



WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE DEMAND POLICE-FREE SCHOOLS IN NEW YORK CITY?

WHAT DOES “POLICE-FREE SCHOOLS” MEAN?

This demand describes schools free from policing, surveillance, and the cultures, habits, and tools of youth control. Schools should have creative and restorative ways of being in community with one another that center liberation.¹ School policing is now used instead of meeting peoples’ needs or addressing equity issues. The vision for police-free schools seeks to end youth criminalization and what made police in schools possible, and in that work, transforming what schools can be.

WHAT DO POLICE-FREE SCHOOLS LOOK LIKE?

There are already schools where people rely on one another instead of outsourcing conflict resolution to policing and the legal system. Advocates for police-free schools are part of a long history of anti-violence work and restorative justice, and we believe that in order to keep people safe we must change the conditions in which harm and violence happen. Police-free schools look like people building healthy relationships with one another, learning and understanding why conflict happens, and knowing how to offer safe ways to address issues and meet people’s needs – the principles of Tier 1 Restorative Practice.

WHEN DID POLICE FIRST ENTER SCHOOLS?

The NYC Board of Education began their school policing division in 1968 as part of efforts to repress community organizing and movements set to transform the education system, particularly the Black Power Movement.² In response to the sudden deployment of school policing, youth like the New York High School Student Union (NYHSSU) and the African-American Students Association united under a platform that included “No Cops in Schools,” staging demonstrations across the City. In one NYHSSU leaflet, students explained, “Their solution is to send more cops into the schools,” when “the real problem is our racist, oppressive miseducation.”³ School policing was not accepted then, as it is not accepted now.

WHEN DID THE NYPD TAKE CONTROL?

Mayor Rudy Giuliani transferred School Safety to the NYPD in 1998. The Chancellor at the time objected to the plan, later resigning. The President of the Union representing School Safety Officers released a statement saying “Schools are not jails/keep cops afar,” and “Cops do not belong in the schools.”⁴ The transfer process was contentious among the public, as the Mayor packed a review commission with his friends and employees.⁵ The next Chancellor agreed on the condition that the size of the force stay the same – a promise quickly broken by the Mayor.

DID SCHOOL POLICING WORK UNDER BOE CONTROL?

No. As one example, in the years leading up to the transfer, the Special Commissioner of Investigations for NYC Schools had been reporting on widespread school safety officer misconduct, consistently raising cases of sexual abuse.⁶ We found similar reports of misconduct for at least three decades prior. BOE control also did not guard against the deployment of NYPD officers to patrol schools – which they did with impunity. What’s more, students today are still resisting scanning and metal detectors as part of the work toward police-free schools – and scanning dates back to 1982, well before the transfer. After decades of tried and failed reforms under the BOE, police-free schools are the only logical way forward.

WHAT DO WE WANT INSTEAD?

We are witnessing a disaster where policing spending grows, educational spending declines, and young people are pushed out of school. Schools are being forced to turn to police instead of counselors and restorative justice coordinators because those positions aren’t invested in, they do not exist at the same scale policing does. Believing we can have police-free schools is a first step. We also know that access to housing, food, and opportunity support strong school communities. We propose redirecting the dollars spent on policing to rebuilding and reinventing our schools.

¹ See Alliance for Educational Justice. (2020, May 30). twitter.com/4EdJustice/status/1266732552678670336

² Caldwell, E. (1968, January 23). Donovan Appeals for Security Men to Guard Schools. *nytimes.com*.

³ Buffett, N.P. (2018). Crossing the Line: High School Student Activism, the New York High School Student Union, and the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville Teachers’ Strike. *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 45(6) 1212–1236.

⁴ Newman, M. (1995, June 1). Giuliani Chides Cortines For Resisting Use of Police. *nytimes.com*.

⁵ Toy, V.S. (1995, October 14). Gresser Fails to Sway School Safety Commission. *nytimes.com*.

⁶ Archibold, R.C. (1998, August 29). Schools in Deal To Let Police Run Security. *nytimes.com*.