November 14, 2022

An Open Letter: A Call for Safety and Justice in GCPS

Dear Members of the Gwinnett County Community,

2XU&RPPXQLW\'HVHUYHV%HWWHU We write as members and supporters of Gwinnett County. We stand with our community to

demand emotionally and physically safe schools for all students and reveal the truth: disciplinary

practices and policies that criminalize students and remove them from their classrooms do not

make schools safe. We share continued frustration with leadership who perpetuate the

criminalization and exclusion of students in Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) –

disproportionately harming students of color and students with disabilities – through flawed

policies that have failed for years and do not meaningfully address school safety.

The Gwinnett Parent Coalition to Dismantle the School-to-Prison Pipeline (Gwinnett SToPP)

leads a parent and caregiver-driven, community-centered partnership to dismantle the

school-to-prison pipeline in GCPS. Gwinnett SToPP formed in 2007 to answer growing

frustration with the district’s reliance on harsh punishment and law enforcement to address minor

school misconduct and has since advocated for restorative, equitable schools and discipline

● Jayden Kagiya Ndungu

● Luke Rondelli

● Seven King

● Steven Evert

● Timothy Allen Buchanan

We mourn heavier still as we reflect on the long history of violence in this county, from

classrooms to communities, that too often goes ignored until it is too late. Rather than

meaningfully grappling with this history, our leaders too often criminalize and stereotype young,

Black boys. As a result, we gather to set the record straight and center those in our community

who have been excluded from the conversation on equity, justice, and safety.

On Wednesday, November 2, 2022, members of the business, political, and religious

establishment in Gwinnett County hosted a “Code RED!” meeting to address school violence

and student discipline in Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS). At this meeting, community

leaders advanced false and harmful narratives about school safety, claiming that more policing,

more discipline, and more surveillance are what keep our students safe. This conversation

excluded and marginalized key voices on this issue, including students, parents and caregivers,

and educators.

Policing students and excluding them from their classrooms does not prevent violence. And these

practices uphold white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and the school-to-prison pipeline – which

pushes students out of school and into carceral systems. The current conversation about school

safety does not account for these harms and treats low income, students, students with

disabilities, and students of color – who make up most learners in GCPS – as disposable.

=HUR7ROHUDQFHDQG6FKRRO3ROLFLQJDUH3URYHQWREH,QHIIHFWLYHDQG'LVFULPLQDWRU\

For decades, schools have relied on harsh zero-tolerance policies, student surveillance, and

school policing in response to perceived threats of violence and as primary forms of discipline.

At the recent Code RED! event, the Chief of GCPS police and other community leaders signaled

support for these approaches, claiming that police in schools are “preventative.” However, the

data confirms these approaches do not make schools safe.

1 They’re not only ineffective; these

approaches also increase the risk of negative academic and social outcomes for students,

especially for Black and Brown students and students with disabilities.

2 Students who are subject

to over-policing and exclusionary discipline are more likely to drop out of school, experience

increased behavior problems, diminished educational engagement, and contact with the juvenile

2

Id.

1 Russell Skiba & Daniel Losen, “Turning the Page on School Discipline,” American Federation of Teachers,

available online at https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2015-2016/ski ba_losen.

and criminal systems.

3 When asked at the Code RED! event, the GCPS police chief was unable

to reference any specific data or studies to demonstrate that more police make schools safe.

GCPS has relied on policing and harsh, exclusionary discipline practices for years despite

overwhelming research that these policies disproportionately harm students of color and do not

reduce school violence. At GCPS’s August 2022 school board meeting, the Office of Student

Discipline revealed data that GCPS has referred thousands of students for long-term suspension

and expulsion – more than every other metro-area school district combined. Most of these

incidents did not involve major rule violations involving weapons, drugs, or violence.

4 And

while Gwinnett County’s population has only doubled since 1990, the number of people

incarcerated in Gwinnett County has increased six times.

Black and Brown students have experienced disproportionate harm because of GCPS’s historic

approach to school safety and student discipline. Black students make up a disproportionate

number of those suspended and expelled in GCPS.

5 GCPS has more than 1,400 children enrolled

in alternative schools, most of them Black and Latinx students.

6 Black students are also more

likely to be arrested at school than their white peers.

In recent months, GCPS finally acknowledged this harm. Board Member Everton Blair

commented that GCPS’s student discipline data made his “chest hurt.” Our chests hurt too as we

continue to witness educators, community members, and others signal a desire to return to the

previous administration’s harmful, ineffective disciplinary policies. Let’s be clear: while

suspensions, tribunals, School Resource Officers, and other punitive measures increased in

GCPS, so too did crime, challenging behaviors, and violence. So why should we return to

solutions that have not and will not work? Who do these solutions truly serve, and who do they

exclude? We must affirm and center those students that the establishment would rather throw out

of the classroom and lock up in cages. They are not the problem.

At the Code RED! event, Chairwoman Nicole Love Hendrickson implored to the Gwinnett

community that “we all need to be at the table addressing [school violence] in a collective

6 According to discipline data collected from GCPS pursuant to an Open Records Act re

c i p l i n e d a] �t�tpob lin e t

response and in a holistic way.” We agree. Fortunately, effective strategies to reduce violence

exist - strategies that prioritize the safety and holistic well-being of all students and our

community at large.

7 A positive school climate emphasizing relationship building,

social-emotional learning, and preemptive, structural behavioral interventions can decrease crime

and violence and reduce racial disparities in school discipline.

8 The community schools model

has also been a proven strategy to create more inclusive, community-centered, and safe schools. A few weeks ago, the Superintendent and GCPS Board of Education announced necessary, yet

incomplete, improvements to the disciplinary policy. These include increasing reliance on

restorative practices and alternative disciplinary approaches, the inclusion of social-emotional,

healing-centered learning, and responses that account for teacher and administrator capacity.9

However, these recent changes do not allow every student engaged in a disciplinary incident to

return to school immediately. To the contrary, Georgia law and GCPS policy mandate expulsion

for incidents involving dangerous weapons.

1

0 The recent changes prioritize building an inclusive

and culturally-responsive school culture, implementing school-wide, preemptive, structural

behavioral interventions, teaching new behaviors, and utilizing school exclusion only as a last

resort for the most serious offenses. We ur

From those in positions of power and influence, policymakers and administrators, and each

other, we demand the following: ● Create a community accountability committee to review interactions with, funding, and
role of School Resource Officers (SROs). ● Hire an RJ Consultant and practitioner, to properly implement restorative practices on a

school by school basis. ● Overhaul the student discipline processes and policies which includes 1) rewriting the
student code of conduct and related disciplinary policies and procedures and 2) the mandated implementation of Restorative Justice in all local schools by highly-skilled

personnel. ● Hire more culturally competent behavior specialists, counselors, MTSS coordinators, and
psychologists. Increase mental health services and resources for students and staf f members to meet the guidelines set by mental health professionals, including the ratio of

one counselor per 250 students. ● Fund and invest in student-led affinity spaces such as Black Student Unions, LGBTQIA+

support clubs, Muslim Student Associations, and more. ● Mandate implicit bias, anti-racist, and Restorative Justice professional development and

resources for all faculty and staff members. ● Invest and support our ongoing efforts to address empowerment, health, and wellness,

through comprehensive sex ed that represents all identities. ● Implement quality health education that teaches students the effects and dangers, but
more importantly, addresses the nuance of trauma and addiction, and provides access to

recovery and mental health services. ● Use evidence based Restorative Justice practices through highly-skilled professionals,
like circles, re-entry plans, and family group conferencing to address violent of fenses in schools.
Alongside these demands, we call for GCPS Board members, Gwinnett County policymakers and administrators, community leaders, caregivers, educators, students, and community members to continue to have open, honest, historically accurate, and equitable conversations around what our community needs.
Most importantly, at the center of these demands, we know and af

psy-̀̀̀ ollo�

Sincerely,

Georgia Youth Justice Coalition

Gwinnett SToPP

Gwinnett NAACP

Southern Poverty Law Center