

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

**Kilmar Gomez
Young Women's Project Peer Educator
February 19, 2015**

Hello Chairman Grosso and other Committee members. My name is Kilmar Gomez and I am 17 years old. I am originally from El Salvador and I came to the United States when I was 7 years old. I am currently a junior at Bell Multicultural High school. I always have been intrigued by the art of making music because it brings a peace in my mind that I want to share with the world. My favorite genre of music is hip hop, and I was lucky enough to have found an organization called Words Beats & Life that teaches hip hop. I go there every Monday and Wednesday after school from 6pm to 9pm. I am also a part of the student government in my school and I am currently the 11th grade secretary. I plan to start a music club next year for anyone who is interested in learning piano, and/ or guitar. I have made many plans and I have set up many goals for the next five years, but I cannot achieve them if I do not go to college. Therefore, my number one priority is going to college and getting a good education. In college, I plan to major in business and develop my music skills. The reason I want to major in business is because I want to learn how to promote and manage my music label that I will be starting in a few of years.

Today, I am here to testify about my work as a youth health educator at the Young Women's Project (YWP). One of the things I will be talking about is how being a peer educator affects me as a student, as a friend, and as a person. I will also be talking about some issues regarding the pressure that high school students deal with at Bell from standards that they are obligated to meet in order to graduate from high school. Finally, I will be making some recommendations that could help teenagers participate in this program more. I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to share my testimony.

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) which works to expand comprehensive sexuality education, ensure access to community and school based reproductive health care, and engage teen women and men as peer educators and decision makers. Thanks to your support, we now have 58 youth educators in our Youth Health Educator Program (YHEP). During the last year, my co-workers and I distributed 11,074 external condoms, 1,190 internal condoms, 1,037 flavored condoms, 1,223 packets of lubricant, and 339 dental dams. We also

conducted 4,000 educational interventions. So far this school year, we have distributed 8,943 external condoms, 1198 internal condoms, 2,011 flavored condoms, 1,1573 packets of lubricant, and 252 dental dams. We have conducted 11 lunchroom presentations reaching 449 teens, and 2,785 one-on-one education sessions. We will be expanding the program to include 200 youth educators through the DC Peer Educator Network.

I heard about YWP from my counselor who was helping me find places that provide internship hours for teenagers who need them. I need 80 internship hours and 100 community service hours in order to graduate from my school. I showed up my first day of training and immediately started learning about sex. I was very intrigued because I didn't know most of the information that our supervisors were providing and they did a great job of making the lesson entertaining. I learned about anatomy, relationships, and preventing pregnancy.

At the time, I was taking a health class so this program also helped me pass my final exams for that class. My teacher, Mr. Gadjents, asked me why I knew so much about the unit, so I told them that about YWP, and he was very pleased to hear that there are people out there trying to help teenagers have awareness about sexuality. In my first two weeks I started to notice that students at my school did not know much about sex like how to prevent pregnancy, HIV, and where to get condoms. Whenever I asked someone about sex, they always gave me a vague or cliché answer. This concerned me greatly, so every time I am asked about sex I always try to give really thorough advice.

Once I passed my test and started handing out condoms, I was surprised at how many people started coming up to me for condoms and asking me questions about HIV and STIs. The word got around and by the end of my first week I gave out about 50 condoms. Now I have a group of people who come to me regularly to get condoms. Some are friends. Some are strangers. Most of them are guys. I give away about 40 condoms per week. Sometimes I talk to people who are trying to impress their friends, mostly 10th graders. They come up and take 10 condoms and put them in their pockets -- but don't really ask questions. The older, calmer people take 2 or 3 and ask more questions. Most of the people ask about preventing HIV. They will talk to me about relationships. I just give them advice about ways to work together and how to agree on what you want to do. Through being a peer educator, I learned that people really trust me. That makes me feel good about myself. I don't hang around a lot of people. I am a straight-forward guy. Peer educators take a role that adults can't. Youth have a hard time trusting adults when it comes to talking about sex. They are afraid of being judged. Some adults are very supportive. My health teacher is really good. He covered all the important stuff about

relationships, sex and portrays himself like he wants to help. He goes beyond what is asked of him in class and helps people with resources and other support. Most teachers are supportive of this work.

Students have a lot of support at Bell -- especially for going to college. The teachers put a lot of pressure on us to go to college and graduate. The good thing is -- if you look for the support, you can get it. The challenge is -- there are so many requirements to graduate that it's hard to meet them all. We have more requirements than other schools. We have to do 100 community service hours and another 80 internship hours. At the end of the year, we have to do a 30 minute presentation in all the classes -- math, English, etc. -- about how you've done in the four years you are in high school. If you don't pass that, you don't graduate. A lot of students think it's too much pressure and they transfer to other schools. In a way -- it prepares us better for college and teaches us how to be responsible.

Here are my two recommendations for graduation requirements and youth health educator programs.

More schools should do the kind of graduation requirements Bell has. Bell students are under a lot of pressure to get extra internship hours and to deliver end of the year presentations. Some kids manage to dodge bullets and graduate and then when they get to college they are surprised at how hard it is. They are hit in the face. Students at Bell have an easier time making those transitions because of how much more is required of us. A girl in my English class that was new said that she would have gotten a 4 in her other school for the project. At Bell, she got a 2.5. The requirements are hard but it prepares us to do better in the future and I think that all schools should have tougher graduation requirements such as added internship hours and end of the year presentations.

Keep supporting the Youth Health Educator Program. Programs like these take a lot of weight off of students by providing them with internship hours. They also help kids get comfortable with the idea of working and studying. There are kids in high school that need 80 hours or more of internship and this job provides that for me and other students in the program. This program gives students an opportunity to talk to other youth when they are uncomfortable talking to adults. Youth also need both condoms and good information about how to protect themselves from STI's and prevent pregnancy.

Thank you for your support and for listening to my testimony.