

**Testimony to the Committee on Health and Human Services
For the Performance Oversight Hearing on the Department of Health**

**Abigail Koerner
Young Women's Project Peer Educator**

March 11, 2015

Hello Chairwoman Alexander and other Committee members. My name is Abigail Koerner, I am a sophomore at Woodrow Wilson High School. I like to consider myself a "student- athlete". I've been on my school crew team since 8th grade. Rowing is an incredibly rewarding activity to me and from that I have learned a lot about myself and my abilities. Through my love of rowing, I have been able to meet a number of other kids who have similar interests. These connections have inspired me to be an activist for my friends and for my entire school community. One day, I hope to go into international relations, business, law, or maybe even public health. I am currently a Peer Educator at The Young Women's Project. Before being employed at YWP, I've had a couple other jobs, babysitting, tutoring, waitressing, and working as a sales associate at a small department store. Though each job was an interesting life experience, YWP is by far the most rewarding. With YWP, I work with kids who go to my school to educate them about healthy sexual activity. In essence, I get paid to advocate for things I truly believe in amongst people with whom I can truly relate. I am here to testify about the inclusion of consent in health class curriculum for DC Public Schools. Thank you so much for hearing my testimony.

I began my work as a peer educator this October. During a presentation in the cafeteria at Wilson, I fatefully approached the YWP table. I was initially drawn to the table by their large, "hiring" sign, and once I found out what the job was, I immediately filled out an application. My supervisors, Aurora Munoz and Jessica Anderson contacted me soon after, and the rest is history.

At school, people now know me as the "condom lady". When I am handing out condoms, I try to ask questions, "Do you know who you are going to use this with? Do you know when and where? Do you know what you are comfortable with?" Kids will often open up to me. It's important to have people like me who are kids talking to other kids. We have connections with other youth. We understand where they are coming from. And most importantly, we are able to get a closer look at conflicts involving sexual health, including a significant misunderstanding of the meaning of consent.

Consent is an important issue for me. So many problems arise in sexual encounters because no one understands what it means -- that you can say no at any time. People of all ages are forced to deal with the vague meaning of this term. By definition, consent is "permission for something to happen or an agreement to do something." This dictionary definition is incredibly clear, but when consent is tied to obscurities associated with sexual behavior, the definition becomes equally obscure. Without consent from both sides for the entire encounter, everyone involved could be put in dangerous, confusing, or uncomfortable situations that will continue to affect them for the rest of their lives. People have different personal boundaries and it's easy for things to escalate. From my experience as a peer educator, I have found that people have no idea what consent requires in a sexual encounter. Friends have mentioned "the sex eyes" as a means of consent. However, a facial expression can never explicitly tell a partner what you are or are not comfortable with. I believe the only solution to this problem is to integrate consent into health class curriculums.

In understanding consent, it is important to recognize that consent is a verbal, voluntary, sober, enthusiastic, honest, and mutual agreement. Especially for teenagers, communication before, after, and during sex can be awkward and uncomfortable. For this reason, it is imperative for teenagers in high school to receive education about when to say no well before they even consider doing anything. Teenagers should be able to mindfully approach a situation with the attitude that they control their circumstances and that they can always just say no. If teenagers are taught about consent, problems like self esteem, violence and unhealthy relationships, and the continuation of a cycle of abuse will begin to be eliminated. It is especially important for kids to be taught about consent and sexual health in school since many kids don't have responsible parents at home to provide an explanation. Maybe a girl ended up pregnant because her mom was raped her whole life and wasn't able to explain the concept of "saying no". Maybe the boy who got her pregnant didn't know to ask the girl if she wanted to have sex in the first place because all the women around him seemed to be expected to have sex so no one ever explained the importance of communication. With an issue like consent, school should be a safe place for this type of education to occur. I believe that every person should be educated the same way, leaving no exceptions to boys, girls, or anyone else because consent is something that all people have a right to and that all people have a moral obligation to respect.

Even though schools provide education, right now health class is like any other class that students try to pass in order to graduate. Health classes seem to lack application to real life. Health should be a real life class that helps teens become more aware of their lives and their decisions. From the Young Women's Project, I have

learned that there is a “textbook” sexual health that can provide a person with basic knowledge, but there is also real life sexual health where there are real issues and real human bodies. Application to real life is the missing part of health education in schools. Drawing together textbook information and real life scenarios could be incredibly beneficial to the sexual health of DC teenagers.

Although health class is an important part of the education process, I think that youth can be even more effective when dealing with sexual health. Boundaries between adults and children have always existed and will continue to exist. Youth who are educated in sexual health who are capable of educating our peers are a crucial way for teens to receive information about safe sex, condom use, consent, gender issues, STIs, birth control options and other important topics that we learn about at YWP. In such a big school like Wilson, many kids don't even go to class. If they aren't even in health class then how will they learn about safe sex? Peer educators who are always around and always willing to share information with their peers are imperative in circumstances like this. It is important for youth to be paid for this work. Not only do we need to learn how to manage money for our future life as adults, but paid work will be more effective than volunteer work because of the cash incentive. As a working teenager, the more money I make, the more responsible I feel, and the more inspired I am to continue working. Adulthood is right around the corner for me and my job as a peer educator is a baby step towards the jobs I hope to have in the future. Please continue to support funding for the Young Women's Project because with an issue as important as sexual health, we need as many kids as possible to be an active in promoting healthy sexual activity.

To conclude, I recommend that DCPS implements a “consent unit” in health class where kids learn about consent and healthy relationships. I recommend that more real- life connections are made in health class. This could be done by including real life examples to lessons or using graphics and videos to portray people struggling with their sexual health. Real life examples should be included with other topics like drugs and alcohol as well. Most importantly, I recommend that more peer educators are trained to work in schools. Sometimes the only way to break through to teens is through other teens. If the goal is for teens to have safe, knowledgeable sex, then teens need to have a convenient, reliable support system. Peer educators not only support our communities, we provide crucial information and resources that health teachers can't provide. The Young Women's Project has taught me so much and I hope with your support I can continue to share everything I've learned with everyone I know. Thank you.