

**Testimony to the Committee on Education
For the Budget Oversight Hearing on the District of Columbia Public Schools**

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Hello Councilmember Grosso and other Committee members. My name is James Peters and I attend Columbia Heights Education Campus. I am a peer advocate at the Young Women's Project (YWP). I work in the Peer Health and Sexuality Education campaign, a youth-adult partnership that works to improve DC teens' reproductive health by expanding comprehensive sexuality education, ensuring access to community based services, and engaging teen women and men as peer educators and decision-makers.

Today, I am here to discuss the need to include students and their families in DCPS budget processes, and about the benefits of using participatory budgeting for DCPS at-risk funds.

As a peer advocate, I work with policy issues. I deliver testimony about different issues in my school and community. I also sit on working groups, help with town halls, have revised the health standards, and look at the budget.

At YWP, I have worked with students from all over DC. I have learned that some of my peers have access to more and better programs, than others. In some of the richer wards, students from schools like Wilson senior high school talk about all their different programs and teams that are available to them, which is wonderful. But on the other hand, some peers from different wards say that there is a lack of resources and programs for students- like AP classes and different afterschool clubs.

Working with my friends and coworkers from different schools over the city, I have learned that there is gap between the schools and equal resources. If we all were in a circle describing some resources at our school, some will have a long list, while others might only have a few. This shows that there are some improvements to be made to ensure every student has the opportunity to use and have good school resources.

For these reasons, it is important and extremely beneficial for teens to get involved in policy work because students need to understand and have input in the issues that affect them. When I explain my job to my friends they are surprised, and they don't understand what testimony is, or why I testify. They do not know that teens are even able to testify in front of city council, or that they can testify about the problems they

have with the school. If teens were engaged in policy work, they would have a gateway to expressing their concerns in a constructive manner that will help lead to making those changes.

We have started working on issues of educational equity. We have seen documentaries discussing trauma and how inner city have the same disadvantages as returning vets that struggle with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Some of my peers work on testimonies revolving around trauma and programs that help students.

Luckily, in DCPS, we have at-risk funds, which is basically money that is supposed to give an extra boost to the students who have setbacks, like poverty, homelessness, and other issues. The problem is that part of that money is being used for things that a school should already have, instead of programs and resources for specific at-risk students.

Through this work, I also learned that my school receives 15 million dollars. However, I think there should be evidence of where the money is being spent properly. The schools should have open budget report with the students, so students will trust in the budget and believe it is being properly managed. At Bell, I'm in the student government, when we ask for funding for different projects, some staff and faculty act like we're asking them for a kidney. Most students do not understand the process of the budget and where that money is allocated. The budget is a complex system that even adults do not understand it.

That's why, just like my colleague said before, I support a more inclusive process to decide how DCPS uses its money. There is a lot of money out there, and students, especially at-risk students, need to be involved at every level. Participatory Budgeting can get us there because it brings students, parents, teachers, and policy makers together to try to solve problems that affect the education of DC youth and children. I have testified and my peers have testified before you many times, which shows that youth are interested in talking to their representatives and having a say in what's going on.

For these reasons, we ask you to set aside 5% of at-risk funding in DCPS for a participatory budgeting process that includes students. And for DCPS to work to create budget tools and documents with parent and student input.

We are also happy to hear that you will be having a budget process hearing in the fall. We look forward to provide you a more detailed plan for this process at that time.

Thank you for listening to my testimony.