

From Failure to Freedom: The Youth Power Agenda



The systematic criminalization of Black and Brown youth, and youth with disabilities, in schools is one of the most blatant and egregious examples of systemic racism and violence in this country. The presence of police officers, guns, handcuffs and metal detectors in schools creates hostile teaching and learning environments that are reinforced by harsh, punitive and exclusionary school discipline policies. Police brutality, arrests, suspensions and expulsions are far too common a feature of the educational experiences of students of color from low-income communities. These practices also create negative psychological impacts as the schools in communities of color resemble prison conditions.

Divest From Failure:

Remove police officers from in and around schools. Police do not create safer schools and the city's current policing system has deepened existing racial inequities. The regular presence of police in schools must end. A draft Department of Justice report that reviewed the MPD highlighted that trust is broken between the troubled police department and community members. School Safety Aides' security and enforcement role in schools must also end. SSAs should be re-trained as educational or support assistants that MPS employs solely to support young people in the classroom.

Remove metal detectors from schools. Metal detectors create a flashpoint between students and police and make students feel criminalized as soon as they enter the school building. Removing these machines will eliminate one of the main mechanisms of racially discriminatory policing, and prevent the psychological harm created when young people are made to feel systematically criminalized. In addition, it will save the city money which can be better spent on support services.

End suspensions and expulsions. With already extreme rates of suspensions, MPS should end the regular use of suspensions and expulsions. The response to behavior should be rooted in respect by using practices such as restorative justice and mental health care. MPS should seek to phase out all exclusions, including classroom removals, suspension, and expulsions. While exclusionary discipline is still in use, young people should still learn at alternative learning locations during the time of exclusion.

End arrests and citations for misdemeanors. Provide citywide alternatives to incarceration for students charged with felonies in school. These policies will ensure that no student is torn away from their family or community and thrown into the criminal legal system.

Stop the use of seclusion and restraints. Ninety-one percent of the young people restrained (e.g. by use of handcuffs, physical force) or secluded (i.e. put in a guarded solitary room) are young people with disabilities. These practices are inhumane, steal young people's freedom, and are discriminatorily applied. MPS and MPD must put an end to restraining or confining young people, especially for having a disability. Teachers and school personnel should be trained in de-escalation and working with young people experiencing trauma or mental health needs to avoid such treatment.

Stop truancy citations and prosecution. Research shows that young people usually miss school because of family obligations or to avoid a negative situation in school. Treating missing school as a criminal act, rather than a warning sign that a young person may need additional supports, is counter productive. Truancy citations and punishments push students further away from school emotionally and physically as students are forced to miss more school to go to court. MPS must use truancy as an indicator to provide additional services to young people and end all punishment for it.

Invest in Freedom:

Create an inclusive school code. Young people in Milwaukee and advocates across the country have developed a model school code that is rooted in the human right to education and the dignity of all young people. MPS should adopt this code to eliminate the harmful practices embedded in the current Handbook. The new school code must focus on developing robust and enforceable due process for disciplinary actions; *requiring* school personnel to implement supportive interventions, such as restorative practices or therapy, before a school may remove a student; eliminating all vague or subjective offenses; and creating a clear and accessible complaint process.

Implement robust restorative justice practices citywide. All school personnel and the school community should be trained in using restorative practices. Schools should adopt a restorative approach to behavior. Restorative approaches should follow nationally developed models and could include components of peer-counseling, drug and alcohol treatment, community service, non-fiscal restitution, mental health care, and behavioral contract. Through this process, youth peers should be included in any restorative circles. If the school fails to use restorative practices and instead uses a punitive approach, peers should be included in any discipline conference, if the other student desires.

Increase the number of licensed support professionals, including therapists, social workers, psychologists and guidance counselors. Licensed support professionals provide vital services to students including mental health services, college and career readiness, and connecting young people to community based groups. Many students currently have no access to guidance counselors or mental health professionals. The city should drastically increase the number of licensed support professionals in schools. Provide trauma-informed care and mental health training for school personnel, including teachers, administrators and other school staff who are involved in making discipline referrals and imposing disciplinary sanctions.

Reduce classroom size. Provide critical funding for MPS to hire more teachers and educational assistants to reduce class sizes. Small class-size improves student outcomes, especially for student of color and low-income students. Currently, Milwaukee's student-to-teacher ratio exceeds the state average.

Provide culturally responsive training and courses. A culturally responsive approach to teaching acknowledges that students and families come from diverse backgrounds and treats this diversity as a positive asset. This approach also aims to understand and address institutional, personal, and instructional biases. Providing culturally responsive educational opportunities can lead to safer communities for women, youth of color, and LGBTQ students.

Collect and publish accurate data regarding all forms of discipline. The OCR investigation found that discipline data is inconsistently collected and recorded across MPS. In addition, MPD has refused to provide detailed data regarding arrests and police interactions with young people in schools. MPS and MPD, must accurately collect information about discipline and police interactions, disaggregated by race, age, gender, school, charge, sanction imposed, and type of interaction. This data must be published online at least quarterly.

Invest in universal free high-quality early childhood education. Early childhood education has been shown to increase educational achievement, reduce misbehavior, and improve other outcomes from both the child and their family even years after the early childhood education is provided. Early childhood education has the most profound impacts on students of color and students from low-income communities. Milwaukee should develop program to provide universal access to early education for children three years old and older.

Create a universal youth jobs program. Youth employment creates safer communities, builds skills in young people, and helps develop a workforce that can address many social needs which would otherwise go unfilled. Milwaukee has taken steps to increase youth employment. This program should be universalized and extended through the school year so that all young people who want to participate are able to join.