, 2024

Good evening members of the State Board of Education and SBOE 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).

First, I echo my colleague Maya's gratitude for the SBOE's consistent engagement with PAVE families and staff!

Today, I will also testify on PAVE's glows and grows for the proposed FY25 budget, and I will focus specifically on specialized school programs. 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.

Over the years, PAVE has consistently worked to increase access to specialized school programs in the District. It first came up in our community engagement work around the Master Facilities Plan in 2018 as something parents wanted prioritized. Then in 2019, PAVE parent leaders selected specialized school programs as one of their top issues. While they had to pivot due to the pandemic, it has always remained top of mind for parents.

Additionally, PAVE parents helped bring two new specialized schools to DC.

- Parents on the Ward 8 POST (Parent Operator Selection team) wrote and released their own RFP and did school visits to select the model they thought would work best for both Ward 8 and military families. They selected LEARN public charter school, which offers a blended learning program.<sup>1</sup>
- PAVE parents were critical in bringing Bard Early College High School to the District, the first selective high school to open East of the River where students can earn both a high school diploma and an associate degree.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mailchi.mp/81c2f01d0fb7/ward-8-post-update-mondays-pcsb-vote-will-send-a-message-to-all-dc-parents>

<sup>2</sup> <https://mailchi.mp/e57a24612297/families-celebrate-first-selective-early-college-high-school-east-of-the-river-647127>

We are committed to ensuring all students have access to the specialized programs that are the best fit for their individual needs and interests. Specialized school programs are particularly important now because they engage students in their education and translate to stronger career outcomes. Especially as we battle record chronic absenteeism and learning loss from the pandemic, we need to do all we can to get students invested in attending school. We hope you will join us in advocating for parents' policy solutions to improve access to specialized programs in the Council's final budget.

**I'll begin with our celebrations for the Mayor's proposed budget:**

- We appreciate the Mayor for her 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 in specialized programs 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, \$21.8 million to expand CTE programming, \$700,000 to maintain the District's dual enrollment program, \$2 million for high-quality instructional materials to support literacy, and more.
- Lastly, we are happy to see the \$668,000 funding increase to the Office of Education through Employment Pathways for their Education through Employment Database. 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. Gathering this data and sharing it transparently can help parents make informed decisions about what schools will best serve their children.
- We know that this is a tight fiscal year, so we are encouraged by the executive's decision to make education a priority.

**Next, we will discuss our grows for the FY25 budget.**

- We are calling on the Council to add \$750,000 for a school navigator to help parents make informed school choices. 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 programs<sup>3</sup> 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 school<sup>4</sup>, and they are most often Black students and low-income students.<sup>5</sup> 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.
- **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.

We know funding is tight, but we need to make sure we continue to prioritize students 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 SBOE who also believe in the power and promise of community voice and will stand hand-in-hand with parents to ensure students get what they need and deserve. Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify today, I hope we can count on your leadership.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ednavigator.org/for-families>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4279956/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/student-mobility-how-it-affects-learning/2016/08>

In service,

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