



May 3rd, 2023

Good Afternoon Everyone, My name is Niyo Gumbs, my pronouns are he/him, and I'm a Junior at a high school in the Bronx and a youth leader in the Bronx. Today I'm testifying to tell the New York State Legislature that after 8 years it is time to pass the Solutions Not Suspensions Act S1040 and A5691. It is unfair that students that look like me are unjustly and disproportionately harmed by suspensions, which ultimately impacts young people's futures. Many of us in support of this bill have picked up from where young people before us left off. It is so hard knowing that while this bill has sat in committee for years, young people across New York State have paid the price by missing millions of days of school because of suspensions, missing valuable educational opportunities, and being labeled as "bad kids" because of the lack of action from the state.

While I haven't been suspended, I sure have experienced what it is like to be threatened to be suspended, which is how some of our schools choose to handle school discipline. Particularly in charter schools, which I currently attend, staff feel at liberty to threaten students or even often suspend them for minor incidents—incidents that a simple conversation could have supported shifting student behavior. Not too long ago, at a time when I needed some support and was clearly not showing up as myself, I was met with harsh treatment from my school. I was intimidated and threatened to be suspended if I didn't change my behavior. Behavior that was not harmful to others but was clearly a call for my school to support me in a time of need. This was difficult for me because I could have used support from my school staff but they didn't feel obligated to provide support. Instead they were allowed to dismiss my needs and that's exactly what they did. My behavior changed because I wanted to at least stay in school with my peers and because I was intimidated, which is not how schools should be. I felt this was an indication that if I faced any issues I should just keep it inside and not call attention to myself because my school would not attempt to be supportive. This is why The Solution Not Suspensions Act is important. Students in all schools deserve to attend schools that will use positive intervention practices before a suspension. Schools are supposed to be a place where students feel safe and supported, not like at any moment they can be pushed out of school.

Right now without protections for students in charter schools, I HOPE I can successfully graduate from high school without being suspended. Doesn't it seem crazy that I have to hope for

this? I should just be worried about academics, instead, I'm also worried about how I may be pushed out of school because of a suspension.

I fight for this bill to be passed not just for me but for all young people including my younger siblings. I am fighting for all schools to protect young people, especially Black and Brown young people like myself. We need our schools to use practices that will shift student behavior, not just control students. We need our schools to use restorative practices and we need this law to protect our most vulnerable student population. The time to act is now, don't allow 8 more years to go by. Thank you and I appreciate you hosting this hearing.