



# SUSTAINING POLICE-FREE SCHOOLS THROUGH PRACTICE:

A TOOLKIT FOR NEW YORK CITY SCHOOL COMMUNITIES



## TOOL 1.4A – FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Below we offer responses to some frequently asked questions about the Police-Free Schools demand. These answers are meant to be a starting point to help you think things through and talk with your school community, and not meant to be exhaustive. We encourage you to come up with replies that best work for you, and practice communicating these ideas with different audiences.

### WHAT DOES “POLICE-FREE SCHOOLS” MEAN?

The demand and slogan “Police-Free Schools” describes learning environments that are free from policing, surveillance, exclusion, punishment, and all of the other cultures, habits, and tools of youth control. The quest for Police-Free Schools also recognizes that the decision-making power of police positions them as “gatekeepers” to confinement and incarceration for young people, and facilitators of school pushout, forcing students out of school before graduation.

What’s more, Police-Free Schools means freedom from racism, classism, ableism, ageism, sexism, and all forms of oppression that policing cultures perpetuate. Schools should and can have creative and restorative ways of being in community with one another that center liberation and learning. Meeting peoples’ needs and addressing equity issues, like the uneven distribution of public funding and resources should be the priority and focus of schools, not finding more ways to police, surveil and control them.

The vision for Police-Free Schools seeks to end youth criminalization and dismantle the system and relationships that made police in schools possible in the first place. In doing that work, we can transform schools into the best possible iteration of what they 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 are built on the foundational principles of Tier 1 Restorative Practice. In action, these practices 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. It also means people's real material needs are being responded to, addressed, and met, and resourcing schools and communities is what is required to meet those needs.

### **HOW WILL WE STAY SAFE?**

We understand policing as a form of ever-present, state-sanctioned violence, and therefore see the shrinking of policing as a safety strategy in and of itself. In part, the "shrinking of policing" means that we shift responsibility away from police and toward community-based models of safety, support, and prevention. The people who respond to conflict and crisis in our community should be the people who are best equipped to deal with those crises – students, educators, families – not those who the state has given the authority to inflict physical and deadly force and are emboldened by the power of the carceral and legal systems to enact extreme measures of surveillance and punishment.

We need conversations about defining and building safety to happen regularly at the school community level, focused on assessing the strengths and assets of its members, building right relationships, and meeting people's real and most fundamental needs. In doing this, we will increase community accountability and make space for those who really make up the fabric of a community to look out for one another.

### **BUT WHAT ABOUT VIOLENCE?**

There is no consensus on what "violence" means, especially as the state is largely exempt from mainstream conversations of violence. However, we can also conceptualize violence as the result of people being unable to meet their basic needs through other means.

As we consider the role police play in our schools, we assert that they do not prevent violence. Instead, they stop and harass Black and Brown young people in their own schools, and escalate conflict by utilizing their powers to arrest and forcibly push young people through the legal system. Police weaponize the penal law to respond to student behaviors, not to end or protect people from violence – what they do is reactionary.

Policing and carceral systems have had decades and a tremendous amount of public funding to attempt to end violence. Instead, they have ensured the continuation of violence through surveillance, harassment, policing tactics, and the abuses inherent to imprisonment. Surely it is time to shift our thinking and practices.

### **WHY DEFUND? WHY NOT FUND THE NYPD AND ALSO SCHOOLS?**

First, the City budget is a zero-sum game. Meaning, every dollar spent on policing is a dollar not spent on public education. Advocates often point out that the school system funds 5,500 school police but only 2,800 guidance counselors. Second, it's not just that there are too many police, or that they don't make school safe, but that they are actively harmful.

A robustly funded restorative justice initiative alone has not stopped police from harassing and harming young people in their schools. We must also reject the false choice presented to us that schools either get police or schools get nothing.

If the school system shifted its line of questioning and stopped asking us “why do you want police in your schools?,” and instead asked “what do you want in your schools?” they would learn the truth. If they listened to our answers and acted upon them, our system would undoubtedly be much different.

### **BUT I LIKE MY SCHOOL POLICE?**

The explanations we hear to justify the asking of this question often come up in spite of the job description of school police, not because of it. For example, one person may associate someone in a policing role with things not tied to policing, like being friendly – regardless of whether that is everyone's experience. Many people get stuck focusing on defending individual people or trying to separate people they know from the oppressive agency they are employed by. This thinking blocks efforts to address the core of the issue. Do you like the person because of or in spite of their legal authority to use physical and deadly force to enforce the law? This work is not about parsing out good cops from bad cops, it is about reckoning with a system that inflicts violence on young people despite countless reforms.

We want better for our communities than just more jobs that exist to harass, surveil, hurt, arrest, and imprison young people. We believe in richly-staffed schools, where people have ready access to support – and by support, we do not mean police. We demand better. It is our collective responsibility to disband oppressive systems and create supportive ones that heal and liberate. We all must work together to achieve a future free from state violence.

### **WHAT ABOUT JOBS?**

There are so many people across New York City who would like access to care-based careers in their neighborhood schools. Why doesn't a paid training program exist for school-based counseling, mediation, and peacekeeper roles in the same way the NYPD has their police academy (a building that cost the public a billion dollars to build) to train the agents who are stationed in our schools? With what seems like unencumbered access to limitless funding, the NYPD has built up one of the most, if not *the most*, accessible pathways to school-based work. That is unacceptable.

What would it mean to have a paid, jobs-training program like the NYPD has for school police, but for restorative school staff? With the redistribution of the money spent on school policing, we can create and staff care-based positions in schools at the scale we currently staff policing. In reallocating those funds to create these positions, we also create a new system that includes a pathway to school-based careers not preempted on violence or disproportionate power over young people but rooted in restorative practices and healing-centered community care.

### **WHAT ABOUT REFORMS LIKE COMMUNITY POLICING?**

Demanding reforms like community policing centers police in what we ask for, instead of asking for what we actually want. This also ignores the reality that supportive, care-based school positions are not being funded or made available to schools at the same scale as police are. School policing has undergone many reforms over many decades and all have failed to address the fundamental issue – policing is incompatible with positive youth development and the types of environments needed to support young people.

The NYPD works incredibly hard to maintain its legitimacy in the face of public scrutiny and protest. For school policing, that has meant the careful branding of the division as something other than police (like as a substitute for counselors in a school system with only 2,800 counselors for 1.1 million students).

We know through first-hand communication with young people themselves that is not how those who are most impacted by school policing perceive them.

Reforms have been tried already. The duration and type of school police training have been reformed. Police have been trained in restorative practices. Police have been trained by the DOE to work with students with disabilities. Reforms that submit to police discretion have been tried, like through the creation of a “warning card” where agents can choose whether or not to ticket young people to appear before school staff instead of pursuing a criminal court summons. Rebranding reforms have been tried, for instance, through adapting some “School Safety Agent” roles to “School Coordination Agent” roles, focused on growing the connection between schools and precincts. During the time of pandemic, the NYPD has deployed school police to communities to perform “social distancing outreach” and distribute hand sanitizer. None of these reforms attempted to chip away at the oppressive, punishing power and presence of school police.

We do not seek reforms that, time after time, fail to reduce the size and scope of police power. We seek to transform our schools into something completely new, different, and positively Police-Free.

#### **BUT SCHOOL SAFETY AGENTS AREN'T POLICE?**

School Safety Agents (SSAs) are part of a school-based police force and have been employed by the NYPD since 1998. SSAs are certified New York City Special Patrolmen and granted New York State peace officer authority – meaning, among other authorities, the power to use physical force and deadly physical force.

SSAs work within the School Safety Division of the NYPD and collaborate with other divisions of the NYPD to criminalize students – like by calling patrol officers to schools, recommending young people for the NYPD’s gang database, or sharing information about young people’s activity and movement with detectives or other NYPD commands. SSAs wear NYPD-issued uniforms and have the legal authority to make arrests and conduct warrantless searches. They are not accountable to the Department of Education or young people. SSAs answer directly to the NYPD.

#### **WHEN DID THE NYPD TAKE CONTROL?**

Mayor Rudy Giuliani transferred School Safety from the Board of Education 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.” The transfer process was [contentious](#) among the public, as the Mayor packed a review commission with his friends and employees. The next Chancellor agreed on the condition that the size of the force stays the same – a promise quickly broken by the Mayor.

### **ISN'T DOE CONTROL OF SCHOOL POLICE A GOOD IDEA?**

Young people are fighting across the country to disband school policing – including disbanding school district-run policing. Look to Los Angeles – they have the largest school-district-run police department in the country and they are marching in the streets calling for it to be dismantled. Policing in some other outfit or with some other name is still policing. To shift school policing back to the DOE now, in this political moment, will only legitimize it as a viable part of the school system.

We cannot afford to fortify this system of school policing by shifting the control internally to the DOE. If this is the case, we will have to work twice as hard to tear it down. In the words of the self-described “Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet,” Audre Lorde, “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” Shifting control of school policing from the NYPD to the DOE is simply a relocation of the police to another house. We must do our best to remain focused on dismantling the house.

### **BUT ISN'T THIS IMPOSSIBLE?**

We are witnessing a disaster where policing spending grows, educational spending declines, and young people are pushed out of school. Due to a misappropriation of funds to the NYPD, schools are being forced to turn to police instead of counselors and restorative justice coordinators because those positions aren’t invested in and they do not exist at the same scale policing does.

Part of the work of Police-Free Schools is ending the policing of the imagination. Over the last several months communities across the country have successfully compelled their school districts to break ties with local police departments. Believing we can win and sustain Police-Free schools is just the first thing. We also know that access to housing, food, and opportunity support strong school communities. We propose redirecting the dollars spent on policing to these things in order to rebuild and reinvent our schools.