

Bill of Rights to Support the Mental Health of Girls and Gender-Expansive Youth of Color in Schools

We, the Youth Advisory Committee of the Schools for Girls of Color Learning Network, recognize that the American education system is lacking the necessary mental health support and care for girls and gender-expansive youth of color in schools. As girls and gender-expansive youth of color, we require our rights to be respected in order for us to be able to focus and learn. Schools' recognition of these demands will grant girls and gender-expansive students of color the rights of dignity and respect that are inherent to all human beings.

We Demand Recognition of these Rights:

1. The Right to Mental Health Care

Schools must provide better mental health supports and services for girls and gender-expansive youth of color.

Improving access to mental health care will help girls and gender-expansive youth of color by:

- Offering a supportive, healing alternative to judgment and punishment
- Providing resources for girls and gender-expansive youth of color who have experienced trauma and other harms unique to them
- Improving conditions for girls and gender-expansive youth of color to focus and learn

To respect this right, we demand the following:

- School-based comprehensive and long-term mental health counseling
- School-based meetings with psychiatrists
- Opportunities for girls and gender-expansive youth of color to provide input about their own mental health needs and solutions to meet those needs
- Space for mindfulness activities and moments to breathe and relax
- Opportunities to speak publicly or anonymously to administrators about how mental health is being dealt with at school, including spaces to offer recommendations for improving service quality and access.
- Mental health days, such as excused absences, to address mental health needs that do not require formal documentation from a medical or mental health provider
- Curricula that teach girls and gender-expansive youth of color about mental health and wellness

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2. The Right to Culturally Relevant Curricula

Girls and gender-expansive youth of color do not see themselves in the textbooks they read or in classroom discussions. Classrooms must embrace their heritage and experiences.

Culturally relevant curricula in school can help the mental health of girls and gender-expansive youth of color by:

- Making classrooms more welcoming by connecting students' cultures, languages, and life experiences with what they learn in school
- Facilitating learning and engagement in the classroom through rigorous curricula that reflect a wide diversity of perspectives
- Promoting a sense of belonging and safety
- Upholding the cultural identities of students
- Creating an environment that is welcoming, supportive, and affirming between both adults and peers at school

..... To respect this right, we demand the following:

- Mandatory cultural-competency training for all faculty and staff
- The opportunity to engage in open dialogues about national and community level current events that uniquely impact girls and gender-expansive youth of color
- Trauma-informed classrooms that flexibly respond to the emotional needs of students to make them feel physically, emotionally, and socially safe
- Culturally relevant curricula

3. The Right to Physical Health

Schools must support the physical health of girls and gender-expansive youth of color, which benefits their mental health.

Supporting physical health in schools can help the mental health of girls and gender-expansive youth of color by:

- Teaching girls and gender-expansive youth of color about dietary and exercise habits that can contribute to body-positive thinking and self-esteem
- Helping girls and gender-expansive youth of color understand their bodies as they are growing up and into themselves
- Mitigating the mental health challenges that can stem from physical health issues
- Minimizing stigmatization of body types that differ from mainstream white beauty standards
- Supplying information about nutrition that incorporates students' diverse food traditions and cultural context
- Learning about physical health in ways that are inclusive and affirming for gender-expansive youth

To respect this right, we demand the following:

- Opportunities to learn about how to maintain a healthy body and mind and the science behind those practices
- Opportunities to become aware of and learn about overcoming eating disorders and body image issues
- Provision of nutritional meals that cannot be denied as a form of punishment
- Spaces where students can learn about reproductive health, menstrual health, and gender-identity in a serious, affirming, non-condemning way
- Time to exercise, stretch, and engage in physical movement

4. The Right to Spaces to be Ourselves

Schools must be safe spaces where girls and gender-expansive youth of color can be themselves without fear.

Safe spaces in schools can support the mental health of girls and gender-expansive youth of color by:

- Giving girls and gender-expansive youth of color the opportunity to express themselves without fear of judgment
- Allowing girls and gender-expansive youth of color to grow into their identities
- Creating spaces in school that are conducive to building self-esteem
- Creating safe opportunities to discuss issues of identity with peers and adults
- Allowing girls and gender-expansive youth of color to make mistakes without shame or judgment
- Allowing girls and gender-expansive youth of color to advocate for themselves without fear of punishment or physical harm
- Providing a learning environment that is free from sexual, physical, or emotional harm

To respect this right, we demand the following:

- The end of disciplinary responses to girls and gender-expansive youth of color for expressing themselves and instead the encouragement of expressions of all emotions, including sadness, anger, and joy
- Educator training to overcome racially biased misperceptions of whether students present a physical threat or are disruptive or disobedient
- The end of the sexualization, over-surveillance, and criminalization of girls and gender-expansive youth of color related to dress code enforcement and other forms of self-expression
- Sensitive classroom discussions of differences
- Resources such as counseling and therapy that serves as alternatives to school discipline for students
- Safe alternatives to school punishment such as restorative justice practices
- Classrooms that prioritize building community and regular check-ins with students
- Opportunities for students to evaluate faculty and staff with accountability measures that ensure changes are made based on those evaluations

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5. The Right to Police-Free Schools

Schools must be places where girls and gender-expansive youth of color are supported, rather than criminalized.

Police-free schools can help the mental health of girls and gender-expansive youth of color by:

- Freeing girls and gender-expansive youth of color from the trauma, anxiety, and distress that police presence and actions can create
- Helping to free girls and gender-expansive youth of color from surveillance of their bodies

To respect this right, we demand the following:

- Removal of police officers from school grounds
- Bans on arrests on school grounds
- Responses to students that are not based in racial or gender bias and which aim to understand the root cause of any school-based incident

