



April 5, 2016

Dear Members of the School Board,

I write today to express my strong support of the proposed new health standards, which include curriculum/material specific to children who have experienced significant adversity. The breadth and depth of the standards put forth are an excellent representation of a health curriculum that will foster the healthy development of the District of Columbia's students – with a particular eye towards strengthening health and education outcomes for our most vulnerable children.

As a behavioral geneticist whose research focuses on the intersection between genes (“nature”) and the environment (“nurture”), with a particular interest in early childhood origins of wellness and disease, unfolding work within the fields of biological and social science continue to reinforce the premise that the roots of adult health lie early in life. Building a child's knowledge base in the manner laid out by the proposed health standards will provide skills that will bolster a child's odds of strong mental and physical health throughout life. A foundation of good health will improve a child's opportunity to achieve strong academic outcomes, hence benefit from the myriad downstream effects such as job productivity, lower healthcare costs and lower rates of incarceration.

Specific to trauma and adversity, having good information and/or knowing where to find it when in need can help mitigate the effects of toxic stress on a child / adolescent's brain and immune system – both which have significant implications for optimal learning in school. With the right resources, support, and trusted adult relationships in place, science tells a very optimistic story about human potential -- resilience and malleability are fundamental characteristics of our biological systems. Through the science of epigenetics, or the way in which “nurture” shapes “nature”, our growing understanding of the power of context to shape development at a molecular level provides unprecedented potential to help our children not only survive, but thrive.

On a further note relative to early childhood, the proposed K-2 standards are noteworthy. The proposed material will augment the formation of early healthy neural wiring patterns around key self-care and self-management behavior patterns. Presentation of this material by a trusted and supportive teacher, and continued repetition / reinforcement, will enhance the potential for these early learnings to become habit, providing essential tools for the child to draw upon throughout life. While the benefits of teaching this knowledge base early in life is clear, the standards for *all of the age groups* provide helpful, thorough and thoughtful guidelines for children and adolescents to reflect, self-identify, access reliable resources, and self-advocate – to have an enhanced sense of agency in setting healthy goals physically, emotionally and intellectually.

The manner in which the health standards are structured establishes an excellent and developmentally appropriate framework not only for the present, but also can be fine-tuned and built upon in the future. From the five basic categories (Mental and Emotional Health, Safety Skills, Human Body and Personal Health, Disease Prevention, and Nutrition) to the 8 distinct strands within each category (Health Promotion, Analyzing Influences, Accessing Information, Communication, Decision-Making, Goal Setting, Healthy Behaviors, and Advocacy) a breadth and depth of substantive life skill information will be provided – one that has the potential to pay dividends over a child's lifetime, and into the next generation.

Protecting Health, Saving Lives—*Millions at a Time*

The science of toxic stress / adversity links the fields of medicine and education in a profound way. Simply stated, public education, particularly for our most vulnerable children, is a public health issue. Without mental and physical health at the foundation, a child's chances of reaching their optimal potential are inherently limited. The proposed standards are essential in further connecting two fields that can sometimes be viewed as separate. Indeed, just as nature and nurture cannot realistically be disentangled, as one affects the other in a profound way through the life span, neither can medicine and education.

In closing, the proposed health education standards represent a very strong step in addressing complex issues in the lives of all of our children, especially those at risk. With more knowledge and access to trustworthy information, our children can make better decisions – giving them the best possible chance for a healthy, happy and productive life. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any further questions or thoughts, and thank you for all that you do for our children!

Best regards,

Sheila Ohlsson Walker, CFA, PhD