

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

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Hello Councilmember Grosso and other Committee members. My name is Angela Montero and I am a senior at Woodrow Wilson High School. I am currently a Peer Educator at the Young Women's Project. As such, I work with other peer educators to present information in classes and at lunch to other students and I work to distribute contraception and information to my friends and peers whenever possible. As a peer educator I have also had the opportunity to work on the revision of the DC health standards and be a part of YWP's training of other peer educators who will go on to do similar work in their respective schools.

Through this work, I have had the chance to get to know many teens from different schools with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and environments. All of the peer educators at the Young Women's project attend different schools and are taught by different teachers through different curriculums but in the end of the day we are expected to do perform the same caliber of work as one another.

Today I am here to do two things- highlight the different levels of education that DC public schools offers, and discuss one way that youth can be engaged in their education- mainly the budget process.

I will be highlighting school equity issues with my co-worker Taliyah who will speak right after me. Taliyah and I both live in ward 4, just separated by Rock Creek Park, but our educations have been worlds apart.

Education Access at Wilson

I have been a student at Wilson for about 3 and half years now and I will graduate this fall. Throughout my time working at the Young Women's Project I have come to realize that a lot of the resources made available to me at Wilson aren't available to students at other DCPS schools. The number of AP courses Wilson offers is extraordinary in comparison with the rest of DCPS. In my 4 years I will have taken a total of nine AP courses ranging from AP Chemistry to AP Latin. Wilson offers 29 different AP courses and about 200 other courses. The graduation requirements at Wilson follow the general DCPS guidelines.

Students must complete .5 credits of art, 3.5 elective credits, 4.0 English, 1.5 health/PE, 4.0 mathematics (including Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II and Upper Level Math), .5 music, 4.0 science (including Biology I, 2 lab sciences and 1 other science), 4.0 social studies (including World History I and II, US History, US

Government, and DC History), and 2.0 world Each of the Wilson academies offers specific elective courses that center around their respective subject. Since I am a part of Wilson's Biomedical pathway within the SciMaTech academy, I have to take 4 different elective courses (one each year) that center around the principles of biomedical science, human body systems, and medical interventions. Right now I am currently completing the final capstone project for this pathway by interning with a hospice care facility.

A Typical English Course at Wilson

Another way to examine educational inequality is to compare the experiences of two different students in a particular type of course. I know from speaking with Taliyah that her experience inside a classroom is often very different from mine.

At Wilson I have taken two different AP English courses and two Honors English classes. My experience with these courses range dramatically. In my time at Wilson I experienced the best English course I have ever taken and also a few subpar ones. English education gets bogged down by standardized testing. Some teachers focus on improving multiple choice scores or on teaching students how to answer the free response essay questions. I fervently believe you learn nothing about English from this type of teaching. It generally involves a lot of worksheets and mindless packets that are meant to teach you how to take a test not teach you English.

My favorite English teacher was Mrs. Mclaughlin whom I had junior year for AP English Language and Composition. Her class was the first English class I have been in where I felt like I actually learned how to write. Writing is something I have always felt unsure of, but as a junior I was responsible for a yearlong cumulative research paper on social injustice and despite my initial fear I loved writing the paper. I was fascinated by my topic and I found that writing the actual paper was actually quite easy after I had enough research.

Mrs. Mclaughlin's class was mostly based on discussion and analysis. Socratic seminars were almost weekly occurrences. While reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* we had Tea cake parties where she made us all tea and we all sat in a large circle just talking about the book. I think that type of environment should be the model for all English classes. You learn so much more about a book when you discuss it and you gain so much by hearing how other students with different backgrounds and perspectives interpret the same piece of text.

My sophomore year English teacher spent a lot of time emphasizing personal reading. At the very beginning of the year he gave us a list of authors and told us that a good English student has read all of them. I still have that list hanging on my bedroom wall. The class itself was a little boring. A lot of time was spent going over basic English grammar skills, but the emphasis on reading to make us better writers was really important to my development as an English student.

As important as it is to use Wilson HS as a model for resources and education quality, it is equally important to remember that educational inequality exists within the walls of the Wilson building. The quality of an honors or AP course is radically different than the quality of most on level classes. A lot of this comes down to the level of involvement and dedication of the teacher. On level courses at Wilson tend to be worksheet centered. Furthermore there is a huge difference between the race, and affluence, and residency of students in on level classes and those of students in AP or honors courses.

As part of our educational equity work at YWP, a group of youth advocates tried to analyze and have input into the DCPS budget. First we tried to understand how DCPS creates it's budget, and allocates certain funds for expenditures. We tried to look for school-specific budgets, which was very difficult. We also looked at the at-risk funding and how it has been spent- which also proved difficult. Youth advocates then compiled a list of suggestions and opinions about how schools should be spending money. Each member of our team researched and wrote their opinion on a specific aspect of the budget. Some of these suggestions ranged from more educational supports through credit recover, field trips, health education, and college preparation. We sent a compilation of all of these ideas to DCPS, and are awaiting feedback.

Budget Clarity

Throughout my research into the DCPS budget I had a lot of trouble discovering how the money was being distributed within schools. The entire process seems extremely closed off to outside opinion which is problematic because students who experience DC public schools everyday seem the most qualified to comment on what areas need improvement and increased funding. However, the only student involvement on an official level came through a meeting that was held with the chancellor and selected students. These teens had to be personally chosen by their principal in order to offer their suggestions.

I think it is a real problem that students aren't more directly involved in creating the budget for their school. As students we know and experience the school on a daily basis and we are therefore best qualified to

comment on what aspects need more attention and financial support. Integrating student opinion into budget decisions ensures that the needs of the students are being met and supported by the new budget.

Perhaps a survey could be distributed to all students or an open discussion could be held, that doesn't require an invitation. This change would ensure that all students can give their opinions and it makes sure that the budget changes are not being made based only on the needs of a school's best or most favored students. After all it's probably the students who aren't favored by the faculty that need the most resources and budget changes.

The DCPS website provides the initial school budget allocations for individual schools, but within this document only broad categories are laid out not specific uses for funds. The only clear information available is the funds per student at specific schools. The information about specific school spending should be public knowledge and it should be readily given to students or adults who wish to offer suggestions on future budget changes.

Now, I would like to turn your attention to my co-worker Taliyah.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.