



January 29, 2021

VIA ELECTRONIC MAIL

Dr. Debra P. Pace
Superintendent of Osceola School District
812 Bill Beck Blvd.,
Kissimmee, FL 34744
Debra.Pace@osceolaschools.net

Clarence Thacker
Osceola County School Board Chair, District 4
812 Bill Beck Blvd.,
Kissimmee, FL 34744
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Sheriff Marcos R. Lopez
Osceola County Sheriff's Office
2601 E. Irlo Bronson Memorial Hwy,
Kissimmee, FL 34744
marcos.lopez@osceola.org

Dear Dr. Pace, Mr. Thacker, and Sheriff Lopez:

We write on behalf of Faith in Florida, the Alliance for Educational Justice, and Advancement Project's national office in response to the vicious assault on a minor Black female student at the hands of a School Resource Officer (SRO) at Liberty High School. As organizations committed to racial justice in education and in protecting Black and Brown people from police violence, we found it imperative to respond.

On January 26, 2021 videos documenting the vicious assault of a student by an Osceola Sheriff's deputy began to spread across social media. The student, a Black girl, who attends Liberty High School, was slammed to the ground by the deputy, who has since been confirmed by the Osceola County Sheriff's Office to be employed by the agency as a school resource officer at the high school. According to local reports, after the student was slammed to the ground by the deputy she appeared to lose consciousness. This happened to a student left to your charge to care for, nurture and educate by law enforcement on school property. A swift response is required to provide justice to this student and to protect others from such violence in the future.

Faith in Florida is a membership organization based throughout Florida that advocates on behalf of communities of color on a range of issues. Members, including those in Osceola County, engage

in activities to hold elected officials and others accountable to the people they represent. [Advancement Project National Office](#) and [Alliance for Educational Justice](#) are long standing partners with thousands of youth organizers who are pushing local governments to enforce #PoliceFreeSchools.

The #AssaultAtLiberty can be added to a long list of infuriating attacks on youth that bring to light the continued maltreatment of Black and Brown people by this country's police-state and the ways that our Black and Brown youth are criminalized in their places of learning.

The proliferation of law enforcement in our nation's schools is a pressing and alarming issue. The Alliance for Educational Justice and Advancement Project's national office report, *We Came to Learn*¹, which chronicles the 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.² According to the most recent data released by the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection for the 2017-2018 academic year, Black students represent 15% of enrollment in public schools across the country, yet they are overdisciplined in all areas of school discipline compared to white students.² School discipline includes: rates of suspension, expulsion, arrest, restraints, referral to law enforcement, and transfers to alternative schools for disciplinary reasons. Incredibly, Black girls are overrepresented compared to white youth of any other race and gender.³ Compared to white girls, Black girls are 3.66 times more at risk to be arrested at school and 5.34 times more at risk of transfer for disciplinary reasons.⁴ Research shows that higher discipline rates for students of color are not due to higher rates of misbehavior, but instead to race.⁵

These disproportionate harms to Black and Brown students persist not only throughout the country, but also within Osceola County Public Schools. According to the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, in 2019-20, there were 168 arrests in Osceola County Schools, or 4.1 per 1000 students.⁶ Importantly, the overwhelming majority of these arrests were for misdemeanors. At Liberty High School, Black students are targeted for harsh treatment. While Black students are only 20% of the student population they are 42% of referrals to law enforcement.⁷

¹ <https://advancementproject.org/wecametolearn/>.

² 2017-2018 Civil Rights Data Collection: The Use of Restraints and Seclusion on Children with Disabilities in K-12 Schools, U.S. Department of Education, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/restraint-and-seclusion.pdf>; Data Snapshot: 2017-2018 National Data on School Discipline by Race and Gender, Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality's Initiative on Gender Justice & Opportunity and the RISE Research team at New York University, <https://genderjusticeandopportunity.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/National-Data-on-School-Discipline-by-Race-and-Gender.pdf>

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Skiba, Russel J., et al. *Are Black Kids Worse? Myths and Facts About Racial Differences In Behavior: A Summary of the Literature*. Indiana University (March 2014).

⁶ Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, <http://www.djj.state.fl.us/research/reports/reports-and-data/interactive-data-reports/delinquency-in-schools/school-delinquency-profile>

⁷ 2017 Civil Rights Data Collection, Liberty High School, Osceola County, Florida, U.S. Department of Education, https://ocrdata.ed.gov/profile/9/school/268221/disciplinereport?survey_Year_Key=9&schoolOrDistrict=s&districtSearchCheckbox=on

There is no evidence demonstrating that school police officers make students safer. Conversely, the increased presence of police officers in schools is linked to increases in school-based arrests for minor behaviors and negative impacts on school climate. Research and the experiences of countless students, educators, and families have taught us that police in schools create a toxic school climate and fuel the school-to-prison pipeline.

There are obvious, less discriminatory and less punitive methods of addressing school safety than policing and surveillance. Safety is found in schools that have positive school climates and provide supports for their students. The most effective methods to improve school climate engage students and educators in pro-social activities that build positive relationships and instill a sense of community throughout campus.

School-wide restorative justice initiatives are effective at making schools safer by improving school climate and promoting emotional, social and communication skills that follow youth into adulthood. Yet these methods do not receive comparable or adequate funding – ultimately undermining the objective of keeping students safe.

In light of the current COVID-19 pandemic leading to disproportionate social, medical, and economic harms for communities of color and further state sanctioned violence by law enforcement, including #AssaultAtLiberty on January 26, these are our community demands:

1. Fire the Osceola Sheriff's deputy involved in this assault and guarantee that he will not work as a school resource officer elsewhere in the future.
2. Ensure that no charges are made against any of the students involved in this incident, including those who recorded and shared video on social media.
3. Ensure that none of the students involved in this incident, including those who recorded and shared video on social media, are suspended.
4. Provide emotional, social, and mental health support and resources to the students involved, including those who witnessed this assault, and their families.

Our call for #PoliceFreeSchools is urgent. The time for #PoliceFreeSchools is now. In the meantime, we invite you to contact us with any questions you or your office may have. Please do not hesitate to contact Maria Fernandez, Senior Campaigns Strategist at mfernandez@advancementproject.org or Ky'Eisha Penn, Staff Attorney at kpenn@advancementproject.org. Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,

/s/ Judith Browne Dianis

Judith Browne Dianis

Executive Director, Advancement Project National Office

/s/ Jonathan Stith

Jonathan Stith

Director, Alliance for Educational Justice

/s/ Maria Fernandez

Maria Fernandez

Senior Campaign Associate, Advancement Project

/s/ Ky'Eisha Penn

Ky'Eisha Penn

Staff Attorney, Advancement Project

cc: Terry Castillo, Osceola County School Board Member, District 1,
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