



## A NEW VISION OF SAFETY FOR GCPS MOVING TO POLICE-FREE SCHOOLS IN GWINNETT COUNTY

## *Moving to Police-Free Schools in Gwinnett County*

We demand police free schools in Gwinnett County. Gwinnett SToPP has worked to end overly harsh and ineffective discipline at Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) since our founding in 2008. We won the demand to denote Official Code of Georgia Annotated (OCGA) violations in the GCPS Student/Parent Handbook that could result in a referral to a School Resource Officer (SRO) and possible criminal charges. Once identified, we then reduced the number of disciplinary infractions that could garner police interaction by 33%. Gwinnett SToPP discovered and eliminated a county wide SRO contact quota.

It is time for GCPS to invest in a restorative, not punitive discipline system. Training sessions for officers will not help. We need more culturally competent counselors and others trained in child development, not cops! We are ready for a discipline system that is led by the community, counselors, and restorative justice practitioners that examines the root cause of misbehavior and seeks to end the cycle of suspensions. SROs have no place in our schools.

Gwinnett schools' funding for SROs is \$10,446,769. Instead of investing in police, GCPS should invest in research-based supports such as counselors, restorative justice practitioners, and community intervention workers<sup>1</sup> to maintain a peaceful learning environment.

We know that "armed personnel pose a safety threat to students and other school staff, and there is no evidence they make schools safer."<sup>2</sup> According to the latest data available from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, Black students and students with disabilities are disproportionately referred to law enforcement in Gwinnett Schools. Black students continue to be under-represented in academic opportunities and over-represented in discipline and criminalization.

We cannot overcome the dual role of SROs serving as both staff and police. Children can confide in school counselors, but police have a mandate to report misconduct. They are fundamentally at odds with effective and safe education. Black and brown students at GCPS have been forced to deal with a racist school culture that disproportionately disciplines them and fails to address racist incidents at their schools.

We cannot expect students who have had negative and discriminatory encounters with SROs to learn in places where they feel targeted, especially in light of recent events involving police across the country. It is incumbent upon GCPS to create a climate and culture of care and nurturing, a place where students are emotionally and physically safe to learn.

We call on Gwinnett County Board of Education to begin the process of removing SROs and implementing a fully-funded alternative discipline system led by the community and counselors that will restore students, not criminalize them.

## 1. Eliminate SROs from GCPS

This would prohibit a regular presence, such as being stationed full or part-time in a school or set of schools, making daily or weekly visits, or the inclusion of a school in an officer's regular beat. This includes School Resource Officers (SROs), police, security officers, probation and parole officers, and any other law enforcement personnel.

The arrest or detention of a student shall be used only as a measure of last resort<sup>3</sup>, and law enforcement should not come into schools to arrest or question students about a non-school related incident.

School safety cannot be just "hardening" schools, adding police or legalizing the arming teachers. We prevent school shootings and other violent events by building relationships with students and emotionally supporting them. Any definition of school safety must include emotional safety— children must be emotionally safe to learn at school in order to thrive. Right now, students with disabilities and Black and Latinx students are not emotionally safe to learn while at school. We must invest in preventative measures, especially for children. The fundamental purpose of police is to respond to incidents that may be criminal in nature, not examine the root cause of child misbehavior and trauma.

## 2. Reinvest \$10.4m+ GCPS Police Budget into Hiring Additional School Mental & Behavioral Health and Restorative Justice Staff.

Gwinnett County Public Schools will adopt a college model of counseling and student support in which culturally-competent certified and licensed therapists work on-site at schools during the full school day, before and after school, and on weekends as necessary. Most college campuses have counseling centers designed to support students as they navigate the rigors and demands of college and life and help students grow and develop emotionally, physically, socially, and intellectually. Counseling services are confidential as to not break trust or bring unnecessary harm to students and families. Currently, GCPS counseling is severely underfunded and significantly understaffed. For example, GCPS high school counselors spend the majority of their time with college admissions and scheduling. We need a counseling department that is fully equipped to serve a diverse population of students who need support in increasingly uncertain times. GCPS must:

- a. Ensure access to culturally competent and racially diverse counselors and social workers with a background in trauma-informed practices and behavioral and mental health at each school.
- b. Employ staff<sup>4</sup> trained to ensure safe and positive school climates, such as community intervention workers, peace-builders, transformative or restorative justice coordinators, behavior interventionists, school aides, counselors and other support staff.<sup>5</sup>

### **3. Revise the student discipline policies and practices to include Restorative Practices within the PBIS Framework**

A restorative philosophy emphasizes problem-solving approaches to discipline, attends to the social/emotional as well as the physical/intellectual needs of students, recognizes the importance of the group to establish and practice agreed-upon norms and rules, and emphasizes prevention and early restorative intervention to create safe learning environments.<sup>6</sup> GCPS discipline is ineffective and overly harsh. Cycles of suspensions disrupt the classroom and are an impediment to our students' future potential to advance academically, socially, and economically. The same students are repeatedly recycled in and out of the classroom. We can do better. It is time for the district to take restorative justice seriously.

a. Schools will use non-punitive interventions, whenever possible, in response to school infractions. Nonpunitive options include but are not limited to: schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), counseling services, restorative justice, and peer mediation. Student discipline will emphasize peace-keeping and restorative justice. Schools shall support non-punitive interventions by providing/utilizing:

- i. Training for administrators, teachers and staff to serve as effective de-escalation intervention practitioners;
- ii. Restorative measures that allow all parties to be heard, which include peer counseling, mediation, restorative circles and conferences;
- iii. PBIS to address the behavior of all students and staff with transparent, measurable goals and published results.

b. Reduce the amount of discretion in the Student Code of Conduct.

Increase the number of levels ideally to seven, but at the least five. This would provide the opportunity to add non-punitive interventions. If our only tool is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Data demonstrates that children of color and children with disabilities are punished more severely for minor infractions. Clear and narrowly-defined rules ensure that children receive equitable discipline and helps enable children working through restorative circles.

c. Establish a School Culture and Climate Team (SCCT) at every school consisting of the lead school counselor, school social worker, support staff, and senior level students. Each school will incorporate culturally-affirming social-emotional learning (SEL) programming into their standard educational practice. The SCCT will be grounded in culturally-affirming SEL. An SCCT has the training necessary to look beyond the immediacy of a conflict, address underlying issues and establish a plan that addresses the

needs of the students involved. The object is to create a way to reset and move forward.

- d. Hire racially diverse and culturally competent independent hearing officers.
- e. Extension of the GCPS Discipline Code Review Committee one calendar year.

This comprehensive review dictates an ample amount of time for thoughtful examination of student discipline policies and practices. The committee requires more than five meetings to be successful in identifying solutions to eliminating racial, ethnic, socioeconomic status, and differing ability disparities in the development and administration of student discipline practices and policies. Committee members must also have clear direction, goals and objectives to perform a comprehensive review.

**4. Implement a culturally relevant inclusive curriculum in elementary, middle, and high school.**

Students need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum. The current curriculum lacks sufficient representation of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian contributions to the foundation of this country and the agricultural, literary, industrial, technological and scientific achievements these groups made for the advancement of the American society. Thereby, the curriculum is a miseducation of our country's history. Curriculum is an important part of school culture and students who are excluded from the curriculum have a more difficult time participating. Disengagement leads to misbehavior. Gwinnett County Public Schools' student population is majority students of color. The current curriculum does not reflect the diversity of the community.

To reduce disciplinary issues and ensure that students are engaged, GCPS must implement the following:

- a. Teach Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian history using a curriculum curated by Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian people.
- b. GCPS will convene an independent and ethnically diverse review board for the curriculum, comprised of educators of all subjects, ethnic studies researchers, child psychologists, parents, students and grassroots education-centric organizations.

**5. Transparent review and reporting of student achievement and discipline including arrests and use of force.**

Regularly review disaggregated individual student level data. All student discipline reports shall be disaggregated by race, gender, education program, grade, and school. Reports shall be posted on the GCPS website.

- a. Create a community accountability committee to review and redress complaints regarding Interactions with SROs or local law enforcement.

Students, parents or guardians, teachers, administrators and principals must have easy access to a simple and straightforward complaint process which is clearly outlined and must be notified of any investigation and outcome in a timely manner.

- b. In accordance with Gwinnett County Public Schools Department of Safety and Security Procedural Manual, produce and publish quarterly community reports (see SRO manual Chapter 107.00 Community Relations, version 1, Reference 14) to include the following:

- i. The current concerns expressed by the school community
- ii. Current and potential problems that have a bearing on the school system and the school community
- iii. Proposed solutions to the problems identified
- iv. A progress report on the issues previously addressed
- v. Data on all SRO interactions which result in arrest and/or filing of criminal or juvenile charges. Data will fully be disaggregated by school, the officer and student's race, gender identity, and the student's grade and education program.

- c. Establish an ongoing committee devoted to eliminating disparities in discipline and achievement.

The team will include parents, students, community members, social workers, counselors, juvenile judges, researchers, restorative justice practitioners, educators with a background in culturally relevant pedagogy, and advocates with knowledge of model school discipline codes and practices.

**6. Ongoing mandatory anti-racism and cultural competency professional development for all GCPS staff.**

The district and schools shall invest in staff training that includes educating staff to become aware of the origin of their cultural perspectives while developing an understanding of the beliefs, practices and history of those outside of their own cultural group. Additionally, the schools shall invest in other preventative measures to avoid disparate impacts to any particular student population, including but not limited to: students of color, students with disabilities, students of low income, and students who identify as lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, queer, questioning, or asexual (LBGTQ+).

- a. Train school staff to utilize trauma informed practices.
- b. Training for administrators, teachers and staff to serve as effective de-escalation intervention practitioners.
- c. Ongoing classroom management training for school staff.



**7. Establish a protocol for the rare occasions that local police are called to school.**

GCPS shall limit the rare cases when law enforcement can be called into schools and recognize the principal as the primary authority responsible for school climate and safety.<sup>7</sup>

Absent a “real and immediate”<sup>8</sup> threat of serious physical injury to a student, teacher, or other member of the school community, school discipline issues must be handled by school personnel and not by SROs, police, security officers or other law enforcement. School administrators shall have final responsibility and jurisdiction over the building, the grounds and all members of the school community.<sup>9</sup>

- a. GCPS shall adopt a publicly accessible Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between schools and local police departments that limits the role of any law enforcement personnel who come in to contact with schools, including by:
  - i. Prohibiting the regular presence of law enforcement in schools (as detailed in section 1 above).
  - ii. Identifying incidents for which the school shall not call the police, and if called, the police will not respond.<sup>10</sup>
- b. Ensuring that any SROs, police or security officers that are called into a school are not involved in school discipline issues. They shall be responsible only for responding to serious criminal law matters where there is a real and immediate threat<sup>11</sup> of serious physical injury or where it is mandated by law that such offenses be referred to the criminal justice system.
- c. Setting strict limits on what law enforcement personnel can and cannot do when they are called to schools to respond to serious criminal matters.
- d. Requiring that all law enforcement personnel who come in to contact with schools receive training to ensure they are responding appropriately to youth, including at least 105 hours of training before being assigned to respond to schools and at least 10 hours of annual professional development. Decisions on the training requirements and specific training curriculum of police and other law enforcement personnel working in or around schools shall be developed in consultation with students, parents or guardians, teachers, school administrators and other stakeholders.
  - i. Topics for training shall include: trauma-informed practices, child and adolescent development and psychology, and de-escalation techniques. (See reference for the full list of training topics)<sup>12</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Dignity in Schools Campaign. (October 2018). Avoiding Criminalization in School Discipline: Law Enforcement [PDF file]. Retrieved from [https://dignityinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/AvoidingCriminalization\\_LawEnforcement.pdf](https://dignityinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/AvoidingCriminalization_LawEnforcement.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Dignity in Schools Campaign. (October 2018). Why Counselors Not Cops? [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://dignityinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/WhyCounselorsNotCops.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child art. 37.

<sup>4</sup> These staff should be protected by all applicable labor laws, including overtime pay where applicable, and should not be expected to perform these duties outside of their paid hour

<sup>5</sup> Each school must determine what their needs are in terms of supportive school staff, which may include both guidance counselors and therapeutic counselors, social workers, therapists, psychologists, substance abuse counselors, and other mental health professionals. All of these roles are meant to address the root causes of issues impacting students and the larger school climate

<sup>6</sup> Schiff, M., & Bazemore, G. (2012). "Whose Kids Are These?" Juvenile Justice and Education Partnerships Using Restorative Justice to End the "School-To-Prison Pipeline". In National Leadership Summit on School-Justice Partnerships (p. 6). New York, NY. Retrieved from <http://www.nycourts.gov/ip/justiceforchildren/PDF/Handouts/Collection%20of%20Reports%20-%20National%20Summit.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Police in Schools Are Not the Answer to School Shootings (2018). Available at:

<http://dignityinschools.org/resources/police-in-schools-are-not-the-answer-to-school-shootings>

<sup>8</sup> A "real and immediate" threat occurs when an individual "'has sustained or is immediately in danger of sustaining some direct injury' as the result of the...conduct and the injury or threat of injury must...not [be] 'conjectural' or 'hypothetical.'" City of Los Angeles v. Lyons, 461 U.S. 95, 102 (1983).

<sup>9</sup> RESOLUTION 118B, supra note 52 at 16-17

<sup>10</sup> See sample policies in Philadelphia and Los Angeles available at:

[https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/10497b\\_f7d-8280b96464077a7fb1da49c4f85f0.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/10497b_f7d-8280b96464077a7fb1da49c4f85f0.pdf); and

<http://www.fixschooldiscipline.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/LASPD-Arrest-and-Citation-Reform-Policy.-8-15-14.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> A "real and immediate" threat occurs when an individual "'has sustained or is immediately in danger of sustaining some direct injury' as the result of the...conduct and the injury or threat of injury must...not [be] 'conjectural' or 'hypothetical.'" City of Los Angeles v. Lyons, 461 U.S. 95, 102 (1983)

<sup>12</sup> Dignity in Schools Campaign. (2016). Counselors Not Cops: Ending the Regular Presence of Law Enforcement in Schools. Section (3)(j). Retrieved from [https://dignityinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/DSC\\_Counselors\\_Not\\_Cops\\_Recommendations-1.pdf](https://dignityinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/DSC_Counselors_Not_Cops_Recommendations-1.pdf)