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# Resist School Pushout With and For Black Girls

*Joanne N. Smith*

Girls for Gender Equity (GGE) is an intergenerational, advocacy organization committed to the physical, psychological, social, and economic development of girls and women. Through youth organizing, leadership development, and community building for gender and racial equity, GGE challenges structural forces—racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, economic inequality—that work to constrict the freedom, full expression, and rights of trans and cisgendered girls and young women of color and gender nonconforming youth of color. At the forefront of GGE’s strategy is the belief that young people are strong leaders and catalysts for change.

Black girls, young women, and gender nonconforming young people of color in the United States face distinct forms of gender-based discrimination and violence in their communities and schools. For example, Black girls are more likely than their White peers to experience sexual harassment that makes them feel unsafe on their way to school and in school, to encounter threats and injuries with weapons on school property, and to be forced to have sexual intercourse or experience dating violence (Eaton et al., 2008).

Nationally, 12% of Black girls have received at least one in-school suspension, versus 2% of white girls (Henderson, 2014). Black girls are disproportionately suspended from middle school for behaviors subjectively determined to be worthy of reprimand; in the classroom, educators are more likely to view Black girls as “loud, defiant, and precocious” and reprimand them for being “unladylike” (Morris, 2016). In New York City, 50% of women living in areas of concentrated poverty, the majority of whom are women of color, have not earned high school diplomas (Mason, 2013). As Heleya, a Black 16-year-old GGE participant, explained, “I feel like the education system has found multiple ways to push me out of the community and isolate me and make me feel discouraged to participate.”

GGE’s efforts, described here, are designed to demonstrate how youth and adult allies counteract the systemic barriers that cause “school pushout.” GGE recognizes school pushout as anything that prevents or gets in the way of a young person completing their education, including harsh discipline policies, high-stakes testing, unsafe schools, and a history of gender-specific systemic ideologies that

perpetuate inequality. School pushout disproportionately affects students of color, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans youth, due to the various forms of oppression that these groups face daily.

### Black Girls Breaking the Silence on School Pushout

The need for Black girls to break their silence on school pushout grew out of GGE's Sisters in Strength Youth organizers expressing their frustration about being disciplined more severely than non-Black peers. The same youth organizers began a participatory action research (PAR) project to examine the relationship between school pushout and harsh discipline policies. PAR has deep roots in social justice, critical theory, and participation of the most marginalized, and views knowledge from lived experiences as equal to that produced in the academy; it seeks to challenge and expand traditional notions of expertise, centering those most impacted by social disparities and inequalities (Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012).

With support from GGE staff, youth organizers interviewed peers about the forces contributing to oppressive school environments and increased suspensions. One 16-year-old described the flawed system:

We used to have metal detectors that we as students would have to go through every morning. There use[d] to be a line that stretched from the basement of the school to outside the main gate of the school with students. Some days you could be on that line for at least an hour waiting to get into the building. There were days you missed your first-period class.... Then one day they tried to tell girls to stop wearing bras with wires in them so they can shorten time by not having to get wanded by the guards. Mind you, my first day of middle school I was scared because they made me take off my shoes, coat, and jewelry. From then on, I had to get use[d] to doing that every morning depending on the outfit I wore that day.

GGE staff led a power-mapping activity to make a web of influence, power, privilege, oppression, resistance, and liberation. This helped the girls understand and discuss the incongruent relationship between teachers, administrators, school safety officers, and youth, as well as the policies that criminalized normal adolescent behavior. Figure 1 outlines key aspects of their discussion.

**Figure 1: School Pushout Factors**



The girls’ experiences affirm that the criminalization of Black female bodies in schools begins with interactions between youth and school safety officers. A study by the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality provides data showing that adults view Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than their White peers, especially in the age range of 5 to 14, suggesting that the perception of Black girls as less innocent may contribute to harsher punishment by educators and school resource officers (Epstein, Blake, & Gonzalez, 2017).

Under the guise of protecting the school climate, officers often perform “stop and frisk”-like violations. Girls are forced to remove headscarves and bobby pins and suffer encroachments on their personal space, inappropriate touching, and sexual harassment. When they advocate for themselves, Black girls are often disciplined for being “loud” or “out of line,” underscoring implicit bias, racism, and stereotypes about the “angry Black girl” (Morris, 2013).

Girls also reported being suspended rather than being referred to guidance counselors or mediation programs. In a recent study, one high school junior described her first suspension for “insubordination”—wearing a cardigan that didn’t match the colors of the student uniform (NWLC & GGE, 2015). Too many times, Black girls are criminalized for normal adolescent behavior, offenses based on survival, trauma, or mental health issues, and substance abuse issues that require social and community support rather than incarceration.

GGE youth organizers most affected by school pushout led the PAR project so they could help liberate the voices of others and demand changes in the school climate. They attended local and national campaign meetings, led trainings on implicit bias, developed public service announcements, and created photo essays. They partnered with Dr. Monique Morris, author of *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (2016), and Dr. Venus Evans-Winters, author of *Teaching Black Girls: Resiliency in Urban Classrooms* (2011), to present findings at the 2014 American Educational Research Association conference (Evans-Winters, 2017).

The girls also developed and released an educational advocacy video (GGE, 2015). Through storytelling, they amplified their ability to influence legislation and sway decision-makers including teachers, philanthropic partners, and civic leaders at the state and federal levels. Most importantly, they inspired others to tell their stories and underscored that the flaws lie with systems and institutions, not with them.

## **School Girls Deserve Campaign**

The School Girls Deserve Campaign (SGDC) is also part of GGE’s larger school pushout work. Often advocates, teachers, and young people are able to articulate problems but do not communicate concrete visions of what youth deserve. GGE’s youth organizers and staff have led visioning sessions with over ten organizations throughout New York City to engage cis, trans, and gender nonconforming youth in imagining the schools that they desire, need, and deserve.

In October 2015, Dignity in Schools (2006), a national coalition to combat school pushout, organized a national week of action. As a partner, GGE hosted workshops for parents, teachers, students, and school safety agents. Participants learned about school pushout, viewed the Black Girls Breaking Silence on School Pushout video (GGE, 2015), and unpacked real-life scenarios where implicit bias led to mistreatment of young people of color. As a result, GGE worked with a group of teachers and parent coordinators to incorporate restorative justice practices into the school culture.

GGE also collaborated with Teachers Unite, a New York-based organization growing restorative and transformative justice strategies, to put SGDC into practice in GGE's middle school. The goal was to provide resources on running community-building circles and working with schools to develop a curriculum that could be used school-wide within three years. Simultaneously, GGE (2017) developed a policy book to share findings with coalition partners, policymakers, and youth to strengthen local, state, and national school climate policies and practices. The book addresses the emergent needs of cis and trans Black girls, young women and girls of color, and gender nonconforming young people. It presents local policy recommendations that build efforts at the intersections of their identities and lived experiences while advancing educational justice that centers intersectional, youth-centered solutions.

## **Engaging Young People to Combat School Pushout**

The institutional violence that schools direct towards Black girls stops them from meeting their basic needs and is 100% preventable. GGE's work to combat school pushout focuses on the dynamic possibilities of galvanizing young people, youth advocates, policymakers, educators, and school administrators to interrupt institutional and interpersonal violent policies, practices, and culture. While the fight to eradicate racial and gender injustice in education in the twenty-first century is global, local strategies are particularly important. Black girls, young women of color, and gender nonconforming youth of color have always provided legislative, practical, and resource-allocation solutions to improve systems that devalue their basic humanity. GGE's work with young people to combat oppressive educational institutions and classrooms is in keeping with this tradition.

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