

Safe Should Be Normal- Safe Passage In the District of Columbia



CJCC Fall Public Meeting

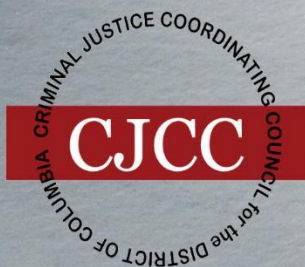
October 24, 2019

6:00-8:30 pm

Thurgood Marshall Academy PCS

2427 Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue SE

Washington, DC 20020



On October 24, 2019, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC) convened its annual fall public meeting at the Thurgood Marshall Academy Public Charter High School. The meeting theme was “Safe Should Be Normal - Safe Passage in the District of Columbia.”

Persistent and escalating violence involving guns and physical assaults directed at District students inspired the public meeting discussion. The cornerstones of the conversation focused on Council legislation, i.e. B23-0393 - Safe Passage to School Expansion Act of 2019, introduced by Councilmember David Grosso (At-Large), and an update on the implementation of the School Safety and Safe Passage Working Group initiative conceived by Paul Kihn, Deputy Mayor for Education.



Mannone Butler, Executive Director, CJCC, welcomed meeting guests, including representatives from CJCC partner agencies, students, and community members. She emphasized the importance of receiving input from District students, some who must daily navigate a dangerous path traveling to and from school, either walking or on public transportation.

Director Butler commented that as an independent agency, CJCC continues to conduct convenings that explore how to achieve a “new normal” of thought and behavior across the District that is devoid of violence and attendant fatalities. Director Butler emphasized that the goal of the meeting was to have a conversation in a safe space regarding the experiences of students, their parents, and community members relative to persistent and increasing violence. Further, Director Butler highlighted the importance of hearing from young people who would speak their truth and offer solutions to make their commuting experiences safer.

CJCC members in attendance were acknowledged, including Quincy Booth, Director, Department of Corrections and Avis Buchanan, Director, Public Defender Service, as well as the Honorable Milton Lee, Jr., Presiding Judge of the Criminal Division of the District of Columbia Superior Court. Additionally, Director Butler acknowledged the efforts of CJCC staff, including Khalil Munir, who organized the meeting, and proceeded to introduce Raymond Weeden, Executive Director, Thurgood Marshall Academy.

Director Weeden thanked everyone in attendance and mentioned his initial skepticism about convening another meeting on Safe Passage. His concern stemmed from the fact that he and his students had participated in numerous similar meetings, but continued to face the same grave realities. Further, he noted that few, if any, concrete actions resulted from prior discussions. Consequently, students became disillusioned with unfulfilled promises made by adults and public officials, whose efforts failed to ensure their safety.

Director Weeden urged members of the audience to commit to doing more than attending the meeting, but to also visit the school and accompany schoolchildren on their way to the Metro or home. He



expressed the hope that the meeting would move from a conversation to concrete outcomes.

Meeting Survey

The program included a survey of meeting attendees to obtain demographic information and participants' perspectives and familiarity with the subject matter. Answers to the survey revealed the following:



- 85% of the respondents resided in the District, and 5% of the respondents respectively lived in Wards 7 & 8, where several of the District's violent "hot spots" are located
- 38% indicated they were under the age of 21
- 33% answered they were in the age group 22-39

- 97% answered that they believe youth are exposed to bullying or physical assault in transit from home to school and back
- 71% responded that they witnessed bullying
- 62% responded that they are familiar with the concept of Safe Passage, while 26% indicated they were unaware of the initiative
- 88% of respondents indicated that everyone needs to be involved in promoting the safety of students

Safe Passage Legislation Overview

Akeem Anderson, Committee Director, Committee on Education, DC Council, provided an overview of Safe Passage legislation, B23-0393 - Safe Passage to School Expansion Act of 2019, introduced by Councilmember Grosso (At-Large). He emphasized the particulars of the legislation, including:

- Getting District students to school safely in priority areas in Wards 7 and 8 via "Safe Routes" that are monitored by Safe Passage personnel from 7 a.m. – 9:30 a.m. and from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m.
- Institutionalizing recommendations from the Safe Passage Working Group by creating an Office of Safe Passage
- Creating a Districtwide and Ward-specific 5-year strategic plan that has measureable outcomes
- Providing recommendations in conjunction with the District Department of Transportation regarding how to enhance transportation to improve safe passage
- Facilitating grants on a competitive basis to community-based organizations in 10 designated priority areas

Mr. Anderson emphasized a few points, including:

- The legislation was based on data analysis, which was used to identify areas designated as high incident locations or “hot spots”
- A provision of the legislation authorizes grant funds to be awarded to community-based organizations that will replicate Chicago’s efforts to involve credible messengers in community outreach and violence reduction efforts
- There are competing opinions regarding how to redirect funds to support Safe Passage, including using Circulator bus funding to provide transportation for students from Metro stations to schools that are located in “hot spots”



Executive Overview

Deputy Mayor for Education Paul Kihn provided an overview of the School Safety and Safe Passage Working Group. He acknowledged the work of his staff and students in attendance.

The deputy mayor stressed the importance of heeding student input surrounding the issues at hand, and expressed the following regarding his efforts:

- He continues to be interested in listening to the ideas offered by the students
- He has attempted to incorporate student and community input into the Working Group initiative based on prior listening sessions in the lead-up to the development of the Safe Passage initiative
- He is working with DDOT to study how people travel to and from school
- An app is being developed to connect carpools for students in need of transportation
- His staff is working on identifying more safe spots
- There is ongoing coordination among agencies participating in the initiative
- He intends to remain true to the process of receiving and acting on student input

Panel 1: Student Perspectives on the State of Safe Passage



Deputy Mayor Kihn moderated the first panel comprised of engaging and enthusiastic students from District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and District of Columbia Public Charter Schools (DCPCS). Jaimon Cooper (senior) represented Thurgood Marshall Academy Public Charter High School, Shaniyah Robinson (sophomore) represented Ballou High School, and Mia Jones (senior) participated on behalf of KIPP College Prep Academy.

One confirmed student panelist, previously a victim of a shooting, cancelled his appearance out of concern that he might be targeted for speaking out

about violence. The students' fears reinforced the gravity of violence affecting youth in the communities where they live and go to school.

Deputy Mayor Kihn commenced the discussion by posing specific questions to the panelists on relevant issues.

Student Perceptions and Experiences

Students commented on a range of issues related to their experiences and concerns involving safe passage in their community.. They stated at the outset of the discussion that in some instances, they experience more challenges (fights and gun violence) in their neighborhoods and families as opposed to when they transit to school. The students also emphasized their belief that family upbringing, community norms, and culturally and socially observed and learned behaviors contribute to the attitudes and violent acts of some District youth.

Regarding violence, students mentioned that their shared values factor into how they respond to aggressive behavior and bullying. Consequently, when confronted by aggressive and hostile behavior, some youth have learned that in order to survive, they must respond in kind with equally aggressive behavior. They also noted that some of their peers who resort to violence do so because they were not raised in environments that emphasized and normalized respectful and kind behavior.

The students offered that some of their peers resort to carrying illegal weapons for specific reasons, i.e. self-protection from being victimized, a sense of powerlessness, lack of self-esteem, and prestige.

The students also vocalized their negative perceptions of and interactions with law enforcement. A number of students expressed concerns about being constantly surveilled and targeted by Metro Transit Police Department (MTPD) and Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) officers. They lamented their experiences when police officers fail to give them the benefit of the doubt



regarding their behavior, i.e. police anticipate that groups of students milling around or walking together will inevitably result in “flashpoints” for violence. Further, the students wondered whether MPD officers receive specific training that will enable them to better understand and engage with youth. They offered that perhaps training would minimize the prospects that officers will resort to heavy-handed approaches when engaging with youth. Fundamentally, student perceptions were rooted in a notion that instead of police protecting them while en route to and from school, police target and harass them.

In sum, the challenges that confront and influence student attitudes span a broad range of factors including: community and home life can present more challenges than those related to transiting to and from school; some of their peers have not learned positive socialization values, which can lead to unruly and violent behavior; in most instances students learn from social experience (at home, their neighborhoods, etc.) that they must defend themselves; and, they maintain negative impressions of police

(MPD and MTPD) and their responses to them when the officers are engaged in performing Safe Passage duties.

Violence Reduction Approaches and Needs

Students expressed a consensus that positive programs such as the Pathways 2 Power initiative at Thurgood Marshall Academy instills students with a sense of purpose, confidence, and a belief that there are persons they can trust at school who will also listen and protect them.

The panelists identified specific policies, procedures, approaches, and takeaways they believe could be useful in reducing violence. Foremost among their suggestions was the implementation of shuttle bus transportation between Metro stations and their schools located within designated hot spots. Many of the students must walk from the Metro to their school. If the school is out-of-boundary of their neighborhood, they expressed a sense of vulnerability that they may be targeted for violence or harassment.

The panelists also expressed optimism in the notion that applying the principles of restorative justice to offenders and persons offended or harmed could lead to community healing. Collectively they agreed that any and all approaches employed to reduce violence must include student-generated ideas. Finally, they emphasized they have offered safety and policy suggestions to public officials in the past, but no action seemingly occurred, i.e. providing student shuttle buses in hot spots. Therefore, a critical takeaway is policymakers must heed the input they ask for and receive from young people.

Audience Questions

A number of audience questions were posed to the youth on the panel, as well as to other youth who attended the meeting. The following reflect the array of responses:

Conflict Resolution

Regarding conflict resolution, students expressed an understanding that conflicts are inevitable, but it is vital for them to learn how to manage their responses. Further, they attached value to the process of mentoring and expressed confidence that there is value in high school and middle school students mentoring younger students, thereby serving as role models and examples regarding how to respond to challenging situations that involve conflict.



Influence of Guns

A range of responses were offered regarding guns and their influence on violence. The students noted that, notwithstanding the fact that guns are dangerous, young people with access to illegal weapons are unafraid to use them. Additionally, the discussion prompted a suggestion that a research study be undertaken to identify how the family life of children contributes to their attitudes about using guns to resolve conflict.

A notable suggestion involved employing African American male role models for community youth. The discussion also highlighted that many communities do not have those role models because segments of

the communities are incarcerated. A key takeaway is that there is value in mentoring programs that include African American males interacting with young people.

Youth-Inspired Violence Reduction Strategies

A number of concrete suggestions were offered to promote violence reduction. The suggestions included: convening events similar to the CJCC public meeting whereby youth input could be heard, ensuring that adults (school and government officials) honor their commitments to protecting students, employing social media platforms to reach young people where they are, and developing empowerment training for boys and young men, as that population seems to be primarily perpetrating the violence, and could benefit greatly from that type of training.

Deputy Mayor Kihn concluded the panel by expressing his gratitude to the students for participating and offering candid responses. He stated that he was humbled and impressed by their attendance and enthusiasm to promote positive change.

Panel 2: School Safety and Safe Passage Working Group Progress Update



Deputy Mayor Kihn moderated the second panel, which explored progress to date regarding the implementation of the School Safety and Safe Passage Working Group.

Participants included:

Sergeant Maurice McKinney, MTPD; Michael Coligan, Commander, School Safety Division, MPD; Niya White, Principal, Center City PCS; Dan Davis, Chief Student Advocate; Robert Thomas, Director, School Security, DCPS; and Derric Daniels, Operations Manager, MLK Deli.

Deputy Mayor Kihn commenced the discussion by asking each of the participants to explain their roles in promoting school safety.

Promoting School Safety

Three organizations, MTPD, a department under the Washington Metropolitan Transit Authority (WMATA), the School Safety Division of MPD, and the Director for DCPS School Security, collaborate and share intelligence to ensure student safety under the Safe Passage initiative. Intelligence-sharing is a key component that aids in determining how, when, and where resources are deployed in relation to potential or actual scenarios that require a law enforcement presence.

Principal White explained she and her staff routinely assume responsibility for ensuring students arrive to school and return home safely each day.

The Office of the School Advocate offered that its role is to facilitate collaboration among parents, schools and community organizations.

MLK Deli serves as a “safe spot” for students seeking refuge from the threat of harm.

Law Enforcement Officer Deployment

The deputy mayor inquired regarding how MPD officers are deployed and how their role can be enhanced. MPD indicated that it has a designated role within the Safe Passage initiative and deploys SROs strategically in concert with DCPS School Security and Metro Transit officers. Resource deployment is predicated on information-sharing and intelligence gathering. Examples of intelligence-gathering and information-sharing may include social media posts regarding scheduled confrontations among competing groups of students, and monitoring emerging online threats. As a practical matter, Metro Transit employs youth liaison officers. A key point made is that based upon lessons learned from evaluations of institutional responses in 2018, the office remediated program shortcomings and enhanced its training to mirror the approach employed by MPD. Consequently, Metro Transit officers are assigned to schools daily across different wards where hot spots are identified. Metro Transit also coordinates its efforts with school principals, in addition to providing an ongoing and familiar officer presence at Metro stations and bus stops within hot spots that students frequent when commuting to school.



Institutional Responses That Work

When queried about strategies that work across the city, panelists offered the following examples, communication, investment in youth voices as mechanisms that serve as solution partners, consistent engagement, and parental involvement.

Panelists expressed consensus that ongoing and effective communication occurs among Safe Passage initiative partners; and that communication, informal and formal, is useful as partners exchange information, engage in conference calls, or pass on strategic intelligence. Additionally, incorporating youth as solution partners was cited as a value-add because it injects youth perspectives into policymaking discussions and decision-making. The Thurgood Marshall Academy Pathways 2 Power leadership initiative was cited as an example of a program that supports youth leadership development and peer support for students adversely impacted by violence. Director Thomas (DCPS) commented that continued student advocacy and attendance at budget justification hearings will serve to highlight the priorities and needs of students, and perhaps encourage action by the DC Council. Finally, parental involvement was cited as an effective strategy, with the caveat that some parents are working and cannot participate in efforts that require their presence and commitment of time.



Audience Perspectives

Students in the audience posed questions and offered comments regarding their perceptions of police responses toward youth within the context of the Safe Passage initiative. Notable among the questions posed was whether law enforcement officers are biased or suspicious of youth gathered at a Metro or bus stop, and if officers receive training that equips them to effectively interact with young students.

Both Sgt. McKinney and Commander Coligan expressed that foremost they see the students as persons they are entrusted to protect, while simultaneously being responsible for expediting their movement to their desired destination. Both officers acknowledged that their officers receive training regarding how to effectively interact with young people, and that their officers are required to attend the African American Museum to gain unique perspective on the history and culture of the youth they monitor. The expressed expectation is that via cultural exposure and sensitivity training, officers will develop a better understanding regarding how to interact effectively and respectfully with DC students. Further, they emphasized that they seek officers who are interested in and motivated to work with young people. The representatives for MPD and Metro Transit highlighted that their overriding concern, though, is ensuring the safety and general welfare of everyone in the public domain, and particularly those persons who may be vulnerable because they are transiting through hot spots in designated wards.

Derric Daniels (MLK Deli) challenged the young people to be mindful of and accountable for their behavior. He mentioned that when young people “act out” in the public arena, there are reaping unexpected and unintended consequences, i.e. persons traveling on public transportation develop negative and enduring impressions of young people, and the police in turn resort to regulating the behavior of the students. Mr. Daniels encouraged young people to “check their behavior” and self-monitor their actions, and to be mindful of the implications associated with their behavior. Lastly, a student offered that perhaps students could benefit from receiving in-class training regarding how to conduct themselves in social situations, given that in some households that type of behavioral socialization may not have been prioritized or demonstrated.

Key points highlighted related to the value of MPD and Metro Transit utilizing parallel training approaches for their officers, particularly training that delineates how to interpret and respond to the thought processes and behavior of young people.

Deputy Mayor Kihn thanked everyone for participating in the panel, and acknowledged Ward 8 Councilmember Trayon White and Markus Batchelor, State Board of Education member, for attending the event.

The following are key takeaways from the discussion:

- There is value in researching the relationship between cultural and social values, family stability, and violence in communities where safe passage is a primary concern
- Violent behavior and responses are observed and experienced culturally, and more effort should be dedicated to incorporating restorative justice approaches to reducing violence
- Continue training police officers to appreciate the attitudes and experiences of the youth with whom they interact to foster greater mutual trust
- Information-sharing and intelligence-sharing is vital and should continue between collaborating law enforcement offices
- Government officials need to heed the input of student recommendations, i.e. shuttle buses in hot spots, and enhanced training for officers assigned to Safe Passage duties
- Develop more mentoring programs comprised of African American males to work with youth
- It is important to mobilize greater grassroots and community support for Safe Passage, i.e. escorts in hot spots
- Incorporate greater student engagement and civic advocacy at Council proceedings
- Maintain a consistent policy, procedural, and programmatic commitment to safe passage, with an accompanying and ongoing presence of familiar law enforcement faces at Safe Passage sites

Closing

Executive Director Butler concluded the program with a call to action to everyone in attendance, and cited the need for more resources and community volunteerism. She thanked everyone in attendance, especially the students who were present.