

Divesting from Policing and Investing in Green, Healthy Public Schools

June 2024

by Climate and Community Project

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Acknowledgements: We are grateful to Black Lives Matter Educators NYC, Akira Drake Rodriguez, Sandhya Kajepta, and other public school educators for the time, labor, and expertise they contributed to the development of this memo.

Introduction

What is the role of public education in the era of climate crisis? As a society, we rely on public education to teach children how to take care of each other, identify and repair harm when it happens, and navigate the world with the skills and knowledge they need in a changing world. Foundational investments in students' futures – and the future of the planet – like the Green New Deal for K-12 Public Schools¹ would support these fundamentals and more by transforming the US public school system into the healthy, inspiring, and fully decarbonized system that all communities deserve.

Yet, it's no secret that the US public school system is crumbling, underfunded, and understaffed. This is particularly true in the Black, brown, and working class communities that already bear the heaviest burdens of climate crisis, hyper-policing, and mass incarceration. **Simply decarbonizing and modernizing the current US public education system would amount to a greener school-to-prison pipeline — not the targeted investments in education, care, and social support needed for truly safe and healthy systems required for an equitable green future for students and workers alike.**

There is a long list of needs to prepare buildings and workforces for a warming world. Most schools in the US were constructed in a different climate era when summers were cooler and shorter. Now, after decades of underfunding and deferred maintenance, water fountains are undrinkable through heat waves across the country and teachers are conducting classes in asbestos-filled rooms as they fill with wildfire smoke. Students can't concentrate without air conditioning on ever-increasing hot days.

A 2020 Government Accountability Office report found that more than half (54%) of all public school districts in the US need at least two major systems updated or replaced, and more than one-quarter of all districts need at least six systems updated or replaced. This backlog of deferred maintenance makes it more difficult for districts to take on the urgent task of fully decarbonizing their systems while providing high-quality education.

Public schools should be safe, healthy, and inspiring spaces for learning – but too many adolescents



experience school as a site of climate vulnerability and part of a pipeline to their criminalization, over-policing, and incarceration.

Policing and surveillance in public schools across the United States draws resources away from urgent climate action and fails to provide the structure and support students need to prepare themselves for a warming world. **Roughly 14 million students attend schools with police but no counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker.**² Instead, there are now at least 27,000 police officers employed in schools nationwide, a nearly 40% increase from 1997.^{3,4} In New York City, the largest US school district, there are twice as many police in schools as guidance counselors, and four times as many police as social workers, a trend that is driven by increasingly punitive responses to student behavior and policy failures to prevent school shootings.⁵ It is not surprising, then, that the number of school-based arrests increased 300-500% nationwide since the 1990s, resulting in hundreds of thousands of referrals to the legal system.^{6,7,8}

Every school needs all of these care professionals at staffing ratios dictated by local school enrollment and recommended by experts and professional organizations.² These workers should also be included in relevant school unions and paid at commensurable wages to other school workers to ensure a healthy working environment across job categories. Especially as vulnerabilities grow through exposure to climate harms, understaffing or absence of any of these care professionals compounds multiple levels of harm.

Directing public dollars to policing and surveillance in schools fuels the school-to-prison pipeline and exposes more students to the atrocities of the US mass incarceration crisis – an unnatural disaster site of intensifying climate crisis and environmental injustices. The United States already incarcerates its residents at a rate and number higher than any other country in the world: at least 1.9 million people across facility types, with Black men facing disproportionately the highest rates of incarceration.^{9,10} Another 3.7 million people are on probation or parole, being supervised in the community.¹¹

The policy choice to prioritize policing and punishment over kids' health, development, and safety through the climate crisis has profound consequences over the life course. It is especially alarming given that we are in the midst of an adolescent mental health crisis, with unprecedented increases in adolescent depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, plans, and attempts over the past decade and a half.^{12,13,14} In the largest survey of climate anxiety in young people every conducted, children expressed

unprecedented levels of anxiety and psychological distress related to the climate and environmental crises. About 75% of participants agreed that “the future is frightening,” 45% said they experienced climate-related anxiety to a degree that affected their daily lives, and young people reported feelings of betrayal as more prominent than those of reassurance when asked about governmental responses to climate crisis.^{15,16}

Adolescence is a critical developmental period, particularly for mental health.^{17,18} During this critical period, schools are the place where kids spend the majority of their time outside their homes.¹⁹ And while most adolescents who need mental health services never receive them, of the small portion who do, a third access those services only at school; they are disproportionately Black and low-income.¹⁹

Schools are thus a crucial public health intervention target, even in the absence of a climate emergency. Especially in the face of mounting climate crises, schools have the potential to serve as community hubs of resilience, care, support, and services that are equipped to offer a range of experiences to prepare students for their future lives in a warming world, from school-to-career pipelines to green jobs to updated climate curricula.

Students deserve schools that not only meet their educational and developmental needs, but help them develop critical skills to question the systems and structures around them, build a moral compass to learn how to do what's best for their communities, and put them on pathways to good, low-carbon careers—not policing, punishment, and incarceration. We can give students such schools by investing in fully staffed school workforces whose needs for a sustainable career are met while addressing decades of deferred maintenance and investing in decarbonization and climate-readiness.

But we also need to reconsider the way we, as a society, approach models of justice. Reframing this narrative for students will also be necessary as they, the students, consider restructuring society to embrace green technologies and phase out harmful outdated practices that exacerbate climate change. In the face of increasing climate catastrophes caused by the ruling class, which will disproportionately impact the poor and working classes, the next generation will need more productive and equitable ways to prevent and address harm, rather than the reductionist punitive models that have failed us so far.

In this short memo, we summarize research and practice that connects the dots between proposals for a Green New Deal for K-12 Public Schools and ending the school-to-

prison pipeline. We argue that Green New Deal for Public Schools agendas must embrace divest-invest strategies for ending the school-to-prison pipeline and recognizing that kids' social, emotional, and intellectual well-being is a core element of building a just and equitable green future.

Divest from policing and carceral infrastructure in schools

Background: The school-to-prison pipeline

Public education in the United States took a “carceral turn” in the 1990s. Local, state, and federal governments began to manage the consequences of economic austerity in education with investments in policing and punishment.²⁰ Indeed, over the past thirty years, state and local spending on jails and prisons has increased at triple the rate of spending on P-12 public education.²¹

The safety of public school students and staff requires divesting from these carceral systems and practices of punishment, while investing in care and community and educational resources. In New York City alone, nearly 100,000 students walk through airport-style security to get to class every day. In the mid-2000s, four in five (82%) children attending high schools with permanent metal detectors in NYC were Black or Latinx.⁵³ The city spent \$2,000 - \$3,000 less per student than the citywide average in schools with permanent metal detectors compared to those without.⁵³ Some schools, like NYC public schools, also conduct “random,” or unannounced, scanning, which can increase detrimental psychological impacts on students. These highly policed schools issue 48% more suspensions, and in most, the graduation rate was less than 60%.⁵³ In 2017, Black and Latinx children in NYC were disproportionately arrested, handcuffed, and issued summonses by police in their schools.⁴ In the same year, Black and Latinx students represented approximately 90% of arrests and summonses in schools, while constituting only two-thirds of the student body.⁴

The carceral turn in public education was justified by a number of tragic, heavily publicized incidents of school violence, which fed a largely manufactured, racist crime panic about the rise of so-called “juvenile superpredators.”²² This educational paradigm comprises airport-style security and surveillance, zero-tolerance policies, police in

schools, and exclusionary school discipline (suspensions, expulsions, and police referrals or arrests). These policies overwhelmingly target BIPOC students in cities, despite the fact that most school-targeted shootings are perpetrated by white students in rural and suburban schools.²³

- Black students are more than three times as likely to be suspended or expelled as white students, controlling for socioeconomic status and misbehavior.^{2,24,25,26}
- LGBTQ youth have 2.4 times the odds of being suspended as non-LGBTQ youth.²⁷
- Black girls are four times more likely to be arrested in school than white girls nationally.²
- Students with disabilities are nearly three times more likely to be arrested than students without disabilities.²
- Black boys with disabilities are arrested at five times the rate of other students.²

Students removed from school are more than twice as likely to be arrested in the same month than those not removed.²⁸ Moreover, these practices parallel broader trends in policing and punishment,^{29,30} in which schools' surrounding communities experienced rises in aggressive policing.^{31,32}

Together, these trends expose some students to what scholars call the mass criminalization of adolescence,^{33,34} a mechanism of structural racism. Indeed, racial disparities in school discipline contribute to racial inequalities in adult arrest rates.³⁵

What sometimes gets lost in these disturbing statistics, however, is that these policies and practices do not even accomplish their purported purpose of making schools safer, as outlined in the next section.

Effectiveness of school securitization and policing

After 30 years of implementation, there is simply no evidence that school securitization, policing, and exclusionary discipline make schools safer, deter future misbehavior, or improve school climate. In fact, these policies can have the opposite effect.

School securitization does not make schools safer, and is a tool of discrimination

- A review of 15 years of research from across the country concluded that metal detectors have

no effect on reducing injuries, deaths, or threats of violence on school grounds. Moreover, these technologies cannot distinguish between different objects made of metal—such determinations must be made by trained employees.^{36,37}

- A nation-wide representative survey of over 6,000 students found that metal detectors and security guards consistently failed at reducing rates of campus theft and violence.³⁸
- A national survey of principals and administrators from over 2,500 schools across the country found that, among high-violence schools, those with majority-minority enrollments were much more likely to conduct metal detector searches than majority white schools.³⁹

School securitization does not increase academic achievement

- A national survey of nearly 40,000 students found no evidence that visible security measures have beneficial effects on academic outcomes.⁴⁰
- A survey of principals and administrators from over 10,000 schools found that some security utilization patterns have modest detrimental effects on adolescents' academic outcomes, particularly the heavy surveillance patterns observed in high schools serving predominantly low socioeconomic students.⁴¹
- A nationally representative survey of 6,000 students found that school security measures are associated with poorer academic outcomes among youth who have experienced multiple victimizations.⁴²

School securitization may increase fear, stress, and anxiety among students — amidst a growing mental health crisis exacerbated by climate anxiety

- Data from numerous large, national surveys show that **visible security measures, including metal detectors, often make students feel less safe and more fearful of harm.**^{43,44}
- The American Psychological Association's Zero Tolerance Task Force found that visible security measures are often used in conjunction with zero tolerance policies, which have been shown to be developmentally inappropriate for youth. Zero tolerance policies may create, enhance, or accelerate negative mental health outcomes by increasing alienation, anxiety, rejection, and breaking of healthy adult bonds.⁴⁵
- The US is already in a national emergency for children's mental health, which is worsened by growing exposure to climate-related disruptions and anxiety.⁴⁶

Displacement due to climate disasters like storms and flooding can result in mental health repercussions both during the events and through recovery from them.⁴⁷

School policing and exclusionary discipline do not make schools safer, and are tools of discrimination

- **There is no evidence** that removing misbehaving students from school improves school safety or student behavior.⁴⁵
- Numerous studies from the mid-late 1990s found that school discipline does not have a deterrent effect on student misbehavior, and can actually lead to an increase in misbehavior and suspension among students who are suspended.⁴⁵
- A recent survey conducted by the Brookings Institute and RAND found that only 13% of school principals agreed that suspensions make students less likely to misbehave in the future.⁴⁸
- In the same Brookings/RAND survey, a majority of school principals (69%) agreed that suspensions and expulsions do not really solve discipline problems.⁴⁸
- Over 30 years of research finds no evidence that Black students misbehave more frequently than white students.⁴⁹ Moreover, research finding dramatic racial disparities in school-based arrest and exclusionary discipline controls for the type of misbehavior and socioeconomic status, which indicates institutional racism drives higher discipline rates for Black students. Hiring and retaining Black teachers is one way to combat this problem, and research shows that having a Black teacher lowers Black students' likelihood of exclusionary discipline.⁵⁰

School policing and exclusionary discipline do not improve academic achievement

- Decades of studies find that receiving exclusionary discipline is associated with subsequently lower academic achievement, in math, science, and reading.^{e.g.,49,51,52}
- Moreover, in classrooms where suspensions for minor infractions were used more frequently, all students had lower academic achievement, not just those who were suspended.⁵²
- Findings are similar at the school-level. Schools with higher levels of exclusionary discipline over time have worse academic achievement, compared to schools with lower levels of exclusionary discipline.⁵³

School policing and exclusionary discipline can harm

social support and adolescent health and development

- A study of stop-and-frisk in NYC found that police encounters can lead to trauma, stress, and anxiety among young men.⁵⁴
- A large study of nearly 5,000 California schools and 5 million middle and high school students over ten years found that schools in which students report higher average levels of substance use and higher levels of violence and harassment had subsequently higher levels of school discipline and police contact in the next year. Schools in which students reported higher average levels of feeling safe in school, school support, and community support had subsequently lower levels of school discipline and police contact.⁵⁵
- Another large study using the same data from California found that schools with higher levels of school discipline and police contact had students who subsequently reported higher average levels of substance use, depressed feelings, and violence and harassment. Schools with higher levels of discipline had students who subsequently reported lower levels of community support, school support, and feeling safe in school.⁵⁶
- In a study of over 9,000 middle and high school students who had never been suspended or expelled, students in schools with more severe exclusionary discipline policies had higher levels of depressive symptoms than students in schools with less severe exclusionary discipline policies.⁵⁷

Invest in schools as sites of mutual care and restoration

As the climate crisis exacerbates inequalities of race, class, and place, climate investment in public schools should also materially improve teaching and learning conditions while preparing students for their changing futures. Schools have much of the physical infrastructure already needed to act as resilience hubs, including kitchens and cafeterias outfitted to feed hundreds of people, capacity to accommodate large groups, showers and multiple bathrooms, and outdoor space. The American Federation of Teacher's vision of [community schools](#) exemplifies how school districts can be resource hubs for entire communities that exist at "the center of their communities by providing the services to students, families and neighbors that best serve their needs, while at the same time promoting stable, healthy neighborhoods." Public schools are also trusted locations where communities already spend ample time; whether or not people have children in the school system, schools are used for a range of services like voting and receiving

COVID-19 supplies.

Police should be removed and excluded from school settings, and SRO contracts with districts should be canceled while ensuring retraining of non-armed security officers under union contracts. Students and school workers alike deserve fully staffed supportive workforces for net positive effects on working and learning conditions. The cost of police in schools and other visible security measures in schools—in addition to the millions of dollars sunk in settlements to resolve misconduct complaints—should be reinvested in measures that contribute to student well-being by creating healthy, inspiring, and safe public school environments.

Social workers, psychologists, nurses, librarians, custodial staff, and other wrap-around service positions; universal social-emotional learning programming; and transformative⁵⁸ and restorative justice practices, should be fully funded. Where appropriate, funding should be transferred from security services budgets, school police budgets should be reduced, and school resource officers should be retrained for new roles. Moreover, to ensure the full benefits of the community school model are experienced and to address the reality that parents are unable to participate as much in school communities when they are over- or underemployed, schools should opt into paying parents for their time and labor contributions.

Schools should fully transition to transformative and restorative practices, and be provided necessary resources to do so. Schools that implement restorative measures have demonstrated [reductions](#) in violence, improved school climate, and improved attendance and achievement, as well as reductions in racial and economic disparities in suspensions. But far too often, restorative practices are implemented without adequate funding, training, and staffing, and without addressing underlying community and institutional constraints, such as inadequate social services and overcrowded classrooms.

Implementing restorative and transformative practices can improve teachers' working conditions.

- In a randomized trial of a restorative practices program in 44 Pittsburgh Public Schools found that these practices had positive effects on teachers' perceptions of their working conditions and students' learning conditions.⁵⁹
- In a study of 24 schools in the Oakland Unified School District in California, nearly 70% of school faculty and staff reported that restorative practices improved school climate.⁶⁰ In one Oakland middle school, teachers felt the atmosphere at school was more peaceful,

with fewer fights and better classroom behavior.⁶¹

- A study of a restorative practices program in Minnesota Public Schools found that the program resulted in higher professional satisfaction among teachers.⁶²

Some schools that implement universal social-emotional learning programming see improvements in students' academic performance and long-term economic outcomes; reduced bullying, aggression, disruption, conduct problems, and emotional distress; improved social and emotional skills and attitudes; and positive social behavior.^{63,64,65} Schools should [select](#) social-emotional learning programming that is proven to be effective among their school population, and avoid relying on programs that have only been proven effective within white or suburban schools.

While police in schools do not increase safety, they can provide the illusion of safety. School systems often lean on increased policing to reassure families in the wake of threats and similar violent incidents. Policy changes that would better protect against outside threats include gun safety laws and increased investment and staffing of mental health infrastructure. Another element of safety in schools is protection from and transparency about outside threats. When threats do occur, systems should be in place to communicate quickly to families, so they can make their own decisions about safety. School workers should also be trained in de-escalation and school safety to facilitate rapid de-escalation and contact with families.

Although school buildings have much of the required social and physical infrastructure to serve as resilience hubs, most schools will need additional resources. The resources needed depend on the school, community needs, and the context of their specific location. In addition, it is important to remember that resilience hubs are meant to serve the community all the time—not only in moments of crisis. These “additional” investments that support communities during moments of crisis will also support community health and well-being, every day.

Additional infrastructure needed for resilience hubs could include backup power sources, which could include renewable energy sources such as solar energy and modern air filtration for smoke exposure. Many schools require updated air conditioning and heating for extreme temperatures (many schools, especially those in typically cooler climates and in older buildings, do not have central HVAC systems). Exposure to high heat levels is not physically safe for students and workers and can negatively affect cognitive functioning, thus contributing to poorer learning outcomes for students.⁶⁶ Low-income students

and students of color are both more likely to be exposed to unsafe heat levels and less likely to have air conditioning in their schools.⁶⁷ Inclusion of green spaces in resilience updates allows for both outdoor education and flood mitigation. Schools should also implement emergency plans to identify procedures, decision-making, and staffing in extraordinary circumstances, ensuring that students and their communities have the information they need to make decisions about safety. To ensure the full benefits of resilience hubs are met, schools need increased staffing levels for school nurses, social workers, psychologists, and counselors.

Conclusion

The divest-invest approach exemplifies the ability of unions, community groups, and organizers to push for economic arrangements that multiply benefits and meet community needs while taking a full view of communities' working, living, and learning conditions. Proposals to remove funding for SROs and school police in public school districts – which already operate under austerity conditions and even face threats of school closures – are often met with valid fears. But continued reliance and deepening of status quo carceral responses will not only fail to meet the needs of public school students, it foregoes a critical opportunity to rethink educational priorities in the face of the climate crisis.

Every public school in the country deserves the highest standards of health and safety, while eliminating carbon pollution. A Green New Deal for Public Schools would upgrade HVAC to provide comfortable learning environments 365 days a year, remove all mold, lead paint, and other toxins, repair all school infrastructure, and invest in staffing levels that allow districts to meet student and community needs, especially in our country's most vulnerable schools. It would launch new, good paying careers for hundreds of thousands of workers. And it would serve as a preventative intervention in ending the school-to-prison pipeline by bringing green, healthy community infrastructure and support to every neighborhood in the country, especially Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and working class communities.

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