

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOLS**



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

Wednesday, April 21, 2021
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 Improvements and Supports for DC Public Schools (DCPS), and I am honored to testify before you today on School Security in DCPS.

DCPS is deeply committed to becoming a school district that is anchored in equity and centered on developing the whole child. We aim to create the conditions that allow all classrooms to support each child and their holistic development, so that students know their worth, discover their interests and passions, and develop skills and identities.

As we work to create these nurturing and supportive learning environments, we know that revisioning school security is critical, and DCPS appreciates the Council’s support and partnership in this effort. I am pleased to provide an update of our comprehensive work, with a focus on how DCPS has invested in (1) mental health supports, (2) trauma-responsive practices, and (3) restorative, age-appropriate responses to student behavior. I will also address shifts in school security where we have focused on (1) seeking feedback and refining our approach with stakeholders, (2) adjusting the school security budget with input from schools, and (3) training contract security guards in practices that reinforce our approach to safe and positive schools. In our comprehensive work and our focus on school security, we are continuously mining for equity, implicit bias, and systemic racism in order to push the appropriate levers to address racial gaps in outcomes.

I will begin with our comprehensive work.

First, DCPS has made significant investments in Mental Health Resources. According to findings from the 2019-2020 DCPS Learning from Home survey, families indicated that mental health supports were one of the greatest needs for students, especially during the Public Health Emergency. DCPS continues to invest in school-based mental health as evidenced by the 486 social work providers, school psychologists, and school counselors it employs. Furthermore, the Mayor’s investment in the School Mental Health Expansion has resulted in 89 community-based providers and 38 Department of Behavioral Health clinicians providing increased access to mental health support. In total, DCPS has 605 mental health professionals serving our schools, meeting the nationally recommended ratios for school social work and school psychology. Additionally, during the public health emergency, DCPS invested in additional training and capacity building for our staff.

Second, Trauma Responsive Practices have been a key focus to improve the social-emotional well-being of all students. DCPS has been using trauma-responsive and healing-informed practices since 2011. Amidst the challenges of the twin pandemics of the global health emergency and increased incidents of racism and racial violence, DCPS launched five, non-negotiable Trauma-Responsive School practices in all our schools: (1) building relational trust, (2) greeting each student daily with positive and affirmative language, (3) addressing staff wellness, (4) providing opportunity and space to practice emotional regulation, and (5) teaching, modeling, and reinforcing school-wide behavior expectations for students and adults. This year, all DCPS school leaders, classroom teachers, and behavioral support staff were provided training on these non-negotiables in our virtual environments. In preparation for the



opening of 2020-2021 school year, DCPS implemented required training on the science of learning and development and trauma responsive practices. This training focused on the impact of stress on the brain and its connection to learning, as well as school- and classroom-level strategies that calm the brain, build relationships, and create the conditions for strong connection and deep learning.

Third, DCPS has taken a restorative, instructive, inclusive, and age-appropriate approach to respond to student behavior. DCPS has developed coaching supports and a robust arc of training that help schools and school teams develop their expertise in various restorative practices, including community circles, peer mediation, and formal mediations. So far, more than 1,700 staff members have participated in restorative practice since summer 2019. In addition, the school culture team has collaborated with school-level behavior staff to create behavior guidance that includes an instructional component and is differentiated by grade-band to ensure that responses, supports, and interventions are developmentally appropriate.

To build on this foundation, DCPS is moving forward with reimagining school security in safe and positive schools.

Our work begins with engaging stakeholders to inform the vision of Safe and Positive schools. Since 2019, DCPS has worked to seek and incorporate stakeholder feedback to ensure schools are safe and nurturing learning environments that support all students. This work specifically centers on the experiences of students of color, who more frequently have negative experiences with law enforcement and security entities. Between November 2020 and February 2021, DCPS held empathy interviews and focus group discussions with more than 500 stakeholders, including 163 secondary school students across 24 campuses, 216 school leaders and school-based staff, and stakeholders on the Chancellor’s Parent, Principal, and Teacher Advisory boards. The key trends that we heard from our stakeholders are the need for: (1) aligned and comprehensive training for contract security; (2) refined policies and procedures for hiring and incident response; (3) clear and consistent expectations for ALL stakeholders; and (4) additional investments in infrastructure, student supports, and mental health services.

Following this stakeholder engagement, DCPS established a Safe and Positive Schools Working Group. This group, composed of 20 internal and external stakeholders, includes students, parents, community representatives, district- and school-based staff and has a charge to lead the development of a multi-year plan for re-envisioning school security and student discipline in DCPS. This team will meet monthly through June to complete research, review feedback, and propose comprehensive solutions. The Working Group is on target to provide recommendations later in 2021. We honored to be doing this work alongside our Working Goup which includes students, families, and community members from agencies such as Georgetown’s Juvenile Justice Initiative, Yielding Hands, Black Swan Academy, and the University of District of Columbia.

Through engagement with school communities, DCPS is adjusting the school security budget and contract to support investments in student well-being. During the 2019-2020 school year, a total of \$4.2M was shifted from traditional, contracted security toward school-based



emotional well-being investments. This opportunity for school leaders to invest in social-emotional learning initiatives and strengthen student engagement was particularly impactful at a time when the virtual platform has presented challenges for many families. For example, Columbia Heights Education Campus added a Coordinator for Student Resources to reach out to their most vulnerable families; Burrville Elementary School expanded its focus on mindfulness practices and purchased additional yoga mats; and C.W. Harris Elementary School invested in professional development to support the implementation of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports.

At the start of this fiscal year, DCPS assumed the management of the security contract from the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD). As part of the budget process for the 2021-2022 school year, DCPS gave secondary schools the opportunity to re-imagine student safety in their buildings and reallocate funds away from traditional, contracted security to more social-emotional resources in their school building. Eighteen (18) schools across all eight (8) Wards, participated in this pilot program and more than 500 stakeholders were engaged in order to inform this work. A total of 54 students and 127 LSAT members were engaged in this process with their schools. Approximately \$1.7M was moved out of traditional contract security budget line items to provide additional culture and social-emotional learning supports. Examples of this include removing guards from their school to fund additional social-emotional learning curriculum, Pathways Coordinators to support academic planning, Behavior Technicians to provide direct student support, and new positions like a dedicated Restorative Justice Coordinator. We are excited to implement and learn from this pilot program next school year.

DCPS is training contracted security guards to support safe and positive schools. Contract security guards in our schools play an important role in ensuring safe and positive schools as they are often the first people that students and families interact with when they enter our campuses. With the contract under DCPS management, we can enhance the professional development we provide to security guards. For example, we have already delivered training to all our guards on trauma-responsive practices within a trauma-informed school. We are also planning to train guards on restorative justice practices, language access, verbal de-escalation, and cultural competency. These trainings will not only give guards tools and techniques to respond thoughtfully when issues arise, but they will help them build stronger connections with our students, families, and school communities.

Finally, DCPS will continue to invest in equity training and development. DCPS has made significant changes that have lowered the suspension rates, both at schools and at the system level, especially for students of color. In the 2018-2019 school year, for instance, students experienced over 6,000 fewer days of lost instruction time due to out-of-school suspensions compared to the previous year. This next stage will more thoroughly address the necessary, adaptive changes to this long-term and complex matter. Even when students are suspended or referred for school discipline at a lower rate, we must pay attention to how adults treat students and examine implicit bias. DCPS will provide additional opportunities for educators to internalize the science of learning through training and coaching, with clear connections of how individual biases transpire in the classroom. We will continue to examine how systemic racism and implicit biases have unintended outcomes for young people.



In closing, DCPS recognizes that keeping our schools safe is the shared responsibility of staff, students, families, and our community. While we are focused on school security today, we know that safe schools do not start or end with security or law enforcement. Instead, this begins with ensuring that schools are nurturing and supportive places where adults intentionally work with students and families to develop positive relationships and trust.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I would be happy to answer any questions.

