

**Testimony to the Committee on Education****For the Performance Oversight Hearing on District of Columbia Public Schools****Dae'Sean Tibbs****Young Women's Project Peer Advocate****February 18, 2016**

Good morning Councilmember Grosso, my name is Dae'Sean Tibbs. I am 17 years old and I currently attend School Without Walls Senior High School. I live in Ward 8 of Washington, D.C. I currently work at the Young Women's Project as a Peer Advocate and Educator. I am planning on going to the military and starting a career with the military IT department. I am currently a peer advocate at the Young Women's Project.

I am here to talk about the lack of support provided in school by counselors regarding family issues, and even mental health issues. From personal experience, I've always found it hard to create a bond with a counselor because their conversations mainly focused around education. I need to talk about other issues that do affect my behavior and ability in school, but are also important in my personal life.

Counselors are supposedly equipped to help students cope with problems in their life, but from personal experience, I've never met a counselor who accomplished this. If counselors are only supposed to focus on education then they should focus on education. However, if that's the case, where are the counselors meant to focus on mental health and to help students cope with stress, issues with fellow staff and teachers, or even crises in their daily lives? I have experienced the loss of a loved one, while attending DCPS schools. First in my elementary years, I lost a baby sister who fell ill before she could even reach the age of a week. It was a traumatic experience for me as a child; in fact I hadn't attended school for an entire month after the incident. Most recently I've lost my grandfather, I even shared such with my counselor who gave me the general, "sorry for your loss", but immediately she delved into the fact that my grades weren't to par. I haven't let it cripple me, yet there are students who are experiencing depression and the only assistance that educational counselors give are to provide extensions on projects and essays that are due. I've never experienced depression first-hand, but I'm pretty sure when I'm stressed I want more than just some extra time to do the work that's stressing me out. For example, a close female friend of mine is currently leaving my school because it simply didn't help her cope with the stress that was placed upon her by the school's rigorous curriculum, something that most students are having issues with at this moment.

When she told me that, it wasn't much of a shock as our counselors help with simple problems we experience, like disagreements with teachers, or unmarked grades due to our teachers' errors. We'd rather a counselor sit down and talk with us about issues that we go through. I would like to see counselors as being similar to therapists, but on a more personal and day to day interactive level. I believe school counselors can be important when it comes to assisting students with lowering stress levels, and also addressing how stress is caused by classes.

This is where the topic of the importance of health education comes into play, but mainly mental health education.

Mental health should be emphasized in school, since stress can distress the body, and trauma directly affects one's emotions. Students don't know what they're experiencing either because it isn't taught in health class. Something what should be clearly addressed seems almost avoided, and because of this, it can push people to points of self-harm or worse. This is something that one of my own friends has experienced, and she spent some time in a hospital and in therapeutic care to address it. One step to fixing some of the issues is merely informing the students about their own health. In this way, students can work along the counselor to find solutions for their mental health problems.

Yet I find the core of the issue to be the counselors themselves. If the person who speaks to me about my grades, suddenly switches up and asks me to open about my feelings, I'm not likely to do so. There should be a difference between counselors, such as my ninth grade year when I had a counselor who took time aside to talk solely about my life outside of school, and then used it to learn what may be the causes for issues within school. Issues like problems with students, and turning in homework were quickly addressed upon discovering my own personal home issues, but this only happened because I felt open with this counselor. They looked out for me, and I found them to be as personal with me as a family member, even going so far as to share their life with me as though we were really related.

Fixing this issue can take some time, so I recommend the following:

- Setting aside a counselor solely meant to help with some of the issues I've mentioned, like helping students cope with stress, and issues at home.
- Instituting time to train counselors once again in skills such as being personable with students dealing with stress.
- Including mental health issues in health education.