



THE RIGHT TO AN EQUITABLE EDUCATION

WHEN OPPORTUNITY
AND RESPECT ARE
GUARANTEED RIGHTS,
YOUNG WOMEN ARE
ABLE TO REACH THEIR
FULL POTENTIAL.

I AM WHY. YOUNG WOMEN
LEAD THE WAY TO JUSTICE



I am Enough
In a School system that
doesn't mind leaving a Student
behind, pushing them through
for a new victim to tolerate.

I AM WHY youth will
KNOW THEIR WORTH.
It is easier building
STRONG YOUTH than
FIXING broken ADULTS.

-Terry



TERRY: PUSHING BACK ON AN EDUCATION SYSTEM THAT PUSHES BLACK GIRLS OUT

“I had a hard view of schools. . . . I realized a lot of teachers will not be on my side, getting phone calls home. . . .that I was being argumentative in the classroom. I’m not sure how a 7-year-old can be argumentative.

“I didn’t learn how to read until fourth grade, and no one knew. . . .As long as they didn’t have to hear my mother’s mouth and my father’s mouth, it’s just move her on up. When my father was incarcerated, I went to foster care. . . .Once I finally got back with my mother, it was another issue with the school – I’m fighting, I’m aggressive, I’m a constant problem to the point where I’ve been put out of school. . . .I’m working to make sure my child doesn’t have to go through that.”

– Terry

SHAI: A STRONG VOICE FOR A POSITIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

“I don’t feel like the school system honored my strengths, my honesty, my wisdom and my voice. . . . Nobody was listening to me and what I was going through in school, when other kids was messing with me. . . . I felt like I was treated like I was dumb. . . . I knew I was intelligent. . . . I just wasn’t being treated like I was. That weighed on me and made me angrier than I already was. . . . [My] strengths served me when it came to advocating for myself. I’m still strong at advocating for myself. . . . I want to use my voice to advocate for other young women.”

– Shai



MARGINALIZED, PENALIZED AND DEVALUED: HOW THE EDUCATION SYSTEM TREATS BLACK GIRLS

Terry's and Shai's experiences with the education system represent the status quo for too many Black girls. They illustrate the life-long impact of an education system that consistently denies Black girls opportunity. The results are devastating. Black girls are disproportionately held back in school and are more at risk than white girls of experiencing school detachment and dropping out.

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM DENIES BLACK GIRLS EQUITABLE EDUCATION BY:

Marginalizing instead of motivating
Rather than engaging with Black girls in supportive, positive ways, schools tend to marginalize them through institutionalized structures such as dress codes and disciplinary policies, which restrict and penalize Black girls' self-expression instead of encouraging it. Schools frequently fail to recognize, understand and constructively address trauma and its behavioral effects. What's more, educators increasingly rely on law enforcement to manage behavior. Instead of acknowledging and investing in the potential of Black girls, schools too often condemn their strengths and ignore their needs.

Oppression instead of opportunity

Along with facing oppression through racism, sexism and disproportionate levels of poverty, Black girls often attend schools that are chaotic and significantly under-resourced. These schools lack extracurricular activities, counselors, a broad curriculum, adequately trained teachers and other basic resources. This failure by the education system to provide equitable opportunity sends a clear message to Black girls: You are not valued.

Punishing instead of praising

Studies show that within the education system Black girls are disciplined far more harshly than white girls. Black girls' assertiveness, a natural response to bias and oppression, often leads teachers to label them as unruly, loud and unmanageable. The result? Black girls are far more likely to be suspended, expelled and referred by their schools to the police or courts, thus creating a direct pipeline between schools and the juvenile justice system.

“If I had a magic wand. . .I’m gonna poof myself to that time and talk to the teachers and my mom and try to navigate how we can help this young person who is. . .extremely headstrong and has all these qualities that are excellent for a great leader — and push her into the right direction, instead of letting life pass by.”

– Terry



WHAT SCHOOL INEQUITY LOOKS LIKE FOR BLACK GIRLS:



Black girls disproportionately attend high-poverty, high-minority and racially isolated schools as compared to girls of other races and ethnicities.¹



Black girls are more likely than white girls to be disciplined at school for behaviors that challenge society's dominant stereotypes of appropriate "feminine" behavior, such as being assertive and expressing the belief that something is unfair or unjust.²



Black girls have been disciplined at school for wearing leggings;³ "distracting, puffy" hairstyles;⁴ wearing hair wraps;⁵ dreadlocks,⁶ or hair extensions;⁷ and exposing their shoulders.⁸



School counselors often fail to provide Black girls with the information and opportunities they need to be competitive in the college admissions process.⁹



School systems typically do not consider the social context and underlying causes of Black girls' behavior, including possible exposure to trauma, violence or abuse.¹⁰



Black girls are nearly six times as likely to be suspended than white girls.¹¹



Black girls are only 15% of girls enrolled in public school, but 37% of girls arrested and 28% of girls referred to law enforcement.¹²

THE SOLUTION: CREATE AN EQUITABLE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT BUILT ON POSITIVITY, RELATIONSHIPS, SUPPORT AND OPPORTUNITY

Girls are motivated by a need for connection and sense of belonging in school. Black girls, in particular, are more engaged in school when they are actively connected to their race, culture and identity. Additionally, Black girls are shown to succeed in school when they have meaningful relationships with adults who value and affirm their strength, resilience, intelligence and power.

“I needed from the school, to thrive, more positive teachers than I had. . . . I needed a positive principal. Because I felt like it starts with the leader. If you can’t have a positive principal, you can’t have positive teachers or positive counselors or positive other people, coaches and stuff, working for you.”

– Shai

¹Smith-Evans, L., George, J., Goss Graves, F., Kaufmann, L.S., & Frolich, L. (2014). *Unlocking Opportunity for African American Girls: A Call to Action for Educational Equity*. New York, NY: NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and Washington, D.C.: National Women’s Law Center. ²Smith-Evans, L., George, J., Goss Graves, F., Kaufmann, L.S., & Frolich, L. (2014). ³Brodsky, A., Evans, N., Patrick, K., et al. (2018). *Dress-Coded: Black Girls, Bodies, and Bias in D.C. Schools*. Washington, D.C.: National Women’s Law Center. ⁴Smith-Evans, L., George, J., Goss Graves, F., Kaufmann, L.S., & Frolich, L. (2014). ⁵Brodsky, A., Evans, N., Patrick, K., et al. (2018). ⁶Smith-Evans, L., George, J., Goss Graves, F., Kaufmann, L.S., & Frolich, L. (2014). ⁷Lockhart, P.R. (April 26, 2018). “Black girls are disciplined more harshly in school. Dress codes play a big role.” *Vox*. ⁸Brodsky, A., Evans, N., Patrick, K., et al. (2018). ⁹Archer-Banks, Diana A.M. and Linda S. Behar-Horenstein. “Ogbu Revisited: Unpacking High-Achieving African American Girls’ High School Experiences.” *Urban Education* 47, no. 1 (January 2012): 198-223. ¹⁰Smith-Evans, L., George, J., Goss Graves, F., Kaufmann, L.S., & Frolich, L. (2014). ¹¹Onyeka-Crawford, A., Patrick, K., & Chaudhry, N. (2016). *Let Her Learn: Stopping School Pushout for Girls of Color*. Washington, D.C.: National Women’s Law Center. ¹²Onyeka-Crawford, A., Patrick, K., & Chaudhry, N. (2016).

HOW CAN WE CREATE EQUITABLE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY FOR BLACK GIRLS?

CREATE AN INDIVIDUALLY-ENFORCEABLE RIGHT TO EDUCATION through state constitutions.

ENACT STATE LAWS THAT PREVENT SCHOOL PUSHOUT by limiting arrests, court involvement, and suspensions and expulsions for misbehavior and truancy at school.

STATUTORILY PROHIBIT INCARCERATION FOR TRUANCY.

EXECUTE MEMORANDA OF UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN POLICE AND SCHOOLS that facilitate collaboration and reduce school-based arrests.

ELIMINATE STATE ZERO TOLERANCE AND MANDATORY EXPULSION LAWS,

and instead create statutory frameworks that support disciplinary alternatives such as positive behavioral supports and restorative justice.

STATUTORILY MANDATE COLLECTION OF DISAGGREGATED DATA

to track suspensions, expulsions, school-based arrests and school referrals to law enforcement by gender, race/ethnicity and sexual orientation.

ESTABLISH TRAINING PROGRAMS ON APPROPRIATE DISCIPLINARY RESPONSES

for teachers, school staff and school resource officers/law enforcement.

NURTURE PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN SCHOOLS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

through new policies, outreach and funding.

DESIGN EDUCATIONAL CURRICULA WITH CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS

to suit individual needs and learning styles.

OFFER SERVICES IN GIRLS'

COMMUNITIES so they don't have to switch schools due to juvenile justice or child welfare system involvement.

CREATE STATUTORY GUIDANCE FOR EDUCATION RECORD-SHARING

among agencies (schools, juvenile justice systems, child welfare systems) and for school re-entry procedures.

ENACT CONFIDENTIALITY MEASURES SO YOUNG WOMEN CAN PURSUE HIGHER EDUCATION

without obstacles.

LEVERAGE FEDERAL PROTECTIONS AGAINST DISCRIMINATION

in the areas of gender discrimination (**Title IX** of the Education Amendments Act of 1972), racial discrimination in discipline (**Title IV and Title VI** of the Civil Rights Act of 1964), special education (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act – **IDEA**), and school continuity (**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)** and Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008).

For examples of these and other solutions at work see IAmWhy.org

I AM WHY. YOUNG WOMEN LEAD THE WAY TO JUSTICE

I Am Why brings young women activists together with researchers and other allies to advance a vision of equitable and just systems that provide opportunity and better serve the needs of young women. Those in the field are invited to use *I Am Why* communications tools, which connect young women's strengths and stories to policies, practices and programs that work.

IAmWhy.org.

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