

Testimony to the Committee on Education

For the Performance Oversight Hearing on District of Columbia Public Schools

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February 19, 2015

Hello Chairman Grosso and other Committee members. My name is Marie De-messou and I am a junior at Woodrow Wilson High School. I am also a part of the Young Women's Project (YWP) and part of a youth organization in DC called SMART. I am here to testify about my work as a youth health educator and to make some recommendations about college assistance within DC Public Schools. Thank you for this opportunity.

YWP is a DC-based nonprofit organization that builds the leadership and power of young women so that they can shape DC policies and institutions to expand rights and opportunities for DC youth. I work as part of PHASE (Peer Health and Sexuality Education), a project that tries to improve youth health through comprehensive sexuality education, access to community and school based reproductive health care, and youth education and leadership. I am one of 58 youth educators who are part of the Youth Health Educator Program (YHEP). Last year, we distributed 12,274 internal and external condoms and educated 4,000 youth. So far this year, we distributed more than 10,000 condoms and educated 1,000 youth. We do this work in partnership with the Wrap MC Program at the Department of Health, HAHSTA Division.

At first, I didn't see myself as a peer educator. When YWP came to school during lunch to recruit, one of my friends was signing up so I decided to sign up too. The training is fun and opened my mind to a lot of things about sexual health. It makes you think, "Oh wow I didn't know that." I'm not going to lie. It is weird to come up to someone at school and start talking about sex or to ask them if they need condoms. But at YWP, we are taught how to approach people and make them feel more comfortable around us. At first, I started passing out condoms to my friends then they told more people and before I knew it, people were coming up to me. It starts with your inner circle and then works its way out.

Whenever I am in class, I let people know I am a peer educator. I use the peer education methods I was taught and now that they are comfortable coming to me with questions. I give advice especially about pregnancy options. I give them information about where to go and let them know that teens in DC have the

right to get services on their own without parental permission, which is very important, because many teens need services but are too afraid to get them. There needs to be more attention on teen pregnancy because it is still a problem in our schools. For example, at Wilson you see a lot of pregnant teenage girls. There is even an organization called "New Heights" that supports teen moms which shows why, as a whole, we need more information on prevention. People my age think they know everything about pregnancy but in reality they don't. Even though we took health class -- it didn't go far enough.

In early February, we did outreach for HAHSTA's STI testing. We did lunchroom presentations and gave out pamphlets. We were trying to get more people to go and get tested. Some teachers would not let students go. I still think it's important for everyone to be able to go and get tested if they want to--especially since so many students think they don't need to. A lot of people think since they only had sex once, they cannot contract an STI. It does not matter how many times they had sex because they can still catch a disease when they don't use protection. We know that STI rates are the highest among teens specifically Chlamydia and Gonorrhea. It's hard to get some people to understand the consequences of not getting tested and not using protection during sex. Here at YWP, we try to inform them in a cool way since we are peers and the same age. Students are more comfortable coming to us to talk about sex without being embarrassed or feeling like they are going to get in trouble. I hope when teens learn the information in a better way, they will take it more seriously and be more open to getting tested.

Here are my suggestions for what can be improved in my school:

Youth health educators should be better supported in schools that have them. We receive 22 hours of training before working as health educators and we come to the office once or twice per week for continuing education and preparation for classroom and presentations. Schools should promote peer educators and our work as WRAP MC's so that we can make an even bigger difference in our schools. Many teachers don't even know about our program and I'm sure that we could reach even more students and have a bigger impact if all of our schools supported and promoted our work.

We need more college counselors. In your senior year, you spend most of your time filling out the common application and talking more to your counselor about your college options. There are always so many kids waiting to meet with counselors but they usually have to come back the next day because they have other

obligations. I am a junior in high school and I'm in the middle of college prep. I plan on applying to Howard, Georgetown, American, and other universities but I know that I will have to quickly make an appointment with my counselor to have a one on one talk about my college planning.

We have a lot of information and opportunities at Wilson--including SAT prep and the College and Career Center-- but as a student, you have to take the initiative. No one ever comes to your class and tells you about the information. It is difficult for young people who don't have support at home to get access to college planning and when to start applying, which is why I feel that Wilson needs to work on getting information to students. One good thing is that we do get college visits from different schools and also have a list of schools that are coming to do visits. The college career center is a place at school where students go to get help and information on applying to college. Students benefit from this because you learn information on the college process and other important things like SAT and ACT test dates. I'm not sure if other schools in DCPS have this but if not, I think that each DCPS high school should provide this because it really helps encourage students to think about college and their future.

The Young Women's Project is my first actual job. I get to work with different people and see what it means to use strategy and communication. There are also the simple things -- like clocking in, showing up on time, and meeting all the distribution requirements that we have each week. It's important for youth to get paid for the work we do. Some youth are helping their families. The \$100+ that we get from our paycheck can go to something very important like buying groceries and new clothes. Working teaches us how to be independent, how to save money, and also how to open checking accounts, which helps us, as youth learn how to be mature and responsible. These are all things that we could also get help with in our College and Career Centers in school. Because I work for YWP, I get job readiness training but it would really be helpful for students who are looking for jobs to get more support from their schools through something like our College and Career Center at Wilson.

Thank you very much. I appreciate your time.