

April 18, 2016

President Jack Jacobson
State Board of Education
One Judiciary Square
441 4th Street, NW, Old Council Chambers
Washington, DC 20001

Dear President Jacobson:

On behalf of the staff and youth of the Young Women's Project (YWP), I am writing with my whole-hearted endorsement for the approval the DC State Learning Standards for Health Education. YWP is a DC-based, nonprofit organization that builds the leadership and power of young people so that they can shape DC policies and institutions to expand rights and opportunities. Since 1994, YWP has developed thousands of youth leaders and has worked in partnership with a number of DC agencies to develop policy and implement programs in sexual health education and services, foster care rights and opportunities, youth employment, and other issues. YWP programs cover a broad range of interventions -- from after school leadership programming to youth employment, peer education, youth-led research, and policy development.

YWP adult and youth staff have been honored to work along-side you, other SBOE members, and Executive Director John-Paul Hayworth on this important project during the past two years. We commend the State Board for taking on this bold revision, engaging youth as partners and stakeholders in the input and drafting, staying focused on the urgent needs of DC children and youth, and keeping the project moving forward through many twists and turns. I also want to acknowledge the work of many individuals who contributed many hours to this project. Thank you to DCPS Training and Learning Team (Heather Holaday, Erin Lumpkins, Miriam Kenyon), YWP staff members Aurora Munoz and Jessica Anderson for their drafting work. Thank you to the Youth Health Working Group members for all of their great research, recommendations, and testimonies over the past two years. And finally, thank you to OSSE Assistant Superintendent Donna Anthony and Superintendent Hanseul Kang and DME Policy Advisor Yair Inspektor for shepherding this important work through the final approval stages.

The DC Health Education Standards will create a foundation of knowledge, skills, and capacity for DC children and youth in a public school system where the vast majority of students have serious health challenges. These challenges are getting in the way of academic progress as is clearly documented in standardized test scores, truancy rates, and youth engagement. Data from the DC's Youth Behavioral Risk Survey (YRBS) makes a clear case for intervention and documents urgent health issues in several areas:

Nutrition: Lower-incomes and poverty correlate strongly with poor nutrition and higher rates of obesity; 32 percent of DC youth are obese or overweight. These same youth lack access to healthy foods and are dealing with hunger. Only 25 percent of high school students actually eat breakfast every day; 11 percent of middle school students and 17 percent of high school students report going hungry at least once within the past 30 days due to lack of food at home (YRBS Surveillance Report, 2013).

Physical Activity: Poor nutrition combined with a lack of physical activity is a bad combination. In DC, 71.9 percent of high school students were not physically active at least 60 minutes per day on 5 days or more. And 32.9 percent of female high school students and 21.9 percent of male high school students did not participate in at least 60 minutes of physical activity on at least one day, within the past 7 days of the survey (CDC, 2014).

Sexual Health: According to the latest Youth Behavioral Risk Survey (YRBS) data, more youth than ever have had sexual intercourse (54 percent compared to 47 percent nationally), and are starting earlier (15 percent had sexual intercourse before age 15 compared to 6 percent nationally), and having sex with more partners (22 percent of DC youth had sex with more than four partners compared to 15 percent nationally). And although they report using condoms in high numbers (75 percent compared to 61 percent nationally), they are also contracting STIs in high numbers

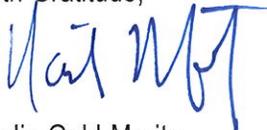
Mental and Emotional Health: Children and youth struggle every day to understand and deal with high levels of stress, family instability, and trauma. Recent YRBS data tells us that 26 percent of high school youth claimed to have felt sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 or more weeks; 31 percent of high school females and 19 percent of high school males felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more that they stopped doing some usual activities; and 28 percent of middle school females and 16 percent of middle school males felt so bad that themselves, a significant difference.

Violence: Violence in our schools and communities continues to be part of the daily fabric and expectations of youth. Twenty percent of DC high school students carried a weapon in the past 30 days; 15 percent were in a physical fight on school property; while 38 percent were in a fight outside of school. (YRBS, 2013). Our child and youth death rate is 41 per 100,000 -- twice the national average. (Kids Count, 2013) Harassment, bullying, and relationship violence are also pressing problems and have a significant impact on a student's emotional and physical well-being and academic success. Thirty percent of DC middle school students report being bullied on school property and 12 percent electronically during the past 12 months. (YRBS, 2013)

Health class will not solve every problem. But it is a starting point. This is an opportunity to create a space within the classroom, led by certified teachers, that is consistent, comprehensive, and most importantly supports children and youth to take on real issues, connect them to resources, and to build and practice communication, problem solving, relationship building, and social skills that enable them to resist social pressures – all of which work to reduce risks for un-intended pregnancy, smoking, alcohol, and other drug use, all of which impede academic achievement. The Health Standards are important part of a health education foundation that can direct and inform the work of teachers, the Department of Health, parents, nonprofit organizations working after school and in the community, and everyone who wants to contribute to improving the health of DC children and youth.

YWP looks forward to continuing to work with the State Board on this important work.

With Gratitude,



Nadia Gold-Moritz
Executive Director