

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

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Good afternoon Council member Catania and other council members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Suzanne Belong. I go to school at Cardozo Senior High School. I am in the 11th grade. In my spare time, I like to hang with my friends. I live in Ward 1. After high school, I plan on going to college and becoming a registered nurse. I always wanted to help out people and work in a hospital. I am a Wrap MC peer educator at the Young Women's Project (YWP). I decided to work at YWP because I needed a job and my friend told me about it. I also think it will help me with the kind of field I want to be in. At YWP, I teach kids about safe sex and pass out condoms. This is important because today, high rates of STIs come from teens. In 2010, 42 percent of DC Chlamydia cases were reported from youth ages 15-19. (2011 CDC Youth Risk Behavioral Survey) So the work we do, passing out condoms for safe sex, is better than not doing anything about these statistics.

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 along with the Wrap-MC program at HAHSTA. We are doing the Youth Pilot program that – thanks to you Chairman Catania -- we helped pass two years ago. I come to the YWP office every week with 35 other students to get training on sexual health and peer education. YWP pays us \$7.25 an hour for the training and for passing out condoms in school. We get the condoms from HAHSTA, but YWP pays all our checks because they don't get any funding from the government. I want to thank Principal Roane for supporting this program and YWP's work.

I am here today to testify about lack of sex education in our school system, the work I have been doing as a peer educator and the situation at my school.

As a certified Wrap MC peer educator at YWP, I am required to know about safe sex, contraception, the different types of STIs, birth control, and proper condom use. I learned that knowing how to use a condom prevents you from getting STIs or having an unwanted pregnancy. The Wrap MC program allows young people to teach other young people about STIs, how you get it, and how you can prevent it, contraception and proper condom use. We do this because in 2012, about 10 percent of about 2,000 students in DC tested positive for an STI, according to the D.C. Department of Health cited by The Washington Post. Passing out condoms for safe sex is a good way to fight these statistics because when young people have condoms, and know how to use them, it keeps them protected. When I am working and even when I'm not, I talk about safe sex to my friends so they can be aware and protect themselves. I feel like I'm making a change, because when I pass out a condom, that's one person I know that I helped not get an STI or have an unwanted pregnancy.

My friends, especially the boys, are always talking about having unprotected sex, or as they call it having sex raw and how it feels better. The biggest problem with teens is peer pressure. For example, friends come up to you and say "oh I had sex raw, it was good, you should too." People don't realize that when you say things like that, someone is pressuring you to do something without thinking that you can catch something or get pregnant.

This kind of peer pressure leads to a lot of teen pregnancy in my school. Even though we can get condoms from the nurse, nobody wants to go up to the nurse and start talking about sex. It is easier for youth to talk to people around their age. The Wrap MC program uses positive peer pressure, as opposed to the bad peer pressure they get from their friends, to encourage people to choose safe sex.

At Cardozo, someone is always fighting and you can see that there is abuse going on in relationships at school. For example, boyfriends and girlfriends are always arguing and even fighting. Ten percent of teens report being physically harmed by their boyfriend or girlfriend in a given year (CDC, Youth Risk Behavioral Surveillance, 2009). This is damaging not only for the person getting hurt, but for everyone around. It makes us feel uncomfortable and it disturbs our learning. I know school administrations can't monitor personal relationships, but here is where peer education can help. As a peer educator at YWP, I have been trained on recognizing abusive relationships. I think that my school could benefit from Wrap MCs

presenting about healthy relationships. This way, we can have less fighting and relationship abuse in school and we can get back to learning.

Overall, I believe the work I am doing has changed my peers in a positive way. When I pass out condoms, I know they're going to use them. That is another person I have helped prevent from getting STI's or having babies. I have three recommendations:

1) We need comprehensive sex education in schools. Learning what I learned at YWP makes me wonder why we don't have sexual health classes in Cardozo. Teenagers and students need more sex education classes, because we don't have any now. Sex education class at school should have condoms in class, pictures of the female and male reproductive system, different type of STI's, and birth control. I think having lessons, just like I learned at the YWP would be good. Sex-ed class should also focus on healthy relationships, abuse and violence. We should participate in group projects, and the teacher should be open-minded and approachable, so kids could ask questions and learn as much as they can.

2) We need more time to do peer education: As a Wrap MC, it would be helpful if we had more than two hours a week to get training and distribute condoms. We are only allowed to do one hour because YWP does not have enough money to pay us for more time worked. We would appreciate if the government helped us push for DCPS to set up money so that all people doing Wrap MC work can get paid. The department of health should supply us with what we need to do a better job. We need extra time to talk to students about all their options. Of course, we can't do all that during school time, so maybe after school would be a good time. It could be like a sex ed class after school.

3) We need more mental health in school. As far as abuse in relationships, we should have more counselors, like someone you know you can trust. Students probably want someone more specialized training to talk to about these problems. It will be better if we can get at least four counselors to do one-on-ones with students. With more training, I think I can learn how to be a good peer counselor, but I will need more training that also means more hours.

Thank you for your time and for listening to my testimony. Thank you, Council member Catania, for always supporting YWP.