

Youth Vision for Education Justice in NYC



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Organizing Organizations:

The Brotherhood/Sister Sol

Children's Defense Fund – NY

Dignity in Schools – NY

Integrate NYC

NYCLU – Teen Activist Project

Youth Power Coalition

This paper was developed collaboratively with input from The Brotherhood/Sister Sol, Children's Defense Fund-New York, Dignity in Schools – NY, New York Civil Liberties Union, and Youth Power Coalition. The collaborators included youth and adult allies of youth-led and youth-serving organizations in NYC, committed to centering young people's voices in education justice advocacy.

Our vision for education in New York City includes safe, restorative, healing environments where all students have the opportunity to learn and grow. To meet this goal, we must pursue policies that value and respect the dignity of students, caregivers, and their communities. This requires providing schools equitable resources, adopting a culturally responsive curriculum, preventing trauma, repairing harm, and promoting restorative practices.

Today, New York City is far from this vision. Our schools face troubling realities:

- NYC has the most segregated school system in America. According to the New York City Council, in our public schools, 74.6% of Black and Latinx students attend a school with less than 10% white students. Additionally, 34.3% of white students attend a school with more than 50% white students.¹
- Nearly one quarter of the 1.1 million children in the DOE system will not graduate on time and only 55% of NYC high school graduates will graduate college-ready.^{2 3}
- 1 in 10 NYC public schools students is homeless.⁴

Additionally, in a nation in which 14 million students are in schools with police but no counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker,⁵ New York City has more school safety agents (SSAs) than any other school district in the U.S. Furthermore, the New York Police Department's School Safety Division is the fifth largest police force in the country – larger than the police forces of Washington D.C., Detroit, Boston or Las Vegas.⁶ The presence of police in our schools has disproportionately impacted students who are low-income, Black, and Latinx as well as students with disabilities as these students are more likely to be the subject of exclusionary discipline and police response at school than their white peers.

Our work requires the leadership of our City's officials, including the City Council, the Mayor's Office, the Public Advocate, and the Department of Education. Our vision also requires the active participation of students and families, who are calling on the City's leaders to be anti-racists and to fight for racial justice and equity. Our officials must ensure that our schools are safe, high-quality, holistic, and globally transformative, educational experiences for all students regardless of socioeconomic status, race, gender or ability.

For this to be successful, it will require strategic legislative action, budget commitments, and leadership within youth-serving agencies of the City to disrupt the status quo. Inertia and generations of inequity in our school system can no longer continue. Our city cannot continue to prioritize sustained surveillance and criminalization. Leaders must *instead* address, provide, and assist with both resources and structural shifts to end homelessness, housing insecurity, food insecurity, segregated and unequal schools, and overreliance on exclusionary discipline.

In order to create an education system that no longer fails to serve our youth and marginalized communities, our leaders must take action. Meeting these demands is long overdue.

This paper outlines our blueprint for change in New York City. We demand:

STRUCTURAL SHIFTS:

Police-Free Schools

Eliminating tools of surveillance in schools, including metal detectors & biometric surveillance technology

An end to all structures that systemically push students out of classes as part of policing culture

Fully-funding our schools so as to center student success and socio-emotional support

Expanding & transforming youth civic power

CULTURAL SHIFTS:

Educators center trauma-informed approaches

City leaders reimagine, fund, and staff meaningful student and community-led safety strategies.

Schools that center healing

Expanded, evidence-based training for school teams so as to eliminate the criminalization of marginalized students

PEDAGOGICAL SHIFTS:

Schools institutionalize & fund culturally responsive education; civic education; and comprehensive sex education in NYC

Equitable distribution of technological resources to all students

Language access for families and students

Equitable access for students and families with disabilities and/or who are neurodivergent

Our Policy Recommendations

(1) Police Free Schools

We must remove school safety agents (SSAs), uniformed police officers, metal detectors, surveillance equipment, and all other equipment and personnel associated with policing from schools. Police free schools mean schools free from policing, surveillance, and cultures, habits, and tools that continuously control and oppress youth.

When we say police-free schools, we are demanding not only that police infrastructure, culture, and practice be removed from schools, but also that this system is replaced by youth, parent, and educator-led solutions that center liberation and restorative justice. Policing resources must be reinvested in initiatives promoting restorative justice, conflict resolution, and social and emotional learning that were included in the City's 2019 school climate package.⁷

To advance this policy agenda requires that the City and State:

- Remove policing personnel from our schools, whether under the supervision of New York Police Department or the Department of Education.
- End all structures that systemically push students out of classes as part of policing culture.
- Discontinue the NYPD Youth Initiative.
- Remove metal detectors and surveillance equipment from schools.
- Reimagine, fund, and staff meaningful student and community-led safety strategies.
- Meaningfully support student leaders on School Leadership Teams and ensure that all high schools have equitable student representation.
- Create voting positions for youth on Community Education Councils, and the Panel for Education Policy.

(2) Fully Fund and Adequately Implement Restorative Practices

The City adopted restorative justice as a key tenet of its school climate reforms in 2019. The intent behind restorative practices is to enable all people to remedy conflict or harm together, and prevent unwelcome behavior by facilitating relationship-building, acknowledging the root issues, setting clear behavioral expectations, and sustaining a positive school climate. Unfortunately, there is no clear timeline for bringing this model into all of the City's schools, and limited resources for training, staffing, and youth engagement in the process to make it effective.

The City must:

- Construct an implementation plan for citywide restorative practices in all elementary, middle school, and high schools based on established best practices.
- Approve and publish a transparent, multi-year budget which would enable the complete and transformative implementation of restorative practices in schools.
- Center youth leadership in school implementation plans.
- Report on the progress of restorative justice programs implemented throughout the city, as per the school-based climate reform package, so as to identify areas of best practices and improvement.

(3) Fully Fund Student Support Staff

To be successful, students need support to navigate the education system all the way through graduation. Currently, New York City does not meet nationally recommended standards for appropriate therapeutic support staff-to-student ratios. The current national recommendation is 1:250⁸ while in New York City the ratio is 1:371.⁹ Currently in New York City, there are only 4,525 guidance counselors and social workers serving 1.1 million students across the city.¹⁰ The National Association of Social Workers suggests a 1:50 staff to student ratio for students with intensive needs.¹¹

The City must make investments in student support staff (counselors and social workers), and, to the extent possible, ensure that support staff hired and assigned to particular schools come from the community being served.

Staff working with students must employ trauma-informed approaches and implement policies that actively seek to address the impact of policing and criminalization on students, particularly Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students, and work towards healing the related trauma. School-based supports must center healing and improve access to more comprehensive health services *and* culturally-competent mental health service spaces for youth – especially youth of color, immigrant youth, queer youth, trans and gender non-conforming youth, youth with disabilities, and other marginalized youth.

The City must:

- Ensure that students receive the social-emotional supports outlined in the 2019 School Climate Package, which are needed for students to excel inside and outside of the classroom.
- Baseline City budget support to launch and sustain a mental health continuum to support students with significant behavioral health needs in designated neighborhoods around high-need schools to reduce reliance on NYPD officers and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) “child in crisis” response.
- Hire and deploy counselors and social workers City-wide and prioritize students from high-needs schools to reach the necessary school support staff at a ratio of 1:100. This ensures that resources are dedicated equitably to high-needs communities that have gone the longest without adequate support.
- Employ support staff who are trained to provide culturally-competent support to students of diverse backgrounds and identities.

(4) Invest in Training and Curricula

Students learn best when they see themselves reflected in the curriculum and know that their identity is affirmed at school. This requires that our educators are equipped to be anti-racist, anti-sexist, and youth-centered *and* to offer high-quality, transformative, culturally relevant educational experiences to all.

Our schools should center trauma-informed approaches and implement policies that deliberately and actively seek to address the impact of policing on students, particularly Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students, then seek to work towards healing the related trauma.

The City must:

- Ensure that educators and support staff are trained to support the successful implementation of culturally responsive practices.
- Create and fully staff an Office of Culturally Responsive Education to ensure culturally responsive education is implemented appropriately throughout the entire school system.
- Require culturally responsive education training be accessible and fully funded for all staff, parents, and students.
- Support schools in their efforts to create spaces for student-led conversation, exploration, and leadership around race, culture, and other core identities.
- Institutionalize and fund comprehensive sex education in all schools.
- Institutionalize and fund civic education in all schools.
- Center language justice in training for teachers, administrative, and support staff in schools, and provide schools with resources necessary for students and families to fully participate in their school communities.

(5) Establish Robust Transparency and Accountability

We believe that the accountability and transparency measures below will help us embark on a path to realizing our vision of students in New York City. This includes:

- **Reporting Bill for Equitable Access to Technology Resources**

In order to ensure an equitable distribution of technological resources to all New York City public school students, specifically those who are underserved and high needs the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) will be required to maintain, sustain, and update a reporting system that will allow for the tracking of all devices to all students. The reporting system will be required to collect data broken down by school district, school, borough, gender, race, whether or not the student is in temporary housing, or alternative care in order for us to have the ability to address any disparities which may arise, targeting a specific group of students. *Please see Intro 2058-2020 passed in January 2021 for inspiration*

- **Reporting Bill for Student Therapeutic Support Staff**

A Student Therapeutic Support Staff reporting bill will allow for full transparency of the success and failures of therapeutic support staff in New York City public schools. This reporting bill should require the following data in order to achieve a holistic understanding of our system: demographic information on all support staff (counselors, social workers, therapist), student population served, types of services used, the total number of students utilizing services, and whether services were provided in lieu of discipline. This bill should also include requirements for schools to administer student surveys to allow youth to share their experiences using these services.

- **Regarding School Leadership Teams, schools must proactively ensure equitable youth representation; respect and honor youth voices and votes; and create protocol for sharing information with the larger student body**

Student voice is essential and should be uplifted and centered in all school environments. Schools must be required to actively inform the school community of opportunities to be a part of School Leadership Teams. This information sharing will be made directly to the student body and their families in order to ensure a diverse set of voices on a team that directly impacts the school.

In order to ensure student voices are equally listened to on School Leadership Team, schools must make meeting minutes publicly available.

- **Independent School Surveys**

It is imperative that student data, disaggregated by identities and backgrounds, not be used to pathologize and criminalize youth. Independent school surveys should be used to create an equitable school system where schools meet the social and emotional needs of students. To ensure unbiased data maintenance, student survey data should be administered and reported by an entity independent of NYCDOE while also published publicly on the NYCDOE website for all to see.

- **Youth Power Reporting**

Schools must be required to annually report on the civic power the student population maintains within their schools – especially as it relates to bodies that administer the school budget, mediate school climate, and have decision making power.

¹ New York City Council, School Diversity in NYC. 2019, <https://council.nyc.gov/data/school-diversity-in-nyc/#:~:text=However%2C%20New%20York%20City%20public,more%20than%2050%25%20white%20students.>

² NYC's 2019 Graduation Rate Inches Up to 77% . January 16, 2020, <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2020/1/16/21121757/nyc-s-2019-graduation-rate-inches-up-to-77>

³ More NYC High School Students are College-Bound – and 'College Ready'. November 21, 2019, <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2019/11/21/21121750/more-nyc-high-school-graduates-are-college-bound-and-college-ready>

⁴ The Children in the Shadows: New York City's Homeless Students. September 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/09/09/magazine/homeless-students.html>

⁵ ACLU, Counselors and No Cops: How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff is Harming Students. 2019, <https://www.aclu.org/report/cops-and-no-counselors>

⁶ NYCLU, A Look at School Safety: School to Prison Pipeline. <https://www.nyclu.org/en/look-school-safety>

⁷ *Mayor de Blasio, First Lady McCray, Chancellor Carranza Announce Major Expansion of Social-Emotional Learning and Restorative Justice Across All City Schools.* June 20, 2019, <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/314-19/mayor-de-blasio-first-lady-mccray-chancellor-carranza-major-expansion-of- /0>

⁸ ACLU, Counselors and No Cops: How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff is Harming Students. 2019, <https://www.aclu.org/report/cops-and-no-counselors>

⁹ NYC Department of Education, Report on Guidance Counselors Pursuant to Local Law 56 of 2014, 2020, https://infohub.nyced.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/guidancecounselorreportandsummaryfeb_2020.pdf

¹⁰ NYC Department of Education, Report on Guidance Counselors Pursuant to Local Law 56 of 2014, 2020, https://infohub.nyced.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/guidancecounselorreportandsummaryfeb_2020.pdf

¹¹ NASW. Standards for School Social Work Services, 2012, <https://www.socialworkers.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=1Ze4-9-Os7E%3D&portalid=0>