

FREEDOM, INC.

POLICE FREE SCHOOLS

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

ABOUT OUR CAMPAIGN

Freedom, Inc. engages low-to- no income Black and Southeast Asian communities in Dane County, WI. Our mission is to end violence by coupling direct services with leadership development and community organizing. Since 2017, our Freedom Youth Squad has led the conversation and action around police free schools in Madison, Wisconsin. Currently, the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD) spends over \$2 million on police, security, and discipline. This disproportionately impacts Black students, students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and students with disabilities. The Freedom Youth Squad elevates the voices of students of color who are criminalized in their schools and demands change and accountability.

Freedom, Inc. and the Safe Schools Coalition have developed an FAQ based on feedback gathered from concerned youth, parents, teachers, and community members.

OUR DEMANDS

- Take cops out of schools
- Invest in the leadership, wellness, and creativity of Black youth and youth of color
- Give most impacted youth, parents, and trusted adults real decision making power over schools
- Use Transformative Justice instead of punishing youth

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Can cops just build better relationships with Black students and students of color? Should schools hire more Black cops and cops of color?

Black students and students of color should not have to rely on “relationships” with officers to avoid criminalization. Community policing, which recommends “relationship building” between cops and communities, exaggerates rather than eliminates racial disparities. In fact, Wisconsin has the second highest rates of referring Black students to law enforcement, nearly three times the national average. This is not a result of a lack of relationships, but the result of racist policies and practices. Additionally, community-policing increases the surveillance and criminalization of Black people and people of color. Police rely on “community-policing” initiatives to increase access to our communities which results in higher incarceration, profiling, and police violence. Likewise, hiring more Black cops or cops of color does not reduce or eliminate the harm. We should remember that Black cops were hired during the Civil Rights Era to specifically target Black civil rights workers. They were hired so that police departments could avoid claims of racist police violence. It is not about the cop's identity; it is about the system in place to keep Black people and other people of color in line and in the criminal justice system. Students do not need “better relationships” with cops or more cops of color in their schools. They should be respected as leaders and decision makers who have the power to define safety and accountability on their own terms.

1

References:

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<http://aworldwithoutpolice.org/2017/10/08/the-problem-with-community-policing/>



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How should we think about and address “behavioral issues” in the classroom?

First, we must understand that Black students and students of color are already over-disciplined in schools. They are essentially punished for simply being themselves. Educational research and our young people tell us that the behavior of the school itself is the source of the harm. We must continue to question when young people are accused of “behavioral issues” in the first place. Also, we know that there is a need for an initiative that centers transformation and healing as opposed to punishment and discipline. Therefore, when SROs get involved with behavioral issues at school, students are more likely to be cited or arrested, and this contributes to the pushing out of Black students and students of color, LGBTQ students, and students with disabilities into the school-to-prison pipeline and the criminal justice system. There are schools all across the country where cops are not a part of daily school practice (including Malcolm Shabazz High School in Madison). There are more efficient, cost effective, and transformative approaches to school discipline. Restorative justice practices can help teachers manage classrooms and center the needs of the student. We must rely on our youth, parents, restorative justice experts, community intervention workers, and other trusted adults to provide additional support to teachers. Creativity and care in our practice, not cops, will best serve our young people.

2

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How should we practice safety in a critical situation involving weapons (i.e. guns) in schools?

It is important to know that issues of gun violence start before someone pulls a trigger. We need to have more conversations about gun access and safety in relation to how and why gun violence happens. There is no direct evidence that proves SROs increase school safety or can stop an active school shooting. Most school shootings end by suicide, the intervention of school personnel, or by the response of “first responders”. Reactive strategies like policing almost always lead to lost lives and irreversible trauma. Armed guards at three recent high-profile school shootings — Marshall County High School in Benton, Kentucky; Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida; and Santa Fe High School in Texas — were unable to stop the shootings. In these situations it is actually more effective to call for outside help. Although mass shootings at schools have dominated headlines, they are still extremely rare. According to Everytown for Gun Safety, less than 1% of gun deaths are a result of mass shootings and the majority of those mass shootings happen at home. While the number of police in schools has grown significantly, there is no positive correlation between police in schools and student safety. Research actually suggests that heavy reliance on SROs promotes distrust and disorder. Additionally, the daily operation of an SRO includes targeting Black youth and youth of color and ticketing and arresting them for small infractions. What we have seen is the increased school violence that takes place in the presence of SROs. School safety must be holistic and utilize an anti-racist lens, gender justice lens, queer justice lens, and disability justice lens. If we want to protect our young people and keep them safe—we must choose community and care over cops. Youth, parents and community need control and decision making power over school safety.

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<https://madison365.com/freedom-inc-mmsd-must-give-community-control-over-school-safety/>
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Why the focus on Black students and students of color?

Simply put, Black students are most impacted by school police, school disciplinary policies, and school practices. They are often seen as criminals who need harsh punishment and control rather than children who need care and support. Numerous studies tell us that Black students get punished more harshly than their white peers for the same behaviors. This is evident in MMSD's data which indicates that during the 2017/18 school year, Black girls receive more citations than any other group in the district. Also, Black and Brown students with visible and invisible disabilities are arrested in schools and/or referred to law enforcement at a rate that far surpasses any of their white peers. While Madison ranks as one of the best places for academic achievement for white students, Black and Brown students in Madison, and across the state, do not have the same level of academic fulfillment and experience police contact at some of the highest rates in the country. A much greater investment of resources in the education of Black and Brown young people that promotes student centered learning and decolonized school curriculum and school policies is a great place to start. To truly transform schools, we need to invest in the leadership, wellness, and creativity of Black youth and other youth of color. Such new and unprecedented investments by Madison's schools will benefit all students by fostering an environment where all Black and Brown students are well resourced, respected, and feel valued as members of the community.

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How should we address physical fights?

Instead of paying \$360,000+ to place officers in schools--a practice which does not reliably demonstrate a decrease in physical fights or violence--we must shift funding to strategies supported by institutions such as the CDC, the ACLU, Dignity in Schools, and the National Education Policy Center. These strategies include: 1) funding substantive and repeated de-escalation and conflict resolution training for all staff (far beyond the one-day training MMSD describes as "required for any school staff member prior to using physical restraint or seclusion") and 2) prioritizing the hiring and retention of mental health providers, restorative justice practitioners, and other staff who have these skills and have demonstrated experience supporting students during conflict. These trained personnel are best suited to perform conflict intervention--including fights. It is necessary that we use evidence-based practices that reduce harm--not school resource officers who are trained to cause more physical harm and criminalize students. A hostile school environment only increases the likelihood of fights. What students need is a substantial investment in their leadership, wellness, and creativity. We must also remember that most fights are relatively short and end by the intervention of school staff or classmates. Police are simply not necessary in dealing with this issue or any other issue for the reasons listed above. Young people, parents, and trusted adults can be practitioners of transformative justice and healthy relationship building. They should have decision making power in the schools to make school a healthier place.

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Why are we demanding community-control over school safety and what does that look like?

Evidence shows that Black and Brown youth, and youth with disabilities are disproportionately disciplined and punished due to racial bias, institutional racism, and antiblackness. In other words, our young people are punished because of their identity—not always their actions. To be clear, current forms of school-based punishment is never the answer. MMSD has “attempted” to address this disparity through several initiatives including the Behavior Education Plan. Despite implementing the Behavior Education Plan and shifting away from Zero Tolerance discipline, MMSD and SROs continue to target our young people. Black and Brown youth are still suspended, expelled, and subjected to other forms of school-based punishment at disproportionate rates. In order to address this issue, the voices of young people and their adult allies have to be at the center of defining school safety. One of the most equitable ways to approach this goal is through local community-control over school discipline. Community Control relies on new models of accountability for school administrators and staff. This approach allows for deep community-engagement and decision-making as opposed to superficial participation. This looks like youth, parents and trusted adults working collectively on committees that would review and amend the discipline and safety policies for each school. The committees would represent student demographics. Positions on the committees would be filled by lotteries. Committees would have decision-making power over a negotiated range of discipline and safety policies in MMSD.

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