



Policy Brief

Policy Recommendations to Improve Schools for Black Students

While the policy recommendations below would certainly be beneficial for all students, they are designed to target the policies and practices that limit or expand opportunities for Black students in particular. For more information about implementing these changes, contact Morgan Craven, J.D., IDRA national director of policy, advocacy and community engagement at morgan.craven@idra.org or Terrence Wilson, J.D., IDRA regional director of policy and community engagement at terrence.wilson@idra.org.

Strategies for Building Safe and Welcoming Schools Free from Harmful Discipline and Policing Practices

Prohibit the presence of police officers inside school buildings. [Police officers do not create safer environments in schools](#) and actually make many students and teachers feel less safe. Yet, they are still allowed inside school buildings, exposing students to potentially harmful interactions. This is especially true for Black students and students with disabilities, who are disproportionately arrested, ticketed and referred to juvenile probation for school-based behaviors. State laws must prohibit the presence of police officers in schools, and school districts should instead invest resources in the people and practices that are proven to help to create safe and supportive school climates.

Prohibit the use of tasers, pepper spray and other [harmful use of force tactics](#) in schools. Even though these weapons are prohibited in many other spaces, they [can still be used in some schools](#) and are [used disproportionately against Black students](#). Students, including bystanders, are harmed in many ways when these weapons are used.

Require that schools **meet the recommended student-to-mental health professional ratios** (including counselors and social workers). Diverse, well-trained mental and behavioral health professionals can help to create safe, supportive schools where the underlying needs of students and adults are addressed, rather than punished. This is especially critical as students and adults are returning to classrooms having endured trauma during and after the pandemic.

Adopt the [CROWN Act](#) and include prohibitions on punishments (like suspensions) for [dress code violations](#), which can disproportionately target Black students and girls and push them out of their classrooms.

Require school districts to perform yearly data audits of their school police activities, including reviews of police calls from schools and actual police interactions. Additionally, schools should gather qualitative information from a diverse group of students and teachers to identify interactions that are not captured by data. Each district should publish these audits and identify appropriate community-based resources and school-based personnel that can be used to address student and adult needs that were previously addressed with police and criminalization, with the goal of significantly reducing any police-student interactions. State and local education agencies should provide training and resources to support these audits.

Require training on preventing and responding to racial bullying. State and local education agencies should provide focused training to all school personnel on how to appropriately respond to racial bullying, just as resources are provided to respond to other types of in-person and cyberbullying. Many students have identified [racial bullying as a problem](#) that their schools are ill-equipped to address.

Limit the use of exclusionary discipline and police intervention in remote settings. As students adjust to remote instruction during COVID-19, schools should prohibit practices that exacerbate remote learning challenges. Schools should not send police officers to homes to punish students for attendance or behavior issues and should not use suspensions or other ineffective punitive discipline practices to punish students for online behaviors, including dress code violations and not having a camera turned on.

Do not use punitive measures to enforce COVID-19 public health recommendations. Some school districts have decided to harshly punish students for behaviors like sneezing, coughing and violating social distancing and mask wearing rules. Harsh punishments for this conduct are a poor deterrent and have harmful – and potentially discriminatory – impacts on the students who are criminalized and impacts on the entire campus community. Schools should focus instead on positive methods to encourage compliance with public health guidelines, including providing personal protective equipment, teaching students about COVID-19 and the science behind infectious disease spread, and creative incentive systems that reward students for supporting and complying with public health protocols.

Raise the ages of juvenile court jurisdiction. We must ultimately adopt systems that do not criminalize children in any fashion, but instead provide appropriate supports to address their needs in their schools and communities. Additionally, we must immediately ensure that children are treated as [children in our current education and justice systems](#). Juvenile courts should not have jurisdiction over young students, including 10- to 12-year-old children. Additionally, older youth, including 18-year-olds, should not be pushed into the adult criminal justice system.

End corporal punishment in schools, which is used [disproportionately against Black students in several states, especially in the U.S. South](#). In addition to having a disgusting history that targeted Black students, Latino students and students with disabilities, corporal punishment policies lead to discriminatory outcomes in application today. The practice has not been found to effectively change student behaviors in schools, serves no educational purpose, and can push students into the school-to-prison pipeline.

Require that every school district with racial disparities in school policing and discipline data use their security and other funds to hire diverse counselors and social workers and to provide teacher training in research-based ways to promote safe and supportive schools and the school-to-prison pipeline. Districts with these racial disparities should be prohibited from using any funds to hire police officers, purchase surveillance equipment or harden school facilities.

Increase recess and outdoor time requirements for all grade levels and prohibit schools from taking recess away from students. Research shows that unstructured outdoor time improves concentration, academic performance, [social emotional wellbeing and health outcomes \(particularly during COVID-19\)](#). Yet, outdoors time is often limited in schools or [even taken away as a form of punishment](#), which, like other forms of punishment, could disproportionately impact Black students.

Require education agencies to **devote more resources to promote the growing ethnic studies network**. School districts should be required to work with community-based organizations, coalitions and colleges to expand access to course materials and promote dual credit options for students who wish to take ethnic studies courses. States can:

Explore incentivizing ethnic studies by creating a certificate designation on graduation diplomas that highlight student's work toward culturally-sustaining awareness.

Create a database of colleges that have high-quality ethnic studies programs and encourage dual enrollment programs with local high schools.

Highlight interdisciplinary, culturally-sustaining K-12 lessons and practices through a statewide [online Community of Practice](#) curated by colleges, school district ethnic studies teachers and students and non-profit organizations.

Protecting Funding for Schools During and After COVID-19

Ensure full funding for schools based on reliable cost studies and use revenue sources including state emergency "rainy day" funds, federal emergency monies and new revenue streams to protect school districts that serve Black students, other students of color, emergent bilingual students (English learners) and students from families with limited incomes. These school districts are the hardest hit by the health and economic impacts of COVID-19 that threaten to exacerbate existing inequities in schools.

Increase resources to address the digital divide in Black communities: provide resources to address connectivity deserts; increase access to devices like hotspots, computers and tablets; and improve user knowledge of online learning platforms for students and families. Resources also should be allocated to support meaningful engagement between families and schools, including through additional parent support specialists and other staff who are trained and tasked with maintaining communication with families, particularly families of color who have less communication with their schools, even controlling for the digital divide.

Expanding Access for Emergent Bilingual Students and Bilingual Education

Promote quality bilingual education for emergent bilingual students through funding, a diverse teacher workforce, and enhanced data monitoring systems. Quality bilingual education programs, such as dual language, require sufficient funding, trained and certified teachers, and instructional materials in both English and students' home languages. Solutions include increasing the student-based funding for English learners to provide appropriate bilingual education resources and resolving the bilingual teacher shortage by reducing barriers to quality preparation and certification programs.

Building School District Health

Provide funding and training to school districts to adopt teaching and learning assessment systems that are non-punitive and that identify and respond to growth and learning over time. These systems should include individualized, portfolio-based formative assessments, combined with testing of small but representative samples of the districts' student population. These assessments are research-based methods that enable schools to respond to student learning needs, ensure student rights to access an excellent education are protected, and reduce the over-reliance on single, sometimes flawed tests in determining grade promotion and campus and school district success. Adopting effective assessment systems has always been critical and is even more important with the limitations presented by COVID-19.

School districts should require equity audits for all schools, provided by a evaluators from a small, well-vetted list of non-profit organizations. Equity audits are used to review a school's culture, trends, practices and policies. They use quantitative and qualitative data to understand how opportunities are distributed and denied to different groups of students through policies and practices. Once issues are identified, they can be addressed with intentional and effective changes. These audits are especially critical now as inequities are exacerbated by COVID-19 school closures and changes.

Ensuring Access and Success in College

Increase funding for state-funded college grant programs and prohibit unreasonable increases in tuition costs. Though grant programs provide critical resources for students with financial need, they are often not fully funded to support all eligible students. Increasing resources for these programs and ensuring colleges do not impose unreasonable tuition costs is important for expanding access to college for Black students and helping them and their families to weather economic downturns, like the one associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Address Black students' disproportionate loan debt through increased instructional funding for colleges and investments in college counseling. Research shows that Black students both take on more student debt and have a more difficult loan repayment process than their college peers. By increasing state and federal funding, through match programs and stable revenue sources of state support for higher education, colleges can more easily lower and maintain their cost of attendance and potential loan debt offered to students. Investing financial and other supports in college counseling toward dual credit and financial aid, and throughout students' postsecondary search process could also alleviate their loan debt burden.

Increase funding for a grow your own grant program and other teacher diversity efforts, to increase training, recruitment and retention for a diverse cohort of teachers. Research shows that all students benefit from having teachers of color, with one study showing the positive impacts on graduation rates that even one Black teacher can have for all students, particularly Black students. Still, Black teachers are only 7% of the teaching force nationwide.

The Intercultural Development Research Association is an independent, non-profit organization. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. IDRA strengthens and transforms public education by providing dynamic training; useful research, evaluation, and frameworks for action; timely policy analyses; and innovative materials and programs.