

## Budget Hearing 4/7/21 Testimony

Hello, my name is Zully Pineda. I am a member of Young People for Progress, and I am here to request that the council allocate funds for more mental health and or restorative justice in schools---specifically a licensed clinical social worker in every high school.

I am a first-generation Salvadoran American. Growing up, I attended Montgomery County Public Schools and now work for MCPS as a paraeducator at Northwood High School. Mental health services have always been a growing need in our communities, especially now during the pandemic. Students are experiencing increased stressors and therefore need more accessible mental health support. As the data has shown, Black, Brown, and low-income communities are at a higher risk of contracting the coronavirus. This virus has had an adverse ripple effect on our students, who have had to take on more adult responsibilities as a result. Black and Brown families who continue to choose virtual learning to reduce their family's risk of contracting the coronavirus continue to get left behind through no fault of their own. From caring for ill parents, working a day job, or helping their siblings navigate virtual learning, our students are under a lot of pressure and stress. They need specialized support. Licensed clinical social workers to meet this need.

A few weeks into the start of virtual learning back in April of last year, I called my students' families to help them with their child's school assignments, only to learn that their families' internet or phones shut off. I was dismayed and concerned but kept working. When I tutor my students, they often are at home with their siblings or extended family's kids, making it hard to have a strong internet connection, let alone space to concentrate. I've personally seen students struggle from stress, depression, or over-work before the pandemic and referred them to our wellness center team with excellent results and turned them around achieving academic success. Many of our students already work to support themselves or their families. I fear many will not graduate and who can blame them? I have had students go missing for weeks only to discover they were painting houses in Baltimore or working at a restaurant kitchen until the morning giving them little to no time to sleep before school.

At Northwood, we are one of only four high schools in the county that have a wellness center to support our students and their families well-being. For unemployment, mental health, and more, it is an essential resource. Virtual learning has widened an already large achievement and opportunity gap exacerbating our schools. With the district pushing for more restorative justice practices, mental health check-ins, and a plethora of other well-intentioned metrics, poor schools are left with zero resources to accomplish the monolith of standards the county wants us to achieve. Instead of making us play therapists and social workers, why doesn't the county give us the funds to hire professionals to help us accomplish these goals? If the county can come up with the funds to implement the harmful SRO program and even expand it, then surely the county can equally provide funds for supports that improve our students' lives and, by extension, our future.

Thank you for your time.