ON A MISSION FOR GIRLS OF COLOR: INEQUALITY AT SCHOOL

Girls of color are often overlooked when educators and policymakers address issues of racial and gender inequality in schools. That's why our 2016 Stand Against Racism campaign is centered on addressing the ways institutional and structural racism impacts girls of color. YWCA is on a mission to eliminate racism, empower women, stand up for social justice, help families, and strengthen communities.

In October 2015, a sheriff's deputy serving as a school resource officer at Spring Valley High School in Columbia, South Carolina, was called to a classroom by a teacher. A Black teenage girl had violated the school's cell phone policy and would not hand over her phone.[i] When the African-American girl quietly declined to leave the classroom, the White officer grabbed her by the neck, flipped her backward as she sat at her desk, then dragged and threw her across the floor.[ii] Even more recently, in March 2016, 12-year-old student Janissa Valdez was thrown onto a concrete hallway floor at her San Antonio middle school.[iii]

Video recordings of these disturbing assaults provide a first-hand view of an all-too-common experience for girls of color in America's schools: disciplinary responses such as removal from class, arrest, and, in some cases, physical violence that are far out of proportion to nonviolent student behavior that is subjectively interpreted as disrespectful. Available data suggests that implicit biases and cultural norms related to acceptable qualities of femininity, such as being quieter and more passive, trigger harsher disciplinary interventions against girls of color, particularly Black girls, who may be perceived to be defiant, loud, and unmanageable.[iv] This dynamic plays out in a structural context that utilizes law enforcement tactics to criminalize otherwise normal adolescent behavior, rather than a restorative or therapeutic response.[v] Frequently, these experiences occur in public schools that are under-funded, under-resourced, and increasingly segregated by race, ethnicity, and economic status.

This convergence of overly punitive disciplinary responses in the under-resourced schools that many girls of color attend and the resulting academic achievement gaps are illustrative of the ways in which girls of color experience significant institutional and structural racism in America's education system.

WHAT THE STATISTICS TELL US

Girls of color experience disproportionately high rates of school suspensions and expulsions, and Black girls in particular face higher risks of exclusion from school for subjective behavioral infractions.

- Black girls are suspended at higher rates (12 percent) than girls of any other race or ethnicity, and at higher rates than White boys (6 percent) and White girls (2 percent); American Indian/Alaska Native girls (7 percent) and Latinas (4 percent) are also suspended at rates that exceed those of White girls.[vi]
- Racial disparities in out-of-school suspensions start early: Black children represent 18 percent of preschool enrollment, but 42 percent of the preschool children suspended once, and 48 percent of the preschool children suspended more than once.[vii]
- Suspension from school increases the likelihood of dropping out of school and having contact with the juvenile justice system, with long-term consequences for Black and Latina girls that include a greater prevalence of low-wage work and unemployment.[viii]

Research indicates that schools with high levels of poverty and racial isolation also tend to have inadequate resources for students, such as basic instructional materials, rigorous curricula, STEM and Advanced Placement course offerings, and access to qualified and experienced teachers.[ix]

- African-American girls and boys disproportionately attend racially isolated, high poverty schools as compared to their peers of other races and ethnicities.[x]
- Resource inequities begin as early as pre-kindergarten, and persist through elementary, middle, and high school.[xi]
- State budget cuts have resulted in far too few school psychologists, social workers, and counselors who might otherwise provide support to girls struggling with trauma or other unmet needs before their behavior leads to punishable offenses: only two states (VT and WY) have counselor-to-student ratios that meet the recommended caseload standard set by the American Counseling Association.[xii]

In this context of under-resourced schools and overly punitive responses to student behavior, it is not surprising to find that some girls of color struggle to achieve the same level of educational success as their White peers.[xiii] For example:

- While 39 percent of White girls tested at or above proficient on the science portion of the 8ᵗʰ grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam in 2011, only 9 percent of Black girls, 13 percent of Hispanic girls, and 15 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native girls achieved proficiency.[xiv] Similar disparities exist across multiple subjects and multiple grade levels.[xv]
- While racial gaps in high school graduation rates are closing overall, girls of color still trail their White peers: In 2010, the graduation rate for White girls was 82 percent, but only 66 percent for Black girls, 71 percent for Hispanic girls, and 51 percent for American Indian girls.[xvi]
- The educational needs of many Asian/Pacific Islander girls and boys are rendered invisible by "the model minority myth."[xvii] While Asian students as a group consistently outperform all other groups on NAEP test scores and other measures of achievement, Southeast Asian groups do not experience the same levels of academic success.[xviii] Rather than being a monolithic group, the API demographic consists of 48 distinct ethnic groups, some of whom experience socioeconomic barriers similar to other racial and ethnic groups and lower levels of educational attainment at every level of the educational system, from pre-kindergarten through high school.[xix]

RESPONSES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Implementation of specific policies at federal, state, and local levels offers opportunities to dismantle the educational structures and institutions that perpetuate racial disparities and inequity for girls of color. To decrease school discipline disparities for girls of color, we advocate for policies and approaches that:

1. **Prioritize the inclusion of girls of color in policy research and in the collection, analysis, and dissemination of school disciplinary data.** While existing evidence makes clear that girls of color experience significant disparities with respect to exclusionary discipline policies, little research exists regarding the short- and long-term effects of excessive discipline on them or the programmatic interventions that could best alleviate the school discipline crisis for girls of color. Intersectional analysis of both the gender and race/ethnicity dimensions of their experiences in the education system will enable policymakers to develop more informed approaches to address the distinct needs of girls of color. YWCA USA incorporates this kind of intersectional approach in the Racial Profiling Education System Checklist, an important resource to help community members identify patterns and practices of institutional and structural racism.

2. **Expand the use of restorative practices and other programmatic alternatives to exclusionary discipline.** Restorative practices are processes that proactively build healthy relationships and a sense of community to prevent and address conflict and wrongdoing. Restorative practices allow individuals who may have committed harm to take full responsibility for their behavior by addressing the individuals affected by the behavior, and have been shown to significantly reduce disciplinary incidents and to promote positive relationships among students and staff. Examples of restorative practices included restorative justice, community conferencing, peer mediation, and peer circles.[xx]

3. **Scale up and fund professional development and training for teachers, school resource officers, and other school personnel in the areas of cultural competence, implicit bias, trauma-informed practice, classroom management, and alternatives to exclusionary discipline.** Training and professional development can help to bridge cultural gaps between students and educators, and increase understanding about the prevalence of exposure to trauma and violence among girls of color and the associated impacts on learning and social interaction. Moreover, school resource officers — who have been at the center of an increasing number of high profile incidents involving the use of violence against students — too often lack appropriate training to de-escalate situations and minimize the use of force.[xxi]

4. **Ensure adequate staffing in schools by specialized instructional support personnel, such as school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists**. These professionals are qualified to provide assessment, diagnosis, counseling, educational, therapeutic, and other necessary services as part of a comprehensive program to meet student needs.[xxii] Such services would be particularly beneficial for girls of color struggling with trauma, interpersonal violence, or other unmet needs and who otherwise may resort to acting out when their counseling needs are overlooked or disregarded.

5. **Rigorously implement the components of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) aimed at ending discriminatory discipline policies.** Enacted in 2015, ESSA marks a significant shift in education policy to more robust decision-making at the local level. Within the broad parameters set by the federal law, community stakeholders have an opportunity to weigh in on how schools will be evaluated and held accountable for student achievement. Advocating for the interests of girls of color as the provisions of ESSA aimed at eliminating discipline disparities and improving school climate are

implemented at state and local levels is crucial in this process. Moreover, robust funding of the Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants (Title IV, Part A) would provide critical supports — such as comprehensive mental and behavioral health services, counseling, violence prevention, and training for educators on trauma-informed practices — for girls of color and other vulnerable students disproportionately impacted by school discipline policies or struggling to navigate stress and trauma in their lives.

i http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/27/us/officers-classroom-fight-with-student-is-caught-on-video.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur&_r=0 and http://www.wistv.com/story/30353999/fbi-to-lead-investigation-of-violent-incident-at-spring-valley-high-school

ii http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/27/us/officers-classroom-fight-with-student-is-caught-on-video.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur&_r=0

iii https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/education/wp/2016/04/07/she-landed-on-her-face-video-shows-texas-school-police-officer-body-slam12-year-old-girl/

iv Crenshaw, K.W., Ocen, P. and Nanda, J. "Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected." African American Policy Forum and Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies (2015) at p. 24. *See also* Sherman, F.T., and Balck, A. "Gender Injustice: System-Level Juvenile Justice Reforms for Girls." The National Crittenton Foundation and the National Women's Law Center (2015) at p. 23.

v Black Girls Matter, *supra* note iv, at p. 24.

vi "Civil Rights Data Collection, Data Snapshot: School Discipline." U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. Issue Brief No. 1 (March 2014) at p. 3.

vii Data Snapshot, *supra* note vi, at p. 7.

viii Black Girls Matter, *supra* note iv. *See also,* Graves, F.G., Kaufmann, L.S., and Frohlich, L. "Unlocking Opportunity for African American Girls: A Call to Action for Educational Equity." NAACP Legal Defense & Education Fund, Inc., and National Women's Law Center (2014) Executive Summary at p. 2

ix Unlocking Opportunity, *supra* note viii, at p. 7.

x Unlocking Opportunity, *supra* note viii, at p. 7.

xi Unlocking Opportunity, *supra* note viii, at p. 8-10.

xii *See, e.g*., Bidwell, A. "Lack of Funds Leave School Counselors Struggling to Find Balance." U.S. News & World Report. (Sep. 16, 2013).

xiii "For Women and Girls, the Common Core Is a Step Toward Greater Equity." Center for American Progress (2014) https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education/report/2014/10/28/99435/for-women-and-girls-the-common-core-is-a-step-toward-greater-equity/.

xiv "For Women and Girls, the Common Core Is a Step Toward Greater Equity," *supra* note xiii.

xv *See* "NAEP Data Explorer". Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naep

xvi Unlocking Opportunity, *supra* note viii, at p. 56, note 227, citing statistics from Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, Education Counts database http://www.edweek.org/rc/2007/06/07/edcounts.html

xvii "Backgrounder: Understanding the Gaps: Who Are We Leaving Behind – And How Far?" National Education Association (2015). http://www.nea.org/home/AchievementGaps.html

xviii "Ethnic and Racial Disparities in Education: Psychology's Contributions to Understanding and Reducing Disparities." American Psychological Association (2012).

xix Backgrounder: Understanding the Gaps, *supra* note xvii, and Ethnic and Racial Disparities in Education, *supra* note xviii.

xx *See* Gregory, A. "Guiding Principles and Efficacy of Restorative Practices in Schools" [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from www.nycourts.gov/ip/justiceforchildren/PDF/RestorativePracticeConf/P1-Gregory.pdf. *See also* "Restorative Practices: Fostering Healthy Relationships & Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools, A Guide for Educators." Advancement Project, AFT, NEA, and National Opportunity to Learn Campaign (March 2014).

xxi http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/11/why-do-most-school-cops-have-no-student-training-requirements/414286/. See also http://www.joincampaignzero.org/train.

xxii https://www.nasponline.org/research-and-policy/policy-matters/the-ever-student-succeeds-act-and-school-psychologists