

## “Pushed Out of School for Being Me”: New York City’s Struggle to Include Youth and Community Voices in School Discipline Reform

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*An education organizer in New York City argues that the lived experiences of students must be placed at the center of strategies aimed at ending systems of inequitable discipline policies.*

Every day in New York City, between 90,000 and 100,000 young people, almost all of them Black and Latina/o, must show up to school thirty to forty-five minutes before their first class begins. They are not showing up for a free breakfast program, and they are not showing up for extracurricular activities being held before first period. They show up early

because they attend schools with metal detectors and scanners. The process of getting through these controls can take thirty minutes on a good day – and on other days, well over an hour.

Pass a New York City public high school on a winter morning, and it’s not unusual to see a line that snakes outside of the doors and onto the sidewalks with young students shaking

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in winter parkas, hats, scarves, and winter boots. Once inside, they are forced to remove their hats, belts, and boots, creating a puddle of mud and slush on the floor that they have to dodge on their way through the metal detectors.



Metal detectors, scanners, school safety agents – we feel criminalized just for going to school.

– Matthew Evans, UYC youth leader

Young Black girls are forced to remove the pins from their hair; some students have had umbrellas with points at the end confiscated; Snapple bottles must be tossed out like they're trying to smuggle liquids through TSA. Forget something in your pockets or book bag and you are brought to the side to get wanded down, or you could be sent to the back of the line and forced to do it all over again. In a recent Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC) meeting, Future of Tomorrow youth leader Onyx Walker said, "We go through less security when we go testify at City Hall!"

School administrators and policymakers have accepted this scenario as part of Black and Latina/o youth's educational experiences. They refuse to acknowledge that this approach to school discipline is an extension of the criminalization of Black and Brown bodies perpetuated by a multitude of systems that young people must interact with every day. In 1998, responsibility for school "safety" was transferred from the New York City Department of Education (DOE) to the

New York Police Department (NYPD). During the Bloomberg administration, school discipline adopted a "broken windows" approach that brought the oppressive over-policing of Black and Latina/o youth in their communities into their schools.

At one point during the Bloomberg administration, suspensions had climbed to more than 70,000, and more than 1,000 students were arrested by school safety agents. These data were lifted up by district officials as proof that our schools were improving and becoming "safer." But students, parents, community members, educators, and administrators – realizing that our schools were pushing out Black, Latina/o, LGBTQ, non-gender-conforming students, and those with disabilities – fought for school policies that treated all children with dignity.

In the 2013-2014 school year, the data on suspensions and arrests helped to paint a picture of the depth of disparities between different populations of students in New York City. Black students represented 26 percent of the student population, but accounted for 53 percent of all students who were suspended and 61 percent of all students who were arrested in school. The lived experiences of the students that continue to be pushed out complete that picture. Black, Latina/o, LGBT, non-gender-conforming students, and students with disabilities are having a vastly different experience with school discipline than their cis-gendered White peers. One conversation I had with a student about how frightened he was to be in his Bronx high school's hallways without a pass sounded like he viewed school safety as an occupying force. NYPD officers circle his school, and seeing a police officer walking the halls in a bullet-proof vest is as normal as seeing a gym teacher in sweatpants.

## NEW SCHOOL DISCIPLINE INITIATIVE, NEW ADMINISTRATION: PROMISING BEGINNINGS AND ROADBLOCKS

It was against this backdrop that the Positive and Safe Schools Advancing Equity (PASSAGE) initiative in New York City was created (for more on PASSAGE, see the preface in this issue). Community organizers, advocates, and the DOE came together as part of this initiative of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (AISR) to develop reforms that would transform our public education systems' approach to school discipline. All of the stakeholders at the table – those representing community organizations and those representing the district – felt a deep urgency to begin to shift New York City's approach to school discipline. But no one had more at stake than the youth at the table. As UYC youth leader Matthew Evans remarked at a City Council hearing, "Metal detectors, scanners, school safety agents – we feel criminalized just for going to school." Then he posed a challenge to the City Council: "You can either support the school-to-prison pipeline, or you can end it. The choice is yours." This challenge should have guided every step that all the partners in the PASSAGE collaboration took.

Youth leaders in UYC (my organization) and other youth leaders throughout the city have been involved in a struggle to end the criminalization of Black and Latina/o youth in schools for years, and they had begun to shift policies and policymakers. In 2013, through a relentless campaign led by students and parents from Black and Latina/o communities, Bill de Blasio

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1 For more on this campaign in the 2013 mayoral campaign, see VUE no. 39, *The Education Election: Community Organizing to Envision and Advance a Progressive Education Agenda*, available at <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/39>.

ran for mayor on an education platform that identified reforming school discipline as a priority.<sup>1</sup> As the public advocate, a non-voting member of the City Council who acts as ombudsman between the mayor and the public, he co-authored a letter with UYC, calling on then-mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott to reconsider the use of suspensions for minor infractions and to expand schools' capacity to use positive interventions and restorative justice and to provide social, emotional, and mental health supports for students.

When de Blasio won the election, this letter served as an edict from the highest level of government that school discipline had to change. The broad goals were clear, and support seemed to be in place. But as PASSAGE developed and evolved, it became less and less clear how the partners were going to collaboratively reach our goals.

When the PASSAGE initiative began, I was the coordinator for community organizing and engagement at AISR (I took my position at UYC midway through the project). My role was to help provide technical assistance to the district and community partners. Coming into this project, AISR was aware that they were not setting up the first conversations or formal partnerships on this issue among stakeholders. There was already a strong coalition of community partners, anchored by the Dignity in Schools Campaign of New York (DSC-NY), which includes community organizations led by students, parents, educators, legal organizations, and civil rights organizations.

The DOE's Office of School Safety and Youth Development had been engaging with many of these partners for years, but that engagement had been fraught with tension and distrust. Under former mayor Bloomberg's administration, community engagement was not a

priority, and major policy changes were imposed on communities with little input or collaboration. The Bloomberg administration often seemed to expect the community to silently acquiesce to any changes – when community members were defiant and loudly protested and challenged reforms that negatively impacted their lives, their concerns often fell on deaf ears. Despite the obstacles to playing an active role in shaping their school communities, students, parents, and educators were piloting positive discipline initiatives in schools from the Bronx to Brooklyn. At times, initiatives were supported by the DOE, both logistically and financially, and other times, school communities implemented positive discipline programs without support and resources. Advocates were hopeful that the new de Blasio administration would be more open to incorporating input from youth and community members.

Our first PASSAGE meetings held much promise. Partners discussed intentionally connecting the city’s major Community Schools initiative to restorative practice training and resources to support positive school discipline in their transformation process. We shared strategies to facilitate the sharing of best practices among schools, educators, and administrators. Communications tools were created to help foster a clear understanding of restorative practices, and we zeroed in on a pilot initiative that would bring funding and support for a whole-school culture transformation approach for twenty schools.

As the initiative progressed, however, the questions that the DOE was not willing to address – questions around funding and the major policy changes that youth and other advocates were pushing for – became more and more integral to the work the initiative was set up to accomplish. Instead of creating a unified approach to engaging

with stakeholders not at the table, particularly the unions representing teachers and principals, the community partners and the district individually engaged with the unions. Without a shared approach to address the concerns about policy changes posed by the unions, and with no transparency surrounding conversations that were happening outside of PASSAGE, historical roadblocks remained in place. Youth organizers were fighting to change the system on multiple fronts, and the collaboration had failed to create an alliance that they could trust. PASSAGE was trying to build a roadmap for schools to use positive alternatives to exclusionary discipline, alternatives that were grounded in deep communication, repairing relationships, addressing the needs of all community members, collectively holding each other responsible for creating a safe and supportive environment, and using discipline as a means to learn, not to punish.

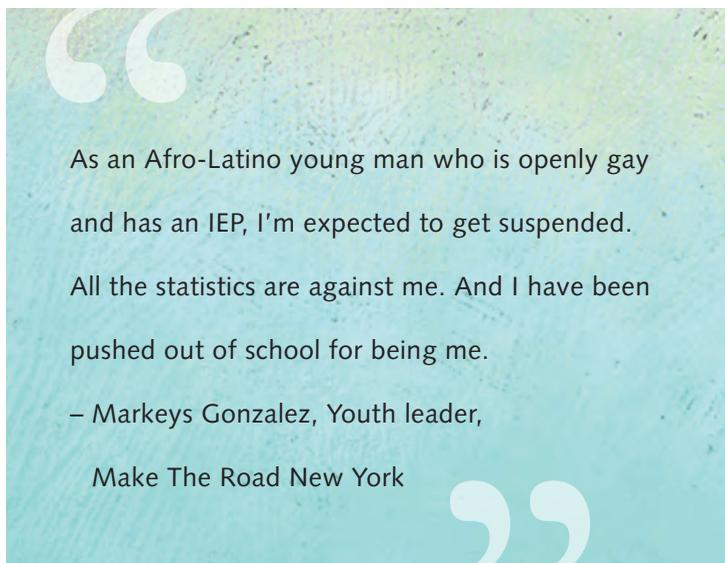
Internally, the collaboration never reflected these principles. It felt like district partners struggled to prioritize the experiences that young Black and Latina/o students brought to the table that showed how they were being oppressed by our approach to school discipline. Youth leaders identified the use of suspensions for minor infractions as creating an environment that made them feel discriminated against and targeted. The DOE had previously reclassified certain behavior, such as wearing a hat in school or talking back to a teacher, so students could no longer be suspended for such minor infractions. But students observed that school-based staff continued to suspend for these incidents – they were just reclassified under Infraction B21, “defying authority,” which was still a suspendable offense. To have a fair school discipline system, students identified eliminating suspensions for B21 as a key policy reform.

Make The Road New York youth leader Markeys Gonzalez, who was active in the PASSAGE collaboration, once described his experience with school discipline policies:

As an Afro-Latino young man who is openly gay and has an IEP, I'm expected to get suspended. All the statistics are against me. And I have been pushed out of school for being me.

Markeys's experiences, knowledge, and expertise should have driven our solutions. But to view Markeys as a change agent, those in positions of power would have to confront the bureaucratic forces that still view him as a statistic, and they never engaged in that struggle to see and embrace him for who he is as a young man. Markeys knew he wasn't alone in his struggle. He knew that there were thousands of other students who also felt targeted. In a district with 1.1-million students and more than 1,700 schools, it would take a willingness to change major policies, significant investments in resources, and a comprehensive long-term strategy for replacing the trauma described by our youth with positive discipline practices.

The change in the administration had so far not substantially altered the DOE's fundamentally transactional approach to community engagement, creating barriers in our collaboration that proved impossible to knock down. Efforts to get the DOE to open up, provide access to data around school discipline issues, and engage outside stakeholders were not successful. Initiative partners were able to identify shared goals, but we could not collectively build a shared vision, shared language, or consensus regarding best solutions, and community organizations felt that the DOE did not always appreciate the expertise and knowledge that everyone brought to the table.



#### LIMITED RESOURCES, COMPETING PRIORITIES

In 2013-2014, the DOE allocated approximately \$600,000 to support restorative practice training for school-based teams. But to change how school discipline was playing out, there had to be a more comprehensive approach than a few trainings – an approach that would make school-based staff feel supported and that would value students and parents as change agents. Community partners like the UYC had been advocating for a whole-school approach to transforming school climate, an approach that built a school's capacity for embedding restorative practices in their school culture by training staff, providing ongoing support, and utilizing the expertise of youth and parents.

Before the 2014-2015 school year, there had been about 100 schools that had received some form of training in restorative practices, either through the DOE or by using their school funding to bring in external partners to provide training. However, schools that were committed to bringing on restorative justice coordinators were often taking from one successful program to support their own school climate efforts. Other schools had a hard time

identifying staff, often already stretched thin, to help lead their efforts. And schools that were sending school-based teams to receive Tier I training in restorative practices were finding it difficult to apply what they learned in training without ongoing support. Experience told all the partners at the table – students, parents, educators, and administrators – that schools needed sustained funding and resources for changes to take hold, but it was unclear if the DOE would provide the funding that was needed to make a more comprehensive vision a reality.

Another challenge was that our initiative emerged just as the de Blasio administration began to build out their plans for improving schools. Their framework and plans were a drastic shift from the ideological approach of the previous administration. Universal pre-K was the signature initiative of our new mayor’s education platform, and the DOE was responsible for creating 50,000 new seats for pre-K in a matter of months. The Community Schools initiative grew from 42 schools to more than 140 schools and was given a three-year deadline to improve schools that had struggled to provide high-quality educational opportunities for decades.

To launch these ambitious initiatives – the public priorities of our new mayor – it was going to take a massive effort from the staff at the DOE, and it would mean prioritizing funding to help these efforts get off the ground. Though universal pre-K and Community Schools have great potential to provide better educational opportunities for Black and Latina/o students, these initiatives had begun to completely overshadow the need to eliminate the racial inequities in school discipline. As the internal infrastructure was being built to support the administration’s signature initiatives, the conversations happening in PASSAGE about discipline disparities seemed to

be siloed from what was happening in other places. We still had no clear answers about funding, a revised school discipline code had been delayed for months, and community partners continued to hear from the DOE that some did not agree with UYC’s position on the reforms that were needed.

### STEPS FORWARD: AN “INSIDE/ OUTSIDE” APPROACH TO COMMUNITY VOICE IN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE POLICIES

In February 2015, the mayor, with a strong and steady push by advocates, named a Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline that included many of the community partners in the PASSAGE initiative, including youth, parents, educators, and legal advocates, as well as the DOE, the NYPD, the unions, and a cross-section of city agency partners, additional advocates, and community organizations. Solutions that emerged in the PASSAGE initiative, many of which community partners had been advocating for years, were now being discussed at a larger table. For community partners this brought up a new set of questions and challenges. Particularly, what did this mean for the work that we were hoping to complete during the PASSAGE initiative? Despite all the challenges, the PASSAGE work had led us to identifying a pilot initiative that felt essential to building out a comprehensive long-term strategy.

Once the Leadership Team meetings began, many of the community partners and the district leadership partners were joined in the same working subgroup. The pilot initiative that we developed in PASSAGE was introduced in the subgroup and evolved to include more mental health services. How this would all be funded became one of the main questions for the Leadership Team. As the budget negotiations for the city’s fiscal year

began to wind down, there was still no commitment for restorative practices in the DOE's budget. The Leadership Team did not guarantee that funding for restorative practices would be prioritized.

Outside of the Leadership Team, UYC and DSC-NY continued their organizing and advocacy to ensure that the city understood school discipline as a systemic racial inequity issue. In May 2015, the City Council allocated \$2.4 million for fifteen schools to use a whole-schools approach to school culture and climate transformation. PASSAGE and the Leadership Team have made engagement a priority. We were able to secure the funding we needed because organizing and advocacy outside of formal structures remained a priority for community partners.

Prior to the Leadership Team coming together, the DOE finalized revisions to the discipline code that shortened the length of suspensions for horseplay to 1 to 5 days (from 6 to 180 days). The new discipline code also required principals to get authorization from the DOE before they could suspend a student for Infraction B21 (defying authority). Our youth leaders had been fighting for the elimination of the use of suspensions for B21, because it is impossible to significantly reduce racial disparities without ending ambiguous policies that lend themselves to individual and structural biases playing out.

The creation of PASSAGE and the Leadership Team has not guaranteed a shared consensus of the transformational policy changes we need, but it has opened up the space to have those conversations and move in that direction. In its next phase, the Leadership Team is committed to continuing to revise the discipline code and will also address the Memorandum of Understanding, the legal agreement defining the role of police in schools – an agreement that expired more

than ten years ago and has never been renewed.

## TOWARD A SAFE, HEALTHY, AND SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

We understand that policy changes do not mark the end of our struggle. Dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline means taking apart the system, brick by brick, to abolish the structural inequities that have produced racially unjust policies and practices. It means addressing funding, standardized testing, curriculum, school control, and much more. Policy changes are a mechanism for forcing a slow, bureaucratic machine to move with more haste and urgency.

When students say that their schools feel like prisons, all stakeholders need to listen to them and figure out what it will take to shift the paradigm. We must listen to students like Onyx Walker, Matthew Evans, and Markeys Gonzalez when they describe the impact that the heavily policed climate and biased application of suspensions in their schools have on them. Removing metal detectors, scanners, and police may not be able to happen overnight. But stakeholders committed to a healthy and supportive learning environment must accept that this will never happen in Black and Latina/o schools if we don't remove all elements of a police state inside and around our schools. If we choose to end this unhealthy and unproductive approach to school discipline, the lessons we learned from PASSAGE will help build a stronger community and district partnership to provide our students with an environment conducive to learning where they are treated with dignity and respect.

*For more on the Urban Youth Collaborative, see <http://www.urbanyouthcollaborative.org/>.*