



OPINION

# Policy Matters for Black Youth Mental Health

Pervasive inequitable issues in education make K-12 schools the breeding ground for anti-Black racism across policy and practice.

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In a recent op-ed, we described the present challenges Black youth are facing regarding mental health. Sadly, these statistics continue to be alarming as rates remain high in comparison to their same-age white peers. These trends stubbornly persist, which points to the systemic nature of the issue.



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We focus, primarily, on systemic issues in K-12 schools as spaces where Black youth spend the majority of their days — an environment meant for their growth and development — academically and socio-emotionally. However, pervasive inequitable issues in education make K-12 schools the breeding ground for anti-Black racism across policy and practice. For example, schools very often engage in zero tolerance discipline policies and practices that thrust Black children into the school-to-prison nexus. This nexus robs Black youth of the innocence of childhood through adultification practices that see them as older than they are. Thus, thoughts of “they should know better” allow for the policing and surveillance of Black youth with said discipline policies.

Further, if indeed there are policies around mental health (i.e., suicide prevention training policies; required social emotional learning for students), these are often done through a lens of color ambivalence that take no account of how youth experience their cultures and identities as a part of mental health. This means that while there may be opportunities to learn and support mental health in schools, it is done through a neutral, (read: white) lens that does not see, trivializes, discounts, or ignores the uniqueness of Black youth, or any youth of color for that matter. Instead, as Black youth and youth of color experience mental health challenges, they are often misinterpreted and wrongfully treated as discipline and compliance issues rather than as needing compassion and support. As such, while Black youth spend the

majority of their days in K-12 schools, their needs are perpetually and systemically overlooked as a part of anti-Black policy; this drives alarming and pervasive anti-Black practices.

What, then, is needed is a systemic paradigm shift — intentional development of policies and subsequent practices that not only see Black youth, but also value them as a part of the school community. We propose that to do this, those we are training to work in them must hold a firm belief that Black youth are beautifully and wonderfully made, and are worthy of a life without anti-Blackness. They are worthy of love and protection from systems that harm them. They are worthy of Black joy. They are worthy of being seen and heard — and belonging. They are worthy of policies and settings designed for their thriving.

As K-12 schools and those who aspire to work in such embrace the aforementioned, then begins an intentional quest to co-create policies and practices with Black youth and their families to ensure that these advocacy-based beliefs become actions. For example, many schools create policies without Black youth and their families at the table, which allows for anti-Blackness to be institutionalized. Imagine this — what if, instead, schools created committees with Black youth, families, and community stakeholders to engage in policy review, assessment, revision, and creation? Toward this end, the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Office of Minority Health has developed a Black youth mental health (BYMH) policy framework that can guide this process (ATW Health Solutions, 2021). This framework includes four phases:

- (1) Policy Identification;
- (2) Policy Assessment;
- (3) Strategic Reform & Implementation; and
- (4) Policy Evaluation.

This process allows for in-depth analysis and evaluation of current policies that have an impact



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on Black youth mental health in schools and also youth-serving organizations. Co-authors of the grant are using the BYMH policy framework as a part of the Black Youth Mental Health Initiative, a Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health grant that is a partnership with the University of Arizona, New York University, and the Richmond, Virginia, community to engage in policy assessment.

As there is much effort toward engaging policy, the BYMH initiative also has an arm focused specifically on training as policies and practices are connected. This training has begun with the Black Joy in Community Series, a free virtual training series that centers intersectional understandings of Black youth and mental health along with practical strategies for caregivers, educators, counselors, and community members. This series highlights community leaders to share about their efforts and expertise in unique aspects of Black youth mental health. Further, Black youth often start each session by sharing what mental health means to them. The series is leading to a culminating training called the Black Youth Mental Health Summit, which will provide professional development sessions alongside related policy that can be implemented in youth-serving settings including schools and community organizations. The summit clarifies the connections between policies and practices to ensure cohesive support for Black youth mental health.

## **Recommendations**

The creation of policy to support Black youth mental health is critical, life-saving work. Every youth-serving organization, especially schools, should engage in the efforts. Toward this end, co-authors encourage the following steps to ensure the mental health and well-being of Black youth:

1. Identify community stakeholders, especially those who identify with the Black diaspora, to serve on policy assessment and review committees.
2. Work with the policy committee to identify beliefs and values regarding Black youth, mental health, schools, and the organization. These common beliefs and values should serve as the foundation for the vision of the committee.
3. Engage policy committees in the BYMH policy framework (ATW Health Solutions, 2021) to identify policies within your respective organization that impact mental health.
4. After the policy committee completes the BYMH policy framework, take the steps necessary to put policy recommendations in place and evaluate their impact. Please note that some organizations may have standing committees that will receive the policy recommendations (e.g., wellness, crisis response, attendance, discipline policy committees).
5. Support ongoing training and professional development opportunities related to policy recommendations. It's important that trainings have a close alignment with policy but are also tailored to the unique roles of staff that would implement policy.

## **References**

ATW Health Solutions. (2021). Black Youth Mental Health Policy Framework Development & Action Report: Promoting Behavioral Health in Black Youth Study. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services Office of Minority Health.

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