



**Testimony for the Education Agencies Budget Oversight Hearing  
Friday, October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020**

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

From: Marcia Huff, PAVE Parent and Ward 7 Resident

Date: October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020

Greetings members of the Committee of the Whole and Committee on Education. My name is Marcia Huff and I am the proud mother of two children who attend Two Rivers at Young Public Charter School located in Ward 5. I am a Ward 7 resident, and I serve with Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE) on the Ward 7 Parent Leaders in Education (PLE) Board. I appreciate this opportunity to share my experiences and my thoughts on what changes and improvements I would like to see.

I share my family's experiences through the lens of a household with two highly educated parents, with stable and supportive employers; who have a safe, large and comfortable home and who have not been negatively affected (YET!!) financially or physically by the COVID-19 crisis. Daily I think how much more difficult this experience would be if I were also worried about our immediate financial stability, childcare, food, safety, or housing. I do not know how I would manage if we had lost someone near and dear to our family. I implore you to remember this I as share my family's experience with distance learning.

My husband and I have two children who are in PK3 (age 3) and second grade (age 7). Our son began distance learning in March 2020 and our daughter began on August 31st. My husband and I both are working from home full time and our jobs are rather demanding but thankfully supportive, understanding, and flexible. Distance learning has been quite the experience and one that would be much easier with in home help (family, nanny, au pair, etc.). Our son has done well overall, but he desperately misses his peers and needs significant supervision to stay on task and complete his requirements. His independence grows each week, but it is still a challenge to keep him focused, engaged, and meeting his teachers' expectations. Our daughter, who turned 3-year-old on the first day of school, has not been receptive to distance learning. She participates in virtual group and individual sessions and attends a daycare for part of the day.

Our family is fortunate to have multiple tablets, laptops and Chromebooks for our children to use (and at times we have needed them all) and we upgraded our internet service in April to accommodate our needs. Our children's school offered assistance with technology and internet access and has been extremely helpful navigating technical issues. They held parent sessions on logins, accessing portals, and using Zoom. Even with this assistance, we have experienced



technology challenges. The internet connection is lost, bandwidth stretched to the max, and Zoom freezes. This is frustrating for all of us, but it is extremely frustrating for our children and their teachers.

Overall, we are satisfied with how our children's school has handled distance learning. The attendance policy is flexible and understanding. Two Rivers has done an excellent job with communicating plans, pending plans, policies, etc. They hold listening sessions and town halls. They have done multiple surveys. They communicate via text message, the student portal, email, and robo calls. The teachers have also been great with communicating the schedule, assignments, etc.

Two Rivers expectations for PK3 have been realistic for our family. The daily sessions are short, engaging, and fun. They include Physical Education and Spanish. There are lots of songs and interactive activities. Unfortunately, despite all of this our daughter is not interested. She does very well at her daycare that has daily lessons and instruction, but she has struggled with online engagement. One issue is that they are in the process of assessing all of the students to create a baseline. Assessing a 3-year-old, via Zoom (with various technical issues) with a teacher she has only interacted through a screen feels unnecessary and unduly stressful. Our concerns were received positively, and the teachers were understanding and supportive. We are working on "going with the flow."

Our experience with our son's instruction (2nd grade) has been positive. The schedule is realistic but since it is spread out throughout the day, he needs constant supervision and oversight to ensure that he is on time, completing tasks, and submitting assignments by the deadline. Our son is also new to using the computer, a mouse, and typing so we often have to assist with navigation. We receive regular updates on our son's progress, and he has been doing well. It just takes a lot of work and can be stressful at times. His teachers are supportive and check in regularly via email, text, FaceTime, etc. I feel like I know what is going on and how our son is doing. Our son is learning, growing and thriving but we are constantly worried about him falling behind. Supervising distance learning feels like a full-time job at times—one that would feel impossible if I had lacked an active partner co-leading. Our family's mental wellness has overall been positive throughout this ordeal, but the school has not offered many resources. Staff repeatedly say that they are available if there is a need, but they are not proactive.

There are many things that DC could have done and can do to make distance learning easier for families:

- **Invest in Childcare.** Families need help with childcare. We need more options and existing centers need more resources. There need to be low cost to free childcare for children up to middle school. In addition, families with special needs children also need care.

Not all parents can work from home and most cannot afford private care for older children. This crisis must be addressed immediately. If my husband and I did not have flexible and understanding employers, one of us would have to resign because we do not have anyone else



to care for our children or oversee distance learning.

- **Safe Social OST Engagement.** Students need outlets for socializing and still need to explore hobbies and interests. Numerous businesses and organizations are offering safe group engagement, but most are expensive. Agencies such as DPR, DCPL, DBH, DCPS, DOES, etc. should collaborate to create weekly activities for kids. These could include arts, sports, fitness, career exploration, and fun academic support. DPR offered small camps this summer (our son participated, and they were a lifesaver) and they could continue this over the next year.
- **DPR.** I feel like DPR has failed the city (outside of the summer camp offerings) during the pandemic. Physical fitness is extremely important for caregivers and children during this time of stress. Gyms and the private industry use online platforms to engage but DPR mostly fell silent during the pandemic outside of a few videos on the website. I am glad to see that classes are slowly being offered but more needs to be done. DPR's staff should offer regular online fitness classes for youth and adults.
- **Accessible mental wellness resources-** Families (parents and students) need access to mental health wellness resources via various means including text message and video. These resources should be quick and easy to obtain with very few barriers.
- **Mental Wellness included in curricula.** Many schools use a trickle-down approach (professionals coach teachers/admin with the hope approaches reach students) with mental wellness resources and only have individual services for those who have extreme needs. Mental wellness needs to be included in regular instruction. Teach methods for managing stress, organizing time, balancing responsibilities, sleep strategies, etc. Direct instruction to students and their parents. It should be regularly included in instruction not just an email or a one-time thing.

We are counting on you to support DC families and students! Now is the time to act. Thank you for your time and attention. Please let me know if you have any questions or would like to meet to discuss further.