

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

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My name is Mykelle Henry and I am in the 11th grade. I attend Cardozo Education Campus. I am peer advocate working at YWP. I work here because I am passionate about what I do. I want teens to be informed on sexual health and youth rights. After graduating from high school, I want to attend Georgia Institute of Technology and major in Psychology to become a children's psychologist and learn how the brain works and develops. I want to work with children who have experienced trauma or have mental illnesses to help overcome their issue. I know that therapy can help a lot because it helped me. I also hope to change the stereotypes about people with mental illness because they're just as normal as anyone else.

I am here to testify about trauma and children because a lot of mental illnesses stem from traumatic experiences. Some adults may think children are too young to understand but they can be affected and the trauma can cause psychological problems later in life. In fact, in the general population one in every five youth in the meet criteria for a lifetime mental disorder. As a result, they may face discrimination or negative attitudes. This can be very traumatic and stressful for any person. For mental illness to be so high in teens, it is a shame that most schools do not want to recognize this statistic and pretend that it is not happening and therefore cause more stress on the teen.

In eighth grade, I was diagnosed with depression because of problems with my mother. I almost failed 8th grade. I was sent to PIW for a few days and missed days in school. While I was gone, my teacher told everyone in the class that I was going to fail without knowing what was going on at home. This made me upset. And when I got back everyone was asking me where I had been and they also said that the teacher told them that I was going to fail. After I returned, I asked the teacher for makeup work and she said she would not give it to me because she felt like I should have been in school. I didn't tell her anything about where I was because I was embarrassed, so I went back home and told my mom. We set up a meeting with the teacher and principal. In the meeting my teacher told the principal that I was lying and that she did give me work. The principal believed her and I ended up failing the class. Dealing with depression and troubles at home made me distant in class and I did not have an urge to learn.

Another example is when my cousin's mother died. The principal announced on the intercom that her mother had died and so my cousin stopped going to school because she may have been embarrassed. She didn't want sympathy from everyone. She would skip days, like 3/5 days she wouldn't go. She then transferred after that.

Situations like these are not handled properly. After the middle school experience I knew that I didn't want to go back to PIW, so I hid my feelings and tried my best to do well in school. I had a therapist for two years after PIW. They helped me a lot with coping skills. I talk to my sister or best friend from 8th grade when I'm feeling sad. So far, I don't have any complaints and I am now in 11th grade year. I am doing well. Juggling school with mental health concerns and issues going on at home can be hard. We need to get teachers to understand that students have challenges at home.

Counselors should be informed about what is going on with students. In my situation, the counselor should have pulled me aside to find out what was going on. I could have talked to the teacher privately about what was going on so she could give me make up work- and I didn't because I was too embarrassed of my situation. But during the meeting my mother and I did tell them that I was at PIW. Before I was sent away, my mother knew something was wrong with me so she could have taken an extra step and talk to some of the counselors but she didn't because she thought it was just a phase. I could have said something or told my counselor that emotionally I was always sad but I didn't because I didn't want to integrate my home troubles with school.

My mother and I have the best relationship we've ever had. Years of counseling have helped us and she understands that most of her decisions affect me and she supports me by sticking with me through anything that I tell her. She trusts me. For example, I am supposed to be studying abroad this summer and most parents would not let their eleventh grader do this. However, if I want to do something and it is positive then she supports me. My advice would be that before parents get angry at their teenagers for being in "a phase", they should take us to see professional help because it may not always just be attitude. It may be something deeper than that. I think that other kids can benefit from having the counseling that my mother and I received if they are having the same problems that I had. They could receive this counseling by getting a referral for somewhere off school grounds from their school.

My school does not have support systems. I don't think my school helps us with mental illness because they don't advocate for mental health. I don't see flyers or anything about counseling. Basically, if you want to talk to someone at school, you have to have a relationship with an adult that cares. I believe this is because schools don't want a reputation of having a large amount of students with mental illnesses. They would rather have a school that is prestigious. But in reality 13 –20 percent of children living in the United States experience a mental disorder. And almost 50 percent of adolescents in high school with mental health problems drop out of school.

Here are my suggestions to help with this problem:

1. I think all schools should hire a separate counselor that specifically deals with emotional and mental health problems in youth and hire however many counselors based on the amount of at-risk students. These school counselors need to have an office that is in a location where other students cannot see where you are going. This is to help students not feel embarrassed. Students would find out about these available counselors through recommendations and school flyers.
2. I think to make counseling referrals easier to access, schools should provide a letter to each students parent, notifying them of the available services.
3. I think schools should be required to talk about mental health more in health class. It takes a good learning experience to understand mental health. However, some teachers may not be interested at all in mental health so I think the schools should hire people specifically for mental illness to teach my peers. Each school should have their own set of mental health peer educators.
4. Teachers should be trained to know when a child is not acting normal around their age range and then report it to a parent or counselor. We see our teachers five days every week so the teachers can at least act like they care or pretend to be a little nurturing. Some teachers seem to be lazy instead of showing interest in the student's well being. Teachers have the opportunity to see students over a period of 10 months. They are in a great position to see and report negative change in the student.

Thank you for hearing my testimony.

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Sources

www.youth.gov

<http://www.childrendefense.org/library/data/mental-health-factsheet.pdf>