



Testimony for Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE)

Performance Oversight Hearing

Wednesday, February 26th, 2020

To: DC Council Committee on Education, DC Council Committee of the Whole, Councilmember Grosso, Chairman Mendelson, and Committee Staff

From: Shavon Collier

Date: February 26, 2020

Good morning to the DC Council Committee on Education, DC Council Committee of the Whole, Councilmember Grosso, Chairman Mendelson, and Committee Staff. My name is Shavon Collier and I am a proud parent of 3 children who attend schools in Ward 5 and Ward 8. I serve as a Parent Leader in Education (PLE) Board Member with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) on the Ward 8 PLE Board. I am here today to share my story about the importance of increasing access to mental health supports and trauma informed training in schools. I hope that by sharing my daughter's experiences with a lack of adequate mental health services in her school, other parents and families will feel that they are not alone. And I hope that telling my story will inspire you to join us in this work.

I am here to tell you about my 10 year old daughter Raya who will soon be graduating from elementary school and going to middle school. I'm so proud of my daughter's academic accomplishments. This is especially true as a parent with a child with several disabilities. Although I am happy with the school that my child is currently attending, Ketcham Elementary School, I am disappointed that before settling on Ketcham I had to transfer to 3 different schools. This is because at her previous two schools, she was not getting her needs met and not receiving the services that were needed for her to succeed in school. My daughter has both special education needs and a diagnosed social emotional learning disorder. At one of her schools before Ketcham, she was assigned at least 5 different speech therapists in a single year.



In another, she went for months without receiving the special educational services she needs because the staffing was cut and never replaced. These types of disruptions to routine and consistency would be challenging for any child, but especially for Raya because of her disorder. These events affected her learning so much that she fell drastically behind academically and in her speech therapy.

I'm happy to say our experiences at Ketcham are totally different. At Ketcham, there is a school climate and culture that addresses the needs of the whole child. There is adequate staffing and Raya receives her special education and speech therapy without interruption. At Ketcham parents and educators are partners in supporting the mental-health and well-being of students. But, now that my child is in fifth grade and near the end of her time in elementary school, I'm afraid that the old patterns will start all over again. As we apply to middle-schools, our family must consider that it is unlikely there will be quality schools to meet my daughter's specific needs in my area. We also have to consider the likelihood that there will be an added burden to our family because my child's disabilities don't qualify her to get picked up by a school bus. This means I'll have to either add hours to an already difficult commute in order to access a quality school or deal with the issues that come with safe passage across the city, particularly for children with special needs.

I am so grateful that the Mayor and our city have decided to deepen the investment in our kids and our schools by proposing to increase the base UPSFF by 4% this year. But the evidence is clear that schools need more resources - period. So today, I am asking you to go even further in your commitment to our kids, by supporting \$16 million for expansion to the department of Behavioral Health to provide mental health professionals in 60 more schools and supporting \$10.6 million for social emotional learning and trauma-informed training in all schools, and working towards full funding of the UPSFF.



I want to close by emphasizing that it's not just about funding... We need strong implementation as well. Even at school's like Ketcham, that are doing an awesome job at providing our kids the mental health support they need, there is still room for improvement. One of the hardest parts about finding the right school for my child was navigating between and understanding what DCPS and PCSB have to offer in terms of mental health services. We must make sure that efforts between divisions and agencies are coordinated to improve efficiency and effectiveness. Mental health supports at school and organizations, have to be offered collaboratively and we must make sure families have access to information. This is so that we're not only getting more resources, but using the resources we already have and making them accessible to everyone.

Thank you,

Shavon Collier,

Parent Leader

PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)