

June 23, 2020

Mayor Muriel Bowser
Office of the Mayor
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Washington, D.C. 20004
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Councilmember Charles Allen
Chairperson, Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety
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Councilmember Phil Mendelson
Chairperson, Committee of the Whole
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Via E-Mail

**RE: REMOVING POLICE FROM SCHOOLS IS NECESSARY TO PROTECT
BLACK AND BROWN CHILDREN FROM FURTHER HARM**

Dear Mayor Bowser, Councilmember Allen, and Councilmember Mendelson:

We write on behalf of Advancement Project National Office and the Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ) to enthusiastically support the call of Black youth across D.C. and Black Swan Academy to terminate the \$23 million dollar school security contract between District of Columbia Public Schools and the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) and eliminate the \$11 million dollars earmarked for school police officers within MPD's fiscal year 2021 budget. Rather than making continued investments in policing children in D.C. schools, we urge you to reinvest those millions into counseling services, mental health supports, positive behavioral interventions, restorative justice programs, and other proven methods that create holistically beneficial and safe learning environments for young people. These resources are especially important for youth returning to school after isolation and the traumas inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are living in a historic moment: The unrelenting police killings of countless Black lives have galvanized local, national, and global protests against the very system of policing in this country, and amplified the long-standing demands of youth organizers to defund police and take cops out of schools. Black Lives Matter—the rallying cry anchoring these protests—demands that elected officials must reckon with the violence and racism endemic to policing and muster the political will and courage to meet this historic moment with historic action. In these past weeks, school boards in Minneapolis, Seattle, Denver, Milwaukee, Portland, and Rochester have acted swiftly to end contracts between their school districts and local police departments, and to remove police from schools. Here in the District, 65% of residents surveyed also support removing police-contracted personnel from schools and investing those funds in school mental health and student support programs.¹ A police free schools future in D.C. is both possible and necessary to protect the safety and humanity of Black and Brown children.

Our organizations have spent the last few years working to highlight the need for police free schools across the country, because we believe that in order for our nation’s students to truly thrive, their educational and socio-emotional needs must be met by those most qualified to meet those needs, like counselors, community violence interrupters, and psychologists. We already know that investment in law enforcement personnel fundamentally fails to make schools safer for students.² Instead, years of DCPS data reflecting an entrenched school-to-prison pipeline confirm the disparate criminalization of students of color by the police. **92% of school-based arrests in D.C. are of Black students, and Black girls in D.C. are 30 times more likely to be arrested than white youth of any gender identity.**³ Currently, there are nearly twice the number of police and security officers in D.C. schools than there are social workers. Since the 2015-16 school year, Black students in the District continue to be pushed out of school: While Black students comprise 67% of the student population, they have made up more than 90% of out-of-school suspensions in each of the previous three school years.⁴

These existing disparities must be contextualized with the backdrop of rampant police violence—amidst a global pandemic—in response to protests of police brutality. Indeed, the violent, unchecked militarized police response to peaceful protests across the country has revealed to the masses what Black and Brown communities have always known: the police cannot be trusted to keep us safe, to keep our neighborhoods safe, to keep our schools safe, and to keep our children safe. You all have a duty to protect students from a police department whose culture allows for the

¹ Nathan Diller, *Two-Thirds Of D.C. Voters Surveyed Support Removing Police From Schools, New Poll Finds*, dcist (Jun. 17, 2020), <https://dcist.com/story/20/06/17/poll-mpd-dcps-no-police-in-schools-dcfpi/>

² Matthew Glowicki, *Police officer uses stun gun on Jeffersontown student who assaulted cop, officials say*, Louisville Courier-Journal (Nov. 1, 2017), <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/crime/2017/11/01/police-officer-uses-stun-gun-jeffersontown-student-who-assaulted-cop-officials-say/822783001/>.

³ Rights4Girls, Georgetown Juvenile Justice Initiative, *Beyond The Walls: A Look at Girls in D.C.’s Juvenile Justice System* (Mar. 2018), <https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/r4g/2018/03/BeyondTheWalls-Final.pdf>

⁴ District of Columbia, Office of the State Superintendent of Education, *State of Discipline: 2018-2019 School Year*, https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/Discipline%20Report%20OSSE%202018-19%20School%20Year.pdf (pg. 17).

brutal and violent use of force against peaceful protestors⁵ and, prior to policy changes being enacted, the handcuffing of Black children as young as 9 years old.⁶ The time is now to implement a new vision for safety in our communities and schools and reject any proposal that calls for increased investments in policing.

For 20 years, Advancement Project, a national racial justice organization, has pioneered efforts to end the school-to-prison pipeline. In D.C., we proudly work alongside the incredible youth organizers at Black Swan Academy who are leading the call for police free schools in D.C., and demanding an investment in resources that will create a safer, healthier, more equitable school environment. Their rallying cry is simple: “Love Us. Don’t Harm Us.”⁷

Working alongside Advancement Project, the Alliance for Educational Justice – a national network of 35 youth and intergenerational organizing groups of color across 12 states – has been similarly leading and coordinating efforts to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. The proliferation of law enforcement in our nation’s schools is a pressing and alarming issue that our organizations have worked tirelessly to combat. To this end, we released a joint report in 2018 titled “We Came to Learn,” which chronicles the violent history of school policing in the United States and the ongoing harms that students, particularly Black & Brown, LGBTQ, and differently-abled students face at the hands of school police officers.⁸

We know that the mere presence of police in schools serves to reinforce and accelerate the school-to-prison pipeline, and this is borne out by the data. According to the most recent data released by the U.S. Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection for the 2015-2016 academic year, Black students represented 15% of enrollment in public schools across the country, yet they accounted for 31% of students who were referred to law enforcement or arrested.⁹ Research shows that higher discipline rates for students of color are not due to higher rates of misbehavior, but instead due to systemic racism.¹⁰ A March 2018 report from the Government Accountability Office

⁵ Andrew Beaujon, *DC Police Again Turn to “Kettling,” a Controversial Crowd Control Technique*, Washingtonian (Jun. 2, 2020), <https://www.washingtonian.com/2020/06/02/dc-police-again-turn-to-kettling-a-controversial-crowd-control-technique/>

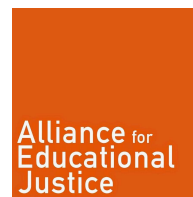
⁶ Theresa Vargas, *‘It hurt’: A 9-year-old boy was handcuffed. But how many other D.C. children have also been?*, Washington Post (Apr. 27, 2019), https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/it-hurt-a-9-year-old-boy-was-handcuffed-but-how-many-other-dc-children-have-also-been/2019/04/26/1b173c0e-6862-11e9-8985-4cf30147bdca_story.html

⁷ Black Swan Academy, *Black Youth Agenda*, <https://www.blackswanacademy.org/black-youth-agenda>

⁸ See <https://advancementproject.org/wecametolearn/>.

⁹ U.S. Dep’t of Ed., *2015-2016 Civil Rights Data Collection: School Climate and Safety*, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/school-climate-and-safety.pdf>.

¹⁰ Russel J. Skiba and Natasha T. Williams, *Are Black Kids Worse? Myths and Facts About Racial Differences In Behavior: A Summary of the Literature*, Indiana University (Mar. 2014), https://indrc.indiana.edu/tools-resources/pdf-disciplineseries/african_american_differential_behavior_031214.pdf.



confirms this fact; the study concluded that stark disparities persist in the administration of discipline for Black students and students with disabilities across the country.¹¹ In the 2017-2018 school year, Black students were suspended 2.54 times as often as their white peers.¹² **Police in schools exacerbate these problems.**

In this time of national civil unrest, we cannot continue to operate our schools and live in our communities as if things will just “go back to normal.” We know firsthand that “normal” for communities of color has always been suspensions, expulsions, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the under-resourcing of public schools. We can no longer be satisfied with “normal.” It is time to actually listen to what Black and Brown youth—who routinely experience police violence in school—have been saying for years: Being forced to interact with a system of policing that views them as threats and not as students, is detrimental to their sense of safety in school. Young people should not have to fear being assaulted, arrested, or killed by a police officer, every single time they show up to school to learn. The policing culture that sanctions the brutality we have all witnessed within and beyond these protests cannot co-exist with the nurturing culture that students need to thrive.

We urge you to divest from the millions being invested in school police and reallocate those resources to expand school-based mental health programs, in order to strengthen the broader mental health infrastructure in D.C., and expand the use of community violence interrupters within schools and the broader community. Additionally, we urge you to prioritize the health and well-being of DCPS students by investing in the continued training of D.C educators to practice social-emotional learning and transformative justice approaches, two critical supports that help students succeed both academically and socio-emotionally.

These asks are not radical: Many organizations have been pushing for school districts to prioritize real school safety for years—which includes providing more mental health resources, more counselors, and more mentors. In the wake of the Newtown, CT and Parkland, FL school shootings, organizations urged more psychologists, therapists, counselors, social workers, and nurses be placed at every school in order to best respond to the social and emotional needs and well-being of students.¹³ We know that for many young people, school is the only place where they can access mental health counseling and support. As this pandemic continues, we are already seeing school districts either making or anticipating significant cuts as a result of budget shortfalls.¹⁴ We cannot ignore the needs of students and remove the vital support needed for their

¹¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *K-12 EDUCATION: Discipline Disparities for Black Students, Boys, and Students with Disabilities* (Mar. 22, 2018), <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-18-258>.

¹² *Supra*, note 4 at 19.

¹³ Advancement Project, Dignity in Schools, Alliance for Educational Justice, and LDF, *Police in Schools are Not the Answer to School Shootings*, (Mar. 2018), <https://advancementproject.org/resources/police-schools-not-answer-school-shootings/>.

¹⁴ Alex Zimmerman and Christina Veiga, *De Blasio proposes over \$221 million in NYC education cuts, including pre-K and school budgets*, Chalkbeat New York (Apr. 7, 2020), <https://chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2020/04/07/budget-cut-tk/>; Max Larkin, *In Randolph, Officials Cited Coronavirus As They Made State’s First Cuts to School Staff*,



growth and development – especially given that the mental health effects of this pandemic will be felt for years to come.

In this time of crisis, we all have the responsibility to care for and support our most vulnerable communities. Young people are most directly affected by changes in the education system and yet their concerns are often left out of decision-making efforts. We need to support the well-being of our students by investing in the supports that will truly guide them through to adulthood. Eliminating the school security contract between DPS and MPD and divesting from the \$11 million dollars set aside for school resource officers in MPD’s 2021 budget is a necessary first step towards that goal.

If you have any questions, please reach out to Krithika Santhanam, Staff Attorney, at Ksanthanam@advancementproject.org, or to Maria Fernandez, Senior Campaigns Strategist, at mfernandez@advancementproject.org. We fully support the elimination of the school security contract, and urge you to take this necessary step to ensure our young people are safe, healthy, and thriving in their schools and communities during and after this crisis.

Sincerely,

Judith Browne Dianis
Executive Director
Advancement Project National Office

Jonathan Stith
National Director
Alliance for Educational Justice

The **Alliance for Educational Justice** is comprised of the following organizations:

Baltimore Algebra Project, Baltimore, Maryland
Black Organizing Project, Oakland, California
Boston Youth Organizing Project, Boston, Massachusetts
Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, Chicago Illinois
Californians for Justice, Statewide, California
Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, San Francisco, California
Community Coalition, Los Angeles, California
DRUM: Desis Rising Up and Moving, Queens, New York
Future of Tomorrow, Brooklyn, New York
Inner City Struggle, Los Angeles, California
Kenwood Oakland Community Organization, Chicago, Illinois
Labor Community Strategy Center, Los Angeles, California
Youth Organizing Institute, Raleigh, North Carolina

WBUR (Apr. 15, 2020), <https://www.wbur.org/edify/2020/04/15/randolph-school-furloughs>; Chris Jones and Nadia Pflaum, *Utah schools could lose up to \$30 million in coronavirus budget cuts*, KUTV (Apr. 13, 2020), <https://kutv.com/news/beyond-the-books/coronavirus-leading-to-cuts-in-utah-school-funding>.



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Philadelphia Student Union, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Power U Center for Social Change, Miami, Florida
Project South, Atlanta, Georgia
Rethink, New Orleans, Louisiana
Sistas and Brothas United, Bronx, New York
Tenants and Workers United, Alexandria, Virginia
Youth Empowered in the Struggle, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Youth Justice Coalition, Los Angeles, California
Youth Together, Oakland, California
Youth United for Change, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Puente Human Rights Movement, Phoenix, Arizona

Alliance for
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