Good afternoon. I am Elizabeth Adams, Director of Government Relations at Planned Parenthood of New York City (PPNYC). I am pleased to submit testimony at today’s hearing on Gender Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) in New York City schools. Thank you to Education Chair Council Member Daniel Dromm for convening this hearing, as well as Council Member Ben Kallos, Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, and the entire Committee for their dedication to these issues.

PPNYC provides education, training and outreach to more than 25,000 youth, adults and professionals annually. Our programs are grounded in the belief that education should support a person’s whole self and well-being and meet the needs of all people. One of our curricula, titled All of Us, is designed as a holistic model of sexual health education for middle and high school students, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender and gender non-conforming (LGB and TGNC) youth. All of Us addresses topics including physiology, healthy relationships, gender and sexuality, communication, and safer sex, in ways that are adaptable for customized implementation in school and after-school settings. The curriculum provides teens with sexual health information that is medically accurate and age appropriate, while remaining inclusive of diverse sexual orientations, identities, and gender expressions.

As a leading sexual health education provider, PPNYC recognizes the importance of cultivating a supportive and inclusive school environment for all students to thrive. One of the most critical components of our sexuality education workshops is the commitment to creating a safer and braver space for students to ask sensitive or tricky questions. Staff often hear questions that boil down to “am I normal?” or “am I safe?” and find that students usually just want to know that their bodies, their behaviors, and their identities are valid. Safety and understanding are core components of comprehensive sexuality education and need to be core components of a school’s broader environment as well.

While all students deserve to feel supported and safe in their schools, bullying, harassment, and discrimination disproportionately impact LGB and TGNC students. Recent CDC survey results found that compared with their peers, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) high school students are significantly more likely to experience dating violence, bullying, and sexual assault than their heterosexual peers.¹ LGB students were almost four times as likely to report being physically forced to have sex (18% vs. 5%) and more than twice as likely to report sexual dating violence (23% vs. 9%).² The CDC report also found that LGB students are at substantial risk for suicide, depression, and absenteeism because they do not feel safe

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² Ibid.
for being who they are.\textsuperscript{3} For transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) youth, school can be even harder; nationwide, 78% of transgender individuals have reported being harassed and 35% report being physically assaulted because of their gender identity.\textsuperscript{4} These findings reveal an urgent need for public health and education agencies to prioritize stronger measures for the safety and wellbeing of LGB and TGNC youth.

A growing body of research shows the positive impact Gender Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) have on students and school climate. GSAs are student-led clubs that bring in LGB and TGNC curriculum resources, coordinate trainings for teachers and students, and help to improve school awareness of gender and sexuality. GSAs also often serve as an important meeting space for student support and queer student-led activism. According to a report by GLSEN, students in schools with GSAs are less likely to hear homophobic remarks in school on a daily basis (57\% versus 75\%), and LGBT students are less likely than those at schools without a GSA to report feeling unsafe in school because of their sexuality (61\% versus 68\%).\textsuperscript{5}

GSAs have also been shown to be important in helping students identify staff they can trust. Students in schools with a GSA are more likely to report that school staff are supportive of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students (52\% versus 37\%) and are also significantly more likely than students in schools without a GSA to know a supportive adult at school (84\% versus 56\%). Despite the enactment of New York’s Dignity for All Students Act (DASA) in 2010, New York City public schools continue to report extremely low rates of harassment and discrimination of marginalized students. In the 2014-15 school year, 53\% of schools reported zero incidents of harassment, bullying, or discrimination of students, and 94\% reported only 10 incidents or fewer. This raises questions of how well schools are providing an environment for students to feel safe in reaching out to staff for support.

The bills proposed today are proactive measures to connect students to gender and sexuality resources, support, and trusted teachers in New York City schools. Int. 1638 would require the Department of Education to collect and report data on GSAs in New York City middle and high schools, and Res. 1442 would call on the Department of Education to create and maintain functional GSAs in all New York City middle and high schools.

PPNYC proudly supports the efforts of Int. 1638 and Res. 1442 to better understand the New York City school landscape and identify opportunities to improve young people’s access to support and resources. GSAs have the ability to deeply affect a student’s life and we applaud measures to cultivate more safe spaces. One PPNYC educator recently shared, “I have seen first-hand the impact that having a space to be

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\item \textsuperscript{3} Ibid.
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oneself, and feel safe doing so, has on young folks. If we could provide the resources and support to create that space in our public schools that would be game changing for so many young people.” We hope this legislation will serve as a useful tool for DOE to better liaise with schools on LGB and TGNC student inclusion measures, as well as to strengthen its commitment to fostering safe and supportive school environments.

While PPNYC is pleased to support this legislation, it is important to acknowledge that for GSAs to provide the safe spaces and support young people deserve, they must be adequately resourced and invested in. The goal of expanding GSAs to middle and high schools citywide is important, yet, it is critical that they are led by committed and well-equipped staff. Currently, GSAs are often run by teachers who are deeply invested in the program and decide to champion it in their school. According to a PPNYC educator, “It’s almost always the case that a teacher has a personal commitment to providing a safe space for young queer teens and very rarely are they provided with any resources to run the GSA.” For New York City to effectively enact stronger support measures for LGB and TGNC students citywide, GSAs need sufficient funding and teachers must be provided with training and resources.

In order to best achieve the goals of the proposed legislation, PPNYC proposes the following recommendations. First, we recommend that all GSA assigned staff receive training in trauma informed care, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, and cultural responsiveness. It is important that students seeking compassionate resources and support not be subjected to potential trauma when seeking out a trusted adult. Second, while we applaud the legislation’s commitment to protecting student and teacher privacy, we recommend assigned GSA staff contacts be made available to DOE central staff to ensure clear and consistent communication. Further, we recognize that extensive reporting can be burdensome on staff and may not always accurately reflect the qualitative work of a GSA, and so recommend that both the meeting frequency and attendee number reporting requirements be lifted. Lastly, we recommend that the DOE’s LGBT school community liaison collaborate closely with schools to facilitate GSA staff communication across schools and ensure that staff have the proper training and support to implement a successful program.

We applaud the commitment to expand GSAs citywide and look to the DOE for implementation that includes adequate funding and staff support, comprehensive training for assigned teachers, and reporting that is meaningful, not burdensome. The City Council and the NYC Department of Education acknowledge that New York is lagging when it comes to the provision of sexuality education in schools. We need a holistic model that prioritizes health beyond just a few lessons during senior year of high school, and connects young people to a range of resources needed to feel safe and lead healthy and fulfilling lives. We are proud to support the Council’s proposed legislation, which would increase efforts to connect students to GSAs, and hope to be a resource and a partner as these conversations move forward.