



BUILDING PEACE

IN WAKE COUNTY SCHOOLS

A PROPOSAL TO REPLACE
SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS
WITH PEACEBUILDERS



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Photo credit: Jane Pierce (Instagram: @jnpmedia_)

03
PROPOSAL

11
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN A
PEACEBUILDER AND A
LAW-ENFORCEMENT
OFFICER

12
STEPS TOWARD
ABOLISHING SCHOOL
POLICING IN WCPSS

14
CITATIONS



BUILDING PEACE IN WAKE COUNTY SCHOOLS

BACKGROUND

Students, parents, and community members are united in the call to remove all school resource officers (SROs) from Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) schools. Instead of policing students, WCPSS must fully implement a Peacebuilder Program that employs community “Peacebuilders” in every school to build positive relationships with students, implement restorative practices, and peacefully address interpersonal conflicts.



WCPSS student statement on the responsibility of school board members:

“If Wake County is going to say we’re going to be pioneers, and we’re going to be diverse and have equality and equity then we have to show it. Don’t just say it. Actions speak so much louder than words. Don’t just listen to Black students. But listen to us, take our demands, and do it.”

For years, students and parents have demanded an end to the WCPSS’s harmful and discriminatory school policing practices. In 2014, students and advocates filed a complaint with the Civil Rights Division of the United States Department of Justice against WCPSS and multiple local law enforcement agencies. The complaint highlighted years of discrimination and criminalization of Black students for minor, age-appropriate behavior and of students with disabilities for actions associated with their disability. In 2018, WCPSS entered into a voluntary agreement with the Office of Civil Rights, agreeing to revise discipline policies, expand restorative practices, and reduce unnecessary referrals to law enforcement. However, two years later, the district continues to criminalize Black students at alarmingly disproportionate rates.



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Following the brutal murder of George Floyd and Raleigh Police Department's violent response to peaceful protestors, students and parents have renewed their demand for justice and police-free schools. The same officers terrorizing peaceful protestors are disproportionately targeting, arresting, and criminalizing Black and Brown students in WCPSS schools. WCPSS must follow the lead of courageous school boards throughout the country by removing police from schools and investing in alternatives to policing that create supportive and nurturing environments for all students.



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SROS FUEL SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE AND DISPROPORTIONATELY TARGET BLACK STUDENTS

Wake County Public School System's (WCPSS) School Resource Officers Program fuels the school-to-prison pipeline in Wake County. There are currently over 70 SROs in WCPSS, with at least one in every middle and high school. Although research confirms that Black students do not misbehave at higher rates than their White peers.ⁱ Black students represented

73%

of complaints to the justice system were against Black students during the 2018-19 school year when Black students only made up only 22% of WCPSS enrollment.

only 22% of WCPSS student enrollment in 2018-19, but were 73% of school-related complaints to the youth justice system.ⁱⁱ In total, WCPSS's SRO program accounts for almost 30% of all complaints to the youth justice system in Wake County.ⁱⁱⁱ These statistics mirror what students of color are experiencing nationwide, especially Black girls. During the 2015-16 school year, when compared to White girls, Black girls were 4 times more likely to be arrested, 3 times more likely to be referred to law enforcement, and 2 times more likely to be physically restrained while attending school.^{iv}



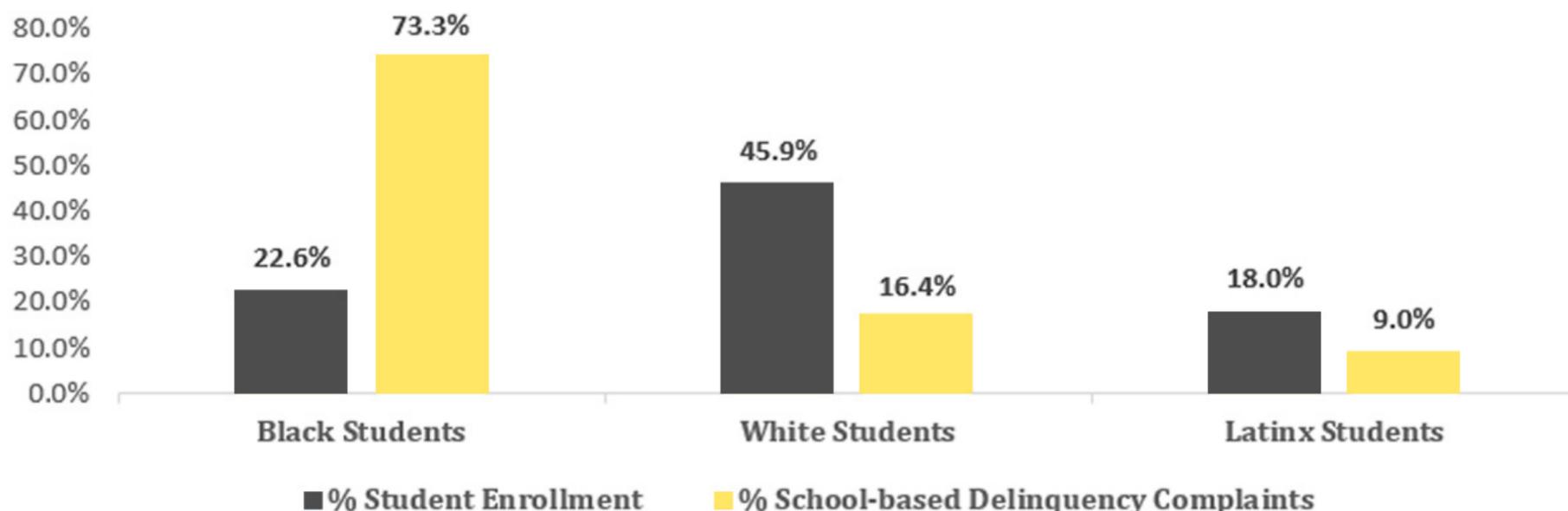
WCPSS student statement on being searched:

"I [have] personally been searched for something I never done before. He told me to, 'Get on the wall and let me search you.' I never smoked a day in my life, I was scared. If I tried to move and just try to like deny it, he's going to say, 'You're resisting.' I don't want to get hurt. So I just let it happen."



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Wake County Public Schools Student Enrollment and School-based Complaints to Justice System by Race



The constant contact between WCPSS SROs and students has resulted in juvenile and criminal records for hundreds of Black and Brown students. The presence of SROs in schools is associated with increased referrals to law enforcement for minor, nonviolent infractions.^v After being arrested by school officers, students face a myriad of collateral consequences that harm their future, their families, and their communities, including: loss of instructional time and course credits; legal costs and court fees; separation from family; emotional and physical trauma; challenges to their immigration status; loss of housing assistance; and loss of employment.^{vi} These consequences only exacerbate racial and ethnic disparities already entrenched in North Carolina's juvenile justice system where 10 Black youth are incarcerated for every 1 white youth.^{vii}

SROS ARE COSTLY, INEFFECTIVE, AND HARMFUL TO STUDENTS AND SCHOOL CLIMATE

WCPSS is actively funding the school-to-prison pipeline while creating harmful school environments that criminalize students of color for age-appropriate behaviors. WCPSS's spends spends roughly a million dollars for SROs from local

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law enforcement agencies. The Wake County Sheriff's Office also funds the policing of middle schools, school-related events, and unincorporated areas of Wake County.^{viii} Instead of investing in student criminalization, these funds and more should be spent on student resources and initiatives that are proven to create positive and nurturing learning environments for all students.

Rather than improve safety, research demonstrates that placing police in schools negatively affects school climate. The over-policed school atmosphere can initiate, rather than alleviate, misbehavior by increasing anxiety, alienating students, creating a sense of mistrust between peers, and forming adversarial relationships with school officials.^{ix} Instead of ensuring safety and improving behavior, police presence often increases disorder among students by diminishing the authority of school staff.^x In fact, the increased presence of school security, including SROs, has been associated with increases in suspension and expulsion for Black students and greater discipline disparities between Black and White students.^{xi}



WCPSS student statement on why SROs do not make her feel safe:

“After the Columbine high school shooting happened, there was a huge push for SROs, but literally in all 50 states, there’s not been a single SRO officer to stop school shootings. The main focus of SROs is to stop school shootings, and you’re not even doing that. What are you doing? Well, you’re antagonizing Black and Latinx students, you’re having racial biases against lower income students. Nobody asked you to do that. We pay them to sit there and waste time, space, and money.”



BUILDING PEACE IN WAKE COUNTY SCHOOLS

positive school climates and support students' needs through guidance counselors, health care professionals, and community peacebuilders who are trained to identify and address concerns without criminalization. One of the most effective methods to improve school climate is to engage students and educators in pro-social activities that build positive relationships and instill a sense of community throughout campus.^{xv}



WCPSS student statement on the need to reallocate SRO funding:

“I think it’s important to not only defund and abolish SROs but take that money and put it into things that will actually help us so we can grow and become better.”

School-wide restorative justice initiatives are effective at making schools safer by improving school climate and promoting emotional, social, and communication skills that follow youth into adulthood.^{xvi} Additionally, school-based mental health services have proven to improve school climate and reduce disciplinary incidents.^{xvii} Yet these preventative measures do not receive necessary funding for adequate and effective implementation.

INVEST IN COMMUNITY PEACEBUILDERS, DIVEST FROM SCHOOL POLICING

The goal of the Peacebuilder Program is to create safe, nurturing environments in WCPSS schools without investing in or facilitating the criminalization and pushout of students of color. The Peacebuilder Program focuses on prevention and positive intervention rather than on punitive approaches that disparately criminalize and often traumatize students of color. Police officers are trained to



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enforce laws, not address age-appropriate behaviors associated with adolescents. They are not experts in adolescent development, restorative practices, mental health support, or socioemotional learning. The contradiction in police officer training and the skills needed to support adolescent development leads to both student criminalization and instances of excessive force that physically and mentally harm students.

GOALS

The goal of the Peacebuilder Program is to create safe, nurturing environments in WCPSS schools without investing in or facilitating the criminalization and pushout of students of color.

WCPSS should divest all funds for school policing and invest in Peacebuilders, who intentionally build positive relationships with students and parents and provide intervention support to teachers and administrators. Their positive relationships and regular interactions with students allow them to identify conflicts before they become disruptive, and their de-escalation skills allow them to intervene nonviolently when conflicts arise. Peacebuilders help create positive school climates by facilitating safe, nonjudgmental, transformative justice circles that help students learn social and emotional skills, understand how their behavior affects others, and take responsibility for their actions. Additionally, Peacebuilders utilize de-escalation techniques to address immediate safety concerns instead of threatening students with physical force, arrest, and incarceration. Oakland Unified School District's Cole Middle School utilized Peacebuilders for 16 weeks. As a result, the rate of suspension declined by more than 75% and expulsions and violent fights were reduced to zero.



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DIFFERENCES BETWEEN A PEACEBUILDER AND A LAW-ENFORCEMENT OFFICER

Peacebuilder	Law Enforcement Officer or SRO
View/Perspective of Students and Families	
A Peacebuilder is an interventionist that identifies the strengths and potential of young people and their families.	Police officers are trained to see people as victims and perpetrators and seek outcomes that enforce the law, not consider the best interest of the student. Profiling is a key aspect of their ongoing training.
Listening with Compassion and Empathy	
Listening practices are necessary skills for peacebuilders. This includes controlling rumors, preventing retaliation, hearing and addressing youth and family concerns, mediating conflicts, and building trust.	Police officers follow a military-like hierarchy. Listening to superior officers and following orders are essential skills for an officer, not listening compassionately to better understand students' needs.
Tools for the Job	
Peacebuilders only need a cellphone with access to email and text messages and a laptop to keep track of data and connect students and families to resources.	Officers carry a loaded gun, chemical spray, a taser, a baton, a bullet proof vest, a radio, and handcuffs – all in plain sight of students and parents.
Uniform	
Peacebuilders wear casual clothing to make them more approachable to students and parents.	The same standard-issue uniform, badge, and boots worn by other officers, which separates the SRO from the civilian community.
Success	
Peacebuilders success is measured by the number of positive relationships established, conflicts solved, lives saved, and students kept out of the justice system.	The success of SRO programs is often measured by how many arrests have been made or how many citations have been given, not by an actual reduction in crime.



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STEPS TOWARD ABOLISHING SCHOOL POLICING IN WCPSS

WCPSS should take the following steps to remove police from schools and fully implement the Peacebuilder Program:

#1

Remove all SROs from WCPSS schools and end all contracts between WCPSS and law enforcement agencies.

#2

Invest the funds, previously used to police students, and additional funding into implementing the Peacebuilder Program by helping students, parents, and community members at each school coordinate the hiring, training, and assignment of paid Peacebuilders. Implement the remaining 4 WCBSC demands (see next page).

#3

Enlist the support of local colleges and universities in assessing the program's impact on school climate, discipline disparities, school based arrests, and community engagement.

#4

Assist parents, students, and community members with making adjustments to their school's Peacebuilder Program based on assessments of the program's overall impact.



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STEPS TOWARD ABOLISHING SCHOOL POLICING IN WCPSS

WAKE COUNTY BLACK STUDENT
COALITION PRESENTS...

THE BIG FIVE DEMANDS

01

Abolition of SROs
in all Wake County
Public Schools

02

Installing Staff
Accountability Systems
through WCPSS

03

A Platform for
Minority Students to
Speak (more
specifically Black)

04

A Safe & Organized
System To Report
Sexual Harassment
of Any Kind for Wake
County Students

05

Integrating In-
Depth Black History
into Main Curriculum



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THE FOLLOWING ORGANIZATIONS, GROUPS, AND ALLIES ARE IN FULL SUPPORT OF THIS PROPOSAL

Education Justice Alliance

Wake County Black Student Coalition

Southern Coalition for Social Justice

American Civil Liberties Union – North Carolina

CITATIONS

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ⁱⁱⁱNorth Carolina Judicial Branch, SJP Resources, Data on School-Based Offenses, School-Based Complaints FY 2018-19, available at <https://www.nccourts.gov/documents/publications/school-based-complaints-fy-2018-2019> (last viewed June 8, 2020).

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BUILDING PEACE IN WAKE COUNTY SCHOOLS

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^{xiii}Nakamoto, J., Cerna, R., and Stern, A. *High School Students’ Perceptions of Police Vary by Student Race and Ethnicity: Findings from an analysis of the California Healthy Kids Survey, 2017/2018*. WestEd (2019).

^{xiv}Wilson, D. (2004). “The Interface of School Climate and School Connectedness and Relationships with Aggression and Victimization” *Journal of School Health*. 74(7), 293-299.

^{xv}Thapa, A., Cohen, J., Guffey, S., & Higgins-D’Alessandro, A. (2013). “A Review of School Climate Research.” *Review of Educational Research*, 83(3), 357-385.

^{xvi}Fronius, T., Persson, H., Guckenburg, S., Hurley, N., & Petrosino, A. (2016). “Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: A literature review.” WestEd Justice and Prevention Center. Jain, S., Bassey, H., Brown, M. A., and Kalra, P. (2014). “Restorative Justice in Oakland Schools: Implementation and Impact.” Oakland Unified School District.



BUILDING PEACE IN WAKE COUNTY SCHOOLS

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National Association of School Psychologists (2013).

