

Chioma Oruh - Statement

Good afternoon, my name is Chioma Oruh and I'm the mother of two brilliant young boys, Atty and Jedi, both DCPS students. I am also a graduate of DC public schools (Takoma EC and Benjamin Banneker Academic High School) and am a long time Ward 4 resident, where I grew up.

It has truly been an honor and a pleasure to be a part of the School Behavioral Health Coordinating Council for the past two years. Within this time, I have learned a lot about the public-private partnerships committed to ensuring that our children have access to quality mental health services in schools and am grateful for these efforts. In addition, I am most proud of the work we have done within the Family and Youth subcommittee and cannot state how empowering to not only feel heard but truly supported by the DBH team and partnering agencies and organizations for embracing our little committees unique contribution to this great work.

While I am highly educated, I am not a psychologist or licensed social worker or any other type of behavioral specialist. I am also not a school teacher nor have I served in an administrative capacity in the education system. My expertise within this arena is strictly as a parent, a mother.

And I have discovered that this is enough contribute ideas and vision for a school behavioral health expansion.

Furthermore, my work as a Parent Support Specialist with Advocates for Justice and Education, the District's parent training and information center, has exposed me to families from all walks of life in the city as they navigate the education and health care systems seeking quality services for their children. I have had the pleasure to service undocumented parents, parents with disabilities themselves, federal/local government employees, diplomats, stay at home parents and grandparents, etc. – you name it, I've seen it.

There is not a single family that I've supported that isn't invested in their child's education; and no matter what adversity that faces them (domestic violence, immigration issues, homelessness, substance use disorder, incarceration) it is still true that they all want what is best for the children and youth. I've learned that families seek out the support of an advocate because they feel their voices are too small. They've attempted all other avenues of establishing positive communication with school teams about their child's physical and mental health and academic learning and have been either been silenced or ignored and, sometimes, even barred.

Knowing these stories so intimately informs my role as part of the Coordinating Council, and I share these with you today as school leaders who also have unique relationships with a diverse population of families. I encourage you to actively and demonstratively allow parents and families to bring their leadership skills in service of the school community. The truth is as adults, we are peers and so it is important to note that every back to school night, parent teacher meeting, IEP meeting, school program or various planning committees – these are all spaces for intentionality. These are spaces we can and must intentionally, include families in key decision making roles and infuse these spaces with opportunities to address trauma and build and support positive social and emotional skills.

Although family leaders and school leaders may not always see eye to eye about the school environment, it is important that we show up for each other and recognize the best intentions in each other. Our abilities to develop these emotionally intelligent interactions and work together despite biases and disagreements, directly correlates to positive behavior in our children.

Thank you and I look forward to working more closely with school communities on family partnerships and leadership development.

Chioma

- Families must have a voice in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the CSMH initiative
- Although I am here and vocal about how this initiative is intended to benefit all youth, including those with and without special needs, remember that every parent in your school is there to partner and help make this a success
- We must allow parents and families to be school leaders too
- Parents have expertise in their own right and know their children better than anyone, so we can contribute in multiple ways to the kinds of improvements we want and need
- They may show up differently and have a different style of communicating, but they deserve a space and a platform to partner with you
- Remember that every space and every interaction in schools is an opportunity for us to address trauma and to build and support positive social and emotional skills
- Although some families need more or better services, and some have significant needs, we are also partners in the solutions to our city's problems and we can help build approaches that are effective and sustainable