



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“The system of education and its policies are a major contribution to the school-to-prison pipeline [*and pushout*]. Most of the students affected by inequity of the system are Black/Hispanic and belong to a lower economic class.”

*Xiomara, 12th grader from the Bronx

Throughout the nation, young Black and Latinx students experience several barriers and hardships that affect their ability to complete school in a timely manner. While some of these hardships are related to family, money or peers, most of the barriers young people experience relate to school pushout.

Programs and policies, such as the national My Brother's Keeper Initiative started by President Barack Obama and the Young Men's Initiative by former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, address and acknowledge the issue of school pushout, but only focus on the experiences of cisgender boys of color. These policies and programs do not address school pushout from an intersectional framework. Given these disparities, there is an ongoing need to explore the needs of and develop policies and programs that benefit girls of color, and transgender and gender nonconforming youth of color (TGNC).

Based in Brooklyn, New York, Girls for Gender Equity (GGE) is an intergenerational grassroots organization that focuses on the development of girls of color. GGE recognizes that girls of color experience unique barriers that can push them out of school. GGE has been at the forefront of highlighting and combating racial and gender disparities in schools, holding schools accountable, and uplifting preventative approaches to end school pushout. GGE has led multiple participatory research projects on how girls of color experience school pushout. These projects led GGE to embark on creating the School Girls Deserve (SGD) Participatory Action Research Project and Policy Report.

GGE explored not only all the barriers that girls and TGNC youth of color experience, but identified their visions for the school that they believe they deserve. While most research on school pushout focuses on how young people experience harsh discipline in school, we know that school pushout goes beyond discipline. As a participatory action research study, our work extends the current literature on school discipline as it captures the multiple layers of school pushout and highlights a youth-centered vision for schools.

*Names have been changed to protect the identity of the young people in this study.

ABOUT THE STUDY

This participatory action research project (PAR) was done in collaboration with a variety of young people in all five boroughs of New York City. We held listening sessions with 120 participants aged 9-23 from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Fifty-three percent of our participants identified as Black; twenty-three percent identified as Latinx, and nearly twelve percent identified as Asian (including Indo-Caribbean and South Asian). Six percent of the participants identified as multiracial/multiethnic and close to three percent identified as white, less than one percent identified as Native American, less than two percent Middle Eastern and less than one percent identified as Pacific Islander. The majority of the vision session participants identified as cisgender females (78.3%) nearly seven percent identified as transgender or gender nonconforming/genderqueer and approximately fifteen percent identified as cisgender males. For the study, we only included the voices of cisgender females, transgender, and gender nonconforming/genderqueer (TGNC) youth¹.

FINDINGS

Throughout the vision sessions, we found that young people experienced multiple forms of violence while in school. They identified experiences with both institutional and interpersonal violence that intersect and overlap through a combination of school policies, curriculum, and practices implemented and executed by peers and adults. Fortunately, the young people have solutions for the various forms of violence they experience in their school that they believe will not only positively impact them, but have the potential to positively impact all students.

Through our analysis, we identified three major findings:

1. Girls and TGNC youth of color experience institutional violence in school.
2. Girls and TGNC youth of color experience interpersonal violence in school from adults and their peers.
3. Girls and TGNC youth of color have visions for safe, holistic, welcoming, and affirming schools for all students.

Finding 1: Girls and TGNC youth of color experience institutional violence in school.

Institutional violence is defined as any form of violence or harm that occurs in institutions or social places that prevent people from meeting their basic needs. Girls and TGNC youth of color experience violence from the oppressive policies and practices in their schools. The institution identified in the vision sessions is the school system. The forms of institutional violence that they've identified are over policing, culturally disconnected curriculum, under resourced and under supported schools.

In the vision sessions, girls and TGNC youth of color identified over-policing in their schools as a barrier that makes school an unpleasant experience. Up to half of the girls and TGNC youth of color reported going through metal detectors. They discussed the negative impacts that the scanning devices had on their daily experiences with school.

Girls and TGNC youth of color also identified school safety agents (New York City Police officers stationed in schools) as another barrier for them. Young people shared how school safety agents make them feel constantly surveilled and imprisoned. These young people reported negative experiences with school safety agents, who they say do not make them feel safe but rather criminalized in their school.

Participants shared that the lack of diversity in curricula also contributed to school pushout. Youth stated that the limited representation in the curriculum was a form of violence because it made them feel disconnected and less valued by the school.

Young people highlighted how they feel pushed out of school because of the lack of resources and support that are available to them. According to our data, because these things are not a part of their environment, they have harder times staying in school and feel less valued in their school community. Young people specifically stated that the lack of mental health support and limited extracurricular activities made school a less pleasant experience.

1 Throughout this report, we interchange the terms, "young people" and "girls and TGNC youth of color," to refer to the students whose voices were captured in this report. While GGE's definition of girls includes girls of trans experience, girls and TGNC are separated because we include boys of trans experience's stories throughout this report. While TGNC youth experience violence because of their intersecting identities like cisgender girls of color, they experience a different type of violence that is not applicable to cisgender girls.

Finding 2: Girls and TGNC youth of color experience interpersonal violence in school from adults and their peers.

In the School Girls Deserve PAR Project young people identified experiencing interpersonal violence from both adults (i.e., educators, administrators, school safety agents) and peers. Interpersonal violence is defined as a form of violence that occurs between people that makes one or more parties feel unsafe. The examples of interpersonal violence that the young people reported include but are not limited to: sexual harassment, racial harassment, Islamophobia, control of their gender expression and identity. Our findings show that interpersonal violence is informed by institutional and structural violence because the interpersonal violence that the young people reported experiencing are microcosms of the institutional and structural forms of violence that they reported experiencing.

In our study, young people reported experiencing sexual harassment while in school. Sexual harassment is defined as, “Any unwanted behavior or attention of a sexual nature that may or may not interfere with a person’s ability to participate in or benefit from a school’s programs or activities.” (Smith, Huppuch, and Deven 2011). Our research shows that approximately one out of three of the vision session participants reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment in school. While they reported experiencing sexual harassment to our research team, they did not always report it to their schools. This is consistent with other research findings (Smith, Huppuch, and Deven 2011) (Hill and Kearl, 2011).

Our research shows that approximately **1 in 3** of the vision session participants **reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment** in school.



Young people reported experiencing racialized harassment and Islamophobia. Racial harassment is defined as discrimination towards a person based on their race. Racial harassment includes, but is not limited to: teachers/peers/school staff making racist commentary about a certain group of people, making racist jokes, and basing treatment of students on race. During the vision sessions, young people gave specific examples of experiences of anti-Black racial harassment and Islamophobia in their schools from peers and adults. These examples included young people being called racist or Islamophobic names and people speaking negatively about their religion and/or race.

In the vision sessions, some participants also reported experiencing violence because they are transgender or gender nonconforming/genderqueer. Like the students who reported experiencing racial harassment and Islamophobia, they reported that the violence came from both their peers and adults. Examples of this violence include: being misgendered by peers and adults in school; being asked to behave and/or dress in a way that does not reflect their gender identity and people making transphobic comments.

Young people also highlighted how they felt that their gender expression was being controlled by policies and practices in their school. According to our research, 50% of young people reported experiences of control of their gender expression and/or identity, particularly when they did not seem to meet white feminine beauty standards or norms (Morris E. W., 2007). For example, participants shared that they were either made to feel uncomfortable or unsafe for dressing or appearing in their traditional religious clothing, dressing or appearing “too masculine”; dressing or appearing “too ghetto”; and dressing or appearing “too sexy”.

Finding 3: Girls and TGNC youth of color have visions for safe, holistic, welcoming and affirming schools for all students.

All the young people who participated in the vision session expressed clear visions for the schools that they want, need, and deserve. These solutions addressed how to prevent pushing girls and TGNC youth of color out of school by calling for major policy and cultural shifts in the education system. They directly address the institutional and interpersonal violence that they reported experiencing. Their visions break down into four major areas: curriculum, resources, support, and discipline.

Throughout the vision sessions, young people envisioned the curriculum in their schools to be affirming of their intersectional identities. They identified this as including culturally responsive topics, themes, and pedagogical practices. Because young people stated that their schools do not provide them with comprehensive sexuality education and their schools focus heavily on high-stakes standardized testing, they envisioned for their schools to provide comprehensive sexuality education and the elimination of standardized testing.

Young people also created solutions that have potential to create stronger mental health and social support systems in their schools. Their solutions included having more effective counselors in school, support for LGBTQ and TGNC youth of color and support for pregnant and parenting students. They also envisioned solutions for teachers to receive more thorough and competent training

to better serve, respect, and affirm their students.

Young people also envisioned solutions to end the racist and sexist discipline practices that they reported experiencing in school. They specifically called for the removal of metal detectors and school safety agents from their school environments. They stated that their presence creates a prison-like atmosphere in their school. They also envisioned solutions that end gender biased dress codes that negatively impact girls and TGNC youth of color.

Finally, young people envisioned solutions for their schools to have more resources. They asked for schools to include more extracurricular activities, healthier lunches with halal options, bathrooms that are affirming for TGNC youth, bathrooms that have menstrual materials such as pads and tampons, improved technology, better textbooks, more desks, and clean drinkable water fountains.

POLICY & PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on what the young people asked for, we've come up with youth-centered policy recommendations to create the school they deserve.

The School Girls Deserve Policy Agenda calls on policymakers, educators and administrators and youth advocates to:

- » **Invest in holistic curriculum and pedagogy** by eliminating high-stakes standardized testing; providing comprehensive sexuality education in K-12; and providing culturally responsive, intersectional, feminist education in K-12.
- » **Create resourceful and dignified schools** by fully allocating all court ordered New York State funds to New York City public schools, providing access to current technology, having mandatory testing of school water fountains for lead and access to clean drinkable water available, providing free and nutritious food options that are inclusive to all students' religious dietary guidelines, providing access to quality tampons, pads, and other menstrual materials and mandating accessible bathrooms for TGNC students.
- » **Create safe and supportive learning environments for all students** by better implementing existing laws that support the

mental, emotional and physical health of all young people, ensuring comprehensive in-school support for LGBTQ and TGNC students, ensuring comprehensive in-school support for students who are victims and survivors of sexual violence and ensuring comprehensive in-school support for pregnant and parenting young people.

- » **Decriminalize learning environments** by eliminating zero tolerance policies, removing all police from schools, removing metal detectors and other instruments of surveillance, reducing school-based discipline referrals, eliminating vague and subjective dress code policies, mandating guidance interventions before the use of suspensions, protecting immigrant youth and families by eliminating Immigrant and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officers in school and implementing restorative justice practices throughout all DOE schools.

This report seeks to analyze, discuss, prioritize, and amplify the emergent needs of girls and TGNC youth of color. Through this, we hope to advance educational justice that centers intersectional strategy and youth-centered solutions. Finally, this report focuses on the dynamic possibilities of galvanizing young people, youth advocates, policy makers, educators and school administrators to interrupt institutionally and interpersonally violent policies, practices, and culture in New York City public schools.