



Policy Agenda

A Black Student Centered Policy Agenda

Just like their peers, Black students bring great talents, interests, joy and cultural contributions to their classrooms. They deserve to be supported and guided through their academic and social lives by teachers and administrators who care deeply about their success and believe in their potential.

Unfortunately, Black students bear the brunt of systemic inequities and the policies that create and sustain them, including underfunded schools, harmful discipline and policing practices, and a lack of access to meaningful counseling and coursework that prepare students to access and succeed in college. Black students also encounter administrators and educators who do not see the assets they bring but instead subscribe to harmful stereotypes about Black students' – and their families' – academic potential, social engagement and commitment to school.

Black students deserve excellent and equitable schools, just like everyone else. Policymakers and school leaders can make changes at every level to achieve that goal, including those in IDRA's newly-updated Black Student-Centered Policy Agenda. These policy recommendations can be tailored for adoption at the local, state and national levels.

Build Safe and Welcoming Schools Free from Harmful Discipline and Policing Practices

Prohibit school-based police officers. 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, subjected to use of force techniques, and referred to juvenile probation for school-based behaviors.

State laws must prohibit the presence of police officers in schools. School districts should instead invest resources in the people and practices that we know help create safe and supportive school climates. This investment in prevention, rather than harmful police intervention, is especially critical as young people, families and teachers call for meaningful strategies to make their schools safer.

For resources about the harms of school-based policing and safety strategies that work, see IDRA's brief, [What Safe Schools Should Look Like for Every Student: A Guide to Building Safe and Welcoming Schools and Rejecting Policies that Hurt Students](#).

Prohibit harmful and unnecessary exclusionary discipline practices in schools, including suspensions and alternative school placements. These practices increase the likelihood that students will struggle academically, be held back, not graduate, and have [contact with the juvenile and adult criminal legal systems](#). Harmful discipline practices threaten the success of both the student being punished and the other students in the classroom and school, all while ignoring what could be an underlying issue being experienced by the student (like hunger or a lack of challenging curriculum) or the [bias of the adult](#) doing the punishing.

[Black students in schools across the country are more likely to be punished](#) than their peers and are more likely to be punished harshly for similar behaviors, even though they are not more likely to break school rules.

For example, though Black preschool students only accounted for 18% of total preschool enrollment in the United States, they received [43% of one or more types of out-of-school suspensions](#). These harmful discipline systems that rely on punishment rather than real support compromise the opportunities for school and life success for far too many Black students and should end immediately.

As states and schools eliminate punitive discipline practices, they should invest in [research-based programs](#) – like [restorative practices](#) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) – that (when implemented correctly) work to build up positive school climates, provide supportive interventions for adults and students when necessary, apply age-appropriate and meaningful consequences, and model healthy conflict resolution.

End corporal punishment in schools, which is used [disproportionately against Black students in several states, especially in the U.S. South](#). Corporal punishment does not effectively change student behaviors in schools, serves no educational purpose, and can push students into the school-to-prison pipeline. Students who are hit, spanked, paddled or slapped in their schools suffer academically, feel disconnected from their teachers and peers, and can experience physical and psychological trauma. For more

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information about how students are harmed in the 19 states that still allow children to be hit in schools and efforts to change state and national policy, [see IDRA's corporal punishment website](#).

Prohibit the use of tasers, pepper spray, physical and mechanical restraints like handcuffs 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 and young people with disabilities. For example, a [report that examined school police violence across the country](#) found that Black girls are twice as likely as their peers to be physically restrained by law enforcement in their schools. Students, including bystanders, are harmed physically and in many other ways when these weapons are used by teachers, administrators, other staff, or law enforcement or other security personnel.

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 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 COVID-19 pandemic. While nearly all states fail to meet the recommended student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1, this failure is especially pronounced in [schools that serve mainly students of color, where student-to-counselor ratios tend to be the worst](#).

Adopt the [CROWN Act](#) and include prohibitions on punishments (like suspensions) for [dress code violations](#), which can disproportionately and [unlawfully target Black students](#) and girls and push them out of their classrooms. [Black girls, in particular, face unique and harmful stereotypes](#) about their femininity, culpability and sexuality, leading to them being targeted for these and other so-called infractions.

Require school districts to perform yearly data audits of their school police activities, including through a review of police calls from schools and actual police interactions with students. Data about school-based policing are notoriously hard to gather and unreliable, often because there is a lack of coordination and accountability for data collection between school districts, school district police forces and local law enforcement.

Additionally, schools should gather qualitative information from a diverse group of students and teachers to identify interactions that are not captured by general data. Each school 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.

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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 provide teacher training in research-based ways to promote safe and supportive schools. School 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 well-being and health outcomes \(particularly during COVID-19\)](#). Yet, outdoor 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.

Promote Culturally-Sustaining Schools that Support and Uplift Black Students and their Communities

States, education agencies and school districts should devote more resources to adopting and promoting ethnic studies courses and culturally-sustaining curricula that reflect diverse communities across all subjects. 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 and school districts can also provide support for training in [culturally-sustaining practices that have been shown to improve connections to school and academic outcomes for students](#). It is particularly important that policymakers and school leaders protect ethnic studies courses and culturally-sustaining curricula as these concepts, courses and materials are under attack by those with a political agenda to whitewash history and protect entrenched systems of power. For more information and free resources, including lesson plans and other teaching materials, see IDRA’s [We All Belong ~ School Resource Hub](#).

Require meaningful prevention and intervention strategies to address racial bullying and harassment that threaten the well-being of students and create hostile school environments. School efforts to prevent and respond to bullying must account for the specific ways that bullying targets students on the basis of their racial and other identities and [the magnified harm](#) that students and a school community experience when the bullying behavior is motivated by bias or discrimination. States and school districts should allocate sufficient resources and provide [evidence-based training](#) to all school personnel on [how to appropriately respond](#) to racial and other identity-based bullying and harassment.

Additionally, national and state policymakers must adopt a clear framework for how schools should provide meaningful prevention, intervention, counseling and other supports for students experiencing bullying, the students who engage in these harmful behaviors, and students who witness or are otherwise impacted by these incidents. There must be appropriate consequences for students who engage in bullying focused on addressing root causes of behaviors, repairing harm, and building healthy relationships [instead of exclusionary discipline](#).

Black students, and many others, have identified [racial bullying as a problem](#) that their schools are failing to address to the detriment of their success and the school climate as a whole. Many educators confirm this, especially following the passage of classroom censorship policies that attempt to limit how adults and students are able to talk about and confront racism and other forms of discrimination in schools.

Ensure Equitable Funding for Schools

Ensure full funding for public schools, [based on IDRA's basic principles of school funding equity](#). Black students are more likely to attend chronically-underfunded schools than white students. This impacts access to modern materials and facilities, experienced teachers, and other programs and opportunities that help to ensure academic success. State policymakers must invest dollars in public education and ensure funding formulae and grant programs target historically-marginalized districts and communities.

In addition, policymakers should reject vouchers, education savings accounts, and other funding streams that pull public monies away from public schools and [compromise important civil rights protections for students](#).

Similarly, federal policymakers should increase funding targeted at historically-marginalized groups of students and incentivize equitable state funding formulae.

Local school district leaders should ensure young people, families, teachers and other advocates understand how funds are spent and have transparent and collaborative budgeting practices.

Increase resources to address the digital divide in Black communities, including 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 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.

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Expand 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. Black students make up nearly [5% of emergent bilingual students across the country](#) and must have access to high-quality programs. 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.

National and state policymakers should increase student-based funding for bilingual education programs and increase funding for grant programs to provide appropriate bilingual education resources.

Additionally, states must address the [bilingual teacher shortage](#) by reducing barriers to quality preparation and certification programs, implementing teacher retention strategies and increasing teacher pay.

Build 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 districts' student populations. Formative assessments are research-based methods that enable schools to respond to student learning needs, ensure students' rights to access an excellent education are protected, and reduce the over-reliance on single, flawed tests in determining grade promotion and campus and school district success.

School districts should require equity audits for all schools, provided by evaluators from a small, well-vetted list of non-profit organizations. [Equity audits 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.

Ensure 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, at the state and federal levels, and ensuring colleges do not impose unreasonable tuition costs is important for expanding access to college for Black students.

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Address Black students' disproportionate loan debt through increased instructional funding for institutions of higher education 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, financial aid, and throughout students' postsecondary search process could also alleviate their loan debt burden.

Increase funding for Grow Your Own grant programs 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. Providing supports and financial incentives at the state and federal levels to teacher development programs can help to address the nationwide teacher shortage crisis and improve outcomes for Black students.

Invest in diverse, well-trained college counselors. The presence and involvement of these professionals [has been shown to improve student achievement, attendance and overall school climate](#). IDRA's research on college counselors in Texas recommends that there be sufficient well-trained counselors to prepare every student in the school to access and succeed in college. This requires those counselors to understand the students and families in their schools and be prepared to offer coursework, college and career advice that is asset-based and meets their needs.

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 (terrence.wilson@idra.org). If you are interested in model policy language in your state or community for any of the policy recommendations above, contact Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D., IDRA chief legal analyst (paige.duggins-clay@idra.org).

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IDRA is a 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 leading policy analyses and advocacy; dynamic teacher training and principal coaching; useful research, evaluation and frameworks for action; and innovative student, family and community engagement.