Testimony for the Committee on Government Operations & Facilities
Office of the Chief Technology Officer (OCTO) Performance Oversight Hearing
March 2nd, 2021

To: Committee on Government Operations & Facilities Chairman Robert White, Committee on Government Operations & Facilities members, and Committee Staff
From: Kerry Savage, Director of Policy at PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)
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Good afternoon Councilmember Robert White and members of the Committee on Government Operations & Facilities. My name is Kerry Savage, and I serve as the Director of Policy at PAVE. I have the honor and privilege of working alongside PAVE parent leaders, a truly awe-inspiring and diverse group of Washingtonians who have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic to advocate for their vision for a family-centered education-system and response to Coronavirus in DC. In this vision, parents lifted up that the pandemic further cemented that reliable, high-speed internet access is a basic need for families across the District. We must create a clear, comprehensive, and equity-centered plan to make universal access a reality for everyone in DC.

<u>We Must Expand Access to Internet in All Wards and Communities</u>
As many District residents have had to transition to remote learning and work, thousands of families have not been able to afford quality and reliable internet access, despite the intensified need. DC's public data on current services and the outlying need is out of date, with the most recent report from 2015. According to more recent data from <u>Urban Institute</u>, 83% of DC households have access to the internet, but only 70% report having a internet subscription at home. Importantly, internet subscription rates vary widely across wards. Only 45% of households in Ward 7 and 48% percent of households in Ward 8 have internet subscriptions. Conversely, in Wards 2 and 3, 82% and 86% of households have internet subscriptions, respectively - almost double the rates East of the Anacostia River. DC must take steps to expand internet access in all parts of the District, ensure timely data tracking and reporting to ensure any investments are working, and make sure that information about these programs is accessible in multiple languages to meet the needs of our diverse communities.

<u>Beyond Expanding Access: We Must Increase the Speed and Reliability of Basic Internet</u>

The creation of the Internet for All program has expanded basic internet access to up to 25,000 families across the District. However, the basic level of connectivity does not adequately handle video conferencing and streaming, which is required for learning and working from home - especially with multiple devices operating at once. At a recent DC Council hearing, Ward 8 Parent Leader DaSean Jones lost internet connection during his important testimony because there were five people, including his children who were in the middle of distance learning, in his household online at once.

DaSean is not alone - these frequent interruptions during important conversations for work, health care, and school are unacceptable in a city with resources and options to prevent this. Students are stuck refreshing web pages, missing instruction after being kicked out of meetings, and navigating choppy video and audio that can be hard to follow - especially for our youngest learners and those with special needs. This is a regional issue and known problem with Comcast Essentials, the main provider of basic internet expansion programs since the pandemic. Students in Baltimore, along with a former Comcast employee, have been voicing the need to elevate the speeds in their community. DC must follow their lead and raise the floor for speeds in basic internet packages so that everyone trying to learn, work, and receive telehealth services can maintain a consistent and uninterrupted connection.

Lack of Reliable Internet Has Great Impact on Student Learning
To help bridge the internet gap, many DCPS and public charter schools have stepped up and provided students with hotspots and devices, which has put an undue financial burden on schools. Although that was a helpful temporary solution, the costs associated with the hotspots, which average to $20 per student and hotspot per month, quickly add up and prevent schools from allocating those funds to mitigating learning loss, mental health support for students and staff, or other helpful programs. Additionally, as those hotspots are used on a daily basis to handle hours of video conferencing and streaming, many students' hotspots have slowed down and become less sufficient for hours of distance learning a day. Thus, thousands of students who depend on hotspots are not fully connected to school.

Even with schools' allocation of devices and hot spots and DC's Internet for All program, the DC Charter School Alliance reported that in January 2021, which is after nearly 10 months of distance learning, about 69% of public charter school students were still experiencing issues with their devices and internet. This report does not touch on the number of DCPS students

who are still experiencing difficulties with connectivity during distance learning, and this combined with the fact that most feedback is gathered online, means the total number of students this is impacting is likely *much higher*. The inconsistency of internet access is directly impeding our students' academic learning and growth, as we've seen unprecedented learning loss that mirrors the digital divide: starkest for Black, Brown, and low-income children.

In conclusion, if we want our students to learn and families to thrive, we must view internet access as a basic need. In order to achieve equitable access to internet, the city should:
- Complete and release up-to-date data about internet access across all wards to properly assess the needs of residents.
- Invest in infrastructure and programs to expand internet access to all residents in DC.
- Raise the level of basic internet in the Internet for All program and any additional basic internet packages to ensure families are able to stay connected all day long.
- Ensure that city services, like Internet for All and OCTO call centers, provide language accessibility.

We are at a critical junction point in our city. Access to internet has become a basic need for residents across the District, yet the lack of reliable internet for families has further exacerbated the disparities that are already present in DC. To foster students' learning and to support residents' abilities to work and participate in telehealth services from home, DC must take action now.

This work is only possible with leaders in the Council and OCTO who are dedicated to empowering communities through expanding equitable access and quality of internet services. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, I hope we can count on your leadership.

In service,

Kerry Savage
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