



EDUCATION K-12

What Happened After LA Schools Cut Police Funds and Hired Mental Health Staff for Black Students

Now other students around the country want to follow their lead.



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Channing Flagg, 9, holds a sign during a news conference held by Students Deserve. The coalition members rallied outside the Los Angeles Unified School District office on June 3, 2021, to call on the school board to completely eliminate the district police department. (Photo by Hans Gutknecht/MediaNews Group/Los Angeles Daily News via Getty Images)

Kyla Payne distinctly remembers being on edge any time she entered Dorsey High School in Los Angeles. The 16-year-old felt uncomfortable being monitored by campus police officers who seemed to be intent on finding crimes and rule violations that weren't there, Payne said.

"I know for me and my friends, it was difficult trying to live just as a high school student and live freely and be creative when you have these figures on your shoulders just waiting to get something out of you," said Payne, a high school junior.

Amid the uncertainty of COVID-19 and remote learning, the trauma of the 2020 murder of George Floyd and the turmoil of the uprisings that followed, Payne said the school police only intensified the students' anxieties rather than calmed them. After witnessing what she calls unfair backpack searches and students being pepper-sprayed by police, Payne, with a group of students and community members in [Students Deserve](#), a youth-led activist group, pushed for the Los Angeles Unified School District to withdraw all funding for school police and divert it to mental health support for Black students.

"For Black students, we literally had to sit back and watch the entire world debate whether or not our lives actually mattered," said Simya Smith, 16, a member of Students Deserve.

After a [yearlong outcry](#) from students and community members, the LA school board in February 2021 [approved a plan](#) to cut \$25 million – a third of the school police budget – and shift those funds into a \$36.5 million initiative called the Black Student Achievement Plan. The mission is to support the mental and academic well-being of Black students in the nation's second-largest school district, adding 221 psychiatric social workers, counselors, "climate coaches," and restorative justice advisers to schools with the highest number of Black students. The new staffers especially target campuses with higher rates of suspension, chronic absenteeism, and low student achievement.

The climate coaches help de-escalate conflicts and provide social and emotional support for struggling students. The district said the coaches would be residents from the communities that their schools serve. The restorative justice advisers help shift the schools' disciplinary practices to focus on rehabilitation and reconciliation to address conflict and crime.

Payne and Smith say they haven't seen any police officers at Dorsey this school year and have seen huge improvements since the mental health staff arrived. They feel relaxed. The counselors talk to them about Black trauma and politics in ways that make them feel safe.

“As a Black person, as a Black woman at that, there’s a lot in society that we have to face. The color of our skin, especially if you’re dark-skinned, the texture of our hair. BSAP really creates that safe space for you to be unapologetically Black,” Smith said.

She said she sees other students interacting with the new mental health staffers daily.

“It looks like positive interactions,” she said. “I feel like a big part of their purpose is to help you feel comfortable in your skin and not to have to modify yourself to fit into the standard.”



Simya Smith (right) talks to other students at Dorsey High School in Los Angeles about their efforts to remove police from the school and bring in more mental health staff. (courtesy of Students Deserve)

When she has an anxiety attack, the psychiatric social worker coaches her on breathing exercises and techniques that help ground her and control her anxiety.

District leaders plan to release a midyear report on their progress to the school board in February. They'll measure whether there has been an impact on student discipline, parent engagement, suspensions, and other outcomes.

While the debate over the utility of school police — particularly for Black students — has long existed, the issue has been amplified by the broader debated “defund police” movement that swept the country after the murder of Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in 2020. Since then, few city police departments have cut their budgets and among those that did, some have [since increased them again](#). But several school districts have made strides to remove police from their campuses.

[Education Week reported in](#) November that at least 49 school districts ended contracts with police or cut their budgets. At least a few shifted those resources to mental health support: In [Madison, Wisconsin](#), four school resource officers were replaced by restorative justice coordinators. In [New Haven, Connecticut](#), the school district hired more school counselors. And in [Alexandria City Public Schools in Virginia](#), the district leaders reallocated funds to mental health services.

Parents, students and educators have continued to debate those decisions. Some have called for schools to reverse course and restaff police in response to student fights and weapons. Others argue that the mental health programs aren't adequately funded or officials have been slow to fill the positions.

There have been federal efforts to divest from the police in schools and invest in mental health support, as well. In June 2021, U.S. Rep. Ayanna Pressley, D-Mass., and five other senators and representatives introduced the [Counseling Not Criminalization Act](#), which would shift federal funds away from school police and invest in culturally responsive social services for students. But the bill stalled in committee.

Los Angeles school district's mental health services plan has been unique in its focus on Black students.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union's [“Cops and No Counselors” report](#), Black students nationwide are arrested three times more often than white students. Black girls specifically are arrested four times more often than white girls. Black students with disabilities also are disproportionately arrested.

The ACLU reports about 72% of children in the U.S. will experience at least one major traumatizing, life-altering event before 18 years old, yet 14 million students are in schools with police but no counselor, nurse, psychologist or social worker.



Black Lives Matter-Los Angeles supporters protest outside the city's school district headquarters on June 23, 2021, to call on the board of education to defund school police and reallocate it to other student-serving priorities. (Mario Tama/Getty Images)

Jared DuPree, the senior director of the office of the Los Angeles schools superintendent, said he wants to separate the Black Student Achievement Plan from debates over police in schools.

“BSAP was funded partially by some of the funds that were received because they defunded the police, but BSAP lived long before the conversation about police being defunded,” he said.

But Students Deserve members said students’ mental health is directly connected to the issue of policing. In fact, Payne and Smith said they want all the money going toward school police diverted to mental health supports in schools.

Their work in Los Angeles is inspiring other teen activists. In January, 17-year-old Keyanna Bernard met with members of the [Urban Youth Collaborative](#) – a coalition of student advocacy groups in New York City – to discuss the strategy Students Deserve used to get their district to defund school police. She and other activists in her group, [Make the Road](#), are working on informing teachers and parents about police-free schools.

Bernard said adults have told her that restorative justice costs too much and that schools wouldn’t be safe without police presence. But she and others in the organization are pushing for change.

“School policing is taking away from mental health support of Black students,” Bernard said. “And I feel like without mental health support the cycle of internalized harm and internalized self-doubt will continue.”