

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

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Hello my name is Jhirbron Tonge. I am 17 years old and I currently attend School Without Walls Senior High School. I live in Ward 8 of Washington DC. I am planning on going to California University of Pennsylvania where I will study psychology. I am also a peer advocate at the Young Women's Project.

The Young Women's Project is a DC-based nonprofit organization that builds the leadership and power of young people so that they can shape DC policies and institutions to expand rights and opportunities for DC youth. I work as part of the PHASE (Peer Health and Sexuality Education) campaign which works to expand comprehensive sexuality education, ensure access to community and school based reproductive health care, and engages both teen women and men as peer educators and decision makers.

I am here to talk about the lack of support for teens with mental illnesses. I know this from personal experience. Life as a teen gets rough, both inside and outside of school. Life got tense and I felt like the world was collapsing on me. My grades dropped, I became less attentive, and less social. There were times where I would break down completely and nearly cry for almost the entire day. Luckily, my mom noticed how I had changed and eventually we got help from a therapist. I had no clue how to get help. I was even afraid to talk to my friends and family. When I first told a classmate, they thought I was just trying to get attention. But I was not alone, YRBS reports that "31% of high school females and 19% of high school males have 'felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more that they stopped doing some usual activities.'" If I was clueless about how to deal with my depression, then there are many other teens that also need support.

I know it can be very difficult to get help or support. For one, no one is completely comfortable talking about a disability or something that makes them seem different from the average person. Talking about mental illnesses can be an uneasy topic. In our current community, people with mental illnesses are frowned upon or alienated because they seem "too" different. For example, for African-Americans seeking mental health help by seeing a therapist or something of that nature gives this false idea that "you're crazy" or "something is wrong with you." Many teens today fear getting help especially from someone they do not know on a

deep level, so the majority of teens keep their problems bundled up. And for those who may actually have a mental illness, they go through life having no clue that they do until they reach adulthood. Even in schools, nothing is taught about mental illness or how to deal with it. Some students are left to believe that their problems are all just from stress when in actuality it could be something much more. They feel like they are vulnerable or looked down upon. And if they do speak up about it, sometimes teachers aren't much help. Sometimes they isolate you, thinking time to yourself will help you feel better, but that's not the case. They also tend to send you to your counselor. Your counselor is supposed to have a degree in some type of psychology. Indeed their job is to help you, but they tend to give you a quick solution, that is not helpful, and push you to "push yourself through the day and complete your work". But that's not really helpful for them. It just forces teens to push back their rage or sorrow and get through the day. Some counselors have students referred to a therapist, which is good advice, but not all teens have the kind of money to pay for a therapist, especially if they don't have insurance.

To add to the problem some schools don't have a support system all together, so those who have mental illnesses that limit their ability to learn are forced to try to "keep up" with everyone else. In school, more specifically, the work load can be very stressful. A child should not be up until 11:00 pm doing homework every night. Pushing students beyond their natural limit may seem like a good thing because it's preparing them for college, but it could work out negatively for them. It can easily push the students to become depressed and have suicidal thoughts.

The main issue here is the lack of knowledge on how to deal with students with mental illnesses, the inability to pay for any form of treatment, and school regulations and approaches for students with mental illnesses.

I've come up with a few ideas on how to approach the issue.

- For one, to address the lack of knowledge teachers have on students with mental illnesses, is to have the teachers learn how to deal with those type of students before they teach.
- To address the issue with people having trouble paying for help, there can be a mental illness fund in which families who can't afford the services can be given money to help out.
- Instead of trying to force students to "keep up", there should be a way for students to catch up and acquire the knowledge needed to be successful during the summer, before attending school in August.
- And lastly, incorporate mental health into our health education. Having a good mental health education could help students avoid becoming overly stressed and could teach students how not to make bad decisions in order to cope with their stress.

Thank you for your time and consideration.