

Thank you for this opportunity to speak with you!

My name is Dana Edell. I'm the director of viBe Theater Experience and I'm here to talk about the need for support for the New York State Council for the Arts (NYSCA), arts education and the importance of creative and positive arts programs for New York's underserved teenage girls.

I want to talk to you about the heart-thumping, life-changing, unquantifiable IMPACT the arts have on girls and how writing and performing can help girls build confidence, strength, leadership & collaboration skills and the creative literacy they need to overcome obstacles and to succeed.

"Epidemic of teenage pregnancy" "girl gangs" "high school drop-outs" "gossip girls" "ghetto girls"... These are the stereotyped clichés that many policy makers, teachers, parents and community members say about the girls in our urban neighborhoods. Are we aware that the actual voices of the girls are missing from our conversation? How would it change our community if adults really listened to teenage girls? How can we change the discourse, challenge the stereotypes and inspire the girls of today to be the women of tomorrow? Where can girls go to release the bubbling rumbling of emotions such as anger, joy, hate, love and frustration? Girls have the lungs and the lips and the stories- what they need is the platform to stand upon, the guidance to construct and shape what they want to express, the strength to "say it how it is" and the community to listen. What they need is theater.

Though I'm thrilled to be here talking to you all, my heart is actually 3 miles uptown at a rehearsal space in Manhattan where 11 teenage girls are hard at work on a play that is being written as I stand here and will be performed in a few weeks. As the co-founder and executive director of viBe Theater Experience (www.viBeTheater.org) and a previous public school teaching artist, I've been making theater with with girls for over a decade.

viBe Theater is a young women's performing arts organization that empowers underserved teenage girls in NYC to write and perform original theater. Through writing poetry, songs, plays, making dances and exploring their individual and collective stories, girls build the confidence to author their culture, express themselves authentically and transform themselves and our community.

I wish I could bring all their voices to this stage so you can feel hear and see their strength and hunger to be heard.

This is a poem 16 year old Naima wrote a couple of weeks ago:

*I need to talk but also to be heard
I need you to listen to every single word
I need someone to listen as I confide
All these breaking emotions I have held inside
Pay attention as the tears roll down my cheek
Try to make me feel strong when you see that I'm weak
I just want someone to actually tell me to stay
When I scream about how I'm gonna run away
I need you to tell me that you'll always care
Make sure I know you'll always be there*

Are we listening?

So as you think about the 2008/09 state budget, please remember Naima's voice and the power you have to transform our communities and empower our girls of today to become the female leaders of tomorrow by funding arts education.

And I'll end with a last quote from 16 year old Zaidy:

Performing feels good. It's my outlet. Without it, I would just keep it in- keep it in- keep it in and I'll blow up one of these days. But because I can write it, I can speak it, because people can hear it then, it helps me because what I write about is what's going on today.

Thank you.

