

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE
“School Safety and Conflict Resolution”
Thursday, January 11, 2024

Thank you, Chairman Mendelson, for convening this hearing on two important bills that I hope will move forward. Thank you to Councilmembers Parker and Lewis-George and co-sponsors for your leadership on these bills. My name is Robert Henderson. I am the Ward 5 member of the State Board of Education. These views are my own and do not represent the views of the Board as a whole.

Speaking first on the School Safety Enhancement Amendment Act, I think schools very much need the extra resources provided for in the act, and it is essential that these resources are truly additional. We can't let school safety resources compete against the already tight and contested school budget. I believe that school safety staff positions should be funded independently of the UPSFF as every school needs at least one and schools, especially smaller ones, shouldn't have to sacrifice other much-needed positions to provide for student safety. If a school already has someone filling similar responsibilities to that of the coordinator role, that school should be able to move them into this dedicated position and then exercise autonomy to the funds to fill other needs within their budget.

The bill speaks to many of the issues that have emerged in my conversations with school leaders and students including the need for more tools to address situations on school grounds that are safety challenges but did not rise to the level of needing a police response or for which a police response risks escalating a situation. Leaders end up calling the police anyway because they don't have enough of the intermediate response mechanisms available to them.

Prior to the introduction of this legislation, I had asked a middle school principal for her thoughts on school safety, and she said that ideally there would be a team of people at each school responsible for preventing and responding to safety concerns to include mental health approaches, and this bill goes a long way towards that ideal.

A second common theme in my conversations with school leaders and parents on these issues is the need for better coordination and information sharing. There are a lot of agencies and entities that must work together and lines of communication are not always well established. What coordination does exist typically falls on principals at the school level. Adding dedicated personnel to take this responsibility will reduce the burden on principals or other school leaders who have many other obligations.

Most of the safety concerns that students have shared with me are either off campus — traveling to and from school, or bullying. For the off-campus issues, I think a critical role of the safety coordinators would be to communicate and plan with the Safe Passage workers and crossing guards serving school communities and the routes students take to school. Parallel to this legislation, I continue to advocate for an expansion and improvement of the Safe Passage program, which would complement these efforts. For bullying and other on-campus safety concerns, I strongly support the emphasis on restorative justice practices. I would like DCPS and

OSSE to continue their training and supports for restorative justice and to investigate and reduce barriers to adoption to this evidenced-based intervention. For the same reasons, I support the Conflict Resolution Education Amendment Act of 2023. Students need important life skills such as conflict resolution and we need to ensure that they have the time and opportunity to learn them.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, I am happy to answer any questions.

Robert Henderson