



**TO:** Chairwoman Carolyn B. Maloney and Members of the House Committee on Oversight and Reform

**FROM:** Communities for Just Schools Fund

**RE:** "The Urgent Need to Address the Gun Violence Epidemic"

**DATE:** June 6, 2022

This memorandum is sent on behalf of the Communities for Just Schools Fund (CJSF). Our 64 partner organizations' efforts to improve school discipline and climate and ensure holistic safety span more than 31 states and have positively impacted millions of students, parents, and educators. We are writing to share our thoughts in advance of ***The Urgent Need to Address the Gun Violence Epidemic*** hearing you are sponsoring on Wednesday, June 8, 2022.

### **Our Partners' Interest and Expertise**

The Communities for Just Schools Fund's partners organize young people, parents and caregivers, educators, and other community members to advocate on behalf of students who are disproportionately impacted by the overuse of exclusionary school discipline practices, including suspensions, expulsions, and arrests in schools. Their advocacy has shed light upon the fact that, in many places, there are far too many students who find themselves being policed and targeted for exclusion from their schools because of racialized systems that criminalize them in addition to flawed school policies and practices *and* biased perceptions of them and their communities. Their advocacy has been crucial in illuminating the need for and value of meaningful engagement with young people and their families, the lack of which exacerbates negative perceptions of young people and their communities.

In most instances, our partners' efforts are local in focus *and* have national impact and reach. They organize community members to stand up for positive, healthy, and supportive school climates. They work to demonstrate how such schools produce better academic and social outcomes than do schools with a heavy police and/or security presence, zero tolerance school discipline policies, and over-reliance on exclusionary discipline methods. Our partner organizations offer what is otherwise all too often limited space for students of color, those with special education needs, immigrant students and LGBTQ+ students, and their family members, to advocate for themselves and their school communities. Using their own lived experiences and the effort they invest in research, data collection, and political education, they are proactively working to shed light upon how they have been harmed by hyper-punitive educational policies and practices. They are also actively identifying, proposing, and even helping to implement evidence-based alternatives. Our partners organize not only around eliminating the use of exclusionary discipline, but also around implementing innovative and proven, positive alternatives that are slowly shifting the needle towards "fair" and "equitable" responses to student behavior— responses that address the root cause and

demand meaningful investments of time, money, and care by districts and school officials working in collaboration with community.

### **Our Perspective on School Safety**

Calls to increase the presence of law enforcement in and around schools as the solution to incidents of gun violence are misguided and reactionary. Emergency planning and infrastructure are important elements of school design; however, law enforcement in schools—along with other school hardening measures—offer only the illusion of safety. In reality, law enforcement in schools has proven to criminalize children and too often comes at the expense of investments in more holistic approaches to supporting student well-being such as restorative justice coordinators, social workers, counselors, culturally-affirming social emotional learning and curricula. School hardening and surveillance actions, including police and the use of policing tactics in schools, derail efforts towards the kinds of schools all young people need and deserve.

Schools must be places where all students feel safe and where their needs are met. However, police in schools make school *less safe* for students of color, LGBTQ+, and gender nonconforming youth, students with disabilities, and their communities. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection, millions of students attend schools with police officers, but no counselors, nurses, psychologists, or social workers.<sup>1</sup> This divestment in student support services and an overinvestment in school policing exacts not only a physical toll on many Black and Brown students in particular, but also an emotional, psychological, and intellectual toll. The presence of police officers in schools has created learning environments of punishment, exclusion, and disposability that deny Black and Brown students an opportunity to learn.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the harm posed to students, law enforcement in schools does not actually address the complex issue of gun violence. Research shows that increasing police in schools is not effective in preventing or stopping mass shootings.<sup>3</sup> In the tragic cases of both Uvalde and Parkland, and in most school shootings, the presence of school resource officers did not stop these instances of gun violence. Furthermore, in cases of school shootings where school police officers are present, researchers have found more casualties.<sup>4</sup> Addressing the root causes of gun violence in school will require a comprehensive approach focused on prevention and repair of social inequities. We must double down on investments in education and student support services that foster “cultures of connectedness” in schools, which requires investments in restorative justice, culturally relevant curricula and practices, diverse teaching and support staff, anti-bias training, mental and emotional health supports and more.<sup>5</sup> Gun violence must be addressed without contributing to the harassment, surveillance, and criminalization of Black and Brown students in particular.

---

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education, 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection: Key Data Highlights on Equity and Opportunity Gaps in Our Nation’s Public Schools.” (June 7, 2016), available at: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Advancement Project. “We Came to Learn: A Call to Action for Police-Free Schools,” (September 2018), available at: <https://advancementproject.org/wecametolearn/>

<sup>3</sup> Eric Madfis, *How to Stop School Rampage Killing: Lessons from Averted Mass Shootings and Bombings*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Jillian Peterson, James Densley, Gina Erickson, “Presence of Armed School Officials and Fatal and Nonfatal Gunshot Injuries During Mass School Shootings, United States, 1980-2019,” *JAMA Netw Open*. 2021;4(2):e2037394. doi:10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.37394

<sup>5</sup> Communities for Just Schools Fund, “Do The Harder - Create Cultures of Connectedness in Schools: A Youth and Parent Organizer Response to the Federal Commission on School Safety,” (December 2018), available at: <https://www.cjsfund.org/do-the-work>

CJSF's partners have been leading the way on the kinds of responses and action we need for years. We offer just a few examples of their brilliance and work here:

**Communities United (CU)** is a survivor-led, intergenerational racial justice organization in Chicago. They say "At the heart of CU's organizing is the development of grassroots leadership to build collective power to achieve racial justice and transformative social change. With this approach, CU focuses on advancing affordable housing, health equity, education justice, youth investment, immigrant rights, and shifting resources from the criminal justice and juvenile justice systems into restorative justice alternatives." Communities United has designed *Healing Through Justice: A Youth led Breakthrough Strategy For Healing Centered Communities*.<sup>6</sup> Through the leadership of young people of color, Communities United is partnering with Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago to invest in a next generation of Black and Brown youth in Chicago to create and sustain healing-centered communities.

**The Black Organizing Project (BOP)** is a Black multi-generational member-led community organization working for racial, social, and economic justice through grassroots organizing and community building in Oakland, California, and across the Bay Area. They describe their work as follows: "The Black Organizing Project launched the Bettering Our School System (BOSS) Campaign in October 2011, in response to the murder of 20-year old Raheim Brown by Oakland Police Sgt. Bhatt. After learning of Raheim's murder, and witnessing the lack of accountability on behalf of the school board in rectifying and addressing the tragedy — our members wanted justice for Raheim and the many Black boys, girls, and families that have been and continue to be targeted by anti-Black policing. We studied the broader issue of police violence in communities of color, and the continued criminalization of Black youth in particular, in order to begin to transform the climate and culture within the Oakland Unified School District. After months of research, listening sessions, door knocking, strategy sessions, and community outreach, we launched the Bettering Our School System campaign to: Abolish the Oakland School Police Department; End the criminalization of Black and Brown students in the Oakland Unified School District; Invest in alternative models of school safety that do not rely on police; Restructure the current policies and practices within OUSD, which do not take a restorative justice approach to student discipline; and to put an end to the the school-to-prison pipeline. They have won significant policy victories through this work. But, their reach and impact go well beyond such definitions of success. They say "we believe that those most harmed by structural racism and anti-Black policing must demand change that provides immediate relief and improvement, while building towards long-term structural change. Through grassroots organizing of youth, parents and community leaders, we have been able to put in place local policies and agreements while strengthening the bonds and resilience of our communities in Oakland and across the Bay Area. Our work has transformed institutions and communities as we know them."

**Teachers Unite** is an independent membership organization of public school educators in New York City collaborating with youth and parents to transform public schools. They say they "resist institutions that segregate and criminalize Black and Latinx youth, such as the school-to-prison pipeline, by organizing educators to work as allies in campaigns for social and economic justice. We develop and share resources for restorative justice and school-based power-building that promote grassroots leadership in public

---

<sup>6</sup> Communities United, *Healing Through Justice*, available at: <https://www.healingthroughjustice.org/about>

education, and conduct collaborative research on pressing educational issues.” Recently, Teachers Unite launched On Our Terms, a participatory action research project built by students, parents, and educators, and activists about what it takes to build restorative justice cultures, collective safety, and healing in schools.<sup>7</sup> They are clear that reimaging school safety requires trusting relationships, open communication, and mutual support, and involves the participation of everyone in the school community. Importantly, law enforcement does not play a role in transforming school culture and growing restorative justice. Instead, community safety workers, positions which can be modeled after community violence interrupters, help prevent violence and respond to violence in school communities.

**RYSE Center** in Richmond, California creates safe spaces grounded in social justice for young people to love, learn, educate, heal, and transform lives and communities. RYSE employs a core set of strategies that are grounded in racial justice, trauma-informed care, healing, and harm reduction and that elevate the lived expertise of young people. Among these strategies are Radical Inquiry and Base-and-Power Building, which facilitate systems transformation. In describing their impact, they name the following: “98% of RYSE members report feeling safer at RYSE than anywhere else. 91% of RYSE members reported that RYSE helped them pay more attention to their emotions and feelings (de-stigmatizing mental health). 93% of RYSE members feel better connected to their community. 94% of RYSE members have tried new things at RYSE.”<sup>8</sup>

**GSA Network** is a next-generation LGBTQ racial and gender justice organization that empowers and trains queer, trans and allied youth leaders to advocate, organize, and mobilize an intersectional movement for safer schools and healthier communities. They say “Our overall strategy for fighting for educational justice is to work with grassroots, youth-led groups and GSAs, empowering them to educate their schools and communities, advocate for just policies that protect LGBTQ youth from harassment and violence, and organize in coalition with other youth groups across identity lines to address broader issues of oppression.” One of GSA Network’s newest efforts is *Devising Freedom*, “a national strategy that will create a vision for transgender, gender nonconforming, and nonbinary youth to blossom despite the persistent attacks on their bodies and their identities. This national strategy will intentionally work to combat the harmful effects of anti-trans legislation and executive orders that have emerged across the country.”<sup>9</sup>

**The Lighthouse | Black Girl Projects’** mission is “to be a revelatory, unflickering light for Black girls and young women in the southeastern United States through focused programming and by creating spaces of solidarity and safety for them.” They say “The Lighthouse | Black Girl Projects takes a holistic approach to the leadership development of Black girls and women through a consortium of projects. These projects are avenues by which Black girls in the southeastern United States are centered, from the research agenda to the programming, board room to legislative halls. The organization creates safe spaces for these Black girls with the goal of having their homes and communities be places where their safety and freedom are welcomed.”<sup>10</sup>

**Freedom, Inc. (FI)** is a Black and Southeast Asian non-profit organization that works with low- to no-income communities of color in and beyond Madison, Wisconsin. They say: “Our mission is to achieve social justice

---

<sup>7</sup> Teachers Unite, On Our Terms, available at: <https://onourterms.nyc/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://rysecenter.org/field-building>

<sup>9</sup> <https://gsanetwork.org/campaigns/devising-freedom/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://loveblackgirls.org/>

through coupling direct services with leadership development and community organizing that will bring about social, political, cultural, and economic change resulting in the end of violence against women, gender-non-conforming and transgender folks, and children within communities of color. FI works to challenge the root causes of violence, poverty, racism and discrimination. Our belief is that people who are most affected by these issues must have voice, power, resources and choice, in order for true social change to happen.” All of FI’s youth programs are anti-violence groups that work to end violence for girls and LGBTQ+ people through political education, leadership development, and relationship building.

**Movimiento Poder**, in Colorado, is led by working-class Latine immigrants, youth, women, and families, and builds power through community organizing, leadership development and civic engagement. They say “Through our work we will build access to schools that uplift and nurture our students by abolishing all forms of policing, surveillance, and harm and provide quality education, mental health services, and access to holistic care.”

**Students Deserve**, in Los Angeles, are students, teachers, and parents working for justice in and beyond schools. They say: “We use political education to name and challenge all oppressive systems that harm people at school and beyond. By learning and teaching histories of dignity and resistance by oppressed communities, we build unity among people for the sake of increasing justice. At our schools, this means supporting and protecting Black, Muslim, undocumented, and queer students who are vulnerable to being targeted. We want an end to all forms of policing. We want to stop the charter school expansion and reconstitutions that target Black, indigenous, and low-income communities. These practices treat students, families, and teachers like problems rather than seeing us as beautiful, creative, and human. We want public schools to be places that welcome, support, and work with Black students rather than excluding, criminalizing, and pushing us out.”

We need Congressional leadership to lean into a vision of public education that is not limited by a narrow and deeply flawed understanding of safety. We strongly oppose calls for threat assessments, school hardening, and increased police and policing tactics. When school is a welcoming, nurturing, and safe place for students, where they have a deep sense of belonging, and where they are challenged to grow, our communities are stronger, and our future is limitless. We commend the resources linked in this letter to you and your fellow committee members as important components of considering how to ensure schools are holistically—physically, emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually—safe spaces for all students. If you have any questions or are interested in dialogue with CJSF and our partners, please contact Jaime Koppel at [jkoppel@cjsfund.org](mailto:jkoppel@cjsfund.org).