

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

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April 14, 2016**

Hello Councilmember Grosso and other committee members, my name is Rahel Mideksa. I am an empowered young woman on the pursuit to change the world. I attend Bell Multicultural High School as an 11th grader. I live in ward 1 and I want to go to school at King College, where I want to major in bioethics and international human rights.

I am here to propose a new project to be put into the DCPS budget development process- Participatory Budgeting (PB) for part of the at-risk funds.

As a peer advocate I have had a liberating experience to become a voice for my fellow teens and communities, expressing changes that we need in the community and getting ready to implement them. For instance, I have had the opportunity to be part of the health standards review, where I had input into what is taught in classrooms. I also became part of a youth advisory board that is helping to lower the voting age to 16. All of my time and effort advocating is impacting significant changes that occur in my community. Malala Yousafzai is a great example of a teen who did not let her age constrain her from making an impact, as she stood for her beliefs.

Many teens are constrained by the idea that their voice will not bring any changes, which is why they hesitate to input their voice. If teens have the ability to impact decision-making, they will be more eager to get into politics at an early age, which is a great preparation as we are the future generations of America. I personally would not be standing here and advocating if I wasn't given the opportunity and told that my voice matters. There is power within the young minds which can revolutionize the society. Every opportunity I am given to sit and testify in front of council members, I am inspired to do more and aspire to make more changes because a leader in my community is sitting down and listening to my ideas.

In this work, I have also been fortunate enough to hear from my peers from many different schools. We have had the opportunity to share what goes on in our schools. Through these conversations, we have noted that educational opportunities throughout the city are not equal. Some opportunities, like AP classes and electives, are limited for some schools and abundant for others. The academic rigor is different in every school, yet we are under similar standards with DCPS.

When doing research about the state of our different schools, I was trying to get information about the DCPS budget process as a whole. We found out that there was a youth hearing on the budget with the Chancellor, so I went to my principal to see if I could participate and she informed me that two representatives had already been chosen. I pestered her about it and she said I could go unofficially to observe, but not participate. The only way I found out about this hearing was from YWP, and I was amazed that so few people knew about the hearing considering it's the schools budget. Only SGA members were allowed to participate, which gives no opportunity for the rest of students to participate.

The budget is important when talking about educational equity, and youth need to be involved. We need a more suitable way to decide where DCPS' budget goes. What better way to do that than to let the community decide where it's needed most? Most students are not familiar with where their school budget comes from and where it goes. It's not accessible. It's hard to see something's equal, and how certain expenditures are beneficial to students.

That's why I'm here to suggest Participatory Budgeting (PB) as a tool for engaging with the community. Through this process, the community will have a voice where their input will not only be written down, but put to a vote. This process involves months of deliberation and decision making where an idea could go through many phases and become a tangible reality. This could be implemented in DCPS with the help of our elected officials and community organizations.

This will not only spark the community's interest but it has the additional benefits of:

- Increasing educational equity in DCPS schools
- Increasing student engagement in their schools
- Allowing people younger than 18 to have their voices heard politically
- Allowing immigrants and incarcerated people

PB happens like this:

1. first the people invested come together to talk about problems and suggest ideas for improving these problems
2. second, these ideas are made into projects by working groups
3. third, these projects are presented to the public
4. fourth, the public votes on these ideas
5. fifth, the winning project, or projects gets funded, implemented and evaluated

Participatory Budgeting is used at an international level and has been very effective in many countries. For example, in Seoul, S. Korea, the government put 50 million won into initiatives voted by PB Council. They voted on projects like, expanding facilities for people with disabilities, and creating programs to prevent

bullying and school violence. In the US, Boston has given 1\$ million to a PB youth-centered process for people ages 12-25 to use in community parks, art walls, etc.

Through this process we can represent student and family needs better. Since, a large portion of at-risk funding is being used to fill other budget roles using a small portion of it for PB makes sense. If we would designate some of the at risk funds for a process that centers on actual at-risk students, we would have the opportunity to let students decide what they need from their schools to succeed.

For these reasons, we ask that the Committee set aside 5 percent of at-risk funding for a participatory budget process that centers on students, their families, and teachers.

Don't you want the young minds of DC to be innovators of America?

Thank you for listening to my testimony.