

Testimony of Ashley Cocca

On January 4, 2022, I attended a virtual Counselor PD given by the SDP. Network of Neighbors presented. If you don't know what the Network of Neighbors is, you should. Under the city's DBHIDS office, the Network of Neighbors is a Trauma Response Network. They spoke about their program and how they come alongside communities who've experienced toxic stress, trauma, loss, and violence within their own communities. They spoke about how they respond to tragedy at the school level. I sat in the PD thinking to myself, "I am glad this type of support exists and I'm so fortunate that our school community has never needed to call on them." The next morning was January 5, 2022. The morning of the Fairmount Fire. The morning that Bache-Martin's school community lost 12 beautiful souls and we, like so many, looked on in terror and were marked by trauma. Our school community changed, traumatic stress entered our bodies and minds, and I didn't know how we could ever recover. My brain did what it had to do and I responded in task-mode. Organizing the red cross, talking to our SDP supports, crafting messaging to students, families, and the community. I understood my task. I had to take care of my community. My 500 students. All of their families. Then the Network of Neighbors came and they took care of me. My school counseling colleagues came and cared for my students, my staff, and me. It was a time of intense devastation and the effects still linger.

The truth is the tragedy of the Fairmount Fire is one example of the type of trauma that impacts our city. Trauma is not always a large-scale tragedy. Sometimes trauma is the headline on CNN. Most of the time and what I see every day is that trauma is nuanced and subtle. It is the backdrop of Philadelphia life. It is the water we are swimming in. I could sit here and read three minutes of staggering statistics that tell the narrative of what the children of Philadelphia face everyday. What children, CHILDREN, are regularly encountering. Gun violence, drug presence, poverty levels, housing inadequacies, domestic violence, underemployment, tragic loss, social isolation, inconsistent and inadequate systems, foster care, homelessness, abuse, suicidal ideation, child welfare systems that

ultimately have few solutions, CRCs that are overrun and understaffed, partial programs and mental health agencies with waitlists, inadequate collaboration, and inconsistent continuity of care. Students in and out of school, foster care, without enough food on the table, and unable to walk to the rec center because there could be another drive-by. It's hearing - "my dad died... my sister was shot... we got evicted again, I don't know where we're staying next... my step-dad jumped me last night... my mom lost her job... my mom let him back in the house, even after I told her what he did to me... I haven't seen my mom in 2 years since leaving El Salvador... I don't know English and no one here can talk to me... the judge said it's either foster care or the Juvenile Justice Center..."

Trauma is so constant in our city that we begin to regard it as normal. But it is not normal. It literally changes the nervous system, the chemistry of the brain. When the brains and bodies of our students are in a constant state of trauma response, they are attuned to surviving, not thriving. Student hypervigilance looks like inattentiveness, anxiety looks like hyperactivity, depression looks like truancy. We mistake survival skills for learning and behavioral deficiencies. And the support systems we have at our disposal come up short-handed with month-long waitlists and inadequate staffing.

Despite this, the children of Philadelphia persevere but not without consequence. Some keep moving forward, a lot can't and a lot don't. Make no mistake - their perseverance is admirable and inspiring but the resilience of a child shouldn't be necessary and it certainly shouldn't be considered enough.

I believe, with my whole heart, that mental health is a basic human right. Mental health is health. And all children - in all zipcodes - have the right to high quality access and opportunity to promote their mental health. Currently, that's not how our systems operate and our children need more. More School Counselors. School Counselors to know more kids - to know their stories, hear their concerns - to know families and connect them with resources. To coach families through the maze of health systems - to collaborate and consult with outside supports - to spend time connecting

and collaborating, ensuring best possible outcomes for students - to teach staff and students about trauma response, trauma-informed practices, coping, and problem solving. More School Counselors to normalize mental health, destigmatize struggles, to advocate for healthy, thriving, and fair systems - to have enough time to run effective groups without being pulled into attendance tasks, the coverage schedule, or lunch duty - to be able to turn off our walkie so we can have uninterrupted time with a student - and fully trust that we can turn our walkie off because someone else's is on - when we are the only life line for student mental health we are NOT PROVIDING SAFE SPACES for anyone. Students need intentional, preventative and responsive care and we simply don't have enough School Counselors.

Our children need more. More high quality mental health agencies - wait lists are too long, referral processes are too complicated, and agencies are too understaffed. We need more people in those agencies because we need less convoluted processes, more collaboration and communication, and easier, smoother continuity of care. Our children deserve it.

Lastly, we need to acknowledge that it's not only our students but our staff that is traumatized - we are in toxic stress all of the time. We need not only enough staff but HEALTHY staff - this includes providing safe spaces for STAFF. We need a staff care team in every building - a Network of Neighbors team for every school - a safe place to process the vicarious trauma, the secondary trauma, the toxic stress. Where do we have to go when we learn a parent was lost to gun violence? Where do we go when students get caught up in drugs, keep running away from home, and become another missing persons post on social media? Where do we go when we see a former student was shot and killed? Where do we go when a student tells us they've been getting inappropriately touched for years by mom's boyfriend? Where do we go with the fire that burns in us, with the tears that well behind our eyes, the emotional exhaustion that makes us question why we do this work? Staff need intentional, preventative and responsive care or we're going to keep losing educators.

There's no way for me to summarize the impact of trauma on our city, and our children in particular. It would take you working alongside us - day in and day out - to fully grasp the layers and intricacies at play as well as the toll trauma takes on all of us.

I don't see everything - I've been one School Counselor for 500 students... there's no way I see it all. There are traumas unknown and hurts unaddressed. We need more.

What do you think of when you hear the term "the youth of Philadelphia"? Until the first image you see in response to that phrase includes healthy, thriving children, I believe we will continue to be underfunded because our children will never be truly seen. We are not a throw away city. If I-95 can burn down and be re-built within weeks - I have to believe there's money out there - we just need to get on the priority list. A city that's been burning in trauma can be rebuilt too.