

**Testimony to the Committee on Education
For the Performance Oversight Hearing on DCPS**

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Good morning Council member Catania and other council members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Monique Garey. I am a senior at Dunbar senior high school. I'm interested in music and I hope to go into broadcast journalism one day. As a peer educator with the Young Women's Project (YWP), I am trained on sex education, peer pressure and healthy relationships. I am also trained on how to teach these topics at school to my peers. The Young Women's Project is a multicultural 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 am a youth staff member at the PHASE program (Peer Health and Sexuality Education), which works to improve DC teens' reproductive health by expanding comprehensive sexuality education, ensuring access to community and school based reproductive health care, and engaging teen women and men as peer educators and decision makers. YWP's peer educator program is working in conjunction with the Wrap-MC program at HAHSTA. We are implementing the Youth Pilot program that – thanks to you Chairman Catania -- we helped pass two years ago. HAHSTA supplies the condoms. YWP does all of the training and education and site management for Dunbar and five other DCPS high school sites and pays us a stipend of \$7.25 an hour for our work. We have 36 peer educators on the ground distributing condoms and information every day. YWP raises funding from private foundations to support this work.

I chose to work at YWP because I wanted to further educate myself first, and then be a voice for young people in my school and in my community. I would also like to thank Principal Jackson, Coach Jones, Ms. Williams and Ms. Jackson for supporting this program and YWP's work at my school. I am here today to testify about the importance of increasing sex education, peer education in high schools, listening to youth voices, and preventing teen pregnancy.

At Dunbar, our health classes are not effective when it comes to sex education, healthy relationships, and peer pressure. These topics were not discussed at all in my health class. Instead, the class focused on physical health. When we did talk about sexual health, the information was one-sided and did not give us options. It's

either you are having sex or not. There was not a discussion about how to have safe sex at Dunbar. Are you using condoms or birth control? Do you know your status? Do you know where your school's health room is? These are the questions adults should be asking.

Physical health and eating right, are great tools too and important information to learn. But I think that knowing about full sexual health and learning how to avoid abusive relationships are equally, if not more important. If schools fail to educate me and my peers on teen pregnancy, STI's or healthy relationships, we could become exposed to the harsh realities of being a teen parent, being HIV positive, or being in a domestic violence relationship. I know that at Dunbar, when I pass out condoms a lot of boys refuse to take them and say that they have unprotected sex. Also, there are a number of girls that are pregnant at my school now. These are examples of how the current sexual health curriculum to prevent these situations is not working.

If schools fail to be part of the solution then they are part of the problem. I choose to be part of the solution. Through YWP peer educator program, I have begun to fill the gap of sexual health education, and have provided my peers with the tools they need to be healthier. I have been distributing condoms at my school, while doing peer education and counseling. Although I have been passing out condoms and giving advice, I cannot do it alone. I think that sexual health education in school needs to be improved, I think we need different strategies to go against the health problems youth face- one of these strategies is peer education.

When it comes to teen issues, I have learned that peers' words travel farther than adults' words. As a peer educator, I learned to be able to adapt my delivery of information so that my peers get all the information available in an understandable way. For example, adults would say words like intercourse or fornicating and I would just say sex. Even before working with YWP, I had people come up to me and ask me for advice and ask questions in general. However, now that they know I'm a trained peer educator, I get questions about sex, relationships, and where to get tested. People will ask me 'what is a dental dam'. When they ask about getting bigger size condoms, I tell them that they could stick their whole foot in a regular condom. Getting these questions lets me know that teens want this information, that they aren't getting it anywhere else, and that the peer education program is very necessary.

I can clearly see the lack of sexual health information just by being in my school. The teen pregnancy rate is through the roof at Dunbar. Even the daycare at the school is overpopulated and some of the students have to

find daycares for their children. I know that teen pregnancy rates in DC are among the highest in the country at 59.1 per 1,000 young women ages 15-19 (National Survey of Family Growth). At first, I thought that people knew this information and that they just didn't care. However now that I've spent a lot of time talking with my peers and distributing condoms to them, I know that people are just unaware. They don't know about safe sex, or healthy relationships, or pregnancy prevention. I know this because my peers are asking me 'can I get pregnant on my period'. They also say things like they will wrap it up twice for extra protection. In relationships, sometimes my peers feel like they have to have sex to be in a relationship. They ask if they should stay with their boyfriends, if they don't want to have sex, and I tell them that they don't have to do anything they don't want to. By my peers asking me these questions, it lets me know that they want to know this information, but that they aren't getting it. It's not really their fault; they just never learned about it at home and they are definitely not teaching it at school. Teen parents didn't have the right information to make healthy decisions, and are now dealing with the consequences of a limited health education.

My peers are also not aware of what the school has to offer to protect their health. Our school has a health center but not that many students know about it. When I pass out condoms and students want a certain brand, if I don't have it, I will tell them to go to the health suite and check, then they'll ask me 'where is the health suite'. They also tell me that they didn't know you can get condoms from the health suite! In contrast, people aren't afraid to ask if I have some condoms. The health center is open every day from 11am to 2pm. They offer general medical services and give advice.

Before I was a peer educator, I did not talk to people about sex. I thought sex was taboo and people didn't want to talk about it. But now that I am a peer educator, I realize that my peers are thinking more about sexual health. The Wrap MC program helps my peers and I take responsibility for safe sex. I have learned that it's better to have your contraceptives and not need them than to not have your contraceptives and need them.

I think that DCPS can help the situation at my school by enforcing Comprehensive Sex Education classes in school, strengthening the Wrap MC program and teaching youth about the resources their schools have.

So here are my recommendations:

1. Our sex education classes need to be longer and stronger. Our classes should have a 2 to 3 week study each on healthy relationships, safe sex and pregnancy prevention. These classes should

also be a graduation requirement, and these classes need to be monitored. To make sure that the teachers are actually teaching the material that needs to be taught and not letting kids do their own thing like a free period. We have everything we need but sometimes delivery is not effective.

2. Youth who are interested in learning peer education should have the option of taking Wrap MC as a class, where students can receive credit. This will increase condom distribution in school, as well as knowledge.

In conclusion, I would like to say thank you for this opportunity to speak to you on these issues that affect my community and my opinions on what can be done to effectively change the issues I see in my school and around DC. I hope that the recommendations that you are getting from my peers and I are put under extreme consideration.