

Statement from Dr. Donielle Prince, MEd, PhD

My name is Donielle Prince, and I am a mental health educator with a background in counseling both children and adults. I live in Sacramento, California. My statement and recommendations today focus on the third theme, “education that offers room and tools for facing, handling and overcoming emotional trauma and other adverse experiences and circumstances around addressing emotional trauma”. I will address the issue with information about my own local context, which has national and likely international relevance when it comes to the education of children of African descent. My comments will address the ways that the school environment itself can be traumatic and what educators can do to shift toward a more caring and healing environment.

In the city of Sacramento where I live, researchers from San Diego State University and University of California Los Angeles identified in a statewide study, that one of Sacramento’s school districts was the “[Capitol of Suspensions](#)”, the name of the report. This 2018 report revealed that African American girls and boys are suspended from school at the highest rate of any other ethnic group, a significant finding for this multi-ethnic, multilingual community in the capital city of California. We have **seven** threshold languages, each of which our professional and civic agencies are prepared to serve.

Yet in a city with many ethnicities, cultures, and languages reflected, children of African descent are still routinely singled out for exclusion from school and educational opportunity. One glaring statistic from the report highlighted that “Black males in early childhood education (kindergarten through third grade) [in the US, this is ages 5-9 years] are 9.9 times more likely to be suspended than their peers (statewide)”. This research was focused on California public schools, but these trends are reflected nationwide.

In addition to unacceptable school exclusion using suspension, children of African descent are also disproportionately targeted by school staff for arrest by police for ordinary issues of student discipline, which should more reasonably be addressed by school authorities. In fact, as the American Civil Liberties Union [reported in 2019](#), many American schools have cut mental and emotional health personnel from their budgets, and transferred that funding to contracts with local police departments, with negative outcomes that disproportionately impact children of African descent. This report further found that: “schools with police contracts reported 3.5 times as many arrests as schools without police contracts. As a result, students with disabilities and students of color are most frequently criminalized”.

It is important to note that in the United States, there is an intersectional connection between students of color and students with disabilities, due to the fact that students of color, especially children of African descent, are more likely to be designated as learning disabled. This is largely due to biased perceptions of these children as not capable of learning, as well as due to structural racism that persists in denying children of African descent resources necessary for social mobility, such as a quality education.

It is incomprehensible that funding for police contracts with schools has been on the rise, while American public schools face a critical shortage of counselors, nurses, psychologists, and social workers, all in the face of a widely reported youth mental health crisis.

There are several factors that contribute to these alarming rates of exclusion and targeting of children of African descent in schools, but the one that I will focus on here, is the dehumanization of Black children. I've been part of several research projects over the years focused on the nature of classroom life, and through this work it became clear that Black children are less likely to be viewed and treated with warmth, care, compassion and empathy than are children of other racial and cultural backgrounds.

In the United States, the recent acceleration of interest in supporting youth mental health, including school based strategies for supporting youth mental health, must be accompanied by a recognition that racism is a clear mental health stressor for young people in schools, one that can only be remedied by acknowledgement by school personnel of the problem, and an active and intentional process for improving relationships between school personnel and children of African descent.

Without a specific and explicit focus on confronting and addressing active racism and bias against Black children, no intervention will succeed in improving social and academic outcomes for these young people.

Recommended interventions include:

- 1) First, Mandatory training for school administrators and faculty to acknowledge, process, and overcome their negative views and habitual mistreatment of children of African descent.
- 2) Second, Interventions must also include dedicated emotional and psychological repair and healing for children of African descent, who have experienced years of traumatic fiduciary neglect by school staffs. This includes bullying from adults and peers, as well as frequent exclusion from the classroom as well as their right to

learn, through the tactics of excessive suspensions, the abhorrent practice of school arrests, and other exclusionary tactics.

- 3) Third, the use of police to discipline children in schools, a process that often leads to the arrest of even very young children, must end, and discipline must return to the fiduciary responsibility of school personnel.

These unwelcoming and antagonistic experiences in schools that I have described, have taught many children of African descent that they are not welcome as learners, and so they will need support and reassurance that it is now safe to learn- that conditions have truly changed- once their schools have actually done the change work recommended above.

As at least two decades of scientific, neurobiological study of the effects of trauma and resilience now makes clear, experiences that evoke fear and anxiety will depress children's cognitive function. Caring, empathetic and supportive relationships at school are required in order for children to learn and achieve at their best.

References (also linked in text)

American Civil Liberties Union (2019). Cops and No Counselors: How the lack of school mental health staff is harming students, <https://www.aclu.org/publications/cops-and-no-counselors>.

Wood, J. L, Harris III, F., & Howard, T. C. (2018). The capitol of suspensions: Examining the racial exclusion of Black males in Sacramento County. San Diego: CA Community College Equity Assessment Lab.