

A Policy Agenda to Support Black Students



by Morgan Craven, J.D. • February 2024

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. Policy-makers and school leaders can make changes at every level to achieve that goal, including those in IDRA’s newly-updated A Policy Agenda to Support Black Students (formerly titled, Black Student-Centered Policy Agenda). These policy recommendations can be tailored for adoption at the local, state and national levels.

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

Prohibit school-based police officers. School-based police officers do not create safer environments in schools and, research shows, can actually make many students and teachers feel less safe, destabilize school climates, and compromise student success. 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 more likely than their peers to be referred to law enforcement – even though they are not more likely to break school rules – and disproportionately arrested, ticketed, subjected to use of force techniques, and referred to juvenile probation for school-based behaviors.

Unfortunately, we have recently seen more efforts to increase the presence of police and other armed officials in schools in the name of “school safety,” even though this approach is contrary to what we know about implementing effective and proactive safety strategies in schools.

[Research shows](#) that this incorrect connection between safety and school-based law enforcement harms students of color, especially. Following high-profile school shootings, police presence and other surveillance measures (like metal detectors and cameras) increase in the schools that serve primarily students of color, even controlling for levels of reported crime at the school and in the surrounding community.

State laws must prohibit the presence of school-based police officers. School districts should instead invest resources in the people and practices, like counselors, social

workers, and restorative 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 ineffective 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 in 2017-18, they received [43% of one or more 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](#). For example, in Mississippi – where 25% of all instances of corporal punishment in the United States occurred in 2017-18 – Black children accounted for 62.9% of students corporally punished, even though they made up 49% of the student population. Black girls received 73% of the punishments given to girls in the state.

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. Major medical, teacher, psychological, legal, and advocacy professional organizations and coalitions have condemned hitting children in schools, as has the U.S. Department of Education in a [“Dear Colleague” letter](#) to state officials (2023).

For more information about how students are harmed in the approximately 21 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.

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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) and ensure those professional staff have the time, support, and resources to serve students' mental and behavioral health needs. 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. 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 highest](#).

Prohibit discrimination and punishments (like suspensions) for dress code, hair style, and other physical appearance rule violations, that can disproportionately and [unlawfully target Black students](#), students from families with limited incomes 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.

Recent [research](#) shows that many school districts' dress codes contain rules that are discriminatory on the basis of race, gender, religion, and other protected characteristics, and that are enforced in discriminatory ways.

Require school districts to perform yearly data audits of their school police activities, including through a review of law enforcement referrals 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 with law enforcement that may not be 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.

Require that **every school district that is not meeting recommended student-to-mental health professional ratios to use their "safety and security" funds, including from state and federal sources, to hire diverse counselors and social workers** and provide teacher training in research-based ways to promote safe and supportive schools. School districts should be prohibited from using any funds to hire police officers, purchase surveillance equipment or harden school facilities because these expensive measures do not help to ensure safety.

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](#). 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.

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

Black students should be able to attend schools where they feel welcome, safe, and see themselves as valued members of the school community. Culturally-sustaining curricula and instructional practices have been shown to improve school climates, connections to school, and academic outcomes for students, including Black students.

It is particularly important for schools to focus on ensuring all students feel safe and supported in their schools given recent efforts in some school districts and states to censor teachers and students in their classrooms, ban books and instructional materials, and create hostile climates where certain students, including students of color and LGBTQ+ students, may feel targeted because of their identities and personal characteristics.

In addition to prohibiting these harmful policies and ensuring robust protections of students' civil rights, policymakers and school leaders must proactively ensure they are creating safe and welcoming learning environments for all students.

Schools must have more resources to adopt and promote ethnic studies courses and ensure that, across all subjects, students have access to culturally-sustaining curricula and instructional practices that reflect and celebrate diverse communities. School districts should receive resources and technical support to collaborate 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.

For more information and free resources, including lesson plans and other teaching materials, see the [IDRA SEEN School Resource Hub](#).

There must be 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. See IDRA's resources for more information about our work with students and families [to address identity-based bullying](#) through federal administrative complaints, community organizing, and state and local policy advocacy.

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Ensure Equitable Funding for Schools

Black students are more likely to attend chronically-underfunded schools than white students. This limits their access to modern materials and facilities, experienced teachers, and other programs and opportunities that help to ensure academic success.

We must ensure full funding for public schools, based on IDRA's [basic principles of school funding equity](#). State and federal 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 privatization schemes** 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. And 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.

Expand Access for Emergent Bilingual Students and Bilingual Education

[Black students make up nearly 5% of emergent bilingual students across the country](#) and must have access to high-quality educational programs that protect their civil rights and ensure academic success. 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 to ensure students whose home language is not English have access to bilingual education programs** and increase funding for targeted grant programs to provide appropriate bilingual education resources.

States must address the [bilingual teacher shortage](#) by removing unnecessary technical barriers to teacher exams and to quality preparation and certification programs, supporting student-to-teacher pipeline programs, like grow your own programs, that incentivize aspiring teachers to teach in their communities, implementing teacher retention strategies, and increasing teacher pay and other financial incentives.

Additionally, states and school districts must **have policies, technical support, and resources to ensure the families of emergent bilingual students are authentically and fully engaged in the school community**. Often, families who cannot speak English are unable to access even basic information about their child's school, well-being, and academic progress. Schools must ensure families have access to translators and translated materials and design school spaces and programming to be accessible to all.

States can implement many of these strategies through more robust **seal of biliteracy** frameworks, that ensure students have access to programs that meet rigorous standards for achieving bilingualism and biliteracy.

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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 tests in determining grade promotion and campus and school district success.

School districts should require equity audits for all schools, provided by well-vetted evaluators. [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.

Finally, policymakers must 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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Ensure Access to and Success in College

Black students continue to be underrepresented in college enrollment and completion. A [2023 study](#) found that six-year completion rates for Black students in higher education degree and certification programs are lower than any other racial group. And barriers to enrollment and completion include high financial costs and "overt forms of racial discrimination."

Unfortunately, [recent coordinated efforts](#) to limit access to college for students of color and other systemically-marginalized groups have seen success in state legislatures and courts. For example, in 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court's decisions in *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina* and *Students for Fair Admissions v. President & Fellows of Harvard College* made it more difficult for colleges to consider all aspects of students' identities and experiences, including their racial and ethnic backgrounds, in admissions decisions. Dozens of states took steps to prohibit, defund, or limit diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives in higher education. These initiatives are designed to promote equitable and inclusive learning environments for historically-marginalized students, including Black students, and can impact college enrollment and retention rates.

In K-12 schools, Black students lack access to the programs and supports that increase their access to college. Each year, IDRA releases its study of attrition rates in Texas that demonstrates school "holding power," or the ability of schools to keep students enrolled in school and learning until they graduate. The [most recent analysis](#) shows that schools are twice as likely to lose Black students as white students before they graduate.

Inequitable access and systemic barriers to higher education are not new phenomena, though we are certainly in a time of unique access challenges. In this environment, there is much to do to ensure K-12 schools are preparing Black students to access and succeed in college, including the following.

At all levels, policymakers should **invest in district-wide early college high school programs**. Through the early college high school model, school districts partner with local colleges and universities to **provide students with dual credit opportunities and engage in counseling strategies to ensure students are on pathways to enroll and succeed in college**. When adopted district-wide, this model ensures that all students, including Black students and others who are underrepresented in higher education, have the opportunity to access the coursework and supports to be prepared for postsecondary success.

School districts must have more funding to hire and train diverse 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 school counseling](#) in Texas shows that the role of counselors, including middle school counselors, is key to ensuring all students are prepared to access college. Specifically, counselors must have well-defined roles and resources, school districts should have college access equity plans in place that emphasize preparing all students for college, counselors should be better equipped to engage with families, and states should collect and publish more robust data on college readiness, success, and student outcomes.

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.

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For more information about implementing these policy recommendations or accessing model policy language, 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).

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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.