



June 30, 2020

Police-Free Schools In California Now!

**Response to State Superintendent Thurmond's Task Force on Police In Schools,
from Dignity In Schools Campaign California**

Cc: Governor Newsom

Dear Superintendent Thurmond,

We appreciate your reaching out to Black Organizing Project to discuss strategies for moving toward police-free schools. Given your disappointing public remarks last Wednesday, we are encouraged by your willingness to reflect and to listen to the leadership from our communities on this issue.

In response to the task force you launched today, there are concerns we need to share with you.

- 1) **Please resist the immense pressure in this moment for cookie-cutter solutions and politics as usual. The most dangerous of these involve the reshuffling and repackaging of school police,** such as higher "standards" for school police hiring and training, banning school police from using traumatizing or violent interventions (pepper spray, restraints, mental health holds, etc), creating school police accountability or oversight mechanisms. Many of these reforms toward decriminalization and police restrictions on campus were first brought forward by our communities to struggle against the ways so many of our children, students and school families were being criminalized, fined, brutalized, jailed and locked out of their education. In Los Angeles alone, LASPD between 2009-2011 had ticketed over 33,000 young people and children and arrested thousands of students (see report "Black, Brown and Overpoliced"). Throughout the state, we challenged this level of heightened criminalization aimed at Black and other students of color and we never suggested or endorsed that idea that school police officers could be mentors or counselors. We were fighting for protections for families and students against the targeting of our students by law enforcement, who had turned

our school grounds into dragnets for arrests and our cafeterias and gymnasiums into substations for ticketing. **We've made many of strides toward restricting such harmful and discriminatory law enforcement behaviors in our schools but the time has now come to remove them. Police do not belong in our schools.**

2) **We want to be clear that there is no need for further study to take action** against the anti-Blackness of school policing. In 2015-16, the most recent year with statewide data from the US Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights Data Collection (which are generally understood to reflect underreporting):

- In one year, California's students experienced 27,422 arrests of students and referrals to police (2,525 arrests, 24,897 referrals)
- California ranks first among all states in the combined number of student arrests and referrals to police (#2 = Pennsylvania; #3 = Texas; #4 = Florida)
- Black students are 4 times more likely to be arrested at school than white students
- Black girls are 6 times more likely than white girls to be arrested at school.

In 2012, West Ed completed a research review of 40 years' worth of studies of school policing and found no positive impact on reducing school crime or delinquency. On the other hand, studies show that schools with police presence tend to overuse suspensions and with higher racial disparities. Our community organizations have also been analyzing and documenting the school-to-prison pipeline for many years. (Please see attachment Reports and Resources)

3) **We call on you to reject anachronistic and reactionary "public safety" rhetoric from the 1980s.** When you cite "school shootings and bomb threats" as reasons for keeping police in schools, you are rehearsing the same inflammatory arguments that were used in the 1980s to pressure school districts to begin stationing police inside schools in the first place. During that period, Governor George Deukmejian - the architect of the California Prison Industrial Complex – and an array of rightwing, pro-prison and "tough on crime" proponents led a campaign of lawsuits against school districts that ultimately paved the way for Proposition 8 "The Victims' Bill of Rights" in June 1982. Not only did Prop 8 impose mandatory minimums, longer prison sentences, prior conviction penalties and restrict court discretion, it also became the impetus for authorizing and compelling districts to station police in schools across the state. By creating for the first time a student "right to safety" in schools under the state constitution, these reactionary forces (including the conservative Pacific Legal Foundation and the National Center for School Safety, a Reagan Administration-funded group) were then able to use Proposition 8 to sue at least 30 school districts for "endangering" student safety, including districts in Oakland Unified, Los Angeles, San Diego, Inglewood, Long Beach, and San Bernardino. **Prop 8 was designed and implemented as a powerful legislative weapon to coerce districts into hiring school police in order to avoid these lawsuits.**

- 4) **Now that momentum is on our side, the law enforcement community and its supporters are undoubtedly pressuring you and will be escalating that pressure in the coming weeks and months, including threats.** As they seek to defend their jobs and professional identities, school police, other law enforcement officials and their supporters are beginning to make veiled threats against the safety of young people and their schools by invoking mass shooting incidents or suggesting that police may (in a kind of retaliation) either slowly respond to emergency calls or, on the other hand, aggressively police students for trying to remove them from campus. It is essential that you stand with our communities in naming the anti-Blackness at the root of school policing and rejecting its history as a political strategy for social control, mass incarceration and psychological warfare against Black communities. **We call on you to resist this political pressure and make clear that the state of California will not tolerate any threats or retaliation from law enforcement against Black students and communities for demanding change.**

Superintendent Thurmond, the political moment is here and the Black Organizing Project and Dignity in Schools Campaign California are ready to work with you to move our state boldly forward. Police-free schools is a visionary banner that has been carried by the parents and youth of the Black Organizing Project (BOP) for 9 years. It is also the proud flag of our statewide movement, Dignity In Schools Campaign California. We have been shoulder-to-shoulder with BOP, taking on school policing and the criminalization of our children in our schools in every corner of the state long before national attention turned our way. Behind us is an endless line of experts and advocates in all areas related to the well-being and education of children and youth. Pediatricians, experts in public health, mental health, behavioral health, youth development. Researchers and faculty in K-12 education, school counseling, school psychology and social work. Advocacy communities in special education and immigrant rights, or those working with foster youth, homeless youth, queer youth. Practitioners of juvenile defense and civil rights law. All will advise you that school policing is not in the best interests of children and youth. All will describe its disproportionate impacts and the myriad harms that come from exposing children and youth to racialized criminalization at school. With the labor movement increasingly expressing support, it's also important to note that **in one of the few times California voters were asked whether hiring a school counselor or a police officer would be more effective at preventing violence, they overwhelmingly chose counselors, by a ratio of 2 to 1 (67% to 26%).**

Superintendent Thurmond, this is your opportunity to free California's students and schools from the repressive social paradigm that has made policing the only social solution for our most complicated social insecurities. For too long, this bankrupt paradigm has diverted attention from the root causes of racism, poverty and divestment and instead focused the blame on our own communities for the structural instability and social precarity that tears into our lives. Worse, we have watched wave after wave of budget cuts on essential school support

staff like counselors, teachers, custodians, and nurses while school police budgets have remained untouchable. The blatantly racist message of these budget decisions--what is expected of our students, what is the goal of their education, what staff are needed and not needed--has gone unchallenged for decades. We call on you to join us in rejecting this victim-blaming and this stigmatizing of our students, families, schools and communities that lies at the heart of the school-policing mindset. We urge you to:

- revoke these reactionary statutes that were written in the 1980s to authorize and compel California school districts to begin hiring school police and creating school police departments like Oakland's;
- reject false solutions and the repackaging of school police. We hope the [State Policy Framework](#) we have attached to this letter will provide useful guidance.

As we wrote in our [Open Letter to Governor Newsom](#), you can open the door to police-free schools in California. By taking these first steps, we could begin working together to reimagine and redefine community-driven safety and build toward the transformation of our schools as spaces for the liberation and self-determination of our communities.

Sincerely,

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