

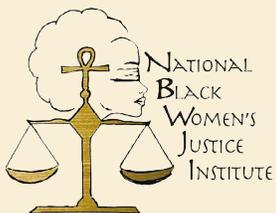
PROJECT FOCUS: GIRLS OF COLOR



# School Culture & Discipline Reform in Boston-Area Primary and Secondary Schools

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

MARCH 2018



Presented by a partnership between the  
National Black Women's Justice Institute (NBWJI) and  
Boston City Councilor At-Large Ayanna Pressley



# Introduction

Girls of color, particularly those who identify as Black/African American/African Diaspora, Hispanic/Latinx, and Indigenous, disproportionately experience exclusionary school discipline, including, but not limited to, suspension, expulsion, referrals to law enforcement and arrest.<sup>12</sup> Across the nation and in Boston, girls of color have described experiencing discipline in response to their expressions, presentation, and/or identity, instead of in response to an actual threat to school safety. Exclusionary discipline is linked to loss of instruction time, poor student performance, and the exacerbation of trauma, which can pave a pathway to contact with the juvenile court and criminal legal system. Research-based best practices in education suggest that alternatives to exclusionary discipline and harsh responses to negative student behavior are more effective in building relationships that develop and sustain safety on campus.

The National Black Women’s Justice Institute (NBWJI) and Boston City Councilor At-Large Ayan-na Pressley partnered in a participatory project that centered the experiences of girls of color in the co-construction of strategies to produce safe learning conditions for girls of color. This initiative, *Project Focus: Girls of Color*, engaged girls of color as policy stakeholders in the development of a school culture that is responsive to their needs. For this project, NBWJI led focus groups with over 100 girls of color attending Boston-area primary and secondary schools, as well as parents/guardians and school personnel. Subsequent to the focus groups, Councilor At-Large Pressley held two listening-only public hearings.<sup>3</sup> The first hearing provided space for the girls to provide public testimony regarding their experiences and needs in school, and to offer solutions for how schools could address them. The second hearing provided a platform for school leaders to provide public testimony regarding policies and practices that aim to improve student outcomes by reducing disparities among the use of punitive school discipline practices. Both hearings were held with the intention of uplifting community perspectives regarding the creation of safe and supportive learning environments for girls of color and their broader school communities.

The following recommendations are a summary of evidence-based practices and innovative solutions from participants in this project. These recommendations, while intended for Boston-area primary and secondary schools—inclusive of Boston Public Schools (BPS), charters, private, and religious institutions—can be considered and applied in school models nationwide.

- 
- 1 Inniss-Thompson, M.N. (2017). Summary of Discipline Data for Girls in U.S. Public Schools: An analysis from the 2013-14 U.S Department of Education Office for Civil Rights Data Collection. National Black Women’s Justice Institute. Found here: [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/0c71ee\\_56ca58a75f8840908dca5decbf6701f6.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/0c71ee_56ca58a75f8840908dca5decbf6701f6.pdf)
  - 2 Latinx is the gender-neutral alternative to Latino, Latina and even Latin@. The use of the term African Diaspora is used to describe individuals of African descent that have been moved, migrated, or scattering away from an established or ancestral homeland, especially referring to the involuntarily dispersal of Africans during trans-Atlantic slave trade
  - 3 Throughout the report, Boston-area schools refers to primary and secondary Boston Public Schools (BPS), charter schools, private schools, and religious based educational institutions.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AT A GLANCE

1. Develop a robust continuum of alternatives to exclusionary discipline and eliminate the use of suspension and expulsions for pre-K and grades K-2.
2. Exclusionary discipline, such as suspension and expulsion, should **only** be considered once an array of alternative, non-exclusionary discipline practices have been exhausted and resulted in no progress.
3. Co-construct dress code policies with students, particularly girls of color, and implement enforcement modalities that are anchored in principles of dignity and respect.
4. Create responses to dress code violations that do not negatively impact student instruction time.
5. Review and develop codes of conduct and other related school mandates to include equity policies with a robust articulation of gender and sex equity and student-focused responses to sexual harassment and assault.
6. Diversify teaching, administrative, and school leadership staff, and invest in additional school counselors and therapists on campus.
7. Create and conduct an annual review of school policing agreements and policies to ensure all agreements between the school and school-based law enforcement reflect the current needs of the student body and faculty. All agreements need to specify the roles and responsibilities of school police and include a requirement of training specific to children and adolescent mental health and cognitive development.
8. Create a parent council that consistently aims to engage all parents/guardians across the spectrum of gender, ability, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, race, ethnicity, age, language, religion, legal involvement, citizenship, and immigration status.
9. Provide educators, school leadership, administrative staff, and school-based law enforcement with training and relevant documentation to understand and recognize signs of behavior that may potentially be connected to a diagnosed or undiagnosed disability. Students that have been diagnosed with a physical or mental disability should be afforded the same alternatives to exclusionary discipline as other students in the school.
10. Employ trauma-informed and healing-responsive strategies to improve school safety and wellbeing.

# Policy Recommendations and Practice Guide: Boston-Area Primary and Secondary Schools

Policies are only as good as their implementation and evaluation. To this end, NBWJI and Boston City Councilor At-Large Ayanna Pressley have created guiding principles of implementation for each policy recommendation. These implementation and guiding principle recommendations are specifically geared toward briefly understanding the “why” behind the policy, as well as practical implementation practices that, if used, will help increase the capacity for schools to address the ongoing needs of girls of color and reduce the use of exclusionary discipline in school.

## **1. POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Develop a robust continuum of alternatives to exclusionary discipline and eliminate the use of suspension and expulsion for pre-K and grades K-2.**

Students, particularly girls of color, who are exposed to this level of exclusionary discipline early on have an increased risk of negative school performance and future contact with the juvenile court. Discipline alternatives should shift away from unnecessarily harsh and punitive responses and instead educate and work to reconcile harm while repairing their relationships within the school community.

### *Practice Recommendations:*

1. Co-construct classroom discipline decision-making tools with students, parents, teachers, and school administrators. The purpose of the tool is to provide a quick and accessible reference guide consisting of a continuum of discipline alternatives for negative student behaviors that range from less intrusive to more severe sanctions for a specific range of misbehaviors. The goal of classroom discipline should be for students to be accountable for their actions, to understand why the choices they may have made were problematic, and to have the information to make different choices in the future. Suspensions do not necessarily accomplish this goal.

As an example, the Baltimore Public School System created a “Levels of Intervention and Disciplinary Response”<sup>4</sup> guide to help teachers in the classroom choose the most effective response to negative student behavior. This guide is part of a broader system of restorative approaches used in Baltimore Public Schools that

---

<sup>4</sup> Data generated from the Maryland State Department of Education and cited in the Baltimore Sun (2017), Baltimore school suspensions fell last year. Found here: [http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/cms/lib/MD01001351/Centricity/Domain/8832/BCPS.code%20of%20conduct\\_16-17.pdf](http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/cms/lib/MD01001351/Centricity/Domain/8832/BCPS.code%20of%20conduct_16-17.pdf)

have produced positive outcomes for students (e.g., a reduction in suspensions and expulsions in 2016-17 of nearly 20 percent).<sup>5</sup>

2. Evidence-based practices that include restorative approaches, mindfulness, yoga, and other culturally competent, gender-responsive, and healing-informed practices have been associated with a decrease in the use of exclusionary discipline. Implement the use of these forms of discipline when responding to negative student behavior.
3. Provide training and/or access to information that emphasizes an empathic response to student misbehavior. Empathic discipline works to build trusting relationships with students by prioritizing, valuing, and understanding each student's individual experiences.<sup>6</sup>
4. Provide students, parents/guardians, and teachers access to the code of conduct<sup>7</sup> prior to the first day of school. Students and parents should specifically be provided, or have access to, the section of the code of conduct that indicates their rights and responsibilities as students and parents. Schools should consider providing students access to and facilitating a discussion about the *Boston Students Rights* phone app created by the Youth on Board and Boston Student Advisory Council.<sup>8</sup>

As an example:

- a. BPS students should be aware that “you (students) have the right to participate in decision-making at your school—your School Site Council, must contain two students elected by their peers. School Site Councils make decisions on staffing, budgeting and school rules.”
- b. In BPS, the district's School Site Council helps guide the decision-making process of the BPS code of conduct. In many charter networks and religious-based intuitions, a volunteer governing body also assists with the construction of codes of conduct and other school-based policies. Similar processes should be replicated on an individual school site basis. Each school's guiding principles and codes of conduct should be co-constructed with parents/guardians and students at the school to ensure all voices and perspectives are represented.

---

5 NBWJI and Boston City Councilor At-Large Ayanna Pressley do not specifically endorse the examples used throughout this document, nor do they indicate statistically significant outcomes (if any) based on the example used. They, however, use each example as a potential alternative that has worked in the community referenced.

6 Okonofua, J., Paunesku, D., & Walton, G. (2016). Brief intervention to encourage empathic discipline cuts suspension rates in half among adolescents. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 113 (19), 5221-5226. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1523698113

7 Codes of Conduct throughout this document refer to the guiding policies and mandates that govern the school body.

8 Boston Students Rights phone app located and downloadable here <http://www.bostonstudentrights.org/>

**2. POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Exclusionary discipline, such as suspension and expulsion, should only be considered once an array of alternative, non-exclusionary discipline practices have been exhausted and resulted in no progress.**

School codes of conduct should specifically address the appropriate uses of exclusionary discipline and clarify the language so it **requires** educators and school administrators to exhaust all applicable, non-punitive, alternative disciplinary practices. The language distinction necessitates the documentation of attempted measures, and also guides the development of alternative measures to be used in lieu of suspension (including supervised suspension/in-school suspension) or expulsion.

To address a similar language clarification need, the state of California recently updated the *California Compilation of School Discipline Laws and Regulations, section EDC 48900.5*, to state, “Suspension, including supervised suspension...shall be imposed only when other means of correction fail to bring about proper conduct.” This regulation is part of California’s robust push for statewide school discipline reform, which includes the 2014 law that mandates the elimination of “willful defiance” or disruption of school activities as a reason to expel students. The California school discipline reforms have begun to show impact; during the 2016-17 school year, 3.6 percent of California’s student population were suspended, which is a decrease from 3.7 percent in 2014, and a significant decrease from 5.7 percent in 2011-12.

*Practice Recommendations:*

1. As an example, in section 6 of the BPS *Code of Conduct*, parameters are provided on the use of exclusionary discipline. It states, “Where possible, safe, supportive and non-exclusionary remedies and processes...shall be attempted prior to removal from class.” Similar language is also stated in the *BPS Students Rights and Responsibilities*. While the current BPS language addresses the need to use non-punitive disciplinary measures, it does not state the requirement to first use all applicable alternatives and non-exclusionary discipline practices to address negative student behavior. This language should be modified.
2. All schools should require teachers to keep a running log of the discipline strategies used in the classroom with students. This log may be used to:
  - Assist the teacher in knowing which strategies render success for certain students and which do not;
  - Facilitate shared understanding between the student and parent/guardian regarding the history of interventions used by a teacher prior to the escalated classroom removal; and
  - Provide the parent/guardian of the child, as well as the school administrator, with this shared documentation.

3. Refer to policy recommendation one when co-constructing a tool to help teachers in the classroom choose the most effective response to a negative student's behavior. This tool will be a resource for teachers to know of and use alternative discipline measures while in the classroom.
4. Teachers should have quick and easy access to the various safe, supportive, and non-exclusionary interventions offered at their school. This document should have a list of potential interventions and guidelines for how to implement potential interventions, and if necessary, a contact sheet for referrals (e.g., restorative justice facilitator, trauma therapist, clinician, etc.)
5. If a school violation has escalated to the level of suspension or other means of exclusion from school, when the student returns to school, s/he should be provided resources and supports to aid in the smooth transition back into school and assist them with making more appropriate behavioral choices in the future. As an example, the PROMISE<sup>9</sup> program instituted in Broward County Public Schools in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, provides a comprehensive set of supports and mentorship for students when they return to school. The purpose of the program is to reduce suspension and recidivism, and to safeguard students from further escalation into the youth justice systems.

### **3. POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Co-construct dress code policies with students, particularly girls of color, and implement enforcement modalities that are anchored in principles of dignity and respect.**

Student dress codes, at a minimum, should refrain from prohibiting or punishing students unfairly based on race, age, ethnicity, expression of faith, sexual orientation, body type/size, and/or gender identity and expression. Student dress codes should not punish hairstyles that unfairly impact or target girls of color. Codes that are co-constructed with students and that are designed to uplift human dignity rather than those created out of social and societal standards are more successful in the creation of environments where students are encouraged to attend school and excel.

#### *Practice Recommendations:*

1. Develop and review school dress code policies on a consistent basis, in partnership with a cross-section of students and parents. Each review process should evaluate the purpose of the dress code and address specific policies within; include a conversation on the relevance of specific policies to the current student body; look at disparities in implementation; and consider whether any piece of the policy impacts specific groups of students unfairly and/or disproportionately.

---

<sup>9</sup> The PROMISE program is listed in the Broward County, *The Code Book for Student Conduct* found here: <https://www.browardschools.com/SiteMedia/Docs/Info/CodeBook/1718-Codebook.pdf>

2. Do not penalize, marginalize, or punish girls for wearing their natural hair in styles, coverings, and cultural expressions historically worn by people of color, such as Afros, dreadlocks, twists, braids, headwraps (e.g., dukus, hijabs, scarves, etc.), and extensions.
3. Equally enforce dress code policies across the student body. The dress code philosophy used by the Evanston Township High School<sup>10</sup> provides a good example of potential language, as well as guidelines for enforcement. The dress code philosophy reads, “School staff shall enforce the dress code consistently and in a manner that does not reinforce or increase marginalization or oppression of any group...”

#### **4. POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Create responses to dress code violations that do not negatively impact student instruction time.**

Loss of instruction time is directly correlated with negative learning and other student outcomes. The enforcement of school dress code policies should not require or suggest that students leave the school campus in order to comply with the policy and participate in learning activities. Schools that do provide attire for students when they violate the dress code policy should allow students to choose clothing that aligns with their gender expression/identity, and clothing that will not elicit ridicule or bullying by other students.

*Practice Recommendations:*

1. Schools should not have dress code enforcement policies that force students to leave campus to comply. This type of enforcement practice does not prioritize the student’s education above their outward appearance. Schools should have clothing at the school that will allow students to borrow more appropriate attire that brings them into compliance with the dress code standard while remaining on campus.
2. In lieu of disciplinary enforcement, schools should consider allowing students to first self-correct when there is a violation of school dress code policies. Self-correction may consist of wearing a classmate’s clothing, putting on a jacket, or finding their own clothing alternative while on campus.

#### **5. POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Review and develop codes of conduct and other related school mandates to include equity policies with a robust articulation of gender and sex equity and student-focused responses to sexual harassment and assault.**

---

<sup>10</sup> Evanston Township student dress code is located in the Evanston Township High school 2017-18 Student and Family Handbook located here: <https://www.eths.k12.il.us/site/Default.aspx?PageID=1381>

All schools should have open and frequent discussion of the various forms of sexual assault and harassment and make it a priority to discuss healthy intimate partner relationships across the spectra of gender and sexuality.

*Practice Recommendations:*

1. Advocacy groups across the nation, like Alliance for Girls in Oakland, California, have developed a student-driven policy platform to stop sexual harassment. These policies include prioritizing the survivor's emotional and psychological health, ensuring that survivor voices are included in the resolution of the complaint, and considering restorative approaches in the repair of harm. Boston-area schools should consider partnering with organizations that are experts in the field to help facilitate this process.
2. Refer to the federal law Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 that prohibits sex discrimination in education, including schools K-12. Title IX ensures that all girls and women receive equal resources and treatment in the classroom and provides protections for students who are sexually harassed and discriminated against and/or bullied based on their gender. The provision in Title IX covers persons harassed by students, persons harassed by administrators/teachers/staff, and harassment by school volunteers/visitors.<sup>11</sup>
3. At the beginning of each year, provide students and parents/guardians with information on where to report any type of sexual misconduct and harassment, including misconduct perpetrated by students, teachers, administrators, and other adults on school grounds. Students should also have more than one avenue of reporting.
4. Provide students, parents/guardians, teachers and school administrators information/training on the specific protocol and recourse for students to report sexual harassment/assault. The actions and definitions of sexual harassment/assault should be clearly defined, and students and teachers should periodically review these definitions for clarity.

## **6. POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Diversify teaching and administrative staff and invest in additional school counselors and therapists on campus.**

A student's mental health cannot be fully protected without adequate qualified staff available to diagnose, treat, and assist students when necessary. Trauma can show up in many forms, and for girls, trauma can manifest in somatic symptoms, as well as in the inability to pay attention, control emotions, manage anger, or understand their behaviors. Too often, when girls of color exhibit these reactions to trauma in school, untrained teachers and

---

<sup>11</sup> Oakland Unified School District Sexual Harassment Policy, Title IX (Students). Found here: <https://www.ousd.org/Page/15492>

school administrators may categorize these behaviors as “defiance” and “disrespect,” and thus punish students for what is otherwise a mental health concern. Adequate and effective counselors are needed in schools to ensure all students have a safe outlet to express needs and concerns, and to help them navigate their education options, including the next steps after high school completion.

To date, BPS has not met the 1985 federal court mandate requiring 25 percent Black and 10 percent “other minority” teachers to occupy teaching positions in Boston Public Schools. Federal Judge Arthur Garrity Jr. designated the specific teaching staff percentage distributions based on the demographics of the student population in 1985. However, the most recent BPS records show that BPS student demographics now reflect an even more diverse population: 42 percent Hispanic/Latinx, 35 percent Black/African American/African Diaspora, 14 percent white, and 9 percent Asian.<sup>12</sup> In accordance with the formula used by Garrity, the BPS teacher population should reflect those percentages. However, the most recent BPS data show the teacher population as 62 percent white, 20 percent African American/African Diaspora, 10 percent Hispanic/Latinx, and 6 percent Asian,<sup>13</sup> a large departure from the student population demographics. In an effort to meet the 1985 mandate, as well as provide adherence to the original teacher population formula, BPS should intentionally create and execute a robust recruitment plan to hire and maintain teachers of color, specifically those identifying as Hispanic/Latinx and Black/African American/African Diaspora.

As the above teacher demographic formula was originally created using the staff and student population of BPS, all schools—inclusive of public, charter, religious institution, and private—should aim to have a diverse and representative teaching and school leadership staff.

*Practice Recommendations:*

1. In an effort to begin building a more expansive educational, counseling, and therapeutic staff, schools should employ a more culturally diverse staff that can assess and guide the response to the academic achievement, social/emotional learning, and mental health needs of girls of color.
2. Employ staff that understand and empathize with the unique needs of girls of color, including racialized gender biases that may inform the conditions of their participation in schools. This includes but is not limited to staff that are trained in trauma-informed care (including historical trauma), and that have a demonstrated capacity for understanding the needs of recent immigrants and their families, understanding the needs of girls who have a history of system involvement (e.g., juvenile court system, foster care, or children protection services, etc.), as well as LGBTQI students and gender nonconforming students.

---

12 Boston Public Schools at Glance, 2016-2017; found here: [https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/cms/lib/MA01906464/Centricity/Domain/238/BPS%20at%20a%20Glance%202016-17\\_online.pdf](https://www.bostonpublicschools.org/cms/lib/MA01906464/Centricity/Domain/238/BPS%20at%20a%20Glance%202016-17_online.pdf)

13 The original data variables listed were originally classified as Hispanic, Black, White, and Asian. However, for consistency, and inclusion purposes the authors have chosen to refer to the variables above as Latinx instead of Hispanic, African American/African Diaspora instead of Black.

3. Providing anti-bias training and routine investments in the preparation and professional development of educators of all racial and ethnic affiliations is important to increase educators' capacity to be culturally responsive and creative first responders to crisis.

**7. POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Create and annually review school policing agreements and policies to ensure all agreements between the school and school-based law enforcement reflect the current needs of the student body and faculty. All agreements need to specify the roles and responsibilities of school police and include a requirement of training specific to children and adolescent mental health and cognitive development.**

Children and adolescent mental health and cognitive development training supports school-based law enforcements' capacity to engage effectively with children and youth and specifically, girls of color. As noted in the *Be Her Resource* toolkit,<sup>14</sup> specified training increases school-based law enforcements' ability to be effective and build trust with girls of color in schools. In addition to providing required training, schools and school-based law enforcement should undergo routine evaluation of the school policing agreements to ensure compliance of the agreement, as well as to assess the policies, protections, and needs of the school and school-based law enforcement.

As an example, the memorandum of understanding (MOU) created in 1996, and later amended in 2016, between BPS and Boston Police Department (BPD), states, "BPD responds to students suspected of using, possessing and distributing alcohol, illegal drugs and weapons, or suspected of engaging in gang activity as well as other incidents of violence..." Based on the MOU, school-based law enforcement's responsibility is to only intervene if a student's behavior is a violation of the law (and designated surrounding areas), and otherwise it is, "the prerogative of the school officials to impose disciplinary actions for infractions of school rules and policies." BPS and BPD should evaluate the compliance to this policy and others within the MOU, and as well as evaluate whether additional policies need to be added. Evaluation questions may include: Do BPS school-based law enforcement **only** intervene when there is a clear violation of the law? Do teachers or administrators ask BPD to intervene in matters of school rules violations? Are school-based law enforcement officers allowed to share information about students with outside entities? Are school-based law enforcement officers and school faculty aware of the parameters and limitations of school police? How are the requirements within the MOU enforced?

*Practice Recommendations:*

1. Develop incident protocols and decision-making instruments for school-based law enforcement and teaching staff. This will provide both school-based

---

14 Morris, M., Epstein, R., & Yusuf, A. (2017). *Be her Resource: A toolkit About School Resource Officers and Girls of Color*. Found here: <http://www.law.georgetown.edu/news/press-releases/upload/be-her-resource.pdf>

law enforcement and teachers with a resource and reference document when deciding who is needed to intervene in a given situation.

2. Require school-based law enforcement officers to be trained in child and adolescent mental health and cognitive development. This can improve interpretation of, and responses to, the behavior of girls of color by accounting for their layers of identity, including their race, ethnicity, gender identity, and sexual orientation.
3. Provide training for educators on the limits of school-based law enforcement intervention and how to effectively handle disciplinary issues without police involvement.

**8. POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Create a parent council that consistently aims to engage all parents/guardians across the spectrum of gender, ability, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, race, ethnicity, age, language, religion, legal involvement, citizenship, and immigration status.**

Parents/guardians are a critical part of the education of students. When parents are co-leaders and co-constructors of policies and activities and part of school-based conversations, school leaders and teachers are better equipped to create a safe and supportive learning environment for students. Thus, every Boston-area school should work to create and maintain a parent council that reflects the population and needs of the school.

*Practice Recommendations:*

1. Schools differ in their effectiveness to create and maintain engagement of parent councils. Schools should learn from other learning institutions that have shown success by implementing creative and engaging ways to cultivate parent involvement. Examples may include: using a student talent show to interact and meet parents and/or having cultural nights based on the demographic of the school and using the event to engage and recruit parents for the parent council. School leaders should also consider attending community events where parents may be in attendance.
2. School administrators and teachers should contact parents to express praise and positive interactions with their child more than they contact parents to discuss negative behaviors.
3. School administrators and teachers should refrain from making judgments regarding less active parents, and instead consider barriers that may prevent parents from engaging (e.g., immigration status, education level, social and/or legal system involvement, language barriers, work schedule, and transportation) and work to implement creative ways to address the barriers.

**9. POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Provide educators, school leadership, administrative staff, and school-based law enforcement with training and relevant documentation to understand and recognize signs of behavior that may potentially be connected to a diagnosed or undiagnosed disability. Students that have been diagnosed with a physical or mental disability should be afforded the same alternatives to exclusionary discipline as other students in the school.**

According to the most recent education data provided by the US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than students without disabilities, and one in five black girls with disabilities will be suspended in a given school year.<sup>15</sup> Students diagnosed with conditions such as oppositional defiant disorder, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, autism, and depression, are often unable to sit still, and struggle with concentration and social interactions, among other behavioral challenges—all of which can look like deliberate misbehavior and, in turn, lead to unnecessary disciplinary action.

*Practice Recommendations:*

1. Historically, black children with diagnosed disabilities experience a greater degree of classroom exclusion than white children with disabilities.<sup>16</sup> Black girls with disabilities are also at risk of lost instruction time, but also criminalization, as a result of their actions being perceived as violations of the law or threats to public safety, rather than symptoms or outcomes of a disability, particularly when chronic or consistent negative behavior is demonstrated in the classroom. Because of this, educators should consider, with supervision, accessing student records to determine if there has been a diagnosed disability. If so, educators should refer the student to the school therapist or counselor for assessment. If the records do not indicate a diagnosis, educators should refer the student for an evaluation and provide written documentation of reasons for referral.
2. Students with disabilities are required to adhere to school policies, and when negative student behavior is demonstrated and a discipline response is necessary (see policy recommendations above), the students' ability (physical, mental, and emotional) and limitations should be well documented and considered when choosing the appropriate response to student misbehavior.

---

<sup>15</sup> US. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights civil rights data collection Data Snapshot: School Discipline (2014). Found here: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-discipline-snapshot.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Blanchett, W. (2006). Disproportionate representation of African American students in Special Education: Acknowledging the role of white privilege and racism. *Educational Researcher*, 35 (6), 24 - 28. doi: 10.3102/0013189X035006024

## 10. POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Employ trauma-informed and healing-responsive strategies to improve school safety and wellbeing.

### *Practice Recommendations:*

1. The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (TLPI) was created in Massachusetts purposed to help create “trauma-sensitive schools.” The goal of this program was to create a pathway where school-wide trauma sensitivity is an integral part of how a safe and supportive school operates. Through the TLPI, *Helping Traumatized Children Learn*<sup>17</sup> Volumes 1 and 2 were created. Schools should consider providing these documents to all school staff as a part of professional development curricula.
2. Trauma sensitivity will vary at each school; however, schools should work with all school staff and students at the school to create an agreed upon definition of what being a trauma-sensitive school looks like, and what it takes to achieve. Relying on the well-documented research from experts in the field, schools should create a specified definition and work to address each need as it relates to their specific student population.
3. For black girls and other girls of color, the layered forms of trauma, such as community and/or household violence, stressors associated with intersections between racism and sexism, and the prevalence of sexual assault, can have a greater impact on academic performance and behavior in school.<sup>18</sup> Schools that do not have the capacity to increase counseling and therapeutic staffing should provide professional development training for teachers and school administrators on trauma-informed care and cultural competency. This may elicit a more empathic response from school staff when encountering a student in need of additional services.
4. Support students impacted by violence or trauma without re-victimizing them.

---

<sup>17</sup> Helping Traumatized Children Learn, volumes found here: <https://traumasensitiveschools.org/about-tlpi/>

<sup>18</sup> Goss Graves, F., Kaufmann, L., Frohlich, L., Smith-Evans, L., & George J. (2014). Unlocking opportunity for African American girls: A call to action for educational equity. National Women’s Law Center and NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. Found here: [https://www.nwlc.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/unlocking\\_opportunity\\_for\\_african\\_american\\_girls\\_report.pdf](https://www.nwlc.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/unlocking_opportunity_for_african_american_girls_report.pdf)

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The policy recommendations are based on the input provided by girls of color, parents/guardians, and school personnel who participated in our focus groups and interviews. We extend our deepest appreciation for the narratives and experiences shared. We would like to extend our special thanks to all of the community groups, non-profit agencies, religious institutions, schools, foundations, individuals, and others that were influential in supporting this project. Without your help, this would not have been possible.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| Boston Public Schools                                    | EAGER Success   |
| Archdiocese of Boston                                    | Girls Rule Foundation                                 |
| Boston Prep  | NAACP of Boston                                       |
| Brooke Charter Schools                                   | Soledad Latina Inc.                                   |
| Neighborhood House Charter School                        | Brook view House                                      |
| Boston Collegiate  | Boys and Girls Club of Boston: Yawkey Club of Roxbury |
| Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) | Family Independence Initiative                        |
| ABCD Health Services                                     | Anna M. Cole Community Center                         |
| Collaborative Parent Leadership Action Network (CPLAN)   | Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción (IBA)                   |
| Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC)                   | Schott Foundation for Public Education                |
| YW Boston  | Communities for Just Schools Fund                     |
| Educators for Excellence                                 | Boston Foundation                                     |
|  | The Hyams Foundation                                  |

# ABOUT THE PARTNERS

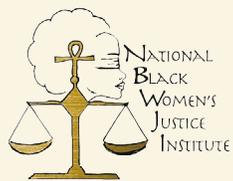


**The National Black Women's Justice Institute (NBWJI)** is a non-profit organization focused on reducing racial and gender disparities across the justice continuum affecting cisgender and transgender black women, girls, and their families, by conducting research, providing technical assistance, engaging in public education, promoting civic engagement, and advocating for informed and effective policies.



**Boston City Councilor At-Large Ayanna Pressley** was elected to the Boston City Council on November 3, 2009, becoming the first woman of color ever elected to the Council. In her subsequent 2011, 2013, and 2015 reelection campaigns, Pressley made history as the first person of color and the first woman in 30 years to top the ticket. During her time in office, Pressley created and chairs the City Council's Committee on Healthy Women, Families, and Communities. The Committee is devoted to the causes that she has always been most devoted to: stabilizing families and communities, reducing and preventing violence and trauma, combating poverty, and addressing issues that disproportionately impact women and girls. Pressley is committed to working in partnership with community, building broad and diverse coalitions to advance policy reforms.





[www.nbwji.org](http://www.nbwji.org)