



**SPLC**  
**Southern Poverty**  
**Law Center**

November 14, 2022

## An Open Letter: A Call for Safety and Justice in GCPS

Dear Members of the Gwinnett County Community,

### **Our Community Deserves Better**

We write as members and supporters of Gwinnett County. We stand with our community to demand emotionally and physically safe schools for all students and reveal the truth: disciplinary practices and policies that criminalize students and remove them from their classrooms do not make schools safe. We share continued frustration with leadership who perpetuate the criminalization and exclusion of students in Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) – disproportionately harming students of color and students with disabilities – through flawed policies that have failed for years and do not meaningfully address school safety.

The Gwinnett Parent Coalition to Dismantle the School-to-Prison Pipeline (Gwinnett SToPP) leads a parent and caregiver-driven, community-centered partnership to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline in GCPS. Gwinnett SToPP formed in 2007 to answer growing frustration with the district's reliance on harsh punishment and law enforcement to address minor school misconduct and has since advocated for restorative, equitable schools and discipline processes. The Georgia Youth Justice Coalition (GYJC) is a youth-led organizing group building an intersectional movement for quality public education for every Georgian. GYJC's organizers, ages 14 to 22, work from the classroom to the Capitol to secure the future they and their communities deserve. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) is a nonprofit civil rights organization that works in partnership with communities to dismantle white supremacy, strengthen intersectional movements, and advance the rights of all people, including children and young people, in the Deep South. The mission of the Gwinnett NAACP works to secure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights in order to eliminate race-based discrimination and ensure the health and well-being of all persons.

We grieve the loss of young people gone too soon since the beginning of the 2022-2023 school year:

- Caitlyn Pollock
- De'Andre Henderson
- Justin "Nick" Adams

- Jayden Kagiya Ndungu
- Luke Rondelli
- Seven King
- Steven Evert
- Timothy Allen Buchanan

We mourn heavier still as we reflect on the long history of violence in this county, from classrooms to communities, that too often goes ignored until it is too late. Rather than meaningfully grappling with this history, our leaders too often criminalize and stereotype young, Black boys. As a result, we gather to set the record straight and center those in our community who have been excluded from the conversation on equity, justice, and safety.

On Wednesday, November 2, 2022, members of the business, political, and religious establishment in Gwinnett County hosted a “Code RED!” meeting to address school violence and student discipline in Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS). At this meeting, community leaders advanced false and harmful narratives about school safety, claiming that more policing, more discipline, and more surveillance are what keep our students safe. This conversation excluded and marginalized key voices on this issue, including students, parents and caregivers, and educators.

Policing students and excluding them from their classrooms does not prevent violence. And these practices uphold white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and the school-to-prison pipeline – which pushes students out of school and into carceral systems. The current conversation about school safety does not account for these harms and treats low income, students, students with disabilities, and students of color – who make up most learners in GCPS – as disposable.

### **Zero Tolerance and School Policing are Proven to be Ineffective and Discriminatory**

For decades, schools have relied on harsh zero-tolerance policies, student surveillance, and school policing in response to perceived threats of violence and as primary forms of discipline. At the recent Code RED! event, the Chief of GCPS police and other community leaders signaled support for these approaches, claiming that police in schools are “preventative.” However, the data confirms these approaches do not make schools safe.<sup>1</sup> They’re not only ineffective; these approaches also *increase* the risk of negative academic and social outcomes for students, especially for Black and Brown students and students with disabilities.<sup>2</sup> Students who are subject to over-policing and exclusionary discipline are more likely to drop out of school, experience increased behavior problems, diminished educational engagement, and contact with the juvenile

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Skiba & Daniel Losen, “Turning the Page on School Discipline,” American Federation of Teachers, available online at [https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2015-2016/skiba\\_losen](https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2015-2016/skiba_losen).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

and criminal systems.<sup>3</sup> When asked at the Code RED! event, the GCPS police chief was unable to reference any specific data or studies to demonstrate that more police make schools safe.

GCPS has relied on policing and harsh, exclusionary discipline practices for years despite overwhelming research that these policies disproportionately harm students of color and do not reduce school violence. At GCPS's August 2022 school board meeting, the Office of Student Discipline revealed data that GCPS has referred thousands of students for long-term suspension and expulsion – more than every other metro-area school district combined. Most of these incidents did not involve major rule violations involving weapons, drugs, or violence.<sup>4</sup> And while Gwinnett County's population has only doubled since 1990, the number of people incarcerated in Gwinnett County has increased six times.

Black and Brown students have experienced disproportionate harm because of GCPS's historic approach to school safety and student discipline. Black students make up a disproportionate number of those suspended and expelled in GCPS.<sup>5</sup> GCPS has more than 1,400 children enrolled in alternative schools, most of them Black and Latinx students.<sup>6</sup> Black students are also more likely to be arrested at school than their white peers.

In recent months, GCPS finally acknowledged this harm. Board Member Everton Blair commented that GCPS's student discipline data made his “chest hurt.” Our chests hurt too as we continue to witness educators, community members, and others signal a desire to return to the previous administration's harmful, ineffective disciplinary policies. Let's be clear: while suspensions, tribunals, School Resource Officers, and other punitive measures increased in GCPS, so too did crime, challenging behaviors, and violence. So why should we return to solutions that have not and will not work? Who do these solutions truly serve, and who do they exclude? We must affirm and center those students that the establishment would rather throw out of the classroom and lock up in cages. They are not the problem.

At the Code RED! event, Chairwoman Nicole Love Hendrickson implored to the Gwinnett community that “we all need to be at the table addressing [school violence] in a collective

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<sup>3</sup> See U.S. Dep't. of Educ. and U.S. Dep't. of Justice, *Dear Colleague Letter on the Nondiscriminatory Administration of School Discipline* (Jan. 8, 2014), <https://bit.ly/38vqCGI>; see also Advancement Project, Padres and Jovenes Unidos, Southwest Youth Collaborative, and Children & Family Justice Center of Northwestern University School of Law, *Education on Lockdown: The Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track*, 2005, 16, <https://bit.ly/3sBdCpH>; Johanna Wald and Daniel Losen, “Defining and Redirecting a School-to-Prison Pipeline,” *New Directions for Youth Development*, vol. 99 (2003), 11, <https://bit.ly/3wpClyc>.

<sup>4</sup> According to discipline data collected from GCPS pursuant to an Open Records Act request for the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, despite issuing over 15,000 suspensions, the district reported only 1,681 major rule violations, involving weapons, drugs, violent conduct, or other serious misconduct.

<sup>5</sup> According to discipline data collected from GCPS pursuant to an Open Records Act request, for the 2020-2021 school year, Black students made up 32% of student enrollment but 42% of the population of students suspended out of school. Students with disabilities make up 33% of students suspended out of school, and only about 13% of the student population.

<sup>6</sup> According to discipline data collected from GCPS pursuant to an Open Records Act request, for the 2020-2021 school year, Black and Latinx students made up over 80% of referrals to alternative school.

response and in a holistic way.” We agree. Fortunately, effective strategies to reduce violence exist - strategies that prioritize the safety and holistic well-being of all students and our community at large.<sup>7</sup> A positive school climate emphasizing relationship building, social-emotional learning, and preemptive, structural behavioral interventions can decrease crime and violence and reduce racial disparities in school discipline.<sup>8</sup> The community schools model has also been a proven strategy to create more inclusive, community-centered, and safe schools.

A few weeks ago, the Superintendent and GCPS Board of Education announced necessary, yet incomplete, improvements to the disciplinary policy. These include increasing reliance on restorative practices and alternative disciplinary approaches, the inclusion of social-emotional, healing-centered learning, and responses that account for teacher and administrator capacity.<sup>9</sup> However, these recent changes do not allow every student engaged in a disciplinary incident to return to school immediately. To the contrary, Georgia law and GCPS policy mandate expulsion for incidents involving dangerous weapons.<sup>10</sup> The recent changes prioritize building an inclusive and culturally-responsive school culture, implementing school-wide, preemptive, structural behavioral interventions, teaching new behaviors, and utilizing school exclusion only as a last resort for the most serious offenses. We urge GCPS to stay on course and implement these evidence-based strategies with fidelity. This is the foundation necessary to create equity, safety, and justice in GCPS. While we support the to-be fully-implemented changes, this is just the beginning, we urge the GCPS Board of Education to take further necessary steps to end the school-to-prison pipeline, implement class and racial conscious restorative practices, and fund our school system in the context of equity.

### **Our Demands: Equitable, Restorative, Empowering Education**

As students, caregivers, educators, residents, and advocates in this community, we believe that school safety and justice in schools means that all students receive the resources they need to succeed in and out of the classroom and that students are provided with opportunities and services that help build a positive future. We believe this standard has not been met for all learners, especially in schools in districts IV and V.

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<sup>7</sup> See “Restorative Justice in Oakland Schools: Implementation and Impacts,” Oakland Unified School District (Sept. 2014), *available at*:

<https://www.ousd.org/cms/lib/CA01001176/Centricity/Domain/134/USD-RJ%20Report%20revised%20Final.pdf>;

*see also* Matthew Steinberg, Elaine Allensworth, David Johnson, “Student and Teacher Safety in Chicago Public Schools,” Consortium on Chicago School Research (May 2011), *available at*:

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED519414.pdf>; Russell Skiba, M. Karega Rausch & Shana Ritter, “Discipline is Always Teaching: Effective Alternatives to Zero Tolerance in Indiana’s Schools,” Indiana Youth Services Association (2004), *available at*: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED488903.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> *See id.*

<sup>9</sup> Gwinnett County Public Schools, “Board’s Theory of Action for Change to Improve Student Behavior and Outcomes,” <https://www.gcpsk12.org/Page/33492> (last visited Nov. 13, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> O.C.G.A. § 20-2-751.1; Gwinnett County Public Schools, “Gwinnett County Public Schools Student Conduct Behavior Code,” R. 6, <https://www.gwinnett.k12.ga.us/polproc.nsf/pages/StudentConductBehaviorCode> (last visited Nov. 13, 2022).

From those in positions of power and influence, policymakers and administrators, and each other, we demand the following:

- Create a community accountability committee to review interactions with, funding, and role of School Resource Officers (SROs).
- Hire an RJ Consultant and practitioner, to properly implement restorative practices on a school by school basis.
- Overhaul the student discipline processes and policies which includes 1) rewriting the student code of conduct and related disciplinary policies and procedures and 2) the mandated implementation of Restorative Justice in all local schools by highly-skilled personnel.
- Hire more culturally competent behavior specialists, counselors, MTSS coordinators, and psychologists. Increase mental health services and resources for students and staff members to meet the guidelines set by mental health professionals, including the ratio of one counselor per 250 students.
- Fund and invest in student-led affinity spaces such as Black Student Unions, LGBTQIA+ support clubs, Muslim Student Associations, and more.
- Mandate implicit bias, anti-racist, and Restorative Justice professional development and resources for all faculty and staff members.
- Invest and support our ongoing efforts to address empowerment, health, and wellness, through comprehensive sex ed that represents all identities.
- Implement quality health education that teaches students the effects and dangers, but more importantly, addresses the nuance of trauma and addiction, and provides access to recovery and mental health services.
- Use evidence based Restorative Justice practices through highly-skilled professionals, like circles, re-entry plans, and family group conferencing to address violent offenses in schools.

Alongside these demands, we call for GCPS Board members, Gwinnett County policymakers and administrators, community leaders, caregivers, educators, students, and community members to continue to have open, honest, historically accurate, and equitable conversations around what our community needs.

Most importantly, at the center of these demands, we know and affirm that our students deserve better. While we can raise expectations, students should not be required to carry all accountability when they have not been provided the resources necessary to succeed. The Board must continue dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline initiated and enforced by the prior GCPS administration and implement policies that create a restorative, empowering, and equitable education system—which will ultimately be a safe one.

Sincerely,

Georgia Youth Justice Coalition

Gwinnett SToPP

Gwinnett NAACP

Southern Poverty Law Center