

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS)



Public Hearing on

School Security in the District of Columbia Public and Public Charter Schools

Testimony of

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Before the

Committee of the Whole

The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairperson

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Zoom Video Conference

Good afternoon, Chairperson Mendelson and members of the Council, and staff. I am Dr. Brenda Elliott, Chief of the Office of School Improvement and Supports for DC Public Schools (DCPS), and I am honored to testify before you on the critical topic of school security in DCPS.

Today I'd like to share the progress DCPS has made to ensure our schools are safe and welcoming environments. The focus on positive school security supports is an essential part of our work toward becoming a whole child-centered, anti-racist school system where we live out the value of equity in all that we do. When we say whole child, we are referring to an approach of thinking holistically about the academic, social, and emotional needs of our students. With approximately 50,000 students back in our buildings, our plan to ensure the wellbeing of our students is focused on three key areas. First, we are focused on leveraging Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) in all schools to proactively create a supportive environment schoolwide and anchor the classroom experience in trauma-responsive approaches. Secondly, we are focused on mental health supports. Third, we are rethinking school security to be supportive, not punitive.

We are pleased to see that year-to-date, suspensions are down significantly, restorative practice implementation has increased, and overall infractions are down this school year compared to SY2019-20, the last time all students were in our school buildings. I would note that similar to nationwide trends, we are seeing an increase in behavior infractions categorized as severe. We are closely monitoring these infractions to best support schools, staff, and students, particularly in the context of the trauma students may have experienced over the past two years.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

We know that the pandemic has left many in our community feeling overwhelmed, and DCPS is investing in strategies that help us better understand and respond to the needs of students and families. This summer, principals, and their school-level MTSS teams attended a four-day Summer Leadership Institute focused on key practices that support a whole child, strengths-based approach to student supports. These practices included ways to support acceleration and engaging instruction for all students, as well as provide more customized, intensive supports for students based on demonstrated needs.

DCPS has continued the implementation of Trauma-Responsive School (TRS) Practices this school year, after a yearlong training series during SY2020-21. Our five TRS negotiables, which are our foundation of Tier 1 behavioral strategies include building relational trust, greeting students with positive and affirmative language, addressing staff wellness, providing opportunity and space to practice emotional regulation, and teaching, modeling, and reinforcing school-wide behavior expectations for students and adults. Our goal is to ensure that all students are physically and psychologically safe so they can fully participate in academic learning.

Mental Health Supports

As I shared last spring, DCPS is a national leader in mental health investments with a total of 131.5 school psychologists, 237 school social workers, 141 counselors, and 132 community-based partners serving in our schools this school year. With a total of 641.5 mental health professionals in our schools every day, we *exceed* the nationally recommended ratios of 1:25 with a ratio of 1:22. This includes an increased investment of 23.5 school-based mental health providers and 26 additional community-based partners compared to last year.

One example of what this looks like in practice is the work being led by the mental health team at Noyes Elementary School in collaboration with their community-based organization, Hillcrest Family Services. At Noyes, mental health staff are helping students strengthen coping skills and improve self-regulation through groupwork. They have also given attention to staff wellness by providing space for teachers to learn diaphragmatic breathing, a commonly used practice for regulating anxiety and coping with stress. At the secondary level, the school mental health team at Sousa Middle School, inclusive of their community-based organization partner SMILE, strategically integrates social and emotional learning as a daily practice. With recovery in mind, school mental health providers facilitate 3 sessions per day on a specific social-emotional topic. Sousa's commitment to dedicating time for building relational trust and skill building is a great example of tier 1 mental health prevention at work.

DCPS also intentionally allocated academic and social-emotional learning supports through ESSER funding of school-lead Acceleration Academies. For example, Cardozo Education Campus created a Summer Acceleration Academy that allowed students to have access to academic curriculum and interest areas such as soccer, theater, martial arts, cooking, gardening, and mentoring. Moten Elementary School launched a new Saturday Academy to support students in literacy as well as to engage families in meaningful social emotional support. The Saturday Academy is a prime example of integrating family engagement with partner collaboration. Partners like DC Scores, AARP, Kennedy Center, Literacy Lab, Horton's Kids, Community of Hope, and others are critical in this work. We know students need targeted academic interventions, but we also know the heightened importance of joy and creating a safe and welcoming environment as students grapple with the traumatic impacts of the pandemic.

In classrooms across the district, we are focused on ensuring our students develop the skills to resolve conflict on their own or in small groups. Each day, our mental health professionals coach students on self-regulation strategies, journaling, and other more formal therapies to focus on positive responses to life challenges. This summer, we practiced those same techniques in wellness breaks with our school leadership teams so that they were equipped with skills from our mental health staff.

This summer, 276 DCPS staff from 89 schools, including Deans, Restorative Justice Coordinators, In-School Suspension Coordinators, Behavior Technicians, and Educational Aides, attended a three-day virtual conference to increase their capacity to support positive student behavior as we returned fully to in-person learning. The training provided guidance on implementing restorative practices as a proactive and reactive approach, LGBTQ+ competency, targeted school violence assessments, bullying prevention, supporting our students with

disabilities, crisis prevention intervention through verbal de-escalation, and the science of stress, adversity, learning, and development. As a result of this capacity-building work, we have seen an increase in using Restorative Practices to resolve challenges by more than 20% this year compared to SY2019-20.

This year, DCPS launched our Youth Mental Health Ambassador program at all high schools. This peer-led intervention aims to remove the stigma associated with seeking help. By partnering with Our Minds Matter, student ambassadors are trained to recognize signs of distress so they can help refer their peers to school mental health providers. As we continue to recover from the pandemic, elevating the voices of our students will ensure that programming is relevant to and informed by their expressed needs.

Re-Imagining School Security

DCPS continues to reimagine school security by grounding our focus in what our students, staff, and families share. Since November 2020, DCPS has heard from more than 500 stakeholders and established the Spring 2021 Safe and Positive Schools Working Group. We were honored to be doing this work alongside students, families, and community members from organizations such as Georgetown's Juvenile Justice Initiative, SHAPPE, and Black Swan Academy. As a result of the Working Group's feedback, in collaboration with our schools and communities, we are prioritizing reducing negative experiences with school security for students, particularly students of color, and aligning school security practices with DCPS's overall approach to supporting students' growth and development. We are also focused on ensuring that all adults in our schools understand the role of school security.

As we heard in the spring testimony, many of our contracted school security personnel take pride in building relational trust with students and being fully integrated into the school community. This summer, DCPS supported this work by providing over 30 hours of professional development to our contract security officers. We have leveraged the expertise of restorative practice and student behavior specialists and other DCPS staff to lead our officers through training in verbal de-escalation, restorative practice, and cultural competency. DCPS is in the process of reviewing our security contract and reimagining how we can best meet the safety and security needs of our students. We've also made an investment in building a stronger partnership with the School & Safety Division (SSD) of MPD by inviting School Resource Officers (SROs) to attend trainings facilitated by our DCPS subject matter experts. This summer, MPD SROs joined our contract officers in attendance at our School Culture & Climate Student Behavior Conference.

We also shared last spring that several secondary schools are piloting innovations to re-imagine student safety in their buildings by reallocating funds away from traditional, contracted security and increasing access to social-emotional resources. Eighteen schools across all eight wards applied and are participating in the Revisioning School Security pilot. We are starting to analyze the results of this shift, which moved approximately \$2 million from security to culture and social-emotional learning supports. In reviewing initial feedback on the pilot, one school leader

shared that they could see the shift in the mindset in their staff due to increased training opportunities. Another shared that the shift in resources allowed them to be more intentional about training their school-based staff and developing guards using a strength-based approach. As of October 29th, out of school suspensions in pilot schools for SY21-22 totaled 235, which is a 51.5% decrease from SY19-20 (484).

Our goal continues to be ensuring our schools are safe and nurturing environments where students develop positive and trusting relationships. We are so happy to have our students back in school, but every day we see the impact that this pandemic and time away from school has had on our students' emotional wellbeing. Our strategic investments to implement our multi-tiered system of supports, expand mental health resources, and provide innovative opportunities to revision school security are key to ensuring that all students feel a strong sense of belonging in our schools and have the resources to support them as they navigate the immense challenges of this current time.

We are thankful for the partnerships across the city in ensuring the safety of our schools, from our incredible teachers and school leaders to the security and law enforcement personnel in the community. Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I am happy to answer any questions you have at this time.