



# **Do the Harder Work— Create Cultures of Connectedness in Schools:**

A Youth and Parent Organizer Response to the Federal Commission on School Safety

**DECEMBER 05 2018**



# Executive Summary



As of the writing of this report, the Federal Commission on School Safety, the body appointed after the Parkland tragedy to make “meaningful and actionable recommendations to keep students safe at school,” has yet to release its final report. The focus of many of the Commission’s panel speakers, however, was physical safety and security measures—which criminalize students of color, LGBTQ+ and gender nonconforming youth, as well as their communities. While emergency planning and infrastructure are important components of school design, calls to arm teachers, increase police presence in schools, and invest in further improving physical security infrastructure all too often come at the expense of more holistic considerations of student well-being. Investments proven to criminalize children threaten to derail efforts towards the kinds of schools all young people need and deserve.

For years, youth and parent organizers supported by the Communities for Just Schools Fund (CJSF) have advocated for eliminating exclusionary discipline and moving to positive school climate efforts that include an embedded sense of safety and wellness for all students and an explicit emphasis on racial equity. Many of them testified to this work before the Federal Commission on

School Safety, pushing back on calls to “harden” schools and sharing what they know from personal experience makes youth of color and LGBTQ+ students feel physically and emotionally safe in schools. In this report, CJSF’s community partners—youth, family, and community organizers from around the United States—provide a roadmap for the harder work of fostering “cultures of connectedness” in schools by investing in restorative justice, culturally relevant curricula and practices, diverse teaching and support staff, anti-bias training, mental and emotional health supports and more.

States and local districts have the opportunity to do what the Commission failed to do: lean into the vision of public education that youth, parents, and teachers are fighting for—a vision that is not limited by a narrow and deeply flawed understanding of safety. Join us as we push towards investments and supports that will actually transform schools into places where all young people are prepared to succeed and thrive in school, in career, and in life. When school is a welcoming, nurturing and safe place for students, where they have a deep sense of belonging, and where they are challenged to grow, our communities are stronger, and our future is limitless.

## WE ARE CONNECTED

Process Shot by Saeviona G., Youth Staff  
DC Youth Mayoral Forum  
Critical Exposure



**The Communities for Just Schools Fund** is a national donor collaborative that provides resources in support of community-led organizations that are working to ensure positive, safe, and supportive school climates that protect and affirm the inherent cultural dignity of all students and foster the success of all students.

## Acknowledgments

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The Communities for Just Schools Fund (CJSF) would like to thank our community partners—youth, caregiver, educator, and community organizers fighting relentlessly for the just schools all young people deserve. The genius shared in this report’s recommendations and in testimony before the Federal Commission on School Safety represents only a small sample of the work they do every day to ensure that schools are welcoming, nurturing, and safe places for students—where they have a deep sense of belonging, and where they are challenged to grow.

We are grateful for our network partners who are leaders, organizers, and advocates working tirelessly for safe, just, and supportive schools. Thank you especially to the Alliance for Educational Justice and the Center for Popular Democracy, and their member organizations.

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We are all indebted to the brilliance, passion, and leadership of Allison R. Brown, CJSF’s beloved Executive Director. Allison, we dedicate this report to you.



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# Introduction

In the wake of the Parkland tragedy, our nation witnessed a historic mobilization. Young people across the country turned out in the streets and at the polls in unprecedented numbers to demand truly safe and welcoming schools.<sup>1</sup> And yet, the proceedings of the Federal Commission on School Safety, the body appointed after the Valentine’s Day shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School to study the prevention of school-based violence and take action to “harden schools,” included only a handful of youth voices.<sup>2</sup> Among those voices—determined to be heard in a “public” listening session—was Amina, a youth leader with the grassroots organizing group Voices of Youth in Chicago Education, or VOYCE: “I’m a 20-year-old African-American Palestinian woman, born and raised on the South Side of Chicago. At the age of nine, I watched my father die. I have lost loved ones due to gun violence in my city. I was arrested in school when I had an anxiety attack. I tried to walk away from a peace circle and a security guard pushed my head into a chalkboard. My most recent loss to gun violence was my best friend.”

Black and Brown youth like Amina intimately know the trauma of gun violence. Their communities have been devastated by it, the proliferation of which is, on the one hand, the result of racist policies, disinvestment, and systemic failures that foreclose opportunities for young people of color in cities across the country; and, on the other hand, the result of racist police forces using lethal force with impunity.<sup>3</sup> Youth of color are also versed in the repercussions of current and previous efforts to “harden schools.” In the aftermath of school shootings at predominantly white institutions, it has been their schools, not those of their white peers, that received an influx of police and surveillance equipment. According to the 2015-2016 federal Civil Rights Data Collection, 54.1 percent of majority Black secondary schools (in which more than 75 percent of enrolled students are Black) had at least one school-based law enforcement or security officer on campus. By comparison, only 32.5 percent of majority white secondary schools (where more than 75 percent of enrolled students are white) had such personnel in place.<sup>4</sup> The stark disparity in the types of staffing

choices is also revealing. The 2015-16 CRDC reveals that majority Black middle and high schools have more security than mental health staff.

In spite of young people’s proximity to the issues at the root of school and community safety, policymakers rarely act on the demands of youth of color.<sup>5</sup> Instead, where issues of safety are concerned, current and past federal administrations have turned to experts like Florida Representative John Rutherford, a career police officer often called “Sheriff” on the Hill. Representative Rutherford was the first person to testify during the Commission’s public listening sessions, where he advocated for expeditiously moving security and surveillance grants to school districts. Rutherford closed his remarks to the Commission with the following comment: “I think we need to look at why these individuals go back to their school to kill their fellow inmates.”<sup>6</sup> Referring to the tragic school shooting in Parkland, Florida, Rutherford unintentionally indicts the shooter’s classmates. The subliminal slip (reading classmates as inmates) gets at the heart of how our nation’s policymakers are criminalizing our public school students in their efforts to create safer—or “hardened”—schools. Certainly, walking into a public school today, especially one serving primarily students of color, one might feel much more like an inmate than a classmate passing by metal detectors, bulletproof glass, armed police officers, k-9 units, and other military-grade equipment.

**“I was arrested in school when I had an anxiety attack. I tried to walk away from a peace circle and a security guard pushed my head into a chalkboard.”**

AMINA HENDERSON-REDWAN  
*Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE)*

Disregarding the prison-like environment of many of our nation’s public schools, the Federal Commission on School Safety is poised to make recommendations that could further criminalize students of color, LGBTQ+ and gender nonconforming youth, as well as their communities. Youth and parent organizers, who have been on the front lines advocating for safe and supportive schools for decades, followed the work of the Commission closely and are responding with their own analysis of what it will take to ensure not only the physical safety of young people but their emotional safety as well. Indeed, rather than the “hardening of schools,” these key stakeholders, some of whom found a way to participate in the largely inaccessible “public listening sessions” held by the Commission, call for a “radical softening.”<sup>7</sup> By this we mean that we must collectively engage in the the harder work of creating “cultures of connectedness” that move conversations about safety beyond fear, punishment, policing, and incarceration, and towards restorative action: building relationships within our school communities with the power to prevent and heal the traumas of interpersonal and systemic violence, and to nurture the inherent genius of youth of color.

Youth and families know what safe and supportive learning environments look like and deserve to be fully heard and meaningfully engaged in any effort to transform our schools. After months of following the Commission closely and participating in public listening sessions, this report addresses the following: (1) Concerns about the accessibility, transparency, and sincerity of the Commission’s process; and (2) the overwhelming opposition to the hardening of schools expressed during public testimony; and offers youth- and family- supported recommendations for creating the truly safe and supportive schools all students deserve.

# Background

## On the Federal Commission on School Safety

On March 12, 2018, President Trump explicitly called for the “hardening of schools” in response to the Parkland shooting.<sup>8</sup> In this same White House memo, he established the Federal Commission on School Safety, chaired by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and tasked with making “meaningful and actionable recommendations to keep students safe at school.” In addition to DeVos, the Commission included only three Cabinet members—former Attorney General Jeff Sessions, Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar, and Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen. They were charged with studying and making recommendations on the following issue areas:

- Age restrictions for certain firearm purchases.
- Existing entertainment rating systems and youth consumption of violent entertainment.
- Strategies to advance the science and practice of character development in youth and a culture of connectedness.
- Effects of press coverage of mass shootings.
- Repeal of the Obama Administration’s “Rethink School Discipline” policies.
- Best practices for school buildings and campus security from Federal Government components, including the Department of State’s Bureau of Diplomatic Security, and also from other State, local, and private sector sources.
- A plan for integration and coordination of Federal resources focused on prevention and mitigation of active shooter incidents at schools.
- Opportunities to improve access to mental health treatment, including through efforts that raise awareness about mental illness and the effectiveness of treatment, reduce barriers to

- the recruitment of mental health professionals, and provide training related to violence prevention.
- Best practices for school-based threat assessment and violence prevention strategies.
- The effectiveness and appropriateness of psychotropic medication for treatment of troubled youth.
- Ensuring that findings are sufficiently supported by existing and additional Federal, State, and local funding sources.<sup>9</sup>

Of the topics the Commission studied, the only one that proactively gets at the root of violence is “Strategies to advance...a culture of connectedness [in schools].” The other topics emphasize “fixing” problems—or worse “fixing” students—rather than ameliorating historically rooted harms that foster disconnection, breed gun violence, and fuel this country’s legacy of racial hate and discrimination. The Communities for Just Schools Fund followed the Commission’s work closely because our community partners—whose work spans more than 31 states—strive every day to foster cultures of connectedness in their communities and their schools, positively impacting millions of students, families, and educators.

## On the Federal School Discipline Guidance Package

While the Commission “studied” other topics, it set forth in a partisan fashion to “repeal” federal guidance on school discipline. In 2014, under the Obama Administration, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice released a joint guidance package on school discipline under the umbrella of the Supportive School Discipline Initiative. The four component package outlines evidence-based best practices and offers recommendations and guidance for school officials to use in ensuring that they are administering discipline in a manner that does not discriminate against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin.<sup>10</sup> Grassroots community leaders, parents, and youth and their allies actively



pushed for years for this guidance as an important means of ensuring school districts had a full understanding of existing laws and regulations and were supported in accessing existing best practice.

Research shows that biases, implicit and explicit, too often govern classroom decisions. During the 2013-2014 school year, Black children were three times as likely as their white peers to be suspended.<sup>11</sup> Students of color are also more likely to be identified as having a disability, and students of color with disabilities are suspended or expelled at the highest rates.<sup>12</sup> Since the 2014 guidance was issued, however, suspensions have gone down in many places.<sup>13</sup> While the decreasing reliance on exclusionary discipline is positive, it is offset by a simultaneous increase in racial disparities - shining a bright light on the absolute imperative that our nation lean more fully into the work we must do to right historical wrongs that play out today as disparate treatment in schools.

The guidance was created because there are far too many students who are not safe in schools. They are not safe because they are policed and targeted for exclusion via flawed policies and practices and fatally flawed perceptions of them and their communities. Rescinding the guidance does nothing to promote safe schools. Rather, it further exposes young people—especially Black and Brown students, LGBTQ+ students, and students with disabilities—to the harms of exclusionary discipline and to the school-to-prison pipeline.

## On School Hardening

The notion of “school hardening”—beefing up physical security measures to include more guns and police officers on campus and more surveillance equipment like metal detectors, smoke cannons, bulletproof glass, and cameras—is not a new response to school shootings, nor is it an evidence-based response. Calls for school hardening focused on placing more police officers and more guns in schools followed the tragedies at Columbine High School and at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Research and the experiences of countless students, teachers, and parents have taught us that while these proposals may create the illusion of safety, the actual effects wreak havoc on school culture and fuel the school-to-prison pipeline.<sup>14</sup> Young people

and their supporters have urged lawmakers at the local, state, and national level for decades to resist policies that would turn even more schools into hostile environments where students, especially Black and Brown students, are more likely to be arrested, harassed, assaulted, or shot by police or armed school staff. In the wake of the tragic Parkland shooting, we have yet again seen calls to militarize and weaponize our schools, despite a lack of evidence that these policies will protect our students.

Notwithstanding the lack of evidence that increased physical security measures and visible crime deterrents actually prevent school violence, the actual evidence that these measures decrease students’ feelings of overall safety, and that the Commission has yet to release its final recommendations, the federal government has already authorized grants to schools specifically for security infrastructure and for hiring more police.<sup>15</sup> Congress passed the STOP School Violence Act of 2018, which establishes a grant program for security infrastructure and police training, authorizing \$75 million for Fiscal Year 2018 and \$100 million annually from 2019-2028.<sup>16</sup> The Department of Justice announced another \$70 million for school security, in addition to direct grants to the National Association of School Resource Officers; The Department of Justice announced another \$70 million for school security, in addition to direct grants to the National Association of School Resource Officers; and the Department of Education has potentially opened the door for districts to use ESSA dollars for the purchase of firearms for school staff.<sup>17</sup> States have followed suit, authorizing their own funding for SROs or armed teachers.<sup>18</sup> Both Maryland and Florida have called for an SRO in every school building.<sup>19</sup>

Not only does research not support school hardening as an effective strategy to create safe learning environments, it is also an impractical solution. There are too many “soft targets”—churches, synagogues, public parks, public sidewalks, and, of course, schools—for this to ever be a reasonable policy solution. Turning public spaces into fortresses is not the answer. Schools so restrictive and policed that they are both physically and emotionally unwelcoming to students and families will not foster learning.

## On the Resistance to School Hardening

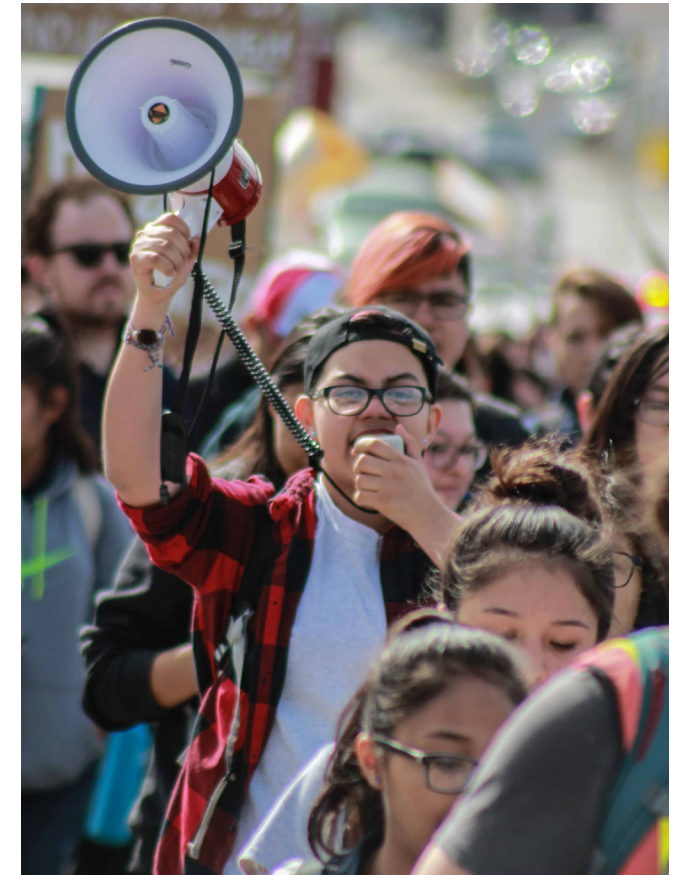
Young Black and Brown organizers were not sitting idly by when the President called explicitly for “the hardening of schools.” They were already organizing to build solidarity with Parkland survivors and to take hold of the narrative around school and community safety. In fact, their work to center a more comprehensive narrative around school climate and safety well preceded Parkland, Sandy Hook, and even Columbine in many instances. They anticipated that, given our political environment and past responses to school shootings, Parkland would offer another policy window for gun, security, and police lobbies to sell school hardening to policymakers and district leaders, and that ultimately their schools and communities would bear the brunt of these changes because of fatally flawed perceptions about Black and Brown youth and their communities.

Immediately after Parkland, youth-led organizations that are members of the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC) in New York City issued a collective call to action for our nation to “fundamentally rethink safety” in order to “move forward without creating unintended harm for any community.” To achieve this, they called for those in power to lean into the voices closest to the solutions:

**“Instead of equipping schools with metal detectors and children with bulletproof backpacks, we must redirect our school safety funding to equip school communities with the staff, training and supports that have been deprived from them for too long.”**

KESI FOSTER & ONYX WALKER

*Make the Road New York; Future of Tomorrow*



“We can do this by centering the voices of the young people, educators and families and human rights advocates that have joined two groups: One group is ready to take to Washington following last week’s tragedy. The other group has been working for safe, supportive and inclusive school communities that embrace alternatives to zero-tolerance, punishment and criminalization.

Instead of equipping schools with metal detectors and children with bulletproof backpacks, we must redirect our school safety funding to equip school communities with the staff, training and supports that have been deprived from them for too long.” — Kesi Foster, *Make the Road New York & Onyx Walker, Future of Tomorrow*<sup>20</sup>

Moved by compassion for their shared trauma, “the other group”—Black and Brown youth organizing to redefine safety—worked to model true solidarity for Parkland survivors and for those newly activated in the wake of the tragedy. Young people like Alex King from Good Kids Mad City, a coalition of youth from Chicago’s South side, reached out to build a collective story with Parkland organizers:





“At Emma [Gonzalez]’s house, we resolved to fight as a family. At Emma’s house, we resolved to fight as a family, and one of our battles as a group is against calls for the “hardening” of schools and for more policing on school grounds, calls that have been made by state legislators in Florida and President Donald Trump.

Trust me, where I’m from schools are already harder than you could imagine. We get up extra early every day to allow time to wait in line for the metal detectors. We’re disproportionately affected by zero-tolerance policies that funnel us into the school-to-prison pipeline. We already see armed police officers walking the halls and if you don’t understand why that alone can cause us stress, then you haven’t learned about the treatment of Laquan McDonald or Tamir Rice or Sandra Bland or Stephon Clark. You should.”<sup>21</sup>

On a bus full of sixty students of color traveling from Florida to DC for the March for Our Lives, Dream Defenders Co-Director Rachel Gilmer penned a powerful op-ed on a “new common sense” shared by young people, “that on a basic level, we should not lose another person to a bullet, a badge or a dollar sign”:

“It’s true that the reception Parkland students have received is much more welcoming than the one we experienced when we fought against Florida’s stand your ground law — legislation that is strongly supported by the National Rifle Association. It’s true that many called us “thugs,” while the Parkland students have been hailed as heroes. But it’s also true that our movements are far more united and interconnected than it may initially appear.

The students who organized and participated in today’s march grew up in a political climate set in motion by organizations like Dream Defenders, Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives...Five years ago, these students watched a group of young black and brown people take on the NRA and the state legislature by occupying Florida’s capitol for 31 days and demanding a special session on Florida’s stand your ground law.

We shouldn’t conflate the bias in the Parkland students’ reception with the students’ own politics. These kids are smart. They don’t have to be told that they have privilege, and they have been among the most vocal in calling attention to the plight of communities of color.”<sup>22</sup>

Youth organizers of color found a way to use the national awareness and current cultural relevance of both Parkland and the March for Our Lives to widen the conversation on school safety to issues of racial equity, police violence, corporate greed, and the tendency to marginalize and/or criminalize students of color. They did this all while reinforcing the powerful ways in which young people are already finding solidarity among each other, and modeling for each other and for adults a different sort of organizing power going forward.<sup>23</sup>

**“Trust me, where I’m from schools are already harder than you could imagine. We get up extra early every day to allow time to wait in line for the metal detectors. We’re disproportionately affected by zero-tolerance policies that funnel us into the school-to-prison pipeline. We already see armed police officers walking the halls and if you don’t understand why that alone can cause us stress, then you haven’t learned about the treatment of Laquan McDonald or Tamir Rice or Sandra Bland or Stephon Clark. You should.”**

ALEX KING  
*Good Kids Mad City*





# The Commission's Flawed Process

Over five months, the Commission held six Commission meetings, made four field visits, and held four public listening sessions. Commission meetings were narrow in scope and demonstrated bias in the selection of “expert” panelists; no field visits were made to urban school districts, high schools, or schools where community organizers are leading successful positive school climate initiatives; and the “public” listening sessions were largely inaccessible to those closest to the solutions we need—students, families, and educators.

## Commission Meetings & Field Visits

A lack of transparency plagued the Commission from its outset. The first organizational meeting was not open to the public or to the press. Thus, there is no record of how and why the Commission conducted its work in the manner it did or of its overarching goals. The subsequent five topical meetings were narrow in focus and reflected bias in the selection of invited speakers. For example, the “Meeting with Experts and Survivors of Mass Shootings” notably did not include Parkland students, nor did it include any testimony from Black experts or survivors.<sup>24</sup> We know that, in part, this is due to what Hashim Jabar, an organizer with Racial Justice NOW!, pointed out in his public address to the Commission in June, “[M]ass shootings do not occur in Black schools and Brown schools.”<sup>25</sup> And because parent organizers and experts on the adverse effects of school hardening were not on the Commission’s invited panels, this point was not made: “[T]o attempt to solve a suburban, aka a white...problem, by adding police in schools would be extremely problematic based on the relationship between Black students and police officers.”

Other meetings were equally rife with misleading titles. The meeting on “The Ecology of Schools: Fostering a Culture of Human Flourishing and Developing Character,” only included panels on “Cyberbullying and Social Media,” “Youth Consumption of Violent Entertainment,” and the “Effects of Press Coverage on Mass Shootings.”<sup>26</sup> The meeting on “Proactively

Protecting our Schools” focused almost entirely, in the words of Former Attorney General Jeff Sessions, “on law enforcement, its role in school safety.”<sup>27</sup> And the title of the final meeting suggests the antithesis of how we might work to build “cultures of connectedness in schools”: “Creating a Citadel [emphasis added] of Learning.”<sup>28</sup>

Field visits made by the Commission were similarly narrow and unintentionally organized. While Secretary DeVos and representatives from the Commission traveled to suburban Hebron-Harman Elementary School in Hanover, Maryland to learn more about Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), this was the only formal session with any obvious reference to positive school climates and alternatives to exclusionary discipline. If the Commission truly wanted to understand the benefits and challenges of implementing district-wide PBIS and how parents and community members can be active stakeholders in continuous improvement, they might have spent time in Los Angeles with the Black and Latinx parent/caregiver-led organization, CADRE (Community Asset Development Re-defining Education). CADRE pushed Los Angeles Unified School District to become the first district in the nation to adopt a district-wide school discipline policy based on positive behavior support and is currently engaged in work that positions parents to monitor school climate.<sup>29</sup>

The Commission could have also spent time in Denver, Colorado with Padres y Jóvenes Unidos (PJU). PJU helped to forge one of the first state-level disciplinary reform laws (“Safe Schools through Smart Discipline”), created one of the first large urban school district and police department agreements restricting law enforcement, and currently conducts the only partnership among a grassroots organization, urban school district, and teachers’ union to advance whole school restorative practices district-wide.<sup>30</sup>

Instead, the Commission’s second and third field visits were to majority white Adams-Friendship Middle School in Wisconsin and majority white Lake Hamilton School

District in rural Arkansas, to study a statewide behavioral health framework and an alternative licensing track for school police respectively.<sup>31</sup> The final field visit was to the Miley Achievement Center in Las Vegas, Nevada, a secondary school serving less than 100 students with mental and behavioral health needs that only came to Sec. Nielsen’s attention when it won a grant from ASIS International, an organization for security management professionals.<sup>32</sup> Rather than investigate why this school for students with behavioral needs serves a disproportionate number of Black students compared to district enrollment, or why it reported 63 referrals to law enforcement in the 2015-16 school year when its total enrollment was 80 students, the Commission instead studied the effectiveness of its cameras and metal detectors.<sup>33</sup>

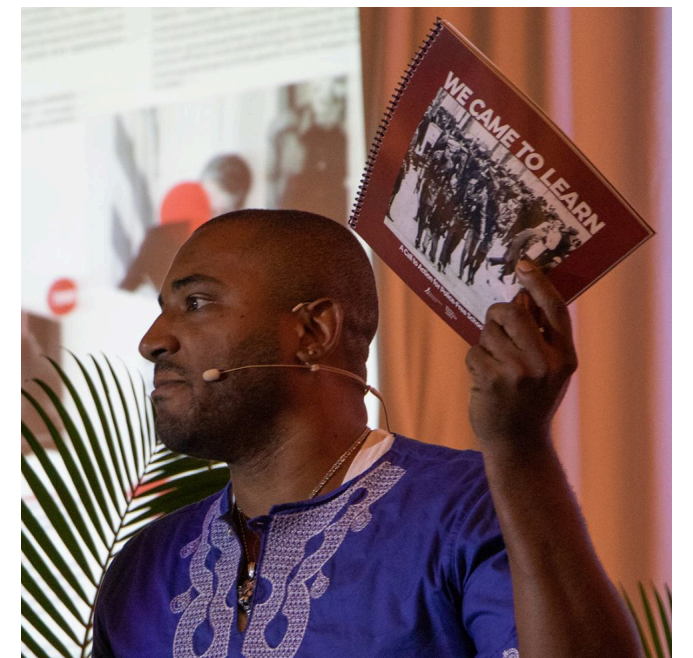
Overall, the Commission made no visit to the West Coast, to the Northeast, to an urban school district, or to a traditional high school. It also failed to visit districts where youth, parents, and educators are leading the way for schools that provide for students’ emotional as well as physical safety.

## Intentions to Resource, Not Study, More Police in Schools

In addition to the limited regional, demographic, and topical scope of the Commission’s meetings and field visits, they generated virtually no critical questions from panelists or Commission representatives. Most notably, the meeting dedicated to school police did not delve into the efficacy of school resource officers (SROs). Instead, the conversation centered on how to increase resources.<sup>34</sup> “President Trump understands the important role each of you have and that’s why the federal government seeks to invest more in you,” said Former Attorney General Jeff Sessions to a panel of police. “We must allow you to know all the information possible, to make the essential decisions, whether from a disciplinary, counseling, mental health or law enforcement perspective to keep our children safe.”<sup>35</sup> Sessions’ eagerness to invest in SROs stands in stark contrast to the reality that “up to 1.7 million students were in schools with cops and no counselors, and over 10 million students were in schools that reported police officers and no social workers in the 2015-16 school year.”<sup>36</sup> This meeting on “proactively pro-

tecting schools” failed to discuss equipping schools with support staff specifically trained to identify and address the social, emotional, and health needs of students.

The choice of panelists selected to speak on the role of police in schools not only reflects an unwillingness to consider the ways in which police make many students of color feel less safe, but also a whitewashed view of the history of police in schools. Don Bridges, the President of the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO), suggested in his statement that the introduction of police into school campuses was a benign act: “The assignment of a school resource officer...is a concept that dates back to the 1950s. More than 60 years later, the goal of the program remains the same: to bridge the gap between police and youth.” This may have been true in white schools and communities, but students of color know a different history. The origins of police in schools serving Black and Latinx students have a long history rooted in suppressing student movements for racial justice.<sup>37</sup> The longer history of police in the US is seeped in racist violence.



The members of Oakland’s Black Organizing Project (BOP) know this history too well. Oakland witnessed a series of high profile police killings of Black people in recent memory: Oscar Grant, Derrick Jones, and Raheim Brown—who was shot to death by a school police officer. The officer was promoted rather than





**“Raheim’s mother came to BOP looking for support from the community when the school district turned their backs. Our members wanted justice for Raheim and also knew that it was important to look at police violence and the school policing issue beyond Raheim’s murder. That it was an institutional problem. It was a dangerous combination, to have the police force with unlimited access to young people and no accountability.”<sup>38</sup>**

JACKIE BYERS

*Executive Director, Black Organizing Project*

reprimanded. Raheim’s death and the criminalization of Black and Brown students and their communities prompted BOP to launch their “Bettering Our School System” (BOSS) Campaign to end Oakland Unified School District’s reliance on police and re-invest those resources in restorative practices and other positive school climate initiatives.

More and more youth-led and community-based organizations are advocating for alternatives to policing in the long run, and police accountability in the short, and are getting only a fraction of the attention they deserve.

In Philadelphia, for example, “a police officer punched a student, threw him to the ground, and put him in a head-lock. Even though part of the incident was captured on video, the officer was transferred, but not disciplined. [In the aftermath] members of the Philadelphia Student Union demanded and won a groundbreaking school-police complaint system, similar to a civilian-complaint review board.”<sup>39</sup>

Rather than hear from those closest to police violence, the Commission heard from police on the efficacy of police in schools. In a damning statement intended

to caution the Commission from arming teachers, Mo Canady, the Executive Director for NASRO, made a damning, yet candid, remark on an officer’s ability to respond effectively in an any emergency: “[I]n many cases, law enforcement, we don’t shoot that well. So I’m really concerned about a teacher carrying a gun and then trying to secure that gun during the normal workday.” Clarence Cox, III, president of the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives also joined the panel on school police best practices and spoke to his experience creating the Clayton County Public Schools Police Department, a force notorious for sexual harassment and for hiring officers who were terminated from from other police departments for a wide range of reasons, including “chronically poor performance, lying to superiors, sexual misconduct and inappropriate use of force.”<sup>40</sup>

## “Public” Listening Sessions

In addition to meetings and field visits, the Commission held four “public” listening sessions.” Marlyn Tillman, with Gwinnett STOPP describes the lack of transparency and intentionality around these sessions best in her June testimony: “The timing of the notice was not conducive for parents and youth to be included in a meaningful way on a topic that impacts them directly. The three proposed upcoming session dates and places have yet to be announced. I implore the Commission to give proper notice so the community can fully participate. Going forward I hope the Commission will ensure that they hear from diverse voices in order to develop a balanced perspective—lean into the discomfort. We will all benefit from it. Don’t let these opportunities become just a photo-op or a box to tick.”

Unfortunately, the Commission failed to heed Marlyn’s advice, or respond to the multiple FOIA requests regarding the dates and locations of future sessions. The four listening sessions in Washington, DC; Lexington, KY; Cheyenne, WY; and Montgomery, AL, were all announced with less than a week’s notice. In the case of the DC session, the notice was posted after 4:00PM on the Friday before a Tuesday session. After the DC session, notice expanded to a week, but the time allotted for members of the public to actually testify drastically

decreased. The open sessions in Lexington, Cheyenne, and Montgomery were two hours each, the remaining day spent in closed sessions with local and state officials. The lack of care around making these sessions accessible was exemplified by the session in Cheyenne, which only recently regained commercial air service.<sup>41</sup> At the time of the listening session, the closest airport for anyone not flying a government aircraft or private charter would have been in Laramie, more than an hour away. CJSF partners drove from Albuquerque and Denver to be heard. To add insult to injury, Commission members did not bother to attend any of these sessions, all were represented by proxy.



# What We Heard From Youth, Parents, & Their Allies

While formal meetings and invited panels excluded Black and Brown youth, families, and their allies, our community partners made sure to be heard during the limited opportunities for public comment. This is just a small sample of the wisdom youth and caregiver organizers shared, offering warnings about the effects of school hardening on their and their community’s safety, alternatives to school hardening, and broadening the conversation on safety to include issues of homelessness, immigrant rights, corporal punishment, and racism and transphobia in schools. Much of this testimony was resoundingly echoed by a noticeable majority of public comment over the course of the four sessions.



**Amina Henderson-Redwan**  
Youth Leader, Voices of Youth in Chicago Education

“[W]henver these tragedies happen, like Columbine, like Sandy Hook, our country’s response has typically been the hardening of schools. But for students like us, this is not what safety means. Safety does not mean more police in schools, more metal detectors and armed teachers. Safety means to get to the root causes of a student’s misbehavior. It means more conflict resolution, alternatives to arrest and supporting students when their mental and behavioral health is needed. This Federal Commission on School Safety needs to listen to communities that it’s supposed to represent, communities like mine. And this is what’s needed.”<sup>42</sup>



**Zakiya Sankara-Jabar**  
National Field Organizer, Dignity in Schools Campaign

“It is the belief of the Dignity in Schools Campaign that funneling more money to police and armed school staff is not the answer to preventing violence in schools. We believe that we must invest in counselors, social workers, restorative justice coordinators, community intervention workers, peacebuilders and other supportive school staff that actually create safer schools.

Having entrances and halls monitored by supportive school staff like community intervention workers and peacebuilders who know the student body, who come from the communities where the students live can prevent issues and address those issues as they come up because there’s a relationship there. School resource officers are police. They’re not counselors. They’re not social workers. Students deserve trained mental health professionals and telling students that they can have an SRO for counseling is counterproductive and unfortunately it’s just not true.”<sup>43</sup>



**Hashim Jabar**  
Director, Racial Justice Now!

“I would like to start by sharing the title of a recent Washington Post article from May 19, 2018. The title said ‘Texas school had a shooting plan, armed officers and practice. And still 10 people died.’ There’s no research, no information, no evidence that more police in schools would create a safer environment. Additionally, if we are honest, mass shootings do not occur in the urban environment, aka black and brown environments. The mass shootings do not occur in black schools and brown schools. So to attempt to solve a suburban, aka white or Caucasian problem, by adding police in schools would be extremely problematic based on the relationship between black students and police officers. We believe in counselors, not cops.”<sup>44</sup>



**Marlyn Tillman**  
Executive Director, Gwinnett Parent Coalition to Dismantle the School to Prison Pipeline (Gwinnett SToPP)

“So what is real safety? It must be proactive and a holistic approach. Create a climate and culture of care and nurturing, a place where students are emotionally and physically safe to learn. We have to invest in evidence-based violence reduction strategies that engage all the community stakeholders and have been proven effective, such as utilizing peacekeepers instead of police, restorative practices and transformative justice. We must provide resources like counselors, improve school facilities, accessible after-school programs that help better connect students to school. When students are connected, their parents connect.

School safety cannot be just “hardening” schools, adding police or setting up the school for a gun battle at the OK corral by arming teachers. Any definition must include emotional safety— children must be emotionally safe to learn at school in order to thrive. Right now, students w/disabilities and black and brown students are not emotionally safe to learn while at school.”<sup>45</sup>







## Jaime T. Koppel

Deputy Director for Strategic Partnerships,  
Communities for Just Schools Fund

“Most personally—I am here as a mother of two Montgomery County, MD public school children. I have experienced first hand just how hard it is for schools to get social emotional learning right—especially in the current environment which so often privileges academic outcomes as a primary objective. I have seen parents, students, and teachers default to reliance on retributive justice to address conflict and harm because it is what they know and are comfortable with. On the other hand, I have seen the transformational power of restorative practices—restoring relationships and allowing for high-quality learning.

Now is the time to acknowledge the importance of ensuring all students are seen, heard, and loved. This may sound soft but it has been proven to be the hardest work we need to do.”<sup>46</sup>



## Eduardo Yanez

Youth Leader, Padres y Jóvenes Unidos

“As a brown transgender male I have faced constant oppression in school and outside of school. I was the first trans student in my school in 2016. I had to face many obstacles as my school was divided by gender. One of my hardest battles was for my school to use the correct pronouns. I was forced to print out paperwork where it states that as a trans student i have a right to use the male bathroom or even be in the same homeroom as other male students. I have had to constantly fight for my right at Kipp Denver Collegiate High School, even before Secretary Betsy DeVos revoked the Obama-era instruction that Transgender students were protected under basic civil rights law under Title IX (9).”<sup>47</sup>



## Jasmine Gonzales

Youth Leader, Padres y Jóvenes Unidos

“In my experience, school hasn’t been able to really keep me safe. There were many days where I wouldn’t want to go to school because I was afraid of being bullied. Even with a police officer in campus I felt like I was being threatened by other students. I didn’t trust the school’s administration nor officer because they didn’t do anything. Every time I talked to them it seemed as if they didn’t care. Telling the officer about my issue actually got me into more problems with more students. With the school not doing anything to keep me safe, I started to not show up to school at all. I got depressed and all I would do was stay home in bed.

Students, like myself, would feel more comfortable in school if there was someone always available to talk to. To make school a welcoming place for all, we need more trusting staff that understand who we are and where we are coming from. We need more staff of similar background as us. School would feel like a second home if the relationships between staff and students were an unbreakable bond.”<sup>48</sup>



## Damar Garcia

Youth Leader, Padres y Jóvenes Unidos

Struggling with homelessness, Damar Garcia, then a high school student in Denver, Colorado turned to adult staff for help, but instead was harassed by the police:

“I had trusted an adult, as a scared, lonely child and instead of helping me, they had turned me over to the police. After that encounter I was classified as a runaway, and was constantly being watched by the authorities. I would constantly get pulled over by officers as I walked to the library or the 7-11 down the street. They were always watching me, “checking up on me” but all they did was intimidate me.”<sup>49</sup>





**Ricardo Martinez**  
Co-Director, Padres y Jóvenes Unidos

“We often hear that school safety is sidearms and metal detectors. For us, it is a relationship between family and school personnel. We need to open arms to students and families, and hire more mental health professionals.”<sup>50</sup>



**Vera Berger**  
Youth Leader with Fight for our Lives Albuquerque and Southwest Organizing Project

“In terms of arming teachers, there are so many things that could go wrong. Beyond being a huge financial undertaking, there’s the potential for accidental shootings, which has happened, and for someone else getting a hold of the gun. Beyond that, teachers get stressed. They get angry. And I can’t imagine sitting in my classroom and knowing that there’s a gun waiting to be pulled. I am asking for holistic support for students from elementary school on. Not only do we need more guidance counselors, but we need social workers [and] trained mental health professionals.

Furthermore, I urge the commission to recommend that we keep the rethink discipline guidance. These guidelines protect my civil rights and my peers. School shootings are not caused by psychiatric drugs or by bad parenting or videogames. A lack of effective intervention is responsible for the threat of a shooting and guns are responsible for the shooting. While the circumstances of past school shootings vary, it’s irrefutable that guns have been involved in every single one. Therefore, I strongly urge the commission to consider guns a primary threat to school safety, including guns in the hands of teachers and guns in the hands of law enforcement and school safety personnel.”



**Ellen Reddy**  
Executive Director, Nollie Jenkins Family Center

“Considering the conditions of Mississippi, considering 20 years of advocacy work at the grassroots level, and our juvenile justice reform efforts, here are our recommendations to this body for a safe, healthy, learning environment for students and school staff. At the Federal level, deputy secretary, I heard you mention that you all will not be making directives. But we’re asking for directives to come from this body to all states that eliminates the use of physical force, physical contact, the application of slaps with a wooden paddle on the post clothed posterior of student by a teacher, assistant teacher, principal or assistant principal to maintain discipline, turn for school rule, for self protection of student or themselves is unusual and cruel punishment and needs to be stopped.”<sup>51</sup>

# Recommendations



The Communities for Just Schools Fund’s partners are organizers. They are young people, parents and caregivers, educators, and other community members who advocate on behalf of students who are disproportionately impacted by the overuse of exclusionary school discipline practices. Their advocacy has shed light upon the fact that, in many places, there are far too many students who experience exclusion from their schools because of flawed school policies, practices and biased perceptions of them and their communities. Their work has illuminated the need for and value of meaningful engagement with young people and their families, the lack of which exacerbates negative perceptions of young people and their communities.

In most instances, our partners’ efforts are local in focus and have national impact and reach. They organize community members to stand up for positive, healthy, and supportive school climates. They work to demonstrate how schools that adhere to these values produce better academic and social outcomes than do schools with a heavy police and/or security presence, zero

tolerance school discipline policies, and over-reliance on exclusionary discipline methods. Our partner organizations offer what is otherwise all too often limited space for students of color, those with special education needs, immigrant and LGBTQ students, and their family members, to advocate for themselves and their school communities. Using their own lived experiences and the effort they invest in research, data collection, and political education, CJSF partners are proactively working to shed light upon ways in which they have been harmed by hyper-punitive educational policies and practices. They are also actively identifying, proposing, and even helping to implement evidence-based alternatives.

Here are what young people, families, and educators—both in public testimony and in their work everyday—say fosters a culture of connectedness in schools:



## 1. Create space and opportunities for relationship building.

Provide staff with the capacity and conditions to connect with students. Address trauma through healing-centered engagement, build resilience, and confront bias to create healthy relationships.

### WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Youth participatory action research led by our partner Californians for Justice (CFJ) found that only “1 in 3 students in California could identify a single caring adult in their school”; and over the course of a day’s observations, “nearly 1 in 5 students did not have a single teacher or staff member make eye contact or greet them by name.”<sup>53</sup> In the Southeast, Gwinnett SToPP reports that in Gwinnett County, Georgia, a school resource officer assigned to one of their most diverse schools lamented that he “does not like that people who come to this country aren’t assimilating and won’t conform.”<sup>54</sup> This is unacceptable. No student should move through our schools without anyone to “believe in them” — to affirm and nurture their inherent genius and value, and that of their communities. Additionally, researchers across the country, including the Consortium on Chicago School Research, have found that relationships between students, parents, and staff are more important in making a school safe than increased security measures.<sup>55</sup>

### WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

Californians for Justice is organizing youth throughout their state to advance “relationship-centered schools,” because “when students have a community of caring adults in their schools so much more becomes possible for student success.” The relationship-centered schools framework addresses decades of systemic and interpersonal racism in schools by confronting bias and trauma, ensuring students are centered in conversations and policies that shape their everyday education experiences; and calling on educators to see students of color as whole and worthy of the best education possible. The effort is about building processes that center race and relationships to change perceptions of students and their families and to transform climate and culture to position youth as co-creators who lead - together with adults - on campus to transform schools into community anchors.

On a local level, relationship-centered schools look like “having students collaborate with administrators and teachers through youth-driven ‘design teams’ to adopt new practices that create a culture of positive relationships.” It also looks like “creating advisory structures so students stay with a caring adult for all four years of high school, changing master schedules to allow for more time for teachers to collaborate with each other and with their students, and creating Freshman orientation days that focus on relationships.”

From a state-level, this looks like a “well-funded public education system and a diverse, prepared, and supported educator workforce;” and “increased capacity building and learning opportunities [for administrators and educators] to build awareness of social emotional learning and school climate strategies that are necessary to achieve racial equity in our classrooms and schools.” Students stop being seen as “failures”, “deficits”, or talked about as “statistics” in the latest report on achievement gaps. Rather students are seen as bright and brimming with talent and potential; and the color of their skin and where they come from are seen as our nation’s greatest strength.

## 2. Invest in mental and emotional health supports and professionals, not more police.

### WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

The average student-to-school-counselor ratio is 482-to-1. This is nearly double the 250-to-1 ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association! In fact, only three states, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Wyoming, have a statewide average that falls at or below the recommended ratio. The highest disparities in access to counselors are in California and Arizona, where the ratios are 760-to-1 and 924-to-1 respectively.<sup>56</sup> Caseloads are only worse for school social workers, psychologists, and nurses. Due to their overwhelming caseloads, “school social workers, in some cases, will not see a student unless the individual is suicidal or an immediate danger to others. Students with mental [health] issues deemed non-life-threatening are often given an appointment weeks away.”<sup>57</sup>

We have the resources to fully support the well-being of our students, but we have chosen instead to funnel those dollars towards exponentially growing a justice system in which there are now nearly eight million adults and youth behind bars or within the probation and parole systems. A report from Communities United, Padres y Jóvenes Unidos, and others exposes the \$3.4 trillion we’ve invested in our system of mass incarceration since 1982 and the kinds of investments we’ve missed out on as a result. For example, according to the report, just a year’s worth of surplus justice spending is sufficient to accomplish any one of the following demands: increase spending by 25 percent at every K-12 public school in the country, provide every household living in poverty with an additional \$10,000 per year in income or tax credits, provide healthcare to five million uninsured persons, or fund one million new social workers, psychologists, conflict mediators, mental health counselors, and drug treatment counselors to address public health and safety issues.<sup>58</sup>

For communities of color that have been devastated by decades of over-investment in flawed and ineffective criminal justice strategies and racially discriminatory policing, and under-investment in meeting critical community needs, the impact has been most severe. For example, approximately 1 in 18 Black residents, and 1 in 34 Latino residents, were under the control of the justice system in 2013 (compared to 1 in 55 White residents).<sup>59</sup>

Shamefully, this logic has followed our children into school [see chart on page 28], and the costs are not just monetary. When police are in schools they tend to get involved in school discipline, escalating incidents that could have been resolved in the classroom, in a counselor’s office, or in a peace circle into involvement in the criminal justice system.<sup>60</sup> The majority of states have no specific laws mandating that school police receive special training in dealing with young people; and yet, as states continue to inadequately fund public schools, while miraculously finding new resources for police and security, officers are asked to intervene in instances where counselors, psychologists, social workers, or other service coordinators are better suited.<sup>61</sup>

Sadly, and too often, police are the cause incidents. Niya Kenny’s unforgettable footage of a school police officer brutalizing a classmate should have been a wake up call.<sup>62</sup> Following the logic of mass incarceration, Niya, who called out for someone to help her classmate while documenting the assault, was, in turn, handcuffed and arrested. For Niya, the courage to speak up for what she knew was wrong came with a price: she was treated like a criminal.

### WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

While states across the country advanced policies to arm teachers or to put more police officers in schools, the Illinois House passed legislation that would have created a grant program for schools that employ social workers or psychologists instead of armed security officers to keep students safe. Youth leaders with Voices for Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE) came extremely close to successfully passing HB 4208, which would establish the Safe Schools Healthy Learning Environment grant to “promote school safety and healthy learning environments by reducing the reliance on law enforcement to address school disciplinary matters and implementing

alternative strategies that will better address the full range of students' intellectual, social, emotional, physical, psychological, and moral developmental needs."<sup>63</sup> Across the nation, community organizations have urged school officials to reimagine safety in schools by making critical investments in supporting young people. In 2016, through their #CounselorsNotCops campaign, the Dignity in Schools Campaign developed a set of policy recommendations for schools, districts, states, and federal lawmakers calling for an end to the regular presence of law enforcement in school and an investment in policies that ensure safe and positive school climates, such as community intervention workers, peacebuilders, behavior interventionists, transformative or restorative justice coordinators, school aids, counselors and other support staff who are trained to prevent and address safety concerns and conflicts.<sup>64</sup>

In September 2018, the Alliance for Educational Justice and Advancement Project, released a groundbreaking report, *We Came to Learn: A Call to Action for Police-Free Schools*, documenting the history and evolution of school policing in America and a powerful case for why the presence of law enforcement in schools fuels racially biased and unconstitutional policing practices against young people and denies them an opportunity to learn. The report outlines the following set of recommendations to transform safety in schools: (1) divest from law enforcement strategies in schools; (2) deprioritize the reliance on school police; (3) disarm school personnel, including police; (4) decriminalize student behavior; (5) delegitimize policing as a safety mechanism; and (6) dismantle school policing.<sup>65</sup>

With momentum building across the country led by youth and parents calling for new models of safety in schools, the question that often surfaces is whether police-free schools are possible. Recently, a "north star" emerged in Toronto, Canada, answering this critical question. Through a powerful community and educator partnership, school district officials and organizers from the Latinx, Afro-Latin America, Abya Yala Education Network (LAEN) and Black Lives Matter Toronto came together to reimagine a new vision for safety in schools. Based on data demonstrating that the district's school resource

officer program led to the over-criminalization of students of color and anti-black racism, the Toronto District School Board voted to end its School Resource Officer Program, opting instead to invest in positive approaches to support safe, healthy, and equitable schools.<sup>66</sup>

### 3. Support the social and emotional development of students and adults.

Unite social-emotional learning (SEL), academics, and community engagement. Embrace youth organizing as a key SEL strategy.

#### WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

SEL is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.<sup>67</sup> Successful social and emotional learning empowers young people to create the kinds of relationships with each other and with adults that help catalyze change.

SEL interventions have found that students who participate in SEL programming perform better academically, have less anxiety, are more attentive and less hyperactive in school, and are less aggressive than their peers. The effects are largest for the students in most need—academically and behaviorally. SEL improves academic outcomes across content areas including English language arts, science, and math.<sup>68</sup> In addition to academic outcomes, SEL provides the skills and awareness to engage in difficult, and often uncomfortable, conversations about race and equity.

For many of our community partners, organizing is what SEL looks like in action. An important component of SEL that many community organizations champion in their everyday work is youth empowerment, the process of acknowledging students' feelings and emotions and channeling them toward change. Students, parents, and educators all deserve to be active participants in building welcoming, nurturing, and safe schools. The stakes are highest when students do not have the tools to be active participants in constructing learning environments in which they have a deep sense of belonging and where they are challenged to grow. Beyond the classroom, youth empowerment supports adolescent brain development, stronger civic identity, and life-long community engagement.

#### WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

Organizations like Youth on Board, are organizing to empower students to be change agents in their schools and communities. Youth on Board promotes youth voice, trains student leaders, and creates programming that empowers young people to develop the knowledge, skills, empathy, and agency to succeed in- and outside of school. Youth on Board co-administers the Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC) with the Office of Engagement of the Boston Public Schools. BSAC is a citywide body of elected student leaders representing most BPS high schools, that works to identify and address pertinent student issues. Engaging young people as partners in community change gives young people a greater feeling of safety and belonging, a heightened sense of confidence and self-efficacy, and a deep understanding of, and connection to, their peers and the broader community. According to Youth on Board:

"The vast majority of BSAC students experience a variety of structural barriers, such as poverty, homelessness, community and interpersonal violence – factors that often contribute to students being labeled 'high risk' for dropping out of school and entering the criminal justice system, and less likely to encounter social emotional learning practices in their daily lives. We have found that young people facing these challenges are not only able to effectively engage in community change efforts, but that joining BSAC is a particularly effective vehicle for their social and emotional growth and development... The result of this philosophy and subsequent approach is a space where young people feel prepared to tackle injustices, but also feel safe experiencing a variety of emotions – exhaustion, frustration, relief, giddiness – without being made to feel that they are distracting the group from 'the work.'"<sup>69</sup>

Having spaces for both "Action and Support" for young people are critical for successful organizing and individual growth.<sup>70</sup>

This all starts with ensuring that both students and adults understand the power of listening: "An adult can begin to break down barriers by listening well to young people, and listening can be used to help young people build relationships with each other. If we can learn to listen to young people with the understanding that, given enough

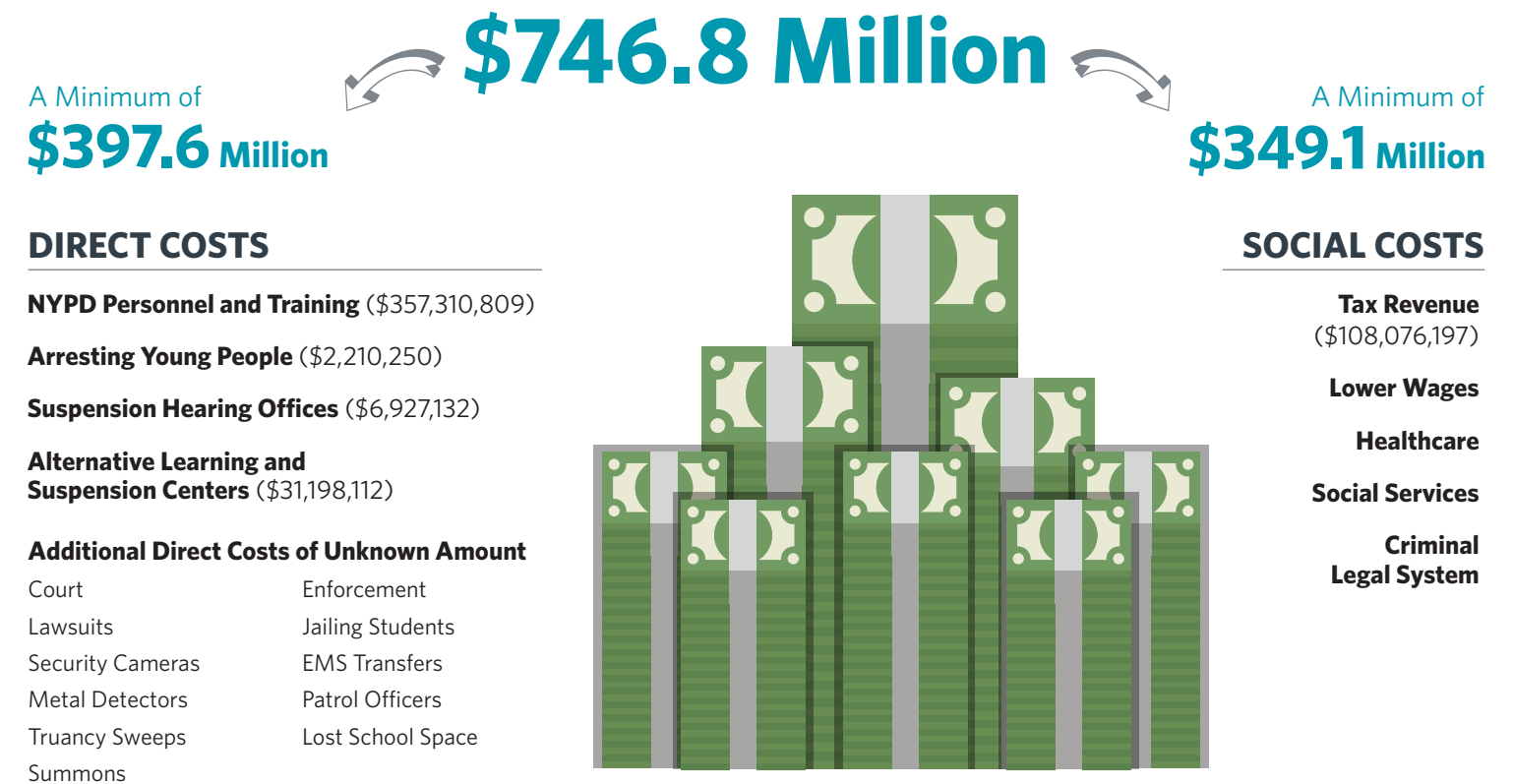


attention and encouragement, they truly have the best answers, we can help them make permanent changes in their lives.”<sup>71</sup> Youth on Board’s efforts to develop the social and emotional well-being of whole school communities are enhanced in the Boston Public Schools by district resources for departments focused on SEL and equity.<sup>72</sup>

When parents, caregivers, and community members have the skills to strengthen their social and emotional lives, those skills are passed on to their children. In Dayton, Ohio, Racial Justice Now! (RJN!), a parent organizing group, collaborates with the Community Healing Network and the Association of Black Psychologists to train parents in their West Dayton neighborhood school in Emotional Emancipation Facilitation, a culturally appropriate method of healing. Emotional emancipation circles help Black communities “defy the lie” by directly addressing how the idea of white supremacy has compelled a notion of Black inferiority in every part of society. Parents in the program say that the circles “deepen our understanding of the impact of historical forces on our emotional lives, our relationships, and the well-being of our communities; free our minds and spirits from the lie of black inferiority and heal from the historical and continuing trauma of racism; tell ourselves a new and empowering story about who we are as people of African ancestry; revitalize ourselves and our relationships with each other; learn and practice essential emotional wellness skills to help us be at our very best—as individuals and as a people; and develop strategies to extinguish the lie of black inferiority—once and for all.”<sup>73</sup>

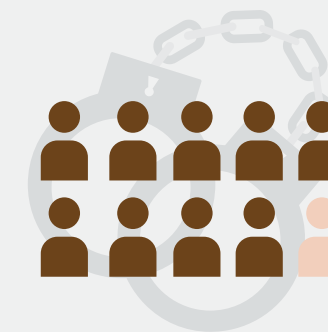
Figure 1: THE \$746 MILLION A YEAR SCHOOL-TO PRISON PIPELINE, reprinted with permission from the Urban Youth Collaborative & the Center for Popular Democracy

Each year, the school-to-prison pipeline in NYC costs **more than**

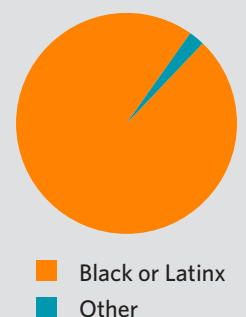


## ARRESTS

**92% Black or Latinx** while the student population is only **67%** Black and Latinx

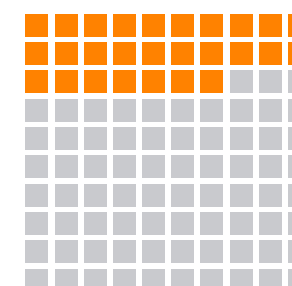


**MENTAL HEALTH EMERGENCIES** with NYPD handcuffing the student **98% Black or Latinx**

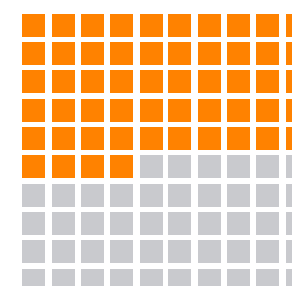


## LONG-TERM SUSPENSIONS for Black Students

**27%** of students are Black, yet...

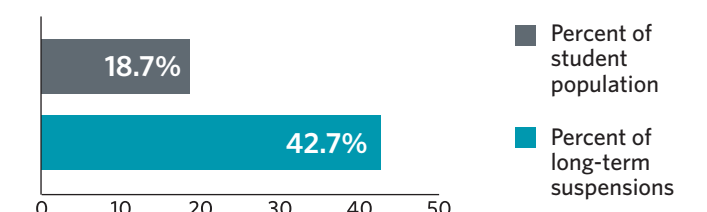


**54%** of students who received long-term suspensions are Black



## LONG-TERM SUSPENSIONS for Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities represent **42.7%** of students who received long-term suspensions, but are only **18.7%** of the student population



#### 4. Provide a culturally responsive education.

Offering challenging, culturally relevant curriculum and investing in the recruitment and retention of educators of color. Provide implicit bias and anti-racist trainings and ongoing professional development for all school staff.

##### WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Providence Student Union (PSU) is a youth-led organizing group working with high school aged students in Providence, RI. In 2016, PSU reviewed demographic data for their school district and the content of their high school curriculum. They discovered that 91 percent of Providence students are youth of color, but approximately 85 percent of their teachers are white and the curriculum did not reflect students' lives. In their words, "Without culturally relevant coursework, students struggle to see themselves in the material and as important voices in our world."

In San Francisco, approximately 90 percent of San Francisco Unified School District students are students of color and yet the curriculum remains largely Eurocentric. As students of color go through the school system, the curriculum's overwhelming whiteness disengages many from academic learning. Extensive research demonstrates that Ethnic Studies, a curriculum that actually reflects the experiences of students of color, has a positive impact on student academic engagement, achievement, and empowerment.<sup>74</sup>

In Washington, DC, the majority of Latino students in D.C. public and public charter schools are of Salvadoran heritage, yet the teachers and administrators acknowledge that they know little to nothing about Central American history or literature. In many schools, students can go from grades pre-K to 12 without one academic reference to their family's country of origin.

The "overwhelming whiteness" of public school curriculum and pedagogy is not unique to Providence, San Francisco or Washington, DC; and it continues in spite of the fact that students entering U.S. public schools in Fall 2018 were among the most diverse.<sup>75</sup> Teachers, however, are more homogenous—roughly 80 percent are white and 77 percent are female.<sup>76</sup> Black and

Brown students are more likely than not to be taught by a staff member who does not reflect nor relate to their culture and norms. It is imperative that school staff receive ongoing implicit bias and anti-racist trainings in order to combat stereotyping students and create a climate of connectedness. The lack of cultural sensitivity shows up in classroom lessons through math questions ("Each tree had 56 oranges. If eight slaves pick them equally, then how much would each slave pick?")<sup>77</sup> and social studies lessons depicting slavery as "not such a bad thing."<sup>78</sup> Staff biases can cause lifelong harm and trauma to children. For children to be truly safe at school staff must be prepared to positively engage children of different races, cultures, and gender.

Given the current political climate, there has been a rise in anti-immigrant, racist, islamophobic, sexist and homophobic behavior and practices/policies in our schools. Young people and their parents need to feel safe and supported in our schools and creating such a climate requires a holistic approach that gets to the root cause and addresses the harm being done and begins the healing process. Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM) addresses these issues under the framework of "Institutional Bullying," which young people say manifests in the following ways:

- Students being constantly pushed out of school through exclusionary discipline policies.
- Parents trying to advocate for their children in school but not being taken seriously by school administration due to their race, ethnicity language ability, religion, etc.
- Students facing derogatory/racist comments from school staff and administration.
- When bullying is normalized, perpetrated, and reinforced by school staff and administration being complicit through inaction or explicitly engaging in harmful and exclusionary practices. When interpersonal bullying is not addressed in a holistic approach by the school or is not addressed at all it ends up escalating.
- When the school blames students and parents instead of identifying and addressing the root causes of problems.

#### A CASE STUDY FOR RECOMMENDATION FOUR: Winning (and Improving) Ethnic Studies Curriculum in SFUSD



In 2010, Coleman Advocates participated in a coalition of students, parents, teachers and advocates who organized and won a pilot Ethnic Studies course in five San Francisco High Schools. After implementation of the pilot, the coalition members continued to work together to evolve the curriculum and plan for its future expansion. In 2014, Coleman worked with Coalition partners to pass a resolution to expand the curriculum and provide access to Ethnic Studies classes for every SFUSD student.

The SFUSD Ethnic Studies curriculum supports students to think critically about race, ethnicity and culture in the context of their own identities and their lived experiences. By exposing students to the histories of diverse cultures, it offers a more accurate sense of the nation's complex, multicultural history. The curriculum is grounded in a social justice framework that provides students with the critical lens necessary to analyze oppression and address issues in their own lives. Some courses also provide hands-on service learning opportunities that support students in making positive changes in their communities.

In the advocacy efforts to win the 2014 Ethnic Studies expansion, students consistently testified about their frustration at the absence of Black, Latino and other historical and cultural figures from communities of color, and the dominance of white ones, in school curricula. That void, they said, made them feel excluded from what was being taught in most classes. "It is just wrong that so many kids never learn anything in history that they can relate to or that has anything to do with their heritage," said Alejandra Mendez-Ruiz, SFUSD senior and a Coleman youth leader.

"It makes us feel invisible and like we don't have any value. Students in my Ethnic Studies class were way more attentive than in my other classes because we were learning about people that look like us and come from the places our families come from. When you walk into a class and see someone of your own background on the big projector instead of the same old Caucasian male as the hero, it makes you more curious and more excited about learning."



SFUSD teachers also testified to the power of the curriculum, making the explicit link between Ethnic Studies and the school-to-prison pipeline. They talked about witnessing struggling students improve when they began to learn about their culture's history – the achievements of the Black Civil Rights movement or the Chicano Movement, for example. Students became more invested in their own education and felt more embraced by the school community, which had positive effects on the larger school climate.

At San Francisco's Balboa High School, an Ethnic Studies course is used as an "early retention strategy" for outgoing middle school students identified as "at risk" of failing or dropping out. **Stanford University released findings from a controlled study in 2016 that revealed that taking this ninth-grade Ethnic Studies course boosted the grades, attendance and course completion rates of participating students.**<sup>79</sup>

The academic benefits of the course were so significant, the researchers who conducted the study said they were "shocked" by their own findings. "Schools have tried a number of approaches to support struggling students, and few have been this effective," said Emily Penner, co-author of the Stanford report. "It's a novel approach that suggests that making schools relevant and engaging to struggling students can really pay off."<sup>80</sup>

## WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

Inspired by similar fights in California, Arizona, and Texas, PSU decided to create a campaign for Ethnic Studies in their schools. The district has made some progress towards meeting their demands. Most importantly, PSU members, operating as the "Ethnic Studies Task Force" are meeting with the district every few weeks to discuss the curriculum and its development. Their consistent advocacy helped push the district to hire a coordinator specifically for supporting Ethnic Studies and expanding culturally relevant and responsive curricula for Providence's 23,000 students.

In Washington, DC, Teaching for Change (TfC) coordinates the D.C. Area Educators for Social Justice to support teacher collaborations in the D.C. metro area around culturally responsive curriculum. To fill teachers' knowledge gap regarding Central America, Teaching for Change offers workshops for teachers on Central American history and literature, posts lessons online for free access by classroom teachers, shares stories with student testimonies from classrooms using lessons on Central America, and convenes a curriculum working group for teachers to learn together and develop new lessons.

In Dayton, Ohio, RJNI and the West Dayton Youth Task Force (WDYTF) successfully campaigned to have culturally relevant books added to the Dayton Public Schools curriculum for mandatory reading. Many scholars, including Dr. Molefi Asante, the author of "The Afrocentric Idea" and Chair of Temple University's Department of Africology and Africana Studies, lent their professional expertise to RJNI's and WDYTF's campaign to promote culturally relevant curriculum and culturally responsive schools.<sup>81</sup>

In New York City, young people enrolled in NYC public schools generated ideas about culturally relevant curriculum through a participatory action research (PAR) process with Girls for Gender Equity (GGE) where they named culturally relevant curriculum as an important way to make schools safe and affirming for them. In particular, students wanted to learn from a curriculum that departed from a Eurocentric framework. They articulated that they would feel more affirmed in schools if they could learn about Black, Latinx, Asian, and Middle

Eastern history. In the same exercise, these young people also expressed that it was incredibly important that students received comprehensive sexual health education, especially sexual health education that affirmed the lives of LGBTQ+, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students.<sup>82</sup>

As the youth in GGE's PAR project pointed out, cultural responsiveness is more than curriculum, which is why the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) is pushing for statewide implementation of culturally relevant education that includes anti-bias and anti-racism trainings as a professional development requirement for all educators and school staff; expanding and broadening the effort to actively recruit and hire a more diverse teaching force; and adding cultural relevance training as a mandatory requirement for teacher certification. AQE seeks additional funding from the state in order for schools to offer a variety of classes, curricula, projects, books and resources that are grounded in the rich diversity of the New York State student population. Students should learn about the histories and cultures of African, Latinx, Asian, Middle Eastern and Naive heritage people in New York schools and the intersections with gender, LGBTQ+, and religious diversity. More than half of New York State's public school students are students of color. In order for students to gain the full benefits of the diversity of New York State, culturally responsive education must be a part of the daily schooling experiences of all students.

DRUM addresses islamophobia, racial and ethnic profiling, and other forms of institutional bullying with an anti-bullying framework through presentations at schools, city council hearings, and workshops in NYC communities. They conduct workshops for schools ranging from Know Your Rights, Ending Institutional Bullying in Our Schools, Immigration/Migration History, and Building Community Safety and Defense which are grounded in the experiences of youth members in order for participants. DRUM's members also focus on policy change. For example, members have fought to get policies passed in the NYC public schools to support immigrant families including expanding language access and interpretation services and guidelines preventing ICE from entering our schools.<sup>83</sup>



DRUM also understands that federal programs such as the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) program and practices such as “See Something, Say Something” contribute to the racial profiling and targeting of communities of color, muslims, immigrants, the LGBTQ+ community, and refugees. CVE provides funding to agencies and schools to identify potential risks but programs like this creates an atmosphere of suspicion based on biases and stereotypes. An example of how a schools’ actions were racialized based on the student involved would have to be the case of Ahmed Mohamed, a Sudanese-Muslim 9th grader of MacArthur High School was arrested for bringing a homemade clock to school.<sup>84</sup> With such policies in place, Ahmed’s identity as a young Black, Arab, and Muslim student, shapes how the very object, a homemade clock, is perceived, despite Ahmed’s protests and the clear physical evidence to the contrary.

## 5. Invest time and resources in fully elevating and integrating restorative justice,

including whole-school models, full-time staff in schools to coordinate restorative practices and positive discipline, and student and parent leadership teams at the school and district level.

### WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Many schools and districts are beginning to move away from the language and practice of “zero tolerance”—which put school resources towards policing and pushout instead of toward teaching and support—and are introducing “restorative justice.” This is an immense victory for activists and organizations that have for years fought to end the school-to-prison pipeline, but simply announcing a commitment to restorative justice make it so. Restorative justice “doesn’t work as an add on. It requires us to address the roots of student ‘misbehavior’ and a willingness to rethink and rework our classrooms, schools, and districts. Meaningful alternatives to punitive approaches take time and trust.”<sup>85</sup>

In its narrowest application, restorative justice offers an approach to conflict that focuses on repairing harm and creating space for open communication, relationship building, and healing. Organizers champion a more holistic application of restorative justice: It is a way

for those impacted by conflict to be a part of finding solutions while building collective understanding of the ways systemic oppressions shape the lived experiences of young people and how they interact with their school community. Ultimately, restorative justice is a transformative tool that can build relationships in the classroom, radically shift school climate, and reshape schools to reflect the society we hope to live in.

### WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

For over a decade, youth leaders with the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC) have led school based efforts to transform approaches to school safety and discipline. Starting in their local schools, leaders worked with educators and school-based staff to develop and expand peer mediation, conflict resolution, and student-led school climate efforts.<sup>86</sup> In 2014, along with partners in the Dignity in Schools New York Coalition, UYC led a citywide effort to divest from school policing and invest in restorative justice. Beginning in 2015, UYC helped to secure a \$2.4 million investment from the New York City Council for the first citywide Restorative Justice Initiative in schools. The initiative created partnerships with local Community Based Organizations and brought Restorative Justice Coordinators to schools to help develop climate plans that incorporate community based practices to keep students engaged in school. Sustained and powerful organizing efforts led by UYC leaders and allies has led to significant drops in the use of suspensions, summons, and arrests and substantial increases in resources and support for expanding restorative practices to schools in communities across the city. In the most recent budget, New York City allocated nearly \$8 million for restorative practices and expanded a district-wide initiative to train schools in restorative practices.

Developing a strong sense of school community at West Side High School in New York City means a deep commitment to restorative practices, “so that when something happens, staff and students feel a shared stake in their community and the sense that something needs to be restored.” With support from Dignity in Schools Campaign-New York, Teachers Unite, and others, West Side works to improve “community-building restorative practices” which include “conversations had in circles, team building activities, and games...Wellness and healthy cooking is another way that West Side creates

a positive school community.” As staff began using these new practices over time, they felt the need to contextualize the work they were doing within a broader struggle to address racism. “This is important,” Nicole Riley, school Dean and Teachers Unite member explains, “because many teachers are unconsciously unaware of their own white privilege and embedded racism. We need to recognize the vast and varied forms of racism that our students face in our society.”<sup>87</sup> By leading restorative practices for their students, educators were introduced to how these practices might also improve their own lives and connection. Through beginning to have deeper, difficult conversations, the staff grows closer and more inclined to take collective action for change.

New York City youth, families, and educators are far from the only organizers advancing school-wide and district-wide efforts to advance and implement restorative justice with fidelity. Padres y Jóvenes Unidos (PJU) has worked for decades to build a strong relationship with Denver Public Schools (DPS) and is a great example of what’s possible when students, educators, and community work together towards equity. PJU has worked tirelessly to enact national disciplinary reform efforts within DPS and currently conducts the only partnership among a grassroots organization, urban school district, and teachers union to advance whole school restorative practices district-wide. With support from the NEA and Advancement Project, PJU collaborates with DCTA and DPS to co-direct the Denver School-based Restorative Practices Partnership, launching restorative practice demonstration sites in three DPS schools, a new RP school visitation and mentoring program, and preparing a new guide for whole school implementation restorative practice.<sup>88</sup>

On the West Coast, Youth Justice Coalition founded FREE L.A. High School, for youth ages 16 - 24. Instead of traditional security or school police, FREE L.A. uses peacebuilders, community members committed to implementing transformative justice inside of the school to reduce violence and build positive relationships with students instead of resorting to out-of-school suspensions, tickets, and school-based arrests.

In the Midwest, Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI) supports parent leaders from across Chicago

in the Parents Organized to Win, Educate, and Renew – Policy Action Council (POWER-PAC) organization that won funding and support from the school district, police department and county government for Parent Peace Centers at Chicago’s public elementary and high schools.<sup>89</sup> At these school-based centers, trained Parent Peacemakers use restorative justice practices, including peace circles and restorative chats, with students at risk of disciplinary actions or in need of additional support. It has been COFI’s experience that supportive and safe schools are schools where community and parents are embraced, welcomed and are at the table in decision-making table. Parent Peacemakers offer a constant and reliable presence in the school because as community members, they know the family and community context and are familiar with the students. Parent Peacemakers also support the work of the educators in creating and sustaining a supportive and positive school climate.

And in the South, faith-based organizing group Citizens of Louisville Organized and United Together’s (CLOUT) campaign to get the Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) to implement whole-school restorative practices continues to be a success. At CLOUT’s Nehemiah Action Assembly in April 2018, with nearly 1000 CLOUT members present, JCPS Superintendent Dr. Marty Pollio committed to expand implementation into an additional ten schools in the 2019-20 school year (beyond the current eighteen), and to continue to expand implementation district-wide. In May 2018, CLOUT leaders conducted their first site visit to one of the restorative practice schools, Knight Middle School, where the principal reported on how the school’s efforts to change the culture and climate of the school, and their approach to student behavior, has enabled the school’s rate of suspensions to decrease by 80 percent. Restorative practices have also contributed to the school going from having 71 percent of the teachers leaving the school three years ago, to a teacher retention rate of 95 percent this year.<sup>90</sup>



## 6. Use gender and reproductive justice frameworks to fully support girls of color.

### WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Girls of color, particularly those who identify as Black/African American/African Diaspora, Hispanic/Latinx, and Indigenous, are disproportionately subjected to exclusionary school discipline measures such as suspension, expulsion, and referrals to law enforcement and arrest.<sup>91</sup> School dress codes, hair policies, and discretionary discipline policies are also used to punish and shame Black and Brown girls in schools.<sup>92</sup> Adding insult to injury, many Black and Brown girls who are punished for their forms of personal expression - which should be celebrated and welcomed - also experience sexual harassment and abuse in schools.<sup>93</sup> While the experiences and voices of Black girls in particular are so often silenced and overlooked in conversations on school discipline reform, Black girls continue to be over-represented in every discipline category in the nation's schools.

### WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

The National Black Women's Justice Institute (NBWJI) was created to elevate and center the voices and experiences of Black girls, Black women and their families. NBWJI is a leading research, training, and technical assistance provider to public agencies, institutions, and foundations on countering the criminalization of Black women and girls. NBWJI works to reduce racial and gender disparities across the justice and education continuum affecting Black women, girls, and their families. They do this from an intersectional lens that centers race/ethnicity and gender as well as gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation/identity for participants, staff, and partners organizations/individuals.

NBWJI works with educators, school administration and legislative bodies across the nation to help schools better understand how school policies and practices disproportionately harm Black girls and other girls of color, how these policies and practices impact their educational attainment and ultimately push them further into the margins. Recently, NBWJI worked with the Boston City Council, public, charter and private schools in the Boston

metropolitan area to provide a robust list of school policy and practice recommendations - generated with Boston school students. These recommendations aim to reform antiquated school policies that disparately impact Black Girls and other girls of color.<sup>94</sup>

In New York City, Girls for Gender Equity (GGE) works with cisgender and transgender girls, and gender non-conforming youth of color through youth organizing programs that meet multiple times a week. GGE has also led participatory action research with New York City public school students, where young people clearly articulated what they wanted and needed to feel safe in school. Young people said that they felt criminalized within schools by metal detectors and school police. In almost every vision session, youth participants said that they would like to see the complete elimination of police from schools.<sup>95</sup> Students instead wanted teachers and school administrators who demonstrated care and support for them. Students asked to be included in the hiring processes of administrators in their schools to ensure that staff would be loving, caring, and respectful.

Students also stated that they did not want to be disciplined or punished because of clothing or gender presentation. Students articulated a need for dress code policies which are affirming to the identities of queer, trans, and gender non-conforming students, as well as dress code policies that did not unfairly target students of color.

GGE's leadership development model centers social emotional learning and supports the economic value of the ideas of women and girls of color. Trauma exposure—personal, community and historical—deeply impact girls' well-being. GGE teaches skills in mindfulness, traditional indigenous healing technologies and restorative practices that offer lifelong tools for self-awareness, emotional regulation and positive relationship building, which students bring back with them into the community and the classroom.

Power U Center for Social Change, a Miami-based youth organization, approaches restorative justice and school transformation through a reproductive justice framework. Their work is grounded in the perspective that schools are the principle institutions relied on by com-



**“Our foundational belief is that in order to dismantle identity-based oppression and economic exploitation, we must center the leadership of girls of color and honor the historical legacy of girls and women of color in securing many of the rights we enjoy today. Our approach is also intersectional. Our core constituents includes trans, cis, and gender nonconforming girls with school discipline, justice and/or shelter system involvement from low-income urban and rural backgrounds. The insight of girls at these intersections makes them uniquely positioned to create groundbreaking solutions that address our world’s problems.”**

WAKUMI DOUGLAS,  
Executive Director, S.O.U.L. Sisters Leadership Collective

munities to shape and develop young people and that the quality of public education and the environments our young people experience in school is a critical reproductive justice issue. Power U has worked to broaden the framework of safe, healthy, and equitable learning environments by advancing reproductive, gender, and restorative justice policies and practices in Miami-Dade County Public Schools. In 2017, Power U released a groundbreaking report, Miami-Dade County Public Schools: The Hidden Truth. The report set the stage for Power U's current work which focuses on actualizing restorative practices and comprehensive sex education in schools, and divesting in law enforcement infrastructure in order to invest in counselors, mental and behavioral health supports, and staff training.<sup>96</sup>

## 7. Make sure LGBTQ+ students are wholly supported.

Create spaces for students to feel safe and loved and comfortable expressing their true selves. Train educators and staff on how to support queer and trans youth.

### WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

In the 2017-18 school year, 70 percent of LGBTQ+ students experienced verbal harassment at school based on sexual orientation, while 59 percent did so based on gender expression. More than 56 percent of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from teachers or staff, while 71 percent of reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or staff. Progress has slowed when it comes to making schools more inclusive environments for transgender and gender-nonconforming students. The frequency of students reporting verbal harassment based on gender expression went up between 2015 and 2017.<sup>97</sup>

Anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and practices in educational institutions pose a serious threat to LGBTQ+ youth who already face an increased risk of substance abuse, homelessness, school drop out or push-out, depression and suicide, and who are disproportionately driven into the juvenile justice system. In fact, 90 percent of LGBTQ+ youth who are currently in juvenile detention reported having been suspended or expelled at least once.<sup>98</sup>

### WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

There are an estimated 4,000 to 6,000 active Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs in high schools and middle schools across the country in any given school year. However, there are over 24,000 secondary schools in U.S.<sup>99</sup> Genders & Sexualities Alliance Network (GSA Network) is a national organization that supports these grassroots youth led clubs, (as well as a network of local and regional partners who work with GSA clubs across the country), to empower them to educate their schools and communities, advocate for educational justice and policies that protect LGBTQ+ youth from harassment and violence. LGBTQ+ and ally youth leaders in GSA clubs work to improve school climates and reform school discipline policies that disproportionately push trans and queer youth of color out of school and into the juvenile justice system.

The compounded impact of racially biased school discipline and hostile school climates for LGBTQ+ youth calls for an approach to advocacy and youth engagement that addresses the whole lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth of color. Safety for LGBTQ+ youth of color looks like: ending harsh, zero-tolerance anti-bullying policies; protecting and expanding access to GSA clubs; creating LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum; medically accurate sexual health education, and supportive and nurturing school environments that uplift and celebrate their diverse identities as LGBTQ+ youth.<sup>100</sup>

## 8. Look beyond the School Yard. Create Sanctuary in our schools and communities.

Consider how immigrants rights and issues of transportation, food, and housing justice affect students, parents, and staff.

### WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

To truly foster connection, we must understand the degree to which hate, bigotry and greed manifest explicitly and insidiously in our schools, communities and nation. The last two national election cycles and the current administration have incited troubling discourses of discrimination and hate by race, class, religion, identity, and immigration status—discourses which led to a disturbing rise in violence and bullying nationwide. Between March 23rd and April 2nd, 2016, a survey of educators indicated that the presidential campaign had a profoundly negative impact on schoolchildren across the country, generating an alarming level of fear and anxiety among children of color and inflaming racial and ethnic tensions in the classroom. Many students worry about being deported. Many educators fear to teach about politics at all.<sup>101</sup>

Beyond the classroom, fears of heightened bigotry and hate crimes became an ongoing reality for Black and Brown communities, and especially for LGBTQ+, non-binary, and gender non-conforming persons; and young women and girls. According to the FBI, the number of hate crimes reached a five-year high in 2016, taking a noticeable uptick toward the end of the year around Donald Trump's electoral college victory.<sup>102</sup> Hate crimes against faith-based and ethnic Muslim and Arab communities during 2016 and 2017 rivaled that seen in the immediate aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks.<sup>103</sup> This hatred is nothing new. What's also a constant is that Black and Brown communities are unduly burdened by things like a lack of affordable housing, public transit, and accessible food; and they are policed and criminalized in their pursuit of basic amenities.

Skyrocketing housing costs continue to drive working class families out of cities, most notably San Francisco, on a daily basis. San Francisco now has a lower percentage of children than any other major city in America.<sup>104</sup> And no one has been hit harder by the

effects of gentrification than Black families. Many of the Black families who remain are concentrated in public housing in the city's industrial Bayview and Hunters Point neighborhoods near the toxic naval shipyard whose jobs drew Black laborers there around World War II.<sup>105</sup> And their children are concentrated in struggling neighborhood schools. The rate of teacher turnover and the percentage of inexperienced first- and second-year teachers in Bayview schools, for example, is twice as high as in other parts of the city.<sup>106</sup>

It is no coincidence that San Francisco schools have the largest racial achievement gap and the worst Black student achievement of any county in California, or that Black students constitute only seven percent of the student population, yet account for nearly 44 percent of all suspensions.<sup>107</sup> There is a direct relationship between the school system and other city systems failing Black families and underinvesting in and criminalizing Black youth. One in three Black students in San Francisco public schools is enrolled in a continuation or juvenile justice school.<sup>108</sup> Schools with the second and third highest cumulative enrollment of Black students are either located in a juvenile facility or run by a Sheriff's Department. Black youth make up 5 percent of San Francisco's youth population, but 56 percent of San Francisco's youth arrests.<sup>109</sup>

In Los Angeles more than 50 percent of the city budget—over \$2 billion— is spent on police. This massive surveillance is felt heavily on the city's public transit system. The MTA just passed a police expansion plan for \$797 million over five years to increase police on its buses and trains—a literal army of “fare collectors.” According to the Strategy Center, Los Angeles Police Department, Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, and Long Beach Police Department created a phony “crime problem” on the trains, and in schools, when the main crimes are MTA police attacks on Black youth, communities, and transit riders.

### WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

Understanding the interconnection between the broader criminalization of Black communities and the disproportionate suspension and pushout of Black students in SFUSD is what motivates Coleman Advocates' youth and parent members to fight for justice and opportunity for youth of color inside and outside of the classroom.



## A CASE STUDY FOR RECOMMENDATION EIGHT:

### Supporting the needs and rights of undocumented youth and families in Philly

In Philadelphia, Juntos is committed to ending the over policing of their community in their schools, in their streets and through ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and the criminalization of migration. They build the leadership of their members and youth to understand the issues of racism and the history of this nation to fight back against unnecessary enforcement and they believe it is this leadership that shapes their city and schools today and will for the foreseeable future. Juntos' members believe in justice that is rooted in restoring the balance of love in their community, not justice that is punitive and creates more trauma. Specifically, they combine leadership development, community organizing, and focused collaborations with other advocates to help their Latino immigrant community develop the necessary tools to become active participants in civic life and socially conscious leaders in the fight for our human rights. Their mission is to build power for justice in and around the City of Philadelphia by creating vibrant, organized, vocal, and healthy communities.

In order to ensure the safety and well-being of their community members, Juntos fought to end police/ICE collaboration and won in 2014 with a historic Executive Order signed by their then mayor, making Philadelphia's immigration policies the most progressive in the country. They did it again this year in 2018 by ending ICE's access to the local arrest database and expanded the policy even further. These campaigns were fought by parents and youth together. Their campaign messaging emphasized investing in schools rather than wasting resources on over policing and deportations. Parents and youth alike have testified at school board hearings and have spoken both in the media and on panels regarding the devastating effects of a society that cares more about deportation or incarceration than the education of young people.

Over the years Juntos' leaders have defined the school-to-prison pipeline as "the disinvestment in our community, our schools and our education coupled with the prioritization of the incarceration, detention and deportation of our loved ones." Parents and young people have felt the negative effects of dwindling school budgets that prioritize school police over counselors and the closing of more than 20 schools in Philadelphia and the ballooning of charter schools in Philadelphia to which many Juntos families have little or no access. At the same time they have served as witnesses to the deportation and incarceration of their loved ones through the criminalization of communities of color.

Juntos is working to address the unmet needs of undocumented youth, who have very little to no support in navigating life after school. As a result, many drop out - discouraged by the many barriers they face in trying to access higher education. In response, Juntos youth have trained more than 450 school counselors, teachers and ESL teachers on how to best support undocumented youth with college access and on various issues, from cultural competency, language access and the criminalization of youth of color. They have also been leading work in criminal justice reform spaces in Philadelphia with other youth groups and organizations on diversion (post and pre-arrest), restorative justice and healing.



For example, Coleman recently co-hosted an action as part of the 'No New SF Jail' coalition protesting the city's overinvestment in police and jails and underinvestment in community-oriented solutions for safety and health. Youth members talked about the school-to-prison pipeline and the relationship between the overinvestment in the criminal justice system and the underinvestment in schools. They spoke to how evictions, foreclosures, rent increases and development projects act hand in hand with policing and imprisonment to push out people of color in San Francisco, resulting in the loss of lives, networks, legacies, systems of social support and cultural traditions.

For the last several years, Coleman and allies have campaigned for increased affordable housing development in the Excelsior District—the San Francisco neighborhood with the highest percentage of children and where the Coleman Advocates Community Center is located: "We are organizing to ensure that all current and future affordable housing projects in the district are genuinely affordable according to an income and poverty measure that accounts for the actual local cost of living in San Francisco, including housing, food, health care, child care, transportation and other basic needs. We are also advocating for community decision-making processes to ensure truly participatory planning and accountable developers. We view this work as intrinsically connected to our education equity agenda."<sup>110</sup>

A few hours south of the Bay Area, in Los Angeles, the Strategy Center sees the work of ending police brutality in schools as intimately connected to transportation and climate justice, with key demands including: "Free Public Transportation," "No Cars in L.A.," "No Police on MTA Buses and Trains," "No Police in LAUSD Schools", and "Stop MTA Attacks on Black Passengers." According to the Strategy Center: "In the typical life of a young Black or Latina student on their way to School, they are likely to see and be harassed by police on their way to the bus stop to get to school, then stopped by the police while on public transportation, then singled out in the middle of class to have their personal belongings searched by armed school police. We can't have a viable public transportation system that is little more than a police state on wheels and tracks, and we certainly can't have a public school system that treats its students as inmates rather than students."<sup>111</sup>

In New Mexico, the SouthWest Organizing Project (SWOP) is integrating their work on another critical issue directly into their collaboration with Albuquerque Public Schools and into their statewide effort to advance community-based state level food policy intended to help schools access healthy food and education options. SWOP is at the vanguard of making important connections between food justice and restorative justice initiatives. They have created dedicated garden coordinators and multiple district-wide food justice events. SWOP youth operate several school gardens year round and are matched with community-based schools and mentors. They are developing an Agroecology Center to serve as a hub for schools, families, and community members. They aim to conduct training of young people in food and farm growing, as well as training in food handling and preparation/catering. In partnership with Three Sisters Kitchen, a community kitchen that they are helping establish, they aim to expand the number of youth jobs at the small farms and gardens in their network.

Drawing upon their deep community connections, SWOP is helping the Albuquerque school district coordinate their 100+ school gardens, including integration into the district's restorative justice initiative - fostering togetherness and consciousness.<sup>112</sup>

It is clear that schools are the ideal site for cross-movement collaboration, as our schools are ground zero for this country's ideological battles. The struggle for educational justice is intimately connected to struggles against criminalization and gentrification, for immigrant and LGBTQ+ rights, and for full inclusion in economic and democratic life. Indeed, the struggle for educational justice has historically been central to the struggle for African American freedom and an inclusive democracy; it must be expanded to adequately address the struggles of immigrants, Muslims, South Asians, Arabs, Latinos, the LGBTQ+ community, and young women and girls. The education young people receive in schools, in family and community, and in the movement itself will determine the future of the next generation.<sup>113</sup>

## 9. Genuinely Engage Youth, Parents, Educators, Communities.

Ensure that youth, family and community engagement does not tokenize these stakeholders, but rather, incorporates their voices into decision-making and offers opportunities for collaborative leadership, which distributes leadership and models the democratic principles upon which our nation was founded.

### WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Much like the Federal Commission on School Safety's narrow approach to gathering citizens' feedback and recommendation, school districts too often take their lead from a limited number of privileged voices with the resources, time, and access to offer comment and feedback. This reality is often exacerbated in large urban school districts operating under mayoral contract. In these places, including but not limited to cities like New York City and Chicago - districts serving a large number of students from low-income communities of color - mayoral control has stripped away residents' decentralized ability to impact decision-making on their public education system.<sup>114</sup> The impact is not benign. Much like voter suppression, failing to create meaningful space for collaborative visioning around public education perpetrates historically racist policies and practices to the benefit of a few and the detriment of many.

Current policy and practice in too many public schools support "random acts of family involvement," rather than a coherent, comprehensive, consistent, and equitable approach to family engagement and involvement.<sup>115</sup> In order to effectively support family engagement and children's learning - work that is central to creating safe schools - it is crucial that schools and districts implement strategies for developing meaningful, ongoing partnerships with families. These strategies should be appropriate for the diverse populations they serve and reflect a commitment to providing opportunities for genuine leadership and power in school and district policy and budget making.

In 2017, the Economist Intelligence Unit downgraded our country from a "full" to a "flawed" democracy<sup>116</sup> - further evidence that we desperately need to develop practices of inclusion and local democracy in our nation, states,

cities and neighborhoods. Public schools are the perfect platform in which to do this work. In the context of safety, leading together with students, parents and staff ensures a shared vision of education and allows students space to lead in terms of what supports they need to be safe and supported in schools.

### WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

The examples provided here encompass only a small portion of the wisdom and expertise CJSF's partners bring to the table in terms of what meaningful community engagement and effective civic education look like. Some of the examples below illustrate what has been accomplished even when collaboration with a school or school district was not possible, but also encompassed here are examples of bold and meaningful collaborations between our partners and their schools, school districts and elected officials.

Four public schools in New York City collaborated with teacher, student, and parent organizers from the Dignity in Schools Campaign - New York, Teachers Unite, Make the Road New York, the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI) and the New Settlement Parent Action Committee to "create positive, safe, and inclusive schools that respect the dignity of all school community members." Their work is summarized in a case study they co-wrote and have used to support effective organizing and advocacy for increased resources for restorative practices and more.<sup>117</sup>

The Gwinnett Parent Coalition to Dismantle the School to Prison Pipeline (Gwinnett SToPP) is a grassroots parent organizing group focused on pushing for and against policies that impact feeders into the School to Prison Pipeline in Gwinnett County Georgia. The Parent Leadership Institute (PLI) is an instrumental component of Gwinnett SToPP's strategy. PLI is a grassroots education advocacy training program designed to equip and empower parents and community members to lead education reforms in their community. Acknowledging the value and power of shared investments in the efficacy of positive alternatives to punitive discipline, the training equips parents with practical skills on how to implement restorative practices effectively. Participants also gained the skills to implement the parent component of PBIS.

As part of its policy change work Gwinnett SToPP launched its initiative "Finding New Directions, increasing student achievement (FND)" to bring community stakeholders together to drive the development and adoption of school discipline policies targeted at reducing suspensions, referrals to the disciplinary alternative school, and school-based arrests. The initiative also addresses transparent data accessibility, reduction in the involvement of School Resource Officers in discipline issues, and increase in the usage of school-based restorative practices. Through FND, Gwinnett SToPP parents and alumni - working together with local and statewide organizations - have won the elimination of contact quotas for school police, provided community feedback on Georgia's ESSA state plan, reduced the number of disciplinary infractions that could garner police interaction by 33 percent, and provided recommendations to inform prospective legislation on school resource officers.

In Rochester, New York family, youth and community engagement and organizing has led to major victories too. Student, family and community voice created the urgency for action needed to overcome barriers that arose through the process and ensured that reforms stayed focused on student needs. More than 3,000 parents and family members were engaged through the Alliance for Quality Education (AQE) and Citizen Action of New York. A core parent leadership team of 20 members meets regularly to plan parent outreach and engagement strategies. Teen Empowerment has been a key partner in engaging students. Ongoing parent and family engagement is crucial to the future success of the project. Outcomes include the adoption of a new Code of Conduct that prioritizes keeping students in school and reducing suspensions, implementation of restorative practices at nearly 30 schools, and increases in school counselors and social workers. The result has been a 38.5 percent reduction in suspensions. None of this would have happened without the organizing work.

Building off of organizing in Rochester, Buffalo and New York City, AQE, Urban Youth Collaborative and others pulled together a statewide campaign for Safe and Supportive Schools. Legislation has been introduced in both houses of the New York State Legislature to dramatically reform school discipline policies, ban kindergarten to third grade suspensions, regulate the role of police in

schools, and prioritize positive interventions over harsh discipline. In addition, AQE — working with the New York City Coalition of Educational Justice — is working on statewide legislation for Culturally Responsive Education. Neither piece of statewide legislation would be possible without the strong parent and youth organizing being done in several communities across the state.



# 10. Keep/Elevate the Federal School Discipline Guidance.

## WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?

Nationally, school children lost more than 11 million days of instruction (11,360,004) as a result of out-of-school suspension in the 2015-16 school year. That’s roughly 66 million hours of missed instruction or more than 63,000 school years of lost learning. The time lost was not distributed evenly. Black students lost nearly five (5) times the amount of instruction as White students did. Similarly profound disparities are observed between students with and without disabilities. The former lost more than double the loss experienced by their non-disabled peers.<sup>118</sup>

One of the realities of living in the South is that federal laws provide more protections for everyday people than state laws. For that reason Gwinnett SToPP engages heavily in federal education policy advocacy. They are members of the national Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC) and Gwinnett SToPP’s co-founder, Marlyn Tillman, serves as the DSC Federal Co-chair and Liaison. The position helps plan and facilitate monthly calls, member trainings, Days at the Capitol, Annual Meeting sessions, Federal Liaison Team and the many aspects of DSC’s federal work.

Part of DSC’s federal work, in close partnership with NAACP LDF, was advocating for policies to eliminate overly-punitive exclusionary discipline. LDF provides technical support to DSC by alerting them to anticipated actions by federal agencies and assisting with developing strategic responses. The U.S. Department of Education’s (ED) Office for Civil Rights and the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division jointly issued guidance documents are a result of the advocacy of DSC, LDF, and other youth- and advocate-led coalitions. These documents provide an important road map for state and local education systems by reminding them of the law and a system to identify, avoid and remedy discriminatory disciplinary policies. Many of the example situations in the Dear Colleague letter were actual events that families have experienced or advocates have assisted with in their communities. Gwinnett SToPP’s co-founder was an active participant in ED’s Rethink School Discipline

campaign - serving as panelist and facilitator at convenings and webinars. The campaign was launched as part of President Barack Obama’s My Brothers’ Keeper initiative and aimed to support all students and promote a welcome and safe climate in schools.<sup>119</sup>

Now, the work has shifted to fighting to keep the guidance in place. DSC members met with ED’s current administration and Congressional representatives to explain how the guidance has helped many districts stop violating students’ civil rights in the discipline process. Because of the guidance, more districts are now exploring restorative practices as a tool within the discipline cycle. Marlyn Tillman also testified at the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (USCCR) briefing entitled, The School-to-Prison Pipeline: The Intersections of Students of Color with Disabilities. Her testimony touched on the importance of keeping the school discipline guidance documents.

To be clear, should ED continue its reprobatory desire to rollback the federal school discipline guidance it does not change civil rights laws. Districts are obligated to follow current civil rights laws - even if the Administration decides to rescind the clear road map of how to accomplish this objective.

# CONCLUSION

Regardless of what the Federal Commission on School Safety recommends, young people, parents, educators, and communities are ready to continue fighting for supportive and safe schools that foster connectedness and acknowledge their genius. This report’s pages contain just a sample of the amazing work and vision that Communities for Just Schools Fund’s partners are advancing every day. We will not be distracted and we hope you will not be either. Safety is not guaranteed by locked doors or armed guards. Safety comes from a sense of inclusion and a space for learning that encompasses different learning styles and a celebration of many cultural views and norms.

## Recommendations summary:

- 1. Create space and opportunities for relationship building.
- 2. Invest in mental and emotional health supports and professionals, not more police.
- 3. Support the social and emotional development of students and adults.
- 4. Provide a culturally responsive education.
- 5. Invest time and resources in fully elevating and integrating restorative justice.
- 6. Use gender and reproductive justice frameworks to fully support girls of color.
- 7. Make sure LGBTQ+ students are wholly supported.
- 8. Look beyond the schoolyard. Create Sanctuary.

## 9. Genuinely engage Youth, Parents, Educators, Communities.

## 10. Keep/Elevate the federal school discipline guidance.

Federal action during this current administration has foreshadowed what the Commission’s final report might include. Despite significant public opposition to adding SROs and arming school staff, the Department of Justice has already pushed millions of dollars to districts for new officers and security infrastructure. The Department of Education has stripped Title IX guidance protecting trans youth and explored ways to use the Student Support and Academic Enrichment block grant under ESSA to fund firearms for school.

Now is the time to “do the harder work.” Now is the time to stand up and demand the resources and support that schools, teachers, students, and families need in order to engage in building cultures of connectedness. We believe, and evidence herein proves, that such actions—creating cultures of connectedness—will redirect us along a path towards the promise of public education and safe communities in which all of our nation’s children can safely learn, grow, and thrive.

# Endnotes



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2. Target hardening” is a term used almost exclusively by police officers, those working in security, and the military to refer to the physical security of facilities such as nuclear reactors, refineries, and airports; however, calls for school hardening followed the tragedies at Columbine High School, Sandy Hook Elementary School, and now Parkland, and focused on placing more police officers, guns, and security equipment in schools.

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