

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
Department of Behavioral Health**



**Council of the District of Columbia
Public Roundtable**

on

School Reopening and Academic Recovery: Government Witness Testimony

**Testimony of
Dr. Barbara J. Bazron
Director, Department of Behavioral Health**

**Before the
Committee of the Whole
Council of the District of Columbia
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chairman**

**Remote Hearing by WebEx
May 28, 2021
9:00 a.m.**

Good morning, Chairman Mendelson, Councilmembers, and Council staff.

I am Dr. Barbara J. Bazron, Director of the Department of Behavioral Health (DBH). I appreciate the opportunity to discuss behavioral health services to support school reopening and academic recovery. As Mayor Bower briefly highlighted yesterday, her proposed Fiscal Year 2022 Budget and Financial Plan includes \$8.3 million to support these initiatives.

These services complement the work taking place within schools under the leadership of the Deputy Mayor for Education, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, Chancellor Ferebee and the DC Public Charter School Board. They support the return to full in-person learning and target services to children and families most impacted by the pandemic as well as the trauma experienced as a result of gun violence in our communities.

Studies show that half of all lifetime mental disorders start by the age of 14 and school-based services have proven to be an effective way to reach children and their families. Our goal is to support the “conditions of learning” that have been shown by the research to be linked to students’ academic success, graduation and post-secondary success. The results of this strategy may contribute to decreasing the literacy gap between Black and White students.

The behavioral health initiatives will

- Make school-based services available in every public and public charter school;
- Provide onsite treatment services in targeted early childhood centers;
- Expand crisis response services in our public schools;
- Provide mental health supports for parents, and
- Offer mental health support for teachers.

I will now discuss each initiative in more detail.

Expansion of the School- Based Behavioral Health services

With the support of the Mayor, the Council and our education partners, DBH now offers behavioral health services to nearly 71,000 students and their families in 172 of the 245 public and public charter schools. This expansion completes the Mayor’s multiyear investment to make behavioral health services available to every child in every public school. This is a tremendous accomplishment that will have a lasting impact on the ability of our children to succeed now and later in life.

Social Emotional Learning and Mental Health Early Childhood Education Pilot Program

As Deputy Mayor Kihn testified, the Social Emotional Learning and Mental Health for Early Childhood Education program will provide early childhood treatment services in eight targeted child development centers in neighborhoods most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic either through disproportionate death rates or positive case rates. Funds will support the training of clinicians in evidence-based interventions with proven outcomes. We expect to support up to 75 young children and their families through this program.

Support for Students in Crisis

DBH now provides 24-hour emergency crisis services for children and youth between the ages of six to 17 years. Clinicians support children and youth in public schools when needed as well as in the home or community. We are adding an additional team of clinicians with the skills required to respond effectively to mental health crisis, including the traumatic impact of the pandemic experienced by students.

Support for Families

The Family Wellness and Support Program will continue a support program started by DBH last September to help parents and caregivers manage the multiple stressors and challenges caused by the pandemic. Wellness Wednesday is an online weekly program that has attracted about 1,000 participants and is offered in English and Spanish. The program also includes free consultations with a clinician without formal enrollment with DBH.

Support for Teachers

We recognize that teachers also may need additional support to manage the stressors in their own lives and the new school environment. Studies have shown that the rates of depression have doubled among teachers. In collaboration with our education partners, DBH will offer weekly support groups and mental health consultation services for teachers. Face-to-face and/or virtual services will be made available to any teacher within the District.

Chairman Mendelson, I appreciate the opportunity to testify today. We continue to collaborate with our education partners to offer high quality behavioral health services that support learning recovery and a healthy school environment for students to thrive. I am ready with my team to answer any questions.

Thank you.