



June 5, 2020

Denver Public Schools
Board of Education
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Via E-Mail

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

Dear School Board Members:

We write on behalf of Advancement Project National Office and the Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ) to fully and enthusiastically support Board Members Jennifer Bacon and Tay Anderson's call to terminate the contract between the Denver Police Department (DPD) and Denver Public Schools (DPS) and remove police from schools. If we have learned anything from this historic moment spurred by the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police, it is that police cannot be trusted to keep us safe. Years of DPS data reflecting a relentless school to prison pipeline indicate disparate criminalization of students of color by the police. DPS has a duty to protect students from a police department whose culture allows for the brutal and violent use of force against peaceful protestors.¹ Officers that roam school hallways are no different from the officers on the streets of Denver and thus, a new vision for safety must emerge from this crisis. The Minneapolis Public School Board's historic, unanimous vote this week to remove police from schools demonstrates that a police free schools future is both possible and necessary to protect the safety and humanity of Black and Brown children.

Our organizations have spent the last few years highlighting 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, psychologists, and social workers. We already know that investment in law enforcement personnel fundamentally fails to make schools safer for students.² Instead of paying

¹ Conrad Swanson, *Denver City Council members call for investigation into police use of force during George Floyd protests*, Denver Post (Jun. 2, 2020), <https://www.denverpost.com/2020/06/02/denver-city-council-investigate-police-force-protest/>.

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/>.



the Denver Police Department to police Denver children, those funds should be allocated towards counseling services, mental health supports, positive behavioral interventions, restorative justice programs, and other methods that create holistically beneficial learning environments for young people. DPS is particularly well-positioned to make this a reality as one of the pioneering districts in the country on implementing restorative justice practices in school. These commitments to resources are especially important for youth returning to school after isolation and the traumas inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

For 20 years, Advancement Project, a national racial justice organization, has pioneered efforts to end the school-to-prison pipeline. We have worked with Padres y Jóvenes Unidos (PJU) for over 15 years in this fight – and have been proud to support PJU in the progress they have made in Denver Public Schools. From the rewriting of the student discipline code, to the signing of the first Memorandum of Understanding with DPD in 2012, to the implementation of restorative justice practices, we have proudly supported and applauded PJU’s advocacy efforts in this district. Unfortunately, despite some progress, the school-to-prison pipeline persists in the district, and it is clear that we need a new vision of police free schools in Denver and across the country. 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 on-going harms that students, particularly Black & Brown, LGBTQ, and differently-abled students face at the hands of school police officers.³

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.⁴ Research shows that higher discipline rates for students of color are not due to higher rates of misbehavior, but instead due to systemic racism.⁵ A March 2018 report from the Government Accountability Office 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.⁶

³ See <https://advancementproject.org/wecametolearn/>.

⁴ 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>.

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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>.



In Denver, these disparities also exist—Black boys and girls are disproportionately disciplined compared to other groups in their schools. In the 2018-2019 school year, 15% of all Black students in DPS received some form of discipline, compared with only 4.4% of their white counterparts.⁷

Police in schools exacerbate these problems. Of the 657 total referrals to law enforcement in the 2018-2019 academic year, approximately 29% were to Black students, despite being only 13% of the district’s student population.⁸ Latinx students received 55% of the referrals to law enforcement, compared to a district population of 53.9%⁹ - this is still troubling because if any of those students were undocumented or DACA-mented, this contact with law enforcement would make them vulnerable to the school-to-deportation pipeline.

These existing disparities must be contextualized within the backdrop of rampant police violence—amidst a global pandemic—in response to protests of police brutality. 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. There is no way that a policing culture that allows for the brutality we all witnessed, can co-exist with the nurturing culture that students need to thrive.

We urge you as a school board to adopt a resolution to end the contract with the Denver Police Department. Additionally, we urge you to prioritize the health and well-being of Denver students by ensuring that there are plentiful supports available to them both academically and socio-emotionally. 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ We cannot ignore the

⁷ Colorado Department of Education, Suspension/Expulsion Statistics, <https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdereval/suspend-expelcurrent>.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ 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/>.

¹¹ 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*,



needs of students and remove the vital support needed for their growth and development – especially given that the mental health effects of this pandemic will be felt for years to come. Eliminating the contract with DPD will allow for resources to be reallocated to the supports that students truly need.

In this time of crisis, we all have the responsibility to care for and support our most vulnerable communities. Young people and their concerns are often left out of decision-making efforts, despite their being the ones most directly affected by changes in the education system. We need to support the wellbeing of our students by investing in the supports that will truly guide them through to adulthood. Eliminating the contract with the Denver Police Department is a great first step towards that goal. If you have any questions, please reach out to Jessica Alcantara, Staff Attorney, at jalcantara@advancementproject.org, or to Maria Fernandez, Senior Campaigns Strategist, at mfernandez@advancementproject.org. We fully support the passing of this resolution, and we believe this is what it will take 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

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