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Hello, my name is Alexandra Valera; my pronouns are she/they, and I am a senior at a high school in Brooklyn. I am also a youth leader with Make The Road NY. I am here today to call on the New York State Legislature to pass the Solutions Not Suspensions Act, S.1040 and A. 5691. For over a decade in public schools, I've witnessed many racist and discriminatory tactics used as a threat and often a reality for me and my classmates. The one that sticks out to me the most is suspensions. Suspensions are thought to be harmless, but the use of suspensions goes against the very reason why schools exist. We are meant to learn in our schools, not be pushed out of them, and that's precisely what suspensions do.

I have always tried my best to get my work done and keep my head down, so I've only been threatened with suspensions for mistakes I've made here and there. However, I've had friends get suspended. One of my friends got caught bringing a lighter to school and was suspended shortly after. They stopped showing up to school a few days later, and when they returned to school, I noticed a trend. They started skipping classes more frequently. No one checks up on the students that get suspended. They are expected to miss a few school days and return as if nothing happened. That's why it's so easy for me to say suspensions don't solve anything; instead, they create trauma, lower a student's self-confidence and push them toward isolation. Our schools should do their best to heal and support students in finding growth opportunities, not becoming the cause of their harm and trauma.

When my school had a restorative justice coordinator, we moved towards a school atmosphere prioritizing students and their voices. Our restorative justice coordinator encouraged students to speak up and provided us with an outlet to voice our opinions. He showed us that all we needed to come to school and enjoy ourselves was to develop our inner confidence, which is badly needed, and not to be afraid to challenge ourselves to step out of our boundaries and make new friends. These achievements were born out of my school trying to use restorative justice to deal with disciplinary issues, not suspensions! If NY State made it a law to prioritize restorative justice instead of suspensions, I would tell you students all over the state would be better for it, and it would be easier for teachers to teach. Our schools would have a fantastic learning atmosphere; students would know that the people we see daily are there to guide and support us, not look for ways to punish. We could be bringing out the creative side of young people and putting more practice into their future as to what they should strive for.

I have survived the public school system and graduated on time, and now I'm hoping to create a better future further when I head to college next year. However, using the word

surviving bothers me because that shouldn't be how our education system operates. I'm tired of schools finding any way that could be used to remove us instead of doing the opposite and finding ways to keep us in school. Our dreams of success beyond high school shouldn't be locked or limited behind the color of our skin or the amount of resources we have. All students should have access to success! Fifteen other states in the U.S. have passed laws to limit suspensions, so why are we choosing to fall behind? It is time that we should too.

That's why I'm calling on the New York State Legislature to pass the Solutions Not Suspensions Act, S.1040, A. 5691. The time is now for N.Y. State to end racist discipline practices and instead use restorative ones that help us learn and grow. As an N.Y. public school student who has worked hard to get where I'm at, it is my duty to continue fighting for the next generation of students that come after me and for a better future for my younger sister. I want her to be a part of an education system that values its students' well-being and does not immediately resort to severely punishing and pushing out students of color.