

Statement of
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Good evening members of the DC Board of Education.

My name is Daniel O'Neill, and I am a fourth year medical student at the George Washington University. My classmate, Julie Gibbons, has asked me to offer my perspective on our shared support of increasing the DC health education requirement for graduation from 0.5 to at least 2.0 Carnegie Units, as per the National Health Education Standards.

In particular, my area of interest in medicine has largely focused in primary care, HIV, and LGBT health, exposing me to a broad cross-section of predominantly racial and sexual minorities in the District over the course of my training. A good portion of my patients have been adolescents and children, in both inpatient and outpatient settings.

Notably, I observed firsthand how Washington, DC endures some of the most stark health disparities in the country – long having the unfortunate distinction of one of the lowest average life expectancies, while also suffering at the epicenter of the modern HIV/AIDS epidemic. Compounding the problem, high levels of crime and drug abuse make staying safe and healthy even more of a challenge to the District's youth. According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Commission to Build a Healthier America, differences in average life expectancy are as large as 9-10 years lower among DC residents as compared to those living in the surrounding counties, disparities largely attributed to differences in wealth, environment and, of course, education.

I recently counseled a teenaged patient with limited sexual experience and awareness about his own sexuality, left to his own devices to "figure it out," only to be broadsided when his first HIV test returned positive. I was disheartened to hear he had not learned about the perils of unprotected anal sex and appropriate condom use. And now it was too late. Another patient of mine was a bright 17 year old, who felt unable to disclose his HIV status or sexual orientation due to stigma and fear of rejection from his family and friends, and presented with suicidal ideation and daily drug use to escape his life of isolation – unaware of local resources, such as Metro TeenAIDS, to help his dire situation. These scenarios happen far too frequently in this city and often rob adolescents of opportunities to reach their full potential before much of their lives have even begun.

In closing, I believe our greatest weapon against such outcomes is prevention through education, empowering DC youth to protect themselves and each other and helping to break down stigma around sexuality, gender identity and sexually transmitted diseases – especially HIV. And for those youth already impacted by the many health challenges this city may bring, we need to provide information on public health resources to prevent ongoing isolation, discrimination, and lack of support. Health class is a prime opportunity to ensure they receive this life-saving information, and that is why I support raising the time allotted for health education to at least the national standard. Thank you for your time.

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Daniel O'Neill is currently pursuing joint Doctor of Medicine and Master of Public Health degrees, as well as a Graduate Certificate in HIV/AIDS Studies, at the George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences, as both a 2011 Point Foundation and National Health Service Corps Scholar. He has been active in the local HIV/AIDS Community since 2006, after completing his MBA in Biotechnology Enterprise at Indiana University to work at the Institute of Medicine's Roundtable on Evidence-Based Medicine. Daniel is a co-founder of the HIV Prevention Working Group of the DC LGBT Center; a co-founder of the provocative safer-sex messaging and condom distribution campaign, DC FUK!T; serves on the Community Advisory Board for Whitman Walker Health and is completing his second term on the DC HIV Prevention Community Planning Group. ``

The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views the George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences.