



May 3rd, 2023

Hello and good afternoon; my name is Nile Borja, my pronouns are he/him, and I'm a youth leader with Make the Road New York and a senior at a high school in Brooklyn. I'm here because of my commitment to fight for a more just disciplinary system that prioritizes students' emotional, physical, and mental health needs instead of severely punishing them and pushing them out of school. We can only achieve these goals by moving towards a more healing approach to dealing with disciplinary issues in our public school system.

As a student, I see, hear, and feel the many struggles that students who look like me go through daily but don't have a big enough platform to advocate against. Struggles that were born out of harsh policies, many of which were not designed to have students of color succeed. It's quite the opposite. Many of our current school discipline policies around the state feel like they are designed to target students of color. That is because these policies are structured to promote throwing students of color into our jails and prisons.

We call that process the school to prison pipeline, and our goal is to effectively end it. Research has shown that the chances of dropping out increase exponentially when a student gets suspended. The same goes for students' exposure to the criminal justice system when they drop out of school. You should have noticed a pattern if you're following what I'm saying. It starts with a student being suspended from school after committing a mistake they could've learned and grown from. Then that student often drops out of school because they feel left behind or like the school doesn't care. Finally, when a student is no longer in school, they're often exposed to things they shouldn't be, and the time they could've spent in school learning is now replaced with something that often increases their proximity to our criminal justice system.

Suspensions are not a universal tool, solution, or even deterrent. We need to start calling them for what they are. Suspensions are a shortcut to dealing with our most marginalized students, and in many cases, those students come from low-income communities and are black and Latinx like myself. That's why I'm calling on the New York State Legislature to pass the Solutions Not Suspensions Act, S.1040, A. 5691. We must stop denying our students the opportunity to make mistakes and, most importantly, learn and grow from them. Their mistakes shouldn't become a life sentence. The point of school is to provide a space where students can be present in a classroom and receive a quality level of education. It should not be a place where knowledge and growth are withheld as a form of punishment, and that's precisely what's being done to our youth when they are suspended. The time to pass this bill is long overdue - support us in our fight for Solutions Not Suspensions!

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