



June 17, 2020

The School District of Philadelphia  
Board of Education  
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Philadelphia, PA 19130  
(215) 400-4000  
[schoolboard@philasd.org](mailto:schoolboard@philasd.org)

*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 the Philadelphia Student Union's call for the removal of all police officers from Philadelphia schools.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, we advocate for the removal of all police officers and school security guards provided by the Office of School Safety (OSS) and the termination of ties with external law enforcement such as the Philadelphia Police Department and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. 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 data from the School District of Philadelphia (PSD) reflect a relentless school-to-prison pipeline and the disparate criminalization of students of color by the police.<sup>2</sup> PSD has a duty to protect students from a policing infrastructure whose culture allows for the brutal and violent use of force against peaceful protestors.<sup>3</sup> Officers that roam school hallways are no different from the officers on the streets of Philadelphia and thus, a new vision for safety must emerge from this crisis. The historic, unanimous votes from the Minneapolis and Denver school boards 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Mezzacappa, *Movement for police-free schools reaches Philadelphia*, Philadelphia Public School: The Notebook (June 11, 2020), <https://thenotebook.org/articles/2020/06/11/movement-for-police-free-schools-reaches-philadelphia/>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Dep't of Ed., 2015-2016 Civil Rights Data Collection: School Climate and Safety, <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/Page?t=d&eid=27031&syk=8&pid=2539>.

<sup>3</sup> Brian X. McCrone, *Philly police conduct, use of teargas during protests to face scrutiny*, NBC Philadelphia (Jun. 15, 2020), <https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/philadelphia-police-conduct-use-of-tear-during-protests-to-face-independent-scrutiny/2433891/>.



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.<sup>4</sup> Instead of spending the \$31 million to police children in Philadelphia,<sup>5</sup> those funds should be allocated towards counseling services, nurses, mental health supports, positive behavioral interventions, restorative justice programs, and other methods that create holistically beneficial learning environments for young people. 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 the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) for several years in this fight – and have been proud to support PSU in the progress they have made in Philadelphia Public Schools. 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 Philadelphia 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> Research shows that higher discipline rates for students of color are not due to higher rates of misbehavior, but

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<sup>4</sup> 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/>.

<sup>5</sup> Dale Mezzacappa, *Movement for police-free schools reaches Philadelphia*, Philadelphia Public School: The Notebook (June 11, 2020), <https://thenotebook.org/articles/2020/06/11/movement-for-police-free-schools-reaches-philadelphia/>.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://advancementproject.org/wecametolearn/>.

<sup>7</sup> 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>.



instead due to systemic racism.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

In Philadelphia, these disparities also exist—Black boys and girls are disproportionately disciplined compared to other groups in their schools. In the 2015-2016 school year, the most recent available data in the CRDC, Black students made up 51.1% of the student population but accounted for 61% of in-school suspensions, 70.6% of out-of-school suspensions and 75.2% of expulsions.<sup>10</sup> **Police in schools exacerbate these problems. Of the 6,834 total referrals to law enforcement in the 2015-2016 academic year, approximately 65.2% were to Black students.**<sup>11</sup> Alarming, there were 4,516 incidents that were reported to school police in the 2018-2019 school year.<sup>12</sup> Because of the advocacy of Philadelphia Student Union, we have also seen evidence of the brutal ways that police in PSD treat Black children – like the assault of a student that occurred in 2016 at Ben Franklin high school.<sup>13</sup>

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 remove police officers and school security guards from PSD and to end collaboration with external law enforcement. Additionally, we urge you to prioritize the health and well-being of Philadelphia students by ensuring that there are plentiful supports available to them both academically and socio-emotionally. Many organizations have been

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<sup>8</sup> 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](https://indrc.indiana.edu/tools-resources/pdf-disciplineseries/african_american_differential_behavior_031214.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> 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>.

<sup>10</sup> 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>.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

<sup>12</sup> School District of Philadelphia, *School Performance*, [https://www.philasd.org/performance/programs/services/open-data/school-performance/#serious\\_incidents](https://www.philasd.org/performance/programs/services/open-data/school-performance/#serious_incidents).

<sup>13</sup> Philadelphia Student Union, *Students Demand Real Accountability and an End to School Police Violence*, PSU (May 11, 2017), <https://phillystudentunion.org/2017/05/11/students-demand-real-accountability-and-an-end-to-school-police-violence/>.



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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> We cannot ignore the 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 expenditures related to policing 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. Removing policing and police infrastructures within PSD 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](mailto:jalcantara@advancementproject.org), or to Maria Fernandez, Senior Campaigns Strategist, at [mfernandez@advancementproject.org](mailto:mfernandez@advancementproject.org). 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

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

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<sup>14</sup> 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/>.

<sup>15</sup> 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*, 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>.



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  
Padres y Jóvenes Unidos, Denver, Colorado  
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

CC:	<i>Joyce Wilkerson</i> <i>Board President</i>	<i>Leticia Egea-Hinton</i> <i>Vice President</i>
	<i>Ameen Akbar</i> <i>Vice President</i>	<i>Julia Danzy</i> <i>Board Member</i>
	<i>Mallory Fix Lopez</i> <i>Board Member</i>	<i>Lee Huang</i> <i>Board Member</i>
	<i>Maria McColgan</i> <i>Board Member</i>	<i>Angela McIver</i> <i>Board Member</i>
	<i>Doha Ibrahim</i> <i>Student Board Representative</i>	<i>Imere Williams</i> <i>Student Board Representative</i>