



FEDERAL POLICY AGENDA

She Matters:

Establishing a
Policy Agenda for
Black Girls to Thrive

The pathway to more equitable systems for Black Girls must begin with Federal policy change.

We have witnessed a series of historic events. With the support of countless Black voters, the American democracy transitioned into a more hopeful existence on January 20, 2021, due to the inauguration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as the new leaders of our country.

As we celebrate the beauty of having a Black woman and HBCU graduate in the White House, a house built by enslaved Africans, we must also prepare to do the work to repair generations of harm of racism and sexism.

The new administration comes on the heels of a white terrorist attack on the U.S. Capitol and American democracy. Our new president and vice-president must show a strong commitment to **all** Americans by initiating and executing policies that will work to reverse centuries of institutionalized oppression. Gwen's Girls and the Black Girls Equity Alliance are calling on the Biden-Harris administration to make history once again by prioritizing Black girls and their needs. Equity was a high value as they solicited votes in 2020. Now that they are in office, **equity must remain elevated on the agenda.**

WE ARE CALLING ON THE NEW ADMINISTRATION TO:

- 1** Prioritize women and girls of color within the White House Gender Policy Council to serve as a convener for research, programs and policies that support Black girls' ability to thrive
- 2** Reinstate Civil Rights protections for students, including updating the School Discipline Guidance Package
- 3** Support the pipeline of highly qualified Black teachers
- 4** Prioritize closing the opportunity gap for Black students
- 5** Openly support the Ending PUSHOUT Act and the Counseling Not Criminalization in Schools Act and demand Congress pass these bills in this legislative session
- 6** Fully integrate evidence-based, trauma-informed approaches into the juvenile justice system through OJJDP guidance and leadership
- 7** Dedicate funding for culturally-responsive and anti-racist grassroots initiatives that divert youth from the juvenile justice system
- 8** Collect and disaggregate data on juvenile court fees and fines. End criminalization for overdue fines
- 9** Uplift the needs of youth who have been trafficked or sexually exploited
- 10** Develop a culture of consent by ensuring the provision of high quality, comprehensive, culturally responsive and evidence-informed sexuality education and gender-based violence prevention for all students in K-12 education
- 11** Restore Title IX protections for students sexually harassed or assaulted at school. Promote evidence-based prevention and intervention programs
- 12** Ensure access to healing-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally appropriate mental health supports and services, especially for Black girls in school



Prioritization

1

Prioritize women and girls of color within the White House Gender Policy Council and provide long-term funding to conduct the following:

Intersectional Data Collection and Analysis

Pittsburgh and Allegheny County have the unique advantage of knowing much more about the experiences of Black girls due to the dynamic work of the Black Girls Equity Alliance (BGEA). Our coalition has issued reports outlining how the intersection of racism and sexism negatively impacts girls' outcomes in the juvenile justice, education and child welfare systems. However, most municipalities across the country do not share this experience. There is still so much more to learn about our girls especially through an intersectional lens. The new administration must make data collection about youth involved in multiple systems and across multiple identities (race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, etc.) a priority.

City, County and State grants to Fund a Black Girls Equity Alliance

Gwen's Girls has led the Black Girls Equity Alliance for five years. This group of stakeholders, including system leaders, community members, parents, policymakers and the girls themselves, consists of four workgroups dedicated to Black girls' success in the areas of juvenile justice, child welfare, education and health and wellness. We fight for systemic change to ensure our girls' ability to thrive. The Black Girls Equity Alliance should not be unique to Pittsburgh. The Biden-Harris administration has the capacity to provide funding to set up similar collaborations in cities across the country.

Girls of Color Caucus and Internships

Black girls should be leading the call for systems change. Creating a framework to capture their voices and ensure their professional development is vital. The Biden-Harris administration should develop a Girls of Color Caucus that will serve as an advisory board for federal policies related to their unique needs. Gwen's Girls and the Black Girls Equity Alliance is leading similar work with our Black Girls Advocacy and Leadership Alliance (BGALA) group. Also, the administration should develop the framework for a paid internship that provides critical exposure to government and policy making for girls of color.

Education

2 Reinstate Civil Rights Protections for students

This moment calls for bold action to dismantle the systemic and institutionalized racism deeply embedded in exclusionary discipline policies and policing in schools.

The Biden-Harris administration should not only reverse the many flawed actions of the Trump Administration on public education, but also **make continued gains by advancing more effective and equitable policies regarding school climate, discipline, and equitable opportunity**. Specifically, the Department of Education (ED) and Department of Justice (DOJ) should **update the School Discipline Guidance Package**, with input from grassroots groups, youth, educators, community organizations, civil rights advocates, parents, students, and researchers, and ensure that the ED, through the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), fulfills its duty to protect all students from discrimination, regardless of their actual or perceived race, ethnicity, English language proficiency, immigration status, national origin, disability, sex, sexual orientation and gender identity. Both of these issues deeply affect Black girls as they are often pushed out of schools and onto a pipeline to the juvenile justice system at very young ages.

In fact, Pittsburgh Black girls are more likely than their white counterparts to face harsh disciplinary policies like suspension, expulsion and disorderly conduct charges. Federal guidance and legal accountability for schools that repeatedly fail to meet the needs of students of color would support advocates in their efforts to reverse these negative outcomes.

3 Support the pipeline of highly qualified Black educators

The Biden-Harris administration should **support the pipeline of highly qualified Black educators and other culturally appropriate support staff into public schools**. Too often, racially diverse schools in urban areas have the highest needs yet lack qualified and culturally appropriate teachers and administrators who reflect the student body. Students are being expected to excel in environments that fail to be culturally competent and inclusive. For this reason, the new administration should prioritize creating and funding Department of Education programs that provide Black educators, staff, and administrators with internships, student loan forgiveness and other incentives to teach at our most underserved schools. This effort would highly benefit Pittsburgh where Black students represent 53 percent of the student population and white teachers comprise 83 percent of the educational staff.¹ Too often a lack of staff diversity and cultural competency is followed by huge opportunity gaps.

4 Close the opportunity gap experienced by Black youth

Nationwide, Black children are experiencing an opportunity gap at the hands of the education system. They lack both access and resources that are necessary to thrive in our society. In fact, the Pennsylvania Human Rights Commission recently issued a report chronicling an abysmal opportunity gap in Pittsburgh schools. For example, only 38 percent of Black students are reading on a proficient level compared to 75 percent of white students.²

The Biden-Harris administration should **prioritize grant funding to under-resourced school districts and out-of-school time programs** to ensure all student have access to essential supports in reading, mathematics and STEAM education. All three have a direct impact on a young person's progressive academic trajectory and career path at very early ages. Public schools need higher expectations and oversights to ensure rigorous education is equitable.

¹ Pittsburgh's NPR News Station, "How the Pittsburgh Public School District Is Trying to Create a Diverse Teacher Pipeline," <https://bit.ly/3vuvhza> (2019).

Juvenile Justice

5 Openly support the Ending PUSHOUT Act and Counseling Not Criminalization in Schools Act and demand Congress pass these bills in this legislative session

Too often Black girls are targeted and disproportionately punished for simply being themselves. Black girls are more than 10 times more likely than white girls to be referred to the juvenile justice system.³ Between structural racism, misogynoir and adultification bias, their childhood misbehaviors can carry grievous consequences unlike their white counterparts. In Pittsburgh, Gwen's Girls and the BGEA have thoroughly documented Black girls' unequal treatment at the hands of schools and school police.

Congresswomen Ayanna Pressley (MA-07), Ilhan Ohmar (MN-05) and Bonnie Watson Coleman (NJ-12) introduced the **Ending PUSHOUT Act** in 2019 to stop the harmful practices that push Black and Brown girls out of schools. The bill aims to dismantle the school to juvenile justice pipeline by creating trauma-informed practices in schools and a healthy ecosystem where our girls can thrive.

The Counseling Not Criminalization in Schools Act would divert federal funding away from school-based law enforcement and toward evidence-based and trauma informed services. Championed by Rep. Ayanna Pressley, Rep. Ilhan Omar, Senator Elizabeth Warren and Senator Chris Murphy, this bill supports school districts in transitioning away from police in schools and towards investing public funding in personnel and services that create safe and inclusive schools.

Supporting these pieces legislation should be a top priority of the Biden-Harris administration.

6

Fully integrate evidence-based, trauma-informed approaches into the juvenile justice system through OJJDP guidance and leadership

Most people think about boys when they picture a "juvenile delinquent," yet girls account for 27 percent of referrals to the U.S. juvenile justice system.⁴ Less than one-third of girls' referrals are for violent offenses, and most violent offense referrals are for simple assault.⁵ Nationally and locally, Black girls are at the highest risk of being arrested and detained by the juvenile justice systems. In Pittsburgh, they are ten times more likely to be arrested than white girls, often for disorderly conduct charges in schools. These charges are subjective at best and biased at worst since they target students for simple misbehaviors like cursing.

Most juvenile justice-involved girls have experienced some type of abuse, and many girls get in trouble for defending themselves. OJJDP needs to **provide support for local jurisdictions in understanding the role that trauma plays in youth behaviors and implementing evidence-based trauma-informed approaches in their work.** The agency should also prioritize funding that assists municipalities in expanding culturally-responsive diversion programs and community partnerships.

² Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, Pittsburgh Public School District Memorandum of Understanding Report (2020).

³ Black Girls Equity Alliance, *Understanding and Addressing Institutionalized Inequity: Disrupting Pathways to Juvenile Justice for Black Youth in Allegheny County*, <https://bit.ly/3vDvOPo> (2020).

⁴ Black Girls Equity Alliance, *Institutionalized Inequity: Pathways to Juvenile Justice for Black Girls in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County*, <https://bit.ly/3qJZgzu> (2020).

⁵ Id.

7

Funding for culturally-responsive and anti-racist grassroots initiatives that divert youth from the juvenile justice system

The racist and sexist pipeline that leads to disproportionate minority contact with the juvenile justice system must end. Grassroots initiatives can play a major role in ending this structural inequity by providing youth with positive interpersonal relationships before they come to the juvenile justice system's attention. The Biden-Harris administration should go beyond simply funding "diversion" programs and instead **channel resources into community-based initiatives that are culturally-responsive and specifically seek to meet the needs of youth of color**. OJJDP should shift its focus to funding holistic programming that truly supports young people versus the biased criminalization of typical adolescent behaviors. This shift will greatly assist in reducing the disparities in juvenile justice that Black girls experience in Pittsburgh and around the country.

8

Collect and disaggregate data on juvenile court fees and fines. End criminalization for overdue fines

Justice should not have a price tag, especially for our youth. Too many young people are falling deeper in the juvenile justice system because of their families' inability to pay court-assessed fees and fines. There is an absence of national guidance and legislation on this issue and many young people living in the same city who have been charged with the same misbehaviors are being assessed different fees and fines. This subjective practice codifies structural inequity and leaves courts open to implicit racial and gender bias.

The Biden-Harris administration through the OJJDP or DOJ should **initiate a nationwide study to develop a thorough understanding of both the breadth and scope of juvenile fees**. The data should be disaggregated by race, gender and other identities to determine the experiences of youth who have been most negatively affected by public systems. Federal guidance should subsequently be issued calling on courts to **eliminate the highly inequitable practice of referring students to juvenile justice for nonpayment of fines**.

9

Uplift the needs of youth who have been trafficked or sexually exploited

Far too many of our girls are trapped in a cycle of human trafficking, sexual exploitation and abuse. Unfortunately, our child welfare and juvenile justice systems continue to struggle with how to end these issues systemically. The new administration should address the pervasiveness of gender-based violence and sexual exploitation. They must identify and implement approaches that help shift the narrative from, "what's wrong with you" to "what happened to you." This shift can support survivors to thrive.

In Pittsburgh, Black girls who have experienced complex trauma and are in need of mental health supports often exhibit behaviors that are misinterpreted and pathologized, pushing them out of the school system and into the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. When Black girls are made to feel invisible by systems designed to help, they become vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers or abusers who position themselves as saviors. It is imperative that the well-being of Black girls is positioned at the forefront to ensure access to supports that address their holistic needs, including prevention and intervention efforts that mitigate commercial sexual exploitation or abuse. The new administration needs to **prioritize initiatives that call for educators, social workers and mental health practitioners that support our girls through a culturally-competent and trauma-informed lens**.

Health and Wellness

10

Develop a culture of consent by providing high quality, comprehensive, culturally responsive and evidence informed sexuality education and gender-based violence prevention for all students in K-12 education

The Biden-Harris administration should **prioritize developing federal guidance on best practice standards regarding sexuality education and gender-based violence prevention.** This guidance should be established not only from public health experts, but also by intentionally integrating Black women and girls to voice their needs, concerns, and perspectives. Too often they are left out of discussions about their bodies due to centuries-old negative stereotypes that cast Black women and girls as promiscuous and deserving of trauma and abuse.

Also, sexuality education and gender-violence prevention should be trauma-informed and recognize the intersections of oppression, such as racism, heterosexism, transphobia and ableism. This effort must be implemented with an anti-bias framework.

11

Restore Title IX protections for students sexually harassed or assaulted at school. Promote evidence-based prevention and intervention programs

The landmark American Association of University Women study found that of 1,965 students surveyed, 48 percent experienced sexual harassment during the 2010-2011 school year.⁶ Our research in Pittsburgh found that girls are experiencing a range of sexual harassment behaviors in person and online and report numerous adverse emotional, physical, and educational impacts as a result.

We call on the new administration to **reverse the harmful changes to Title IX guidance** made by the Trump administration. All schools across the country should have well-trained Title IX coordinators, clear policies about sexual harassment and should communicate regularly with students and parents about these policies. Students and adults working within schools should participate in annual trainings about sexual harassment.

12

Ensure access to healing-centered, trauma-informed, and culturally appropriate mental health supports and services, especially for Black girls in schools

A recent report from the ACLU found 14 million students are in American schools with police but not a single counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker.⁷ Given the COVID-19 pandemic, we know that students are experiencing increased stress and trauma. **It is essential for Black girls to have access to culturally appropriate mental health services,** whether through in-school services or community agencies. States and local jurisdictions need guidance and resources to implement trauma-informed care training that provides a socio-historical and intersectional perspective on the intergenerational and present-day traumas experienced by Black women and girls.

⁶ American Association of University Women, *Crossing the Line: Sexual Harassment at Schools*, <https://bit.ly/3r5sqxN> (2011).

⁷ American Civil Liberties Union, *Cops and No Counselors: How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff is Harming Students*, <https://bit.ly/3eJFMZw> (2019).

In conclusion

Gwen's Girls and the Black Girls Equity Alliance stand prepared to support the Biden-Harris administration to implement the executive mandates and policy shifts necessary to ensure that Black girls have the opportunity to not just survive, but thrive in our society.

Our work as systems leaders, researchers, advocates, parents and community members has informed each of the priorities outlined in this call to action. Structural changes cannot occur unless the voices of Black women and girls are amplified by the new administration.

We stand ready and willing to do the work.



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