



**Testimony for the Committee of the Whole
Education Agencies Performance Oversight Hearing
March 9th, 2021**

To: Chairman Mendelson, members of the Committee of the Whole, and Committee Staff

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

Date: March 9th, 2021

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole. 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.

The trauma and hardship families have faced due to the pandemic are unprecedented, and historic inequities and injustices have been exposed and exacerbated more than ever before. This past year brings us to a critical juncture for education in our city - now is the time for a comprehensive and bold plan for our kids.

We want to thank Chairman Mendelson, and his education team, Christina Setlow and LaKisha Jordan, for reaching out to have a conversation with a diversity of families directly about their issues and what *they* wanted to see in the recovery plan. This type of dialogue - a time for leaders to listen and seek to understand - is exactly the type of engagement we need from all policymakers to come together and create real, community-centered change. We hope this practice continues and are happy to help facilitate more of these conversations.

Here, I want to elevate what we have heard from families as their top priorities for #DCSchoolsRecovery:

Fully Fund Our Schools

Over the past year, we saw remarkable efforts from educators and families to shift to distance learning and meet the needs of students in new ways. Schools provided technology devices, internet access, food, school and cleaning supplies, and more. Teachers adjusted their lesson plans to be conducted online, and many put in innumerable hours to check-in with students and

families at times that worked for them, while balancing their own workloads and households. Schools that were able to open in-person poured resources and time into maintaining a safe, nurturing environment for their students, oftentimes seemingly running two schools, one in-person and one remote - at once. Many parents or older students took on the role of educator - with varied levels of support to manage academics or mental health for kids at home.

As we look to meet the growing challenges head on, and the timeline for navigating COVID and the full return to school remains unclear, we must make sure schools have the resources and support they need. We can't expect schools to continue to fill gaps in the same way for another year, as the added expenses take away from investments in learning and asks educators and parents to do more with less. We must be mindful of our above average teacher turnover rate as we plan to support schools and their staff, especially when the need for stability and relationship-building is more relevant than ever.

The 3% increase to the UPSFF last year was an essential step forward for which we are extremely thankful. Still, the **per-pupil base is nearly 6 percent below the inflation-adjusted recommended base by DC's own adequacy study. Fully funding the UPSFF would increase funding by \$106.7 million for LEAs** and go far to ensure schools have what they need to provide every teacher, parent, and student the support they deserve.

Fully Fund the At-Risk Weight

We cannot talk about education in a vacuum. It is but one component of dismantling a racist and unjust system. Wealth in DC has been historically and disproportionately held in the hands of Wards 2 and 3 residents who are mostly white. There the median income is more than 3 times the median income in Wards 7 and 8, which are mostly Black. As a result, access to essential resources for learning and growing during a pandemic, like reliable internet access, additional academic supports for students, enrichment opportunities, and mental health services, or even in-person learning environments, look very different across Wards.

The lack of equitable access to support has widened the already unconscionable opportunity gap. In a [December 2020 report](#), EmpowerK12 highlighted that in just this school year:

- Students who are at-risk have lost, on average, 5 months of learning in math and 4 months of learning in reading compared to a 4 month and 1 month slide respectively for all students.

- White students, who are often from higher-income households with access to more resources or personalized instruction, are actually gaining faster than before the pandemic in some areas. In reading, at-risk students only grew by 58% from last school year, while, on average, white students grew by 176%.

Couple this lack of resources for education with widely disparate health, economic, and mental health outcomes across race and class as a result of COVID, and the call to action remains clear: **DC must prioritize investments in historically underserved communities, or students who as a result of systemic oppression, are considered at-risk.** The **at-risk weight needs to be fully funded to 0.37** so that **nearly half of our student population can get the support they need to learn** - a percentage that will likely go up as COVID continues. This **\$78.5 million** in funding can and should be targeted to accelerate student learning, acknowledge and address the trauma they've experienced, and provide a holistic and nurturing school environment, including but not limited to family engagement supports, reading specialists, devices for students, targeted curriculum, more mental health supports, and/or additional school staff.

This is well within DC's ability to fund, given stimulus funds and should be viewed as both a moral obligation and a smart investment with a high return on investment, as [research](#) shows that increased school spending leads to higher graduation rates, higher wages, and a reduction in adult poverty, especially for students from low-income backgrounds.

Ensure Access to Mental Health Supports at School

As noted above, it is difficult to focus on learning if a student's mental wellness is suffering. Schools need a holistic approach and therefore DC needs to make holistic investments. We are grateful to the Council for investing \$3.3 million last year to fund the expansion of DC's School-Based Mental Health program to 47 more schools. To ensure thousands more students will have access to this critical care, **we strongly urge DC to deepen this investment and add \$6.4 million to fully fund the next cohort in the expansion**, which will add a clinician to 80 more schools. We should also ensure a total of **\$10.8 million is invested for high-quality social emotional learning programs as well as trauma-informed and restorative practices training in all schools.**

We also ask the Mayor and the Council to **reverse the \$4 million in cuts to community-based behavioral health providers**, who are the backbone of the District's mental health programs. By

restoring these cuts, DC will receive an additional \$5 million in federal funding as every dollar of local spending for Medicaid-eligible services equals more than three dollars in federal reimbursement rates.

Invest in the Continuum of Care

Finally, we must invest in a continuum of care for kids.

- We join our partners in the OST coalition to **expand funding for OST programs so kids can have access to enrichment opportunities that are fun and allow them to explore their passions.**
- We join our partners in the Under 3 DC coalition in asking for **\$60 million to increase subsidies for child care providers** so they can cover the increased cost of care for our youngest residents during a critical period in their development, and get closer to paying a fair wage for early childhood educators.
- We join the broader advocacy community to make sure **families' basic needs are met** by adding funding for internet, health care, housing, and food programs.

Let's Go Big on a Family-Centered Response to COVID and #DCSchoolsRecovery

We're about to get a massive **federal stimulus package and have revenue-raising options that can pay for all of this.** This budget is an opportunity to show that we are a city that prioritizes our District's children and will courageously act to right the wrongs of historic injustice. It's our opportunity to leave a legacy of unprecedented investments and support for our kids to create a brighter future for DC than we could ever imagine - at a time they need it most.

This work is only possible with leaders in our education system who believe in the power and promise of parent voice and leadership, I hope you will hear their call. Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify today.

In service,

Kerry Savage
Director of Policy
PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)