

YOUTH
JUSTICE
PROJECT

SOUTHERN COALITION
for SOCIAL JUSTICE

#LIBERATE TO EDUCATE

- Policy Platform -



RACISM ISN'T
GETTING WORSE
ITS GETTING
FILMED

WHAT IS THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE (STPP)?

The STPP is the system of policies and practices that push students, especially students of color, out of school and into the juvenile and adult criminal systems. The STPP has many entry points, spanning from student criminalization to the systemic underinvestment in resources for Black, Latinx and LGBTQIA+ students.

Youth Justice Project's Policy Platform to End the School-to-Prison Pipeline in Durham

The Youth Justice Project (YJP) is a youth-led group of Durham Public School (DPS) students of color who are committed to ending the school-to-prison pipeline and achieving educational justice. We envision a future in which young people of color attend schools that lift them up, not pat them down; live in communities that follow their lead, not suppress their voice; and are served by governments that invest in their future, not their incarceration. We believe in a world where no child is criminalized and all Black, Latinx and LGBTQIA+ youth receive the education and support necessary to thrive in their full dignity.

Youth Must Lead the Way

The school-to-prison pipeline is bigger than suspensions and arrests. It also includes biased policies, systemic underinvestment and outdated, Eurocentric curriculum – all of which push students out of the classroom and into the justice system. A comprehensive, youth-led effort is necessary to dismantle decades-old practices that wear away at the dignity and wellbeing of

students of color. We urge the Durham Public Schools Board of Education to work with Youth Justice Project members and students of color throughout DPS to implement this policy platform.

The following recommendations were developed by Youth Justice Project members and represent a comprehensive view of educational justice that, if fully implemented, will effectively end the school-to-prison pipeline in DPS. In the sage and powerful words of Assata Shakur, *"It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains."*

DPS student on the harms of policing students: "A culture of distrust between the school and it's Black and Brown students is evident when schools use police to target students of color. Even a "good" police officer can be triggering to students, especially those who have been affected by police brutality."



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**YOUTH JUSTICE
PROJECT DEMANDS**

— DEMAND —

01

Remove Police

— DEMAND —

02

*End Exclusionary
× Discipline ×*

— DEMAND —

03

*Liberate the School
Environment ✓*

— DEMAND —

04

*Implement Culturally
Relevant Curriculum !*

— DEMAND —

05

*Establish Mental Health &
☆ Safe Spaces ☆*



DEMAND #1

REMOVE POLICE FROM SCHOOLS AND END THE CONTRACT WITH THE DURHAM COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

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To end the school-to-prison pipeline in DPS, we must remove school resource officers (SROs) from DPS campuses and end the school policing contract with the Durham County Sheriff's Office. The same police officers harassing, beating and even killing people of color in our communities are targeting and criminalizing Black and Latinx students in DPS schools. Although research confirms that Black students do not misbehave at higher rates than their White peers, Black students represented only 44% of DPS student enrollment in 2018-19, but were 86% of school-related complaints to the youth justice system. These statistics mirror what students of color are experiencing nationwide, especially Black girls. During the 2015-16 school year, when compared to White girls, Black girls were 4 times more likely to be arrested, 3 times more likely to be referred to law enforcement and 2 times more likely to be physically restrained while attending school.

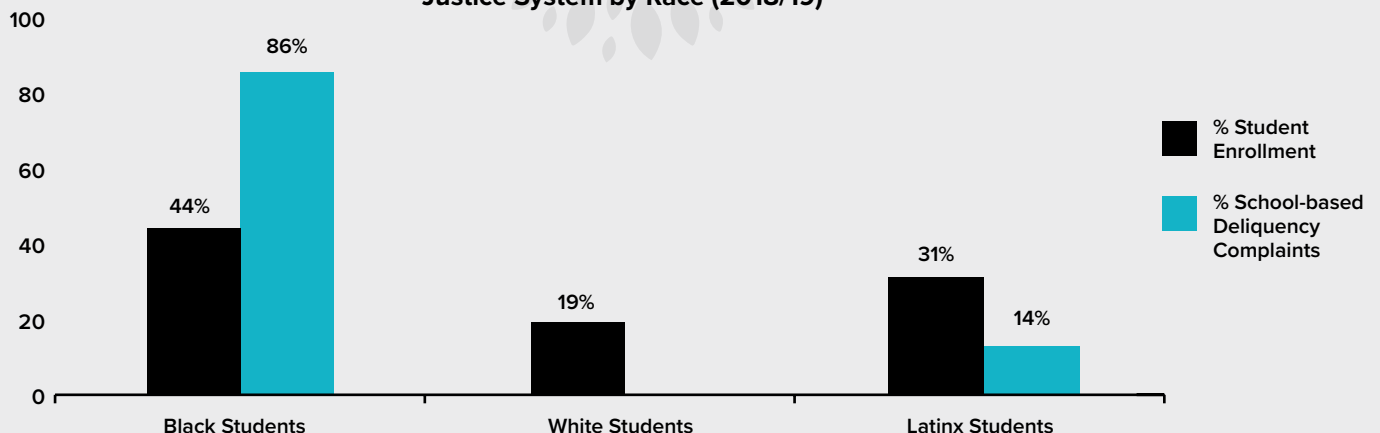
School-based contact with law enforcement funnels hundreds of Black and Latinx students into the justice system, disrupting their education and social-emotional development. The presence of SROs in schools is associated with increased referrals to law enforcement for minor, nonviolent infractions. After being arrested by school police officers, students face a myriad of collateral consequences that harm their future, their families and their communities, including: loss of instructional time and course credits; legal costs and court fees; separation from family; emotional and physical trauma; challenges to their


immigration status; loss of housing assistance; and loss of employment. These consequences only exacerbate racial and ethnic disparities already entrenched in North Carolina's juvenile justice system where Black youth are 10 times as likely to be incarcerated as White youth.

DPS student on the need to remove police from schools: "My safety should be a top priority for DPS. I believe my safety is not being put first when law enforcement officers are placed in schools because they specifically target students that look like me more than any other student demographic in DPS."

SROs are costly, ineffective and harmful to students and their learning environment. During the 2019-20 school year, DPS spent over a million of dollars for 22 SROs to police 17 of Durham's schools, including elementary schools. Rather than improve safety, research demonstrates that placing police in schools negatively affects school climate. The over-policed school atmosphere can initiate, rather than alleviate, misbehavior by increasing anxiety, alienating students, creating a sense of mistrust between peers and forming adversarial relationships with school officials. Instead of ensuring safety and improving behavior, police presence often increases disorder among students by diminishing the authority of school staff. In fact, the increased presence of school security, including

DPS Student Enrollment and School-based Complaints to Justice System by Race (2018/19)





*DPS student on being policed in school:
“One minute the SROs are interrupting a gym class and playing dodgeball with white students then the next minute, they’ll stop a student of color in the hall for wearing a hoodie.”*

SROs, has been associated with increases in suspension and expulsion for Black students and greater discipline disparities between Black and White students.

There is no evidence that law enforcement in schools makes students safer. Conversely, the increased presence of police officers in schools has negative impacts on school climate. This is especially true for Black students, who have more negative perceptions of police in their schools and communities than White students. When students perceive a negative school climate, they are less likely to be engaged and more likely to be truant or dropout. Thus, rather than make schools safer, the presence of law enforcement in schools places students of color at risk of criminalization for age-appropriate schoolyard behavior and facilitates school pushout.

DPS student on what it feels like to be policed at school:
“Walking through school, a place where I’m supposed to feel safe, and seeing police officers is not good. It’s sick, there’s no reason to police children.”

DPS must follow the lead of courageous school boards throughout the country by removing police from schools and investing in alternatives to policing. Fully implementing the Youth Justice Project’s policy platform, including authentic restorative justice programs and comprehensive mental health resources, will create supportive and nurturing school environments that keep students safe without policing and criminalization.



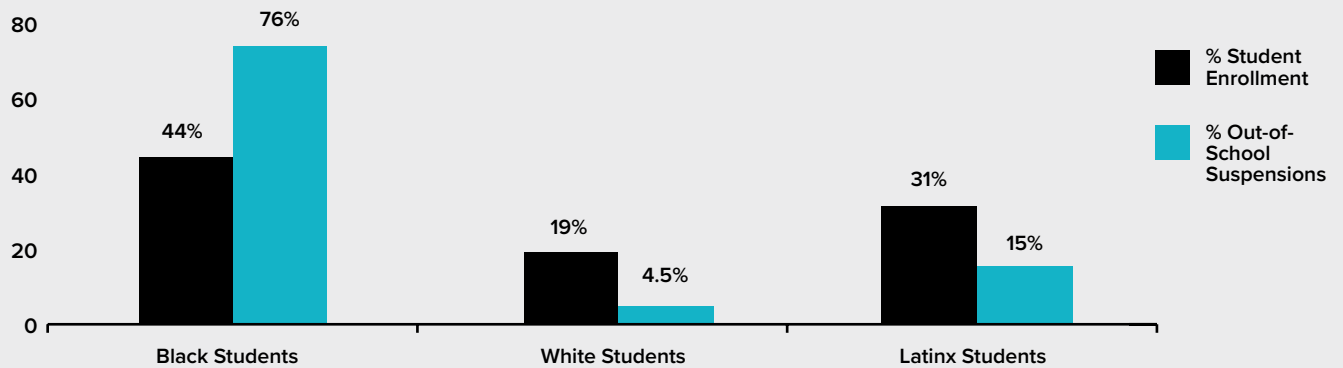


DEMAND #2

END THE USE OF EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE AND FULLY IMPLEMENT SCHOOL-WIDE RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PROGRAMS

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DPS Student Enrollment and Out-of-School Suspension by Race (2017/18)



End Exclusionary Discipline

Ending the practice of exclusionary discipline is also necessary to end the school-to-prison pipeline in DPS, where Black students were 7.4 times more likely than White students to receive a short-term suspension during the 2017-18 school year. Although Black students comprised only 44% of enrollment that year, they represented over 76% of short-term suspensions. During the 2018-19 school year, roughly 1 in 5 Black males in DPS received exclusionary discipline compared to only 1 in 10 of all students. Two of the three most common reasons for discipline in DPS that school year were insubordination

and disruptive behavior – both subjective, minor infractions that can and should be addressed without removing students from the school environment.

Suspensions have collateral consequences that far exceed removing students from the classroom. Students who receive a short-term or long-term suspension are more likely to have low academic achievement, drop out of high school, have negative views about school and enter the youth and adult justice systems. Moreover, exclusionary discipline delays and undermines the process of identifying and addressing the root cause of the issue while placing an unreasonable burden on working families.

DPS student on the need to end exclusionary discipline: "The systemic use of exclusionary discipline within our education system is unforgiving and undermines the health and well-being of its victims. Authoritative figures, who may be racially biased, push Black and Brown students out of the classroom... This process does not contribute to healthy learning."



Implement Authentic, School-wide Restorative Justice Programs

There are obvious, less discriminatory and less punitive methods of addressing school safety and student accountability than policing and exclusionary discipline. School-wide restorative justice initiatives improve school climate and hold individuals accountable while promoting emotional, social and communication skills that follow youth into adulthood. Yet this preventative measure does not receive necessary funding for adequate and effective implementation.

DPS has invested in restorative justice programs. However, the current level of investment and implementation is insufficient to achieve positive, district-wide results. Additionally, students are often referred to these programs as a form of punishment, which ignores the proactive and preventative nature of an authentic restorative justice framework.

Instead of being punitive and reactive, restorative justice frameworks should:

- Proactively build community
- Establish processes that address harmful choices and actions in a fair and humane way
- Separate the action from the actor; and
- Hold both students and staff accountable for “repairing relationships and strengthening community after harm has occurred.”

DPS student on the need for restorative justice: I read a book once and it briefly mentioned restorative justice. I couldn't help but wonder why I didn't see this at my school when it sounded like it could help so many people.

To effectively end the school-to-prison pipeline, DPS should invest more fully in school-wide restorative practices until each school has a proactive and authentic restorative justice framework that is sufficiently staffed with paid restorative justice practitioners.

DPS student on the need for restorative justice in every school: “Implementing Restorative Justice programs can ensure that there is a common language on what equity looks like for every individual school and for Durham Public Schools as a community.”



DEMAND #3

LIBERATE THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT WITH MORE CHOICE IN COURSE SELECTION AND ENDING ACADEMIC TRACKING

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The school-to-prison pipeline involves more than student criminalization and exclusionary discipline. Students are also more likely to disengage when they are not given the freedom to choose certain aspects of their educational experience. This is especially true of students of color who are less likely to participate in higher-level courses and often feel alienated when they are the only person of color enrolled in these courses. To remedy this issue in DPS, the Youth Justice Project believes that the district must liberate the classroom by: (1) Increasing student self-determination in course selection and scheduling; (2) expanding access to higher-level courses; and (3) ending the segregating and alienating practice of academic tracking.

LIBERATE THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT BY:

- ✓ Increasing student self-determination in course selection and scheduling;
- ✓ Providing greater access to higher-level courses; and
- ✓ Ending the practice of academic tracking.

Increase Student Self-determination in Course Selection and Scheduling

Students throughout the state have limited decision-making authority in the courses they can select and their academic schedule. Due to state-mandated graduation requirements, it is understandable that school districts impose some limitations on course selection. Similarly, due to the temporal and practical limitations of the school day, reasonable limitations on scheduling are expected. However, these combined restrictions significantly limit the self-determination of Black and Brown students who have historically been deprived of the ability to dictate their own educational experience.

DPS student on the need for greater self-determination in course selection “I’ve never had much choice in my classes, especially because I was being tracked. It doesn’t create a well-rounded student.”

More student choice benefits students and their overall learning environment. Research demonstrates that allowing greater choice in course selection engages students’ autonomy, competence and relatedness – all three of which enhance their intrinsic motivation and create healthier school environments. Students exhibited a statistically significant higher level of intrinsic motivation when given a personal choice over course selection, regardless whether it was an elective or required course.

DPS student on the need for greater self-determination in course selection: “If high school prepares students for the real world, then student’s should have information about available courses and be able to freely choose the courses that they want to take.”

Moreover, when students perceive that their school is making an effort to include them in decision-making, they perform better academically and are more likely to graduate. Thus, the extent to which a school and/or school district allows students to exercise self-determination over their coursework impacts both their academic and post-school outcomes. These studies and the experiences of students of color throughout DPS demonstrate that the district must increase students’ ability to dictate their own educational experience in order to eliminate this facet of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Provide Greater Access to Higher-level Courses

WHAT ARE HIGHER-LEVEL COURSES?

For the purposes of this policy framework, higher-level courses include Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB) and honors classes.

Educational diversity and inclusion are about more than school enrollment demographics. It is about how students engage with one another within the school building, both academically and socially. During the DPS's 2020 Youth Equity Summit, students of color voiced concerns about either being denied access to higher-level courses or feeling alienated while attending higher-level courses because they were the only student of color in the classroom. These concerns have also been expressed by other youth-led organizations like the Wake County Black Student Coalition.

Nationally and locally, Black and Latinx students are less likely to participate in and complete higher-level courses. The U.S. Department of Education found that although Black and Latinx students are 37% of high school enrollment, they account for "only 27% of students taking an AP class and 18% of students

passing AP exams." This mirrors DPS, where Black students were 47% of student enrollment during the 2015-16 school year, but only 34% of gifted and talented enrollment.

There are many barriers to enrolling in higher-level courses, especially for Black and Latinx students. Schools often create barriers to enrollment that disproportionately limit participation for Black, Latinx and low-income students. For example, in order to enroll in higher-level courses, some schools require high scores on standardized tests, higher grades in pre-requisite coursework and/or letters of recommendation from past teachers. This reflects a false belief that some students are not ready for higher levels of academic rigor solely due to an inability to excel on standardized tests or their experiences in previous classrooms. Information gaps also contribute to enrollment disparities, as many students and parents are not informed about how to prepare for or enroll in higher-level courses.

To provide greater access to higher-level courses and eliminate racial and economic disparities in enrollment, DPS should collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data by school site to determine which policies and practices are contributing to enrollment disparities. By using a participatory research model led by students of color, DPS can address the issue in a way that also expands student engagement and self-determination. DPS should also audit enrollment requirements, removing all prerequisites based on standardized test scores or a student's experience with previous teachers. These limitations in no way reflect a student's current ability or desire to excel in a higher-level course and provide an advantage to students from more affluent families who can afford additional support.



*DPS student on access to higher-level courses:
"I've had to meet with the assistant principal
so my course selection could be approved.
During the meeting, the assistant principal
questioned my ability to succeed in these
courses, discouraging my enrollment."*

End Academic Tracking

Similar to the feelings of alienation and inefficacy associated with inadequate access to higher-level courses, the practice of academic tracking harms the educational experience of students of color in DPS. Although tracking standards are arbitrary, they can have detrimental occupational and educational effects – especially for many Black students who are often misplaced in courses below their ability. Once tracked, it is extremely difficult for students to move into another track because they are taught different material.

DPS student on the need to end academic tracking: “I am a victim of tracking specifically. I was told I could never be put into an honors class because of my test scores in elementary school, the age when my brain is still developing. Tracking holds students back from reaching their full potential, and it prohibits students of color from exceeding the expectations placed onto them during the beginning of their educational career.”

Rather than track students academically, DPS should help teachers learn methods to teach all students the same material. Tracking perpetuates existing racial academic disparities while negatively affecting a student’s identity and sense of self-efficacy. Nationally, Black and Latinx students are overrepresented in the lower tracks. This should create major concerns for DPS, where White students in grades 3-8 were 2.7 times more likely to score “Career and College Ready” on final exams than Black students during the 2018-19 school year.

Some argue that tracking helps accelerate learning for students capable of advanced coursework while allowing for targeted remediation for students in need of extra help. However, research demonstrates that early tracking increases educational disparities while also reducing mean academic performance. Simply stated, there is no “equity-efficiency trade-off” with tracking, only an educational assignment structure that detrimentally impacts Black and Latinx students.



DEMAND #4

REQUIRE ALL SCHOOLS TO IMPLEMENT CULTURALLY RELEVANT CURRICULUM

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Ending the school-to-prison pipeline also requires a commitment to engaging and educating Black and Latinx students in a manner that is culturally relevant and historically accurate. Youth from marginalized communities should see reflections of themselves in all course content. Research indicates that culturally responsive practices improve both academic performance and student wellbeing. Students who participate in culturally responsive learning environments have greater interest in school and are more motivated to learn. When students study their cultural background, they improve their self-esteem and resilience in the face of discrimination.

DPS's strategic plan ostensibly aims to increase academic achievement through curriculum that is culturally reflective of student demographics and claims to offer culturally relevant classes such as African-American Literature, American Indian Studies and Poverty in America. However,

DPS high school students of color say they are only able to register for one of these courses during a given semester. This highlights a disconnect between the culturally responsive curriculum DPS currently provides and students' actual ability to enroll in these courses.

To effectively develop and implement culturally responsive curriculum, DPS must incorporate students' culture and current events, collaborate with communities of color and ensure all students have access to culturally relevant course offerings. DPS students must have access to a wealth of culturally responsive curriculum and the ability to select classes that represent who they are and who they will become. To do so, DPS should work with NC-based organizations supporting implementation of culturally relevant curriculum, like working to extend anti-racist education (we are) and Village of Wisdom.

DPS student on the need for culturally relevant curriculum: "Many of the so-called culturally relevant classes, like Minority Studies or International Studies, are not offered in all DPS high schools, despite them being listed on the DPS Course Guide the district uses."



Youth Justice Project members, with feedback from other DPS students of color, have developed the following list of courses that will help DPS achieve its goal of being culturally responsive to its student demographic:

Potential Black History Course Offerings

African Studies

Slavery and Its long-term Implications

Abolition Movement and Underground Railroad

Separate but Equal

1900's

- Establishment of the NAACP
- Harlem Renaissance
- Black Involvement and Contributions During World War 2
- Civil Rights Movement

Prison Industrial Complex and the Rise of Mass Incarceration

Black Lives Matter Movement to the George Floyd Uprising

Latinx History

Indigenous Peoples and Pre-colonial Periods

Papal Bull Inter Caetera/Treaty of Tordesillas

A Peoples' History of:

- The Conquest of the Aztec and Inca Empires

- The Mexican-American War
- The War of the Triple Alliance
- The War of the Pacific
- The Construction of the Panama Canal

LGBTQ+ History Course Offerings

Roberta Cowell

Sexual Offences Act

Stonewall

Marsha P. Johnson

First Pride March

Mattachine Society

Obergefell v. Hodges

Intersectionality

Religious Studies Courses

Islam

Hinduism

Buddhism

Judaism

Christianity Outside of the White Eurocentric Experience



DEMAND #5

ESTABLISH MENTAL HEALTH SPACES AND SAFE SPACES FOR LGBTQIA+ STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS THAT ARE AVAILABLE DURING AND AFTER SCHOOL HOURS

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Mental Health Spaces Staffed by Mental Health Professionals

Implementing district-wide mental health services and safe spaces are essential to repairing the psychological harm of systemic racism and the school-to-prison pipeline. Criminalizing and incarcerating students negatively impacts their mental health and increases the risk of future contact with the justice system, which only creates additional psychological trauma.

Law enforcement officers in DPS schools do not have training in developmental psychology or treatment modalities tailored to marginalized communities. With co-located mental health services unevenly promoted and integrated across DPS, students with the greatest mental health needs are often met by school personnel who are the least trained to serve them. During the 2018-19 school year, there were 30 school psychologists, representing 1 school psychologist for around 1,080 students. This is well below the ratio of 1 school psychologist for every 500 students that is recommended by National Association of School Psychologists.

DPS student on the need for mental health resources in school: "Many kids, including myself, have had mental health issues that affected every aspect of our lives, including school. We've gone without guidance and help for so long." ☆

Even before the pandemic, DPS students were in crisis. In the 2017 Durham County Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1 in 4 middle school students and 1 in 3 high school students reported feeling depressed in the past year. Suicidal ideation statistics are even more alarming. One in four DPS middle school students considered suicide at one point in their life. Sixteen percent of DPS high school students contemplated suicide within a year before completing the survey.

Too many DPS students are suffering from unaddressed mental health needs. Psychological services must be district-wide and school-based. Youth are six times more likely to complete evidence-based treatment at school compared to other community settings

To effectively provide mental health support, DPS must follow the demands of students who want comprehensive school mental health systems (CSMHS) and greater choice of the care they receive:

- On-site, fully staffed mental health spaces at every school
- Culturally competent mental health professionals trained in student-centered, trauma-informed care and other treatment modalities that affirm the identities of marginalized students, including those in Black, Latinx, Asian, LGBTQIA+ and gender non-binary communities
- After-hours availability
- Student-choice of mental health professionals and treatment plan

Comprehensive school mental health systems (CSMHS) provide a continuum of care rooted in a collaborative approach between the school and community. This includes a built-in assessment tool and multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) that provides awareness and preventative services, early identification and intervention for at-risk students, and treatment for youth with severe mental health needs. Research indicates that CSMHS contribute to improved student and school outcomes. This includes increased academic success, decreased exclusionary discipline,



DPS student on the need for mental health resources: "Students experience so much in school and out of school. Establishing mental health spaces tells students "We see you, we hear you, and we want to help you." ☆

enhanced school climate and safety and improved student social and emotional behavioral functioning.

Students should also be treated as the experts of their own experiences. This means that within CSMHS, students choose their own therapists and treatment plan, evaluate mental health professionals and have decision-making authority in hiring staff. Additionally, students need to be empowered with tools to be mental health leaders who address the psychological needs of their community. Youth should have access to both peer support and mental health first aid training that is relevant to their culture and identity. Doing so will help DPS create safe and supportive schools without the use SROs or student criminalization.

Safe Spaces for LGBTQIA+ Students and Intersectional Student Identities

Comprehensive mental health support must be coupled with student-led safe spaces, especially for LGBTQIA+ students. A recent national survey conducted by GLSEN found alarming statistics on the experience of LGBTQIA+ students in public schools. Over 8 in 10 LGBTQIA+ were harassed or assaulted at school. More than two-thirds were verbally harassed, and 1 in 7 were physically assaulted at school during the previous year because of their gender, gender expression or sexual orientation.

DPS student on the need for safe spaces: "I often feel unheard and unsafe at school, creating safe spaces would help me and other students feel safer and heard at school"

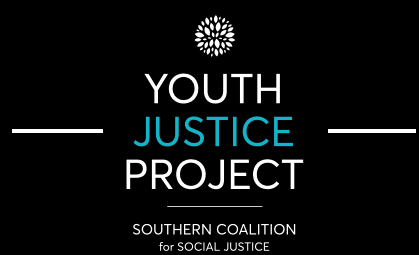
LGBTQIA+ are also harmed by school policies and procedures. The GLSEN survey found that over half of respondents stated that they have experienced school policies and procedures that were discriminatory. For example, students are prevented from or disciplined for expressing their gender and sexuality, including

displays of affection and writing about LGBTQIA+ issues. LGBTQIA+ students are also forced to follow rules that reinforce traditional gender norms, such as not being allowed to use the restroom that aligns with their gender identity and not being able to use their chosen name or pronoun.

Because of these experiences and the policies and practices that create them, LGBTQIA+ students who were victimized at school were:

- Almost three times as likely to have recently missed school due to feeling unsafe;
- Less likely to feel a sense of belonging at school; and
- Had higher levels of depression and lower self-esteem.

DPS must create student-led school environments in which LGBTQIA+ and gender non-binary students, especially those of color, are empowered to embrace their identity and activism. The Youth Justice Project recommends partnering with BYP 100, GLSEN, Southerners on New Ground and El Centro Hispano to help students create safe spaces in which they can build relationships with their peers and their community.



Youth Justice Project Photo Credit:
Abraham Gonzalez-Brindis

