



May 3rd, 2023

My name is Elias, my pronouns are he/him and I'm a youth leader with Make the Road New York. I am a sophomore currently attending a high school on Long Island. Thank you to all members of the Senate Education Committee for joining us today. I'd like to share my story. It's one of many reasons we need New York State to pass Solutions Not Suspensions Act S.1040, A. 5691.

In 6th grade, I was unfairly suspended for defending myself against another student who had been harassing me because of my sexuality and gender identity. This happened after I had repeatedly reported him to teachers for doing so. My calls for help were ignored by school staff. I felt like there was nothing left to do but defend myself. I was given a 4 day suspension. I was not handed any work to keep me up to date with my classes. And my school had the audacity to keep me in the same room with the person who had caused me harm in this situation. Without any proper intervention or emotional support from the school, I was just left there to deal with all of the rage, pain, and fear alone.

After my suspension was over, my teachers had warned me that I should alert them if anything were to happen to me. Even though I did go to them before the incident. I did everything I could to not let it get to this point.

It was also super unfair because the student that harmed me was never held accountable. I would have felt so much better if my school used restorative justice instead of suspending us. Because restorative justice is a proven way of resolving conflict and helping students feel heard and validated. Instead I felt violated and made to feel like it was my fault. They made me apologize for my reaction, but I was never offered an apology for the harm done to me. It felt like my school cared more about punishing me than helping me feel safe, heard and valued.

Now, I'm in high school in the same district. Not much has changed. We are majority Black and brown students. Everyday we have to line up outside of the school, in every type of weather, so we can all pass through metal detectors. If we accidentally forget our ID that day, the principal does not let us inside of the school and sends us back home to miss a full day of school. We are not allowed to have any backpack on unless they are see-through. Police are always around the school and it honestly feels like a prison. I feel like a prisoner in the place my parents send me to learn. We're conditioned into the school-to-prison and deportation pipeline.

And that's what I'm here to dismantle. I will not stand for this any longer. I will not let my younger brother face this same system. I as well as many students from across the state are here

to make sure that unfair suspensions end. We want to ensure that we focus on creating a safe and supportive school environment.

Solutions Not Suspensions will help schools create fair and equitable discipline policies that will address racial disparities, LGBTQ disparities and disparities related to disabilities. By promoting a supportive school environment, this bill will help administrators, teachers, and students intervene in problematic or concerning behaviors before they manifest into bad situations.

That's why I stand here in my vulnerability, calling on each of you in the New York State Legislature to pass the Solutions Not Suspensions Act, S.1040, A. 5691. We can't keep going through this. We fully deserve an education and a school system that is invested and committed in helping us learn and grow.