Good Afternoon Council Members,

Thank you for welcoming my comments to speak on behalf of my Ward 8 school community. My name is Sundai Riggins and I am the principal of Hendley Elementary School located in the Washington Highlands neighborhood of Southeast DC.

Hendley Elementary School serves the highest at-risk population of elementary aged students in the District of Columbia. Our at-risk population is 93% and our student body is 100% African-American. Our school is located between 4th, 6th and Chesapeake streets and is within a short walk away from the Triumph, a Ward 8 short-term family housing facility.

Over the past six years, I have worked tirelessly to ensure that I keep my students, families and staff safe amidst neighborhood strife and gun violence. During the 2018-19 school year, my school was on lockdown ten times due to gunfire within close proximity, about 500 feet or less away from my school. There was one month in which we had lockdowns every Thursday for three consecutive weeks with gunfire occurring between 1 – 3 pm. This presence of continual neighborhood gunfire is a threat to the safety of students, families, and staff at Hendley ES. It causes fear, additional trauma, and worry for parents especially during dismissal time. Several parents have expressed concerns regarding students walking home from school in their own neighborhood. Given the neighborhood context, we can’t effectively ensure safe passage of students without the support of school security officers and MPD.

As a school we make our best efforts to protect students, but we know that schools are situated in communities. In our case, the external context of what may be happening between neighborhood crews, in nuisance properties near school, and other unsafe situations can adversely impact an innocent student, staff member, or community bystander at any given time. As a result of some of these externalities, we have actively collaborated with both school security officers and MPD to be vigilant and proactive in 1) clear communication between school administration and safety stakeholders about what’s happening outside to proactively modify morning arrival, dismissal or recess schedules if needed 2) working together if there is gunfire in the neighborhood to ensure that communication regarding next steps is clear to avoid unnecessarily putting the school on lockdown. This cross-sector collaboration works. During the pre-pandemic portion of the 2019-20 school year, we had zero lockdowns thanks to the collaborative and proactive communication and vigilance of both school security officers and MPD.

I agree that more efforts can be made to ensure that school safety personnel are well- trained in de-escalation strategies, trauma-informed practices, and other more progressive methods to avoid perpetuation of their presence as an extension of the school-to-prison paradigm. I strongly believe that strengthening their practices is the way that we ensure that their sole purpose in schools is preventative and proactive. While there are some communities that may feel they do not need this resources, there are communities like mine that utilize these resources effectively to keep students, families and staff safe. My community is a community of stakeholders that often feels disregarded and unheard. I speak in solidarity with the 330 students, 75 staff members and numerous families and community members that remain safe thanks to the collaborative efforts of our school safety support personnel.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of my school community to advocate for the continual presence and collaboration with both school security officers and MPD. Their support has truly made a difference.

Sundai Riggins

Principal

Hendley Elementary School, DC Public Schools