

Safe Passage to School Expansion Act of 2021 Testimony Guide
Committee on Transportation and the Environment &
Committee of the Whole
Tuesday, October 12, 2021

To: Chairman Phil Mendelson, Committee of the Whole members, Councilmember Cheh, Committee on Transportation and the Environment members, and staff

From: Bre’Jane’e Williams

Date: October 12, 2021

Good morning Chairman Mendelson, Councilmember Cheh, members of the Committee of the Whole and members of the Committee on Transportation and the Environment. My name is Bre’Jane’e Williams and I am a proud parent of two beautiful kids, Bella and Kaleb .I also serve with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) on the Ward 7 Parent Leaders in Education Board.

Thank you for this opportunity to share in the conversation about safe passage to school and the recent bill, “Safe Passage to School Expansion Act 2021! I am testifying today because I want to live in a city where all kids are able to safely travel to and from school every day, regardless of where they live or where they attend school. I know that the safe passage expansion act will play an important part in making this possible.

Testifying today is relevant for my family because my son Kaleb goes to school at Hyde Addison Elementary School in Ward 2 and my daughter Bella goes to Apple Tree Institute in Ward 7. Like many families in the District, we don’t have the luxury of driving to school everyday; instead we mostly take the Metro and bus across town. And if we’re short on time we might use Uber, which can get really expensive. Being able to travel through the District has given me the opportunity to see the differences in how the city creates an environment that fosters feelings of safety and security for students on their way to school.

Commuting from my home in Ward 7 to Apple Tree on Oklahoma Ave, we have to pass the outskirts of Benning road area which is a high traffic area. This includes people moving by foot, car and bus. By the time we arrive at Hillside and Benning Road, it only gets worse! Our family has seen shootings, drug use, and drug needles on the ground. But when I get to Kaleb’s

school in Ward 2, there is a huge difference in what I see and how I feel. I feel safe! There are a number of crossing guards and community members around. If we're in an uber, I'm able to say "okay honey, get out the car and walk to the door of the school building" on your own. But I wouldn't feel good about doing that in my own community and that's not fair!

I hope that you all will consider including Benning Road as a "priority" area. When I think about the number of schools in the area like Kipp, Eastern and Hine, and the number of kids travelling to and from school by themselves, I applaud the expansion act for naming the need for support with shuttles to and from metro hubs. I am also happy to see the District making an effort to collaborate between offices and agencies.

I think it's important not only to increase police presence, but to make sure they and the other adults stationed enroute to schools receive the right training to discourage and de-escalate fights. As parents we know that kids will be kids and conflicts *will* happen. But it's important that we always think about the school to prison pipeline, and not find new and more creative ways to punish kids and make them feel like they don't belong in their own communities.

My former job was a part of the safe passage program and served as a safe space for kids. And honestly, I don't think in the years we participated we ever had a single student use our office. As staff we were told about the program in passing, but for us it was just a sticker on a window. But now, as a parent of kids who will be travelling on their own soon. I know that serving as an official safe space for kids is so much more than that!

With the Expansion Act I hope the community organizations and businesses that participate are given the right resources and training to take the role seriously. It's important that the adults coming into school communities have relationships with the students and families. It is though actually knowing the kids and their stories, that kids will be more likely to actually go to them for help with dealing with more sensitive issues like bullying and street sexual harassment.

Thank you for allowing me to testify and share what I want to see for our kids and our District. School and home are the most important places in a child's life. Kids deal with enough already, they deserve a little peace while travelling. I hope you will consider the needs of the Ward 7 Benning Road community when implementing the safe passage expansion act!