

# **MESSAGING GUIDANCE FOR RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND RETHINKING DISCIPLINE**

2020



# PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

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In the wake of yet more brutal murders of Black people by police, Americans are coming together across our differences to demand that we move our money away from the policing that hurts our communities and towards the services and supports we need. This demand is arguably most urgent for our neighborhood public schools, where for too long certain politicians have denied necessary resources to communities that are struggling, blamed the problems they created on families of color, and then sent in police in place of the nurses and counselors, restorative justice practices and enrichment programs proven to make schools a place where children can thrive.

It is past time for teachers, parents, students, and communities to unite across race and place and demand safe schools where our children can learn, which includes knowing how to resolve conflicts, navigate challenges and grow from mistakes.

The purpose of this guide is to support advocates, educators, administrators, and allies in making the case to fund the programs and resources that make our schools safe for all while eliminating the police presence that directly impedes learning. This includes, moreover, advocating for evidence-based best pedagogical practices to discipline, which preclude forcing children to endure harsh punishments. The messaging principles, sample narratives, and talking points below can serve as a template for advocating for and defending these policy and resource shifts locally, regionally, and nationally.

## Messaging Principles

- **Lead with shared values, not problems. Examples:**
  - “School is a place where childhood happens. And most of us want our neighborhood schools to be safe places for children to ask questions, make mistakes, and learn so they can live fulfilling lives.”
  - “Most of us believe that every child, whatever their color, background or zip code, has the right to learn in a supportive environment.”
  - “Whether Black, white or brown, every child deserves a quality education with well-prepared teachers who nurture a love of learning, meet mistakes with patience, and help them grow.”

- **Frame the problem as the result of deliberate actions and decisions.**
  - Adhere to the “people do things” rule and always assign an actor. For example, instead of saying “Black boys **are arrested** at more than three times the rate as white boys,” say “**police target and arrest** Black boys at more than three times the rate they arrest white ones, causing immediate and long-term harm to their health, education, and well-being.” The latter more readily suggests that police are the problem, as opposed to leaving open the idea that Black boys themselves are to blame.
  - DO NOT assume that simply highlighting disparities in discipline and policing will make the case that racist policies, as opposed to individual failings, caused those disparities. Instead, name how certain people in power are putting in place barriers for students based on race, gender, ability, etc.
- **Call out efforts to divide us, and show the power of joining together across differences of race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, and geography.**
  - Name that certain politicians, corporations, and for-profit education lobbyists deny sufficient resources to neighborhood schools in poorer communities, and then divide us by blaming teachers and Black and brown students for the problems their greed has created.
  - Provide a call to action that explicitly rejects this division and demonstrates strength in unity.
- **Lead with and focus on what we are *for* as opposed to what we are against, using real-world language wherever possible.**
  - DO lead with a positive vision for the future that is grounded in shared values and paints a picture of what we will achieve. For example, stating our goal as “safe schools for all” or “justice for all in education.”
  - DO NOT lead with phrases that describe our goal solely in terms of what bad things we want to ameliorate or stop. For example, avoid leading with terms like “police-free schools,” which counterproductively reinforces an association between police and schools. It centers the conversation on police instead of on the kids and solutions we need to prioritize. Further, by only specifying what we wish schools lacked, it invites an austerity argument: that we should simply cut police out of school budgets, as opposed to moving that money towards restorative justice programs and other resources schools need to ensure students can thrive. We can and should still clearly state that we need police out of schools – we just shouldn’t lead with that.
  - Spell out the solutions that will get us to our positive vision, not with specific policy language but in real-world terms. For example, “supporting a child in resolving conflict and learning from their mistakes” or resourcing schools to provide “engaging lessons in small classes where teachers and students can build strong relationships.”

## Sample Full Narratives

### (A)

School is a place where childhood happens. Most of us believe that every child, whatever their color, background or zip code, has the right to learn in a supportive environment that respects their humanity, upholds their dignity, and responds fairly to mistakes and mis-steps. But today, certain politicians fuel divisions so they can take resources away from our schools while they let the wealthiest few get away with not paying their fair share. They then blame parents, teachers and students to distract from these failures. They send police into schools to harm students who are Black, brown, LGBT or disabled for making mistakes that - for wealthy white kids - are deemed part of growing up and learning. Our schools must treat every child as equal, especially in situations of conflict. By joining together - parents and teachers, Black, white, and brown - we can make every neighborhood public school a place where all children can learn, grow, and thrive.

### (B)

No matter where we live or what we look like, most of us want our neighborhood schools to be welcoming places where every child can thrive. But certain politicians have created color-coded barriers to equal education, denying schools in poorer communities the resources they need and sending in police to target, monitor and punish Black and brown students. Then they turn around and point the finger at Black, immigrant, and other families of color for our schools' problems, while lining the pockets of charter school corporations and letting the 1% refuse to contribute their fair share. We must move our money away from policing and arresting children and towards the proven solutions that set our kids up for fulfilling lives. When we join together across race and place, we can demand that our schools treat all our children equitably and with compassion, nurturing a love of learning and meeting childhood mistakes with the proven approaches that help kids grow.

## Stand-Alone Talking Points

- Schools should support all children, no matter their race, gender, or ability, in resolving conflict and learning from their mistakes.
- Our schools must treat every child equitably, and that requires enabling personal growth and offering restorative justice for Black, immigrant, and other students of color.
- Our neighborhood schools should be safe places for children to ask questions, make mistakes, and learn so they can live fulfilling lives.
- School is a place where childhood happens. We jeopardize all kids' childhoods when we send police into schools to target, harm, and arrest Black, brown, LGBT and disabled students for making mistakes that, for wealthy white kids, are deemed part of growing up and learning.
- By joining together, parents and teachers, Black, white, and brown, we can make every neighborhood public school a place where all children can learn, grow, and thrive.
- Most of us believe that every child, whatever their color, background or zip code, has the right to learn in a supportive environment that respects their humanity, upholds their dignity, and ensures just responses for mistakes and missteps.
- Whether Black, white or brown, every child deserves a quality education with well-prepared teachers who nurture a love of learning, meet mistakes with patience, and help them grow.
- We must move our money away from policing and arresting children and towards the proven solutions that set our kids up for fulfilling lives.