

# Local and State Policy Agenda



Black girls and gender-expansive youth are an integral part of our communities and deserve every opportunity to live safe, healthy, and fulfilling lives. This cannot occur without structural changes to our laws, policies and public systems. Black girls and gender-expansive youth, including Black youth with disabilities, must be centered in local and state policy advocacy in order for these changes to be effective.

The Black Girls Equity Alliance's Local and State Policy Agenda lists the 2022 priorities guiding the coalition's work to create a society where Black youth not only survive, but thrive.



The Black Girls Equity Alliance (BGEA) is comprised of individuals, community-based organizations, universities, and government entities that work with Black girls and acknowledge that their lives and experiences are unique within existing societal constructs. **Our mission is to eradicate inequities affecting Black girls in Allegheny County.**

When we use the term 'girl' it is inclusive of cisgender girls, transgender girls and femmes.

A key component of all the priorities is the need for inclusive and transparent data collection. Such practices facilitate deeper and continued assessment of how Black girls and gender-expansive youth are being impacted by systemic inequities and are necessary to determine holistic solutions to meet their needs.



# Health and Wellness

**The state legislature and Allegheny County school boards must ensure access to healing-centered, trauma-informed, culturally-responsive mental health supports and services, especially for Black girls and gender-expansive youth in schools.**

Black girls and gender-expansive youth are subjected to many forms of oppression and marginalization that pose risks to their wellbeing. These threats have been compounded by the ongoing pandemic and racially-based animus that continues into 2022, making the availability of effective mental health supports even more imperative. This concern was reflected in the December 2021 US Surgeon General's Advisory, *Protecting Youth Mental Health*, which reported that in early 2021, the number of girls who went to the hospital for believed suicide attempts increased by 51% from the same time period in 2019, compared to a 4% increase for boys.<sup>1</sup> The situation is especially dire for Black girls and gender-expansive youth as Black children are twice as likely to die by suicide as white children.<sup>2</sup>

Due to the amount of time youth spend in school, school grounds are a primary place where symptoms of trauma can manifest. Responses by school administrators and personnel can either compound that trauma or open a gateway — through proper services and resources — to healing. Therefore it is vital that the state of Pennsylvania:

- 1** Fund an increase in the provision of mental health services in schools and community agencies
- 2** Mandate and fund training on child development and trauma for all adults who interface with youth in school settings
- 3** Require that providers, school administrators, school personnel, and other adults interfacing with youth at schools are trained to provide support that is culturally responsive and SOGIE (sexual orientation, gender identify and

expression) affirming to meet the needs of vulnerable students of different identities, including trainings that provide a socio historical and intersectional perspective of the intergenerational and present day traumas experienced by Black girls and gender-expansive youth.

Similarly, all school districts in Allegheny County must provide culturally responsive, SOGIE affirming training on youth mental health to educators as part of their professional development.

**The state legislature must mandate and fund, and Allegheny County schools boards must provide: high-quality, comprehensive, culturally-responsive, evidence-informed sexuality education and gender-based violence prevention for all students in K-12 education.**

Comprehensive sex education is important for all young people to gain an understanding of their bodies, exercise bodily autonomy and agency, and make informed decisions that support their health and happiness.<sup>3</sup> Given that so many girls and gender-expansive youth experience sexual violence, violence prevention is a key aspect of comprehensive sex education. Approximately 43% of women who have experienced rape, were raped when they were younger than 18 years old — an estimated 11 million girls.<sup>4</sup> Because Black girls and gender expansive youth are often hypersexualized, fetishized and targeted due to their race in addition to their gender, violence prevention is especially critical to their safety and sexual health.

<sup>1</sup> [US Surgeon General Advisory: Protecting Youth Mental Health](#), page 9

<sup>2</sup> [US Surgeon General Advisory: Protecting Youth Mental Health](#), page 8

<sup>3</sup> Britney Brinkman, PhD, José Garth, Katie Rose Harowitz, MPH, Samantha Marino, MA, Kelly Nestman Lockwood, [Black Girls and Sexuality Education: Access, Equity, Justice](#)

<sup>4</sup> [The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2015 Data Brief — Updated Release \(cdc.gov\)](#)



# Education

(Health and Wellness, continued)

Sexuality education and gender violence prevention must be stigma free, trauma informed, and developmentally appropriate. It must also encompass education on reproductive justice, family planning, and healthy relationships; recognize the intersections of oppression such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, and ableism that impact young people; and be accompanied by greater access to contraceptives outside of clinical settings. To that end, the BGEA supports the Pittsburgh Public Schools' efforts to rewrite its comprehensive sex education policy to be more meaningful and beneficial for young people.

## **The state legislature must require and fund schools to provide free resources that enable students to care for their menstruation and hygienic needs while at school.**

In order for Black girls and gender-expansive youth to thrive, they must first be treated with dignity and respect. A core component of which is having easy access to products and resources that enable them to maintain and care for their fundamental physical health needs. Existing resources must be expanded and enhanced to ensure that they are effective and not merely perfunctory, particularly given the ensuing pandemic. This includes establishing frequent hand sanitizing stations throughout the school and ensuring that bathrooms are structured in a way that enables students to wash and dry their hands without having to touch faucets, doors, etc. that re-soil their hands. In addition, supports should be provided that meet the unique hygienic needs of girls and gender-expansive youth such as stocking all school bathrooms with free, disposable menstrual products for use by all menstruating youth.

Access to culturally competent, inclusive (including for students with disabilities), and equitable public education free of discrimination is a key factor in ensuring Black girls and gender-expansive young people have access to the full range of educational opportunities. Schools have the potential to educate, uplift, and inspire and to be a safe space and source of supports and resources otherwise unavailable to Black girls. Yet too often for Black girls and gender-expansive youth, schools deny access to education, further traumatize, deepen system involvement, and perpetuate cycles of violence, trauma, and abuse for Black girls.

Due to structural racism, misogynoir (the intersection of racism and sexism), and adultification bias<sup>5</sup> childhood behaviors carry grievous consequences for Black children unlike their white counterparts. This disparity occurs in many settings, including our schools where Black children are disproportionately subjected to harsh disciplinary policies that are ineffective in addressing student behavior. Among the harmful outcomes perpetuated by these policies is criminalization through the school to prison pipeline. This is especially so in Pittsburgh, where school referrals of Black girls to law enforcement is higher than in 99% of other US cities of similar size.<sup>6</sup> These referrals greatly contribute to the overrepresentation of Black youth in the legal system. Therefore, ending the numerous exclusionary and harsh discipline practices is critical to dismantling the school to prison pipeline and transforming schools' responses to Black girls and gender-expansive youth from punitive to nurturing.

## **Allegheny County school boards must establish, or expand, suspension bans to include grades K to five.**

Suspensions are an exceptionally harsh form of discipline that, rather than helping students refocus, interrupts their education and further



<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia J. Blake, Thalia Gonzalez, [Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood](#), Center on Poverty and Inequality Georgetown Law.

<sup>6</sup> [Black Girls and Sexuality Education: Access. Equity. Justice](#)

(Education, continued)

disconnects them from school. As with most punitive school practices, Black girls, particularly Black girls with disabilities, are disproportionately harmed by suspension practices. In 2018-2019, Black girls attending grades K-5 at Pittsburgh Public Schools were suspended for a total of 403 days compared to a total of 60 days for white girls and 78 days for white boys.<sup>7</sup> Black girls with disabilities were suspended at twice the rate of Black girls without disabilities.<sup>8</sup>

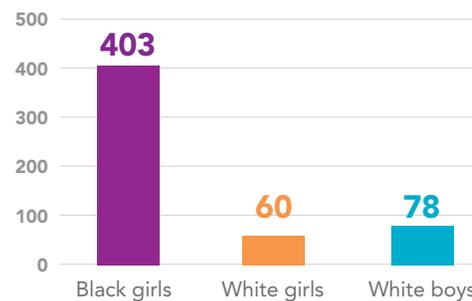
Suspending Black girls literally pushes them out of school and deprives them of all the protective factors an education provides.<sup>9</sup> Though Pittsburgh Public Schools has a policy of not suspending K-2 students for non-violent offenses, students continue to be suspended at alarming rates due to loopholes in this policy's implementation. The suspension ban must be fully implemented and extended to grade three to five students in all school districts in the County.

### **Allegheny County school boards must increase restorative practices that enhance student safety while reducing arrest and incarceration.**

Contrary to making students safe, the presence of law enforcement in schools provides more opportunity for Black girls and gender-expansive youth to be funneled into the legal system through the school to prison pipeline. In Allegheny County in 2018-2019, Black girls were 14 times more likely than white girls to be arrested for school-related matters and the Pittsburgh Public School police are the largest source in the county of referrals of Black girls to the system.<sup>10</sup> Often they are criminalized for typical adolescent behaviors or symptoms of trauma and other difficult circumstances that are best addressed with mental and behavioral health supports, not incarceration.

To ensure that the behaviors of Black girls and gender-expansive youth aren't met with a carceral response, all police must be removed from school and the number of mental health professionals, such as counselors and social workers, must increase considerably. This shift in response cannot be limited to staffing but must also be reflected in policy and practice including: adoption of practices that focus on socio-emotional learning and support; development and implementation of policies that lean on mental health supports to identify and address behavioral concerns, rather than penalization; and administrator/ staff trainings on methods to engage students in a manner that best cultivates their growth and development.

2018-2019 Suspensions,  
Pittsburgh Public Schools



### **Allegheny County school boards must eliminate school dress codes.**

Though schools should be environments focused on the development of young minds, school dress codes disturbingly direct attention to students' bodies. Due to adultification bias, Black girls can be especially harmed by school dress codes because of the negative stereotypes placed upon their normal adolescent biological development.<sup>11</sup> Not only are they belittling in that they deprive young people of agency in determining how to clothe and express themselves, but they also often uphold limited and false concepts of acceptable

attire and expression that are rooted in white supremacy, heteronormativity, and patriarchy. As a result, these dress codes effectually treat the identities of many students—particularly, girls, students of color, LGBTQIA+ students, and students who are ethnic or religious minorities—as being inappropriate and in need of suppression. When students fail to assimilate, they are penalized and often face sexual harassment.

Enforcement of dress codes harms Black girls and gender-expansive youth in multiple ways including being used as justification to disrupt their classroom education, contributing to their hyper-sexualization, and reinforcing the false and dangerous notion that their appearance can provoke or justify disrespect and violence by boys and men. Eliminating dress codes is critical to creating a safe and inclusive school environment in which Black girls and gender-expansive youth can be their authentic selves.

### **Allegheny County school boards must establish culturally and developmentally appropriate school codes of conduct.**

Sadly, Black girls and gender-expansive youth aren't given the same benefit of the doubt as white students. While they are likely to be subjected to harsher responses for any behaviors, this is particularly so when school codes of conduct are ambiguous and, thus, open to interpretation. Culturally responsive, developmentally appropriate protocols must be developed to help ensure that, when circumstances are subjective, educators make equitable decisions that guard against bias and the disproportionate penalization of Black girls and gender-expansive youth.

<sup>7</sup> Pg 9 [ERN2021SuspendedED.pdf](#)

<sup>8</sup> Pg 13 [ERN2021SuspendedED.pdf](#)

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Monique Morris, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (2016).

<sup>10</sup> Student Arrests in Allegheny County, January 2022, public report.

<sup>11</sup> [Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood](#)

In addition to dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline, the BGEA advocates for the following measures which will also help end of the criminalization of Black girls and gender-expansive youth:

**The Allegheny County Department of Human Services must follow through on implementation of county-wide practices that divert youth from the legal system and connect them to community-based services.**

The many harmful outcomes of young people forced into the juvenile justice system are well documented as is the fact that the racial disparities plaguing the legal system harm girls as well as boys. In fact, due to a confluence of racism and sexism in Allegheny County, Black girls are 10 times more likely than white girls to be referred to the juvenile justice system.<sup>12</sup> Where white girls are likely to be treated as children, Black girls are often viewed with bias and treated as criminals.

The criminalization of Black girls and gender-expansive youth must end and be replaced with practices that treat them as children and equip them with tools to learn and grow as people. To that end, the BGEA supports the development and implementation of a countywide, culturally-responsive, pre-citation, pre-arrest diversion program in Allegheny County that will reduce the number of racial disparities in juvenile justice referrals. This program should survey the current community-based resources, work to provide greater access to them for youth and families most at risk for system involvement, and advance a culture of restorative justice.

# Juvenile Justice

**The state legislature must prohibit the imposition of fees and fines on young people and their families due to legal system involvement.**

The overlapping effects of marginalization on Black girls and gender-expansive youth must be confronted in order to end their criminalization. In Pittsburgh, Black girls are overrepresented in the legal system and 55% of Black girls live in poverty, compared to 15% of white girls.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, imposing fines and fees upon these young people and their families only exacerbates systemic disparities. These fees and fines essentially criminalize them for their poverty by pushing them deeper into the system when they can't pay and can follow them into adulthood. Given the inextricable links between race, poverty and criminalization in this country and this state, the imposition of legal fines and fees on justice-involved youth must be eliminated.

**Allegheny County school boards must prohibit law enforcement referrals for disorderly conduct infractions.**

Disorderly conduct is the most common cause of arrest of young people in Pennsylvania.<sup>14</sup> This includes arrest of young people who engage in behaviors deemed to be disorderly conduct at school. Though Pittsburgh schools have prohibited arrest for disorderly conduct infractions, there are still other schools in Allegheny County that continue this carceral practice. The arrest of young people for disorderly conduct infractions must be prohibited in all school districts in the County.



<sup>12</sup> [Black Girls and Sexuality Education: Access. Equity. Justice](#)

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Sara Goodkind and the Black Girls Equity Alliance Juvenile Justice Workgroup, [Institutionalized Inequity: Pathways to Juvenile Justice for Black Girls in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County](#).

<sup>14</sup> Pennsylvania Juvenile Justice Task Force report, page 12.

# Child Welfare

## **The state legislature must require and fund anti-bias training for mandated reporters in the state.**

Without proper training and a clear understanding of marginalization and oppression, mandated reporters yield a dangerous power that can harm children rather than protect them. Due to explicit and implicit bias, Black parents are more likely to be met with judgment and viewed harshly than white parents. Where a white parent could be viewed as going through typical experiences of raising children or struggling through poverty, Black parents are too often labeled as neglectful. Consequently, Black families are disproportionately pushed into the child welfare system.

To protect against the continued use of the child welfare system as an inappropriate policing of Black families and to ensure that reports are only made due to objective concern of serious threat to a child's wellbeing, it is crucial that all mandated reporters in Pennsylvania undergo training to understand, identify and correct any biases they may have.

## **Local human service agencies must partner with community organizations to draw federal *Family First Prevention Services Act* dollars to support culturally-responsive child welfare prevention services.**

When children are separated from their families, it is often a traumatic experience that entails not only removal from their homes but disconnection from people they love as well as their communities. The *Families First Prevention Services Act* must be implemented through an anti-racism lens and fund services that help parents provide their children with the care and resources they need to stay together.

In light of the child welfare system's disproportionate targeting of Black families and the criminalization of Black motherhood well-documented by scholars like Professor Dorothy Roberts, it is vital that human service agencies partner with community organizations to ensure that services and supports are provided in a culturally responsive manner.<sup>15</sup> These services and supports include increased resources to meet families' daily needs such as clothing, transportation, and hygiene products; assistance with obtaining better paying jobs to meet families' financial needs; familial mental health supports; and resources to develop healthy family relationships and navigate familial conflict.

## **Local human service agencies must remove unreasonable barriers to kinship placements.**

We fully support the *Families First Prevention Services Act* and its goal of providing families with supports to enable them to stay together in a safe and healthy manner. In the limited instances when it is in the — objective and unbiased — best interest of the child to be removed from their home, placements should be with close family and friends to minimize disruption, protect against further trauma and enhance the child's ability to stay connected with their family, friends, and community.

Kinship placements must be intentionally and thoroughly explored for Black girls, gender-expansive youth and LGBTQIA+ youth who historically have been overrepresented among youth who are placed in congregate care. It is critical that the child welfare system remove unnecessary barriers to kinship placements including unreasonable or arbitrary qualifications for family members to be approved as a placement.

## **Local human service agencies must provide ongoing cultural and educational supports to transracial adoptive families.**

Just as community supports must be culturally responsive and intentional to meet the needs of Black girls and gender-expansive youth, so must the care provided by families. Black children are tied to a broader community and, therefore, impacted by its culture, history, and current socio-political treatment. Additionally, they may have different physical needs, for example skin and hair care, than their non-Black family members. Transracial adoptions must include ongoing cultural education and resources to support non-Black families in caring for their Black child's physical and emotional needs, and creating a home environment and community connections that best position their child to thrive.

<sup>15</sup> Dorothy Roberts, *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*.





Gwen's Girls and the Black Girls Equity Alliance stand prepared to support Allegheny County and Pennsylvania state leaders to shift and implement policies necessary to ensure that Black girls thrive in our community.

For more information about the Black Girls Equity Alliance and to get involved with the Health and Wellness, Education, Juvenile Justice, or Child Welfare working groups, contact:

**[contactus@gwensgirls.org](mailto:contactus@gwensgirls.org)**  
**[www.gwensgirls.org/bgea/](http://www.gwensgirls.org/bgea/)**



## **HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

[Suicide Among Black Girls Is a Mental Health Crisis Hiding in Plain Sight](#)

## **EDUCATION**

Truancy:

<https://www.publicsource.org/pittsburgh-public-schools-students-truancy-court-during-covid/>

## **JUVENILE JUSTICE**

Fines and Fees:

<https://jlc.org/juveniles-justice/juvenile-justice-fines-fees>