



Our Stories Are the Evidence:

**YOUTH-POWERED**

**POLICY**

RECOMMENDATIONS

*for a more*

**EQUITABLE**

**SAVANNAH**

2019

Deep

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**T**he policies recommended here are an essential part of Deep Center's work to create a more just and equitable Savannah—a Savannah that recognizes and accounts for the historical and contemporary structural inequities that harm some members of our community and benefit others. By “just” and “equitable,” we mean a Savannah that meets all young people and families where they are, removes barriers, and invests the necessary resources to ensure everyone thrives. We understand that one policy brief cannot correct history, but we also know that our community will not get to where we need to go if we do not move past talk and into action. This document is our action: a first step as we make the road by walking.

This policy brief is youth-powered, family-centered, and grounded in research. It is the result, in part, of an innovative process known as participatory action research. In partnership with researchers from the University of Georgia, we centered young people and an array of community stakeholders as researchers, leaders, and change-makers and charged them with recommending policies for a healthier Savannah. We know of no other time in Chatham County's history when youth have been empowered as both researchers and subjects in a community-wide investigation into systemic injustice and vital solutions. As we gathered our community's experiences and determined our focus, we also called on the wisdom of national experts.

Our youth and community called out many issues threatening our security, and we narrowed our focus on one of Chatham County's most pressing ecosystems of harm: the conditions and systems that make up Chatham County's school-to-prison pipeline.

## Here are Deep Center's recommendations:

1. Community, civic, and faith-based organizations should build skills and capacity to undertake systems-change advocacy.
2. Child-serving institutions should embrace a healing-centered, whole-village approach to building a climate of community growth, achievement, and prosperity.
3. Chatham County Juvenile Court should abolish economic sanctions for youth in the juvenile justice system.
4. Our community should reimagine policing.
5. Savannah Chatham County Public School System should centralize and codify positive school discipline across the district.
6. Chatham County should expand affordable mental health care.

The challenge is vast, but there is a great deal of fertile ground in which to grow the transformation we seek. The Chatham County Juvenile Courts are leading the efforts from where they are downstream, while the Savannah Chatham County Public School System is building partnerships and new assets to meet our young people where they are and press for change. Numerous community organizations, including Deep Center, are assisting. An ecosystem of harm needs an ecosystem of reform efforts, and we hope all of Chatham County's and Savannah's child-serving institutions, municipalities, law enforcement, and civic and faith-based organizations will join us in advocating for these policies and making Savannah a more just, equitable, and ultimately healthier place for our young people and families to live.

# INTRODUCTION

## Our Vision

This document is an important part of Deep Center's work to create a more just and equitable Savannah—a Savannah that recognizes and accounts for the historical and contemporary structural inequities that harm some members of our community and benefit others. A just and equitable Savannah meets all young people and families where they are, removes barriers, and invests the necessary resources to ensure everyone thrives.

We understand that one policy brief cannot correct history or provide all the answers, but we also know that our community will not get to where we need to go if we do not begin walking. This policy brief is the first step towards articulating a roadmap for a just and equitable Savannah and is the result of an inclusive process that models the world we envision.

There is much work to be done, and we will make the road by walking.

## Research-driven, Youth-powered Policies

This policy brief is youth-powered, family-centered, and grounded in research. It is also, in part, the result of an innovative process known as participatory action research that centered young people and an array of community stakeholders as researchers, leaders, and change-makers, charged with recommending policies for a healthier Savannah. We know of no other time in Chatham County's history when youth have been empowered as both researchers and subjects in a community-wide investigation into systemic injustice and vital solutions.

This document is the product of a whole village—the Deep Center village. Deep Center is an intergenerational, multi-racial, intersectional community committed to raising Savannah's young people and their families and strengthening the village around them. From the start of

this process, our emphasis has been on producing actionable data that will fuel and justify specific policy solutions. If there was one thing people made clear from the start, it was that Savannah suffers from “dialogue fatigue.” Our communities are tired of talking about our challenges. We are ready to do something about them.

## What We Mean by “Equity” and “Justice”

We began our research process by defining what we meant by the words “equity” and “justice.”

Because of history and systemic injustices, many young people in our city carry much heavier loads than others. Youth of color, youth from migrant families, working-class youth, and LGBTQ youth, among others, are often left out, pushed out, blamed, punished, demonized, ignored, dehumanized, and erased, then told if they cannot pull themselves up by their bootstraps, the fault is their own. Some youth—like black boys, who are six times more likely to be referred to Chatham County Juvenile Court than white boys—have the terrible distinction of being both scapegoated and erased at the same time.

We also recognized that, given Savannah's history as a seat of slavery, anti-black sentiment and racism remain embedded in our city, both at the interpersonal and the structural level. There are direct links between how our systems and institutions are over-disciplining black and brown children today and how those systems were designed to function at their very origins. We can follow a trail of structural injustices—from slavery, to post-Civil War Black Codes and vagrancy laws, to disenfranchisement, to forced labor, to Jim Crow apartheid, to redlining, to the mass incarceration of today—that represent our systems' and institutions' ongoing efforts to shapeshift and adapt to whatever progress seems to be made. All the while, holding true to their original intent to exclude and control black communities.



## How Did Deep Center Get Here?

In spring 2018, Deep Center's community of staff, youth leaders, board of directors, and a diverse array of community stakeholders came together to take an honest look at how Deep's programs addressed the actual manifold needs of young people and their families. We recognized the vast majority of the barriers young people face are not of their own making. We recalled how time and again in Deep's history we had worked to lift up young people only to see them bump into ceilings they did not create and could not, by themselves, be expected to overcome, let alone dismantle.

The story we tell children in the United States is if they work hard enough, build resilience and grit, and learn to take risks, then they will succeed. Unfortunately, the data tells a very different story: according to The Equality of Opportunity Project's 2018 study, *Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective*, racial disparities in income, upward mobility, and other outcomes are among the most visible and persistent features of American society, especially for black Americans.<sup>1</sup> Black children are far more likely to have much higher rates of downward mobility than other groups, and even black children born to parents in the top income quintile<sup>2</sup> are almost as likely to fall to the bottom quintile as they are to remain in the top quintile.<sup>3</sup>

In Chatham County, the income disparity is among the starkest in the nation. For instance, the average household income is \$24,000 for blacks and \$47,000 for whites.<sup>5</sup>

The fact is, for many youth and their families, hard work alone is not enough to help them overcome history and systems designed to hold them back and keep them out.

With this in mind, Deep's community resolved that if we truly wanted to see young people thrive, we needed to start using our organizational power, not just to lift them up but to speak out and take action concerning the unfair systems that are hurting them and their families.

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That conversation represented a watershed moment for Deep Center. It compelled us to develop a root-cause model of youth development that works on three parallel tracks: direct service, systems change, and narrative change. Deep lifts up youth and their village, advocates for just policies, and disrupts dehumanizing narratives with firsthand stories about youth healing, growing, and thriving through individual development and collective action.

## OUR FIRST STEP: Chatham County's School-to-Prison Pipeline

These recommendations are just the beginning. Our research identified numerous systemic issues—some of them dishearteningly old and persistent—creating insecurity for youth and their families in Savannah. For reasons of strategy, capacity, and clarity, we have chosen to focus on policy recommendations most directly embedded in Chatham County's school-to-prison pipeline.

Other critical issues our young people and families talked about include environmental issues and the changing climate, housing insecurity, gentrification and neighborhood displacement, a lack of entry-level jobs with living wages, media bias and misrepresentation, food insecurity, sexual violence, and gun violence. These issues remain part of our conversations, and as we make clear in our first policy recommendation, we encourage Chatham County's community, civic, faith-based and nonprofit organizations to embark on their own coordinated systems-change work that focuses on the full ecosystem of harms our vulnerable populations face.

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<sup>1</sup> Chetty, R., Hendren, N., Jones, M.R., & Porter, S.R. (2018). *Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective* (NBER Working Paper No. 24441). Retrieved from Opportunity Insights website: [https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/race\\_paper.pdf](https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/race_paper.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Quintile: any of five equal groups into which a population can be divided according to the distribution of values of a particular variable.

<sup>3</sup> Chetty, R., Hendren, N., Jones, M.R., & Porter, S.R. (2018). *Race and Economic Opportunity in the United States: An Intergenerational Perspective* (NBER Working Paper No. 24441). Retrieved from Opportunity Insights website: [https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/race\\_paper.pdf](https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/race_paper.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census Bureau and Opportunity Atlas. (2018) The Opportunity Atlas [Social mobility data map]. Retrieved from <https://www.opportunityatlas.org>



# THE LANDSCAPE

## Fertile Ground

Deep Center is not doing this work alone. In recent years, a new wave of systems-change efforts have emerged. Institutions that make up Chatham County's school-to-prison pipeline and watchful community organizations have recognized direct service to individuals alone no longer suffice: the burdens our region's young people of color carry are the result of multiple intersectional structural injustices. That acknowledgement has brought concerted efforts for reform. These model activities make for fertile ground for the deeper work called for in this brief and serve as beacons for the institutions hoping to get started to follow.

**The following efforts, in particular, are affecting systemic change on which we can build:**

- ▶ **Savannah Chatham County Public School System (SCCPSS):** Under the leadership of Superintendent Dr. M. Ann Levett, SCCPSS is implementing policies and programming that, by taking a whole-village approach, are directly and indirectly addressing the conditions that have built and fed the school-to-prison pipeline. Under Dr. Levett's guidance, SCCPSS has increased resources for early-childhood learning, mental health care, and community engagement. While SCCPSS is still, after the police department, the second greatest source of court-referrals for Chatham County's youth, the numbers have dropped under Dr. Levett's leadership.

Furthermore, over the next three years, SCCPSS is partnering with Deep Center to collaboratively build supports for pilot trainings and teachers, principals, and other SCCPSS adults. The goals are to nurture youth, family, and staff leadership and to help SCCPSS staff implement positive behavior responses that are grounded in the values of restorative justice, which align with our local cultures and context. This effort has great promise for addressing the over-disciplining of students by fostering a school climate of health and restoration. This work could be a model for our whole county.

- ▶ **Chatham County Juvenile Court:** Following the lead of Judge Lisa Goldwire Colbert and Judge LeRoy Burke III, and in collaboration with Invest Health and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Court has recognized Chatham County's extraordinarily high number of court-involved youth is indicative not of the character of Savannah's young people but of our propensity to sentence youth—especially boys and girls of color—when we should be serving them.<sup>6</sup> The court has embraced restorative justice, implicit bias training, alternatives to sentencing, data-sharing, transparency, and multi-agency collaborations to provide case work, mental health care, and academic supports for youth who, just a few years ago, would have gone to court instead of to a caring adult intent on keeping them out of the system. This work, too, could and should be a model for our whole county.

<sup>6</sup>Washington, T. (2017, February 12). One Georgia County Reimagines Its Response to Juvenile Delinquency [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/blog/one-georgia-county-reimagines-its-response-to-juvenile-delinquency/>

► **Community Organizations:** Numerous community organizers, civic organizations, and neighborhood leaders are building civic infrastructures and partnerships that reflect the values explicit in our policy recommendations. Grassroots efforts are essential to holding our institutions accountable and to identifying fresh ways of doing things. These organizations are promoting the need to upend business-as-usual, interrogating the local structures of power that are invested in keeping things as they are, and reforming systems that are harming young people and our community as a whole. They have moved past conversations and direct service and are leaning toward policy reform, community advocacy, and a systems approach. Some of them just started; some of them have been around a long time. We celebrate them all. These organizations and community leaders include Healthy Savannah, Invest Health, Harambee House, Forsyth Farmers' Market and FarmTruck912, Reform Georgia, Savannah Undocumented Youth Alliance, 9to5 Georgia Working Women, Step Up Savannah's Neighborhood Leadership Academy, Open Savannah, Bike Walk Savannah, and Bigger Pie Arts Advocacy.

Nationwide, black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than white students. On average, 5% of white students are suspended, vs. 16% of black students.<sup>9</sup> As a result, black and brown students are more likely to attend schools that employ school resource officers (SROs)<sup>10</sup> but not school counselors.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, black students are more than twice as likely as their white peers to be referred to law enforcement or arrested at school.<sup>12</sup> In the SCCPSS, students of color make up 85.2% of court referrals (with black students representing 81.2% of referrals), yet students of color only represent 71.8% of total enrollment (black students totalling 57.4%).<sup>13</sup> In 2018, statewide assessments by Georgia's Disproportionate Minority Contact Subcommittee revealed that Chatham County experienced the highest frequency of disproportionate contact between black youth and the juvenile justice system. In face, black youth are over six times more likely to be referred to court for delinquency than white boys. Black girls are over six times more likely than white girls to be referred to court.<sup>14</sup> According to preliminary 2017-18 data submitted by the SCCPSS, black students were more than eight times as likely as their white peers to be referred to a law enforcement agency.<sup>15</sup>

## The Challenge

### Bias in Discipline and Policing:

As documented in "Police in Schools Are Not the Answer to School Shootings," a 2018 report co-released by the Advancement Project, Alliance for Education Justice, Dignity in Schools, and NAACP LDF,<sup>7</sup> students of color do not misbehave more than white students,<sup>8</sup> yet they are disproportionately policed and disciplined in schools.

Research shows that police officers perceive black youth differently than they do white youth, and this bias, not discrepancies in behavior, leads to the over-criminalization of students of color.<sup>16</sup> Police see black children as less "childlike" than their white peers and overestimate the age and culpability of black children accused of an offense more than they do for white children accused of an offense.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Advancement Project. (2018, March). *Police in Schools Are Not the Answer to School Shootings*. Retrieved from Advancement Project website: <https://advancementproject.org/resources/police-schools-not-answer-school-shootings/>

<sup>8</sup> Skiba, R. J., & Williams, N. T. (2014, March). *Are Black kids worse? Myths and facts about racial differences in behavior: A summary of the literature*. Retrieved from: [http://www.indiana.edu/~atlantic/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/African-American-Differential-Behavior\\_031214.pdf](http://www.indiana.edu/~atlantic/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/African-American-Differential-Behavior_031214.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2014, March). *Civil Rights Data Collection Data Snapshot: School Discipline*. Retrieved from U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights website: <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/Downloads/CRDC-School-Discipline-Snapshot.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Barnum, M. (2016, March 27). Data Shows 3 of the 5 Biggest School Districts Hire More Security Officers Than Counselors. *The 74 Million*. Retrieved from <https://www.the74million.org/article/exclusive-data-shows-3-of-the-5-biggest-school-districts-hire-more-security-officers-than-counselors/>

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2016, June 7). *2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection A First Look*. Retrieved from U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights website: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Civil Rights Data Collection. (2015). *SCCPSS Discipline Report* [Disciplinary data and report]. Retrieved from <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/Page?t=d&cid=28869&syk=8&pid=2539>

<sup>14</sup> Chatham County Juvenile Court. (2018) *2018 Annual Report*. Retrieved from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Mtf17816Rvbw54mVdhIQrMIUFOTnWlJB/view?usp=sharing>

<sup>15</sup> Gordon, R. (2019). [CRDC survey]. Unpublished raw data.

<sup>16</sup> Goff, P. A., Jackson, M. C., Di Leone, B. A. L., Culotta, C. M., & DiTomasso, N. A. (2014). The essence of innocence: Consequences of dehumanizing Black children. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106(4), 526-545. doi: 10.1037/a0035663

<sup>17</sup> See Goff, P.A., Jackson, et. al.; Epstein, R. et. al, supra note 8.



Research strongly shows that youth who live with the daily effects of systemic classism and racism can become less likely to trust and connect with their community, civic spaces,<sup>18</sup> and formal educational institutions;<sup>19</sup> therefore, they are less likely to engage as learners and thrive in these settings.<sup>20</sup> The issue is not that young people and communities with such challenges are inherently deficient, as they are too often depicted in mainstream narratives; rather, due to history and the structural injustices affecting them, the load they carry is heavier, the mountain they climb is higher, and the place they start is miles back.<sup>21</sup> With 42% of all of Savannah's children and 67% of SCCPSS students living in poverty, and 72% of students living in communities that have been historically targeted by structural interpersonal racism and other forms of violence, the likely impact of trauma among Chatham County's children is daunting.

Where the trauma-informed approach falls short, according to researcher and trauma-expert Dr. Shawn Ginwright, is that it too often reduces a young person to their trauma.<sup>23</sup> In doing so, it can pathologize and dehumanize the individual child by using a purely clinical framework, ignoring the fact that trauma can be experienced collectively by communities and across generations and leaving unaddressed the root causes of trauma occurring at the systems level.



<sup>23</sup> Ginwright, S. (2018, May 31). The Future of Healing: Shifting From Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@ginwright/the-future-of-healing-shifting-from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-634f557ce69c>



**T**o produce this document, we have conducted several strands of research and community conversations that included Deep Center’s youth leaders, staff members, and board members as well as dozens of community stakeholders such as organizers, elders, Civil Rights Era leaders, parents and guardians, juvenile court judges, elected officials, social workers, school counselors, public school teachers, experts on race and educational reform, legal aid attorneys, business leaders, and academic researchers. We also solicited advice and feedback from national experts, including staff members of Dignity in Schools, Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative at New York University’s Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools, Forward Promise, Georgia Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, MDC, PolicyLink, Southern Center for Human Rights, Southern Economic Advancement Project, University of Georgia’s College of Education, and the Urban Institute. The participants reflected the communities with whom Deep Center works and diverse represented sources of formal and organic knowledge about our histories, identities, accomplishments and challenges. These conversations happened across Savannah’s many silos, were grounded by the experiences of people most impacted by the issues described here, and—from the start—were aimed at generating actionable solutions intended to make Savannah a more just and equitable place.

## Youth Participatory Action Research:

A core strand of this learning was a process of “youth participatory action research” (YPAR) conducted by the five members of Deep Center’s Action Research Team (ART) in collaboration with Deep staff and expert researchers from the University of Georgia’s College of Education and Missouri State University. A summary report entitled “Savannah is Covered by a Beautiful Wallpaper, but Behind it Hide Skeletons: Summary Report on Youth-led Research into Chatham County’s Supports and Barriers for Young People,” was drafted by Dr. Kevin Burke of the University of Georgia and is available upon request from Deep Center.

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ART members participated in weekly research training and data analysis seminars with their adult co-researchers on Deep's staff. University of Georgia and Missouri State University co-researchers engaged with ART in periodic training and re-visioning sessions at the beginning of the process to introduce not only the methodology (YPAR) but also the theoretical framework which entailed reframing notions of what counted as data. ART members, as part of the iterative process, identified a research question: *How do SSCCPSS's discipline policies and informal practices address root causes and accountability processes?* In order to address this question, ART co-researchers developed a survey as well as a narrative task to elicit stories from fellow youth. After gathering the data, ART analyzed it for core themes and utilized that process to train their peers in the steps of the research training along the way. After deciding on the question, gathering the data and analyzing the results, Deep engineered three youth summits, gathering youth from organizations throughout the city to teach them YPAR methods. The first youth summit occurred in late March of 2019. Here, ART members trained their peers in topic identification and the generation of research questions. Youth were then introduced to various methods of data collection (i.e., photo elicitation; surveys; individual and focus interviews; narrative and document analysis).



Groups were formed around issues identified by youth, and research questions were generated. Methods for data generation were decided upon, and all participants were sent to gather data for the purpose of analysis at the next youth summit in mid-May. In May 2019, it became clear that some youth were returning with data related to their questions but also that new youth who had not yet been trained in YPAR methods would be attending. As such, ART members planned a split youth summit, which allowed youth who came with data to analyze it with their trained peers and new youth without data, to practice gathering it through photo elicitation, participant observation, and youth-guided walking tours. Like before, youth were sent out from the summit with questions to answer and methods for gathering data. In the final youth summit, ART members spent time analyzing the data gathered and providing a guided vision forward for youth participation in community change processes. The published report collects and distills the data generated by youth and augments their ongoing analysis of their findings in the field.



# RECOMMENDATIONS







## 1 Chatham County's community, civic, and faith-based organizations build skills and capacity to undertake systems-change advocacy.

### Fertile Ground

Systemic problems do not go away unless addressed at their root cause, and community-based nonprofits, beholden to people rather than powerful institutions, can play a key role in pressing for change and accountability from the grassroots.

In recent years in Chatham County, there has been a groundswell of community-based organizations rethinking and expanding on the traditional direct-service model, and leaning toward advocacy, development of community leaders, and policy work.

### The Challenges

Nonprofits have long been defined by the direct-service model and limited by funders that restrict organizations to this mindset. Furthermore, nonprofits overly regulate their activities due to common myths and misunderstandings about what they are legally allowed to do.<sup>24</sup> Our community organizations need to understand the structural barriers harming our communities and be made aware of successful grassroots strategies for taking on these challenges. Then, they must be taught the necessary skills and given the capacity to do systems-change work and advocate for policy reform.

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*...nonprofits overly regulate their activities due to common myths and misunderstandings about what they are legally allowed to do.*

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### The Proposals

1. Chatham County's community, civic, and faith-based organizations should seek build the skills and capacity to support their missions by undertaking systems change work individually and in concerted efforts with local, regional, and national coalitions.
2. Local institutional funders should allocate funds to encourage community, civic, and faith based organizations, as well as direct-service providers, to undertake systems-change work.

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<sup>24</sup> Advocacy Defined. (n.d.). Retrieved from Bolder Advocacy website: <https://www.bolderadvocacy.org/advocacy-defined/>



## Key Findings

1. Nonprofits often carry misperceptions about what they legally can and cannot do in terms of advocacy. Nonprofits can and should get involved in advocacy to help advance their mission. Advocacy shapes the public debate about issues that affect nonprofits. In fact, advocacy is the number one way nonprofits can focus attention on the issues they care about and bring about real change for the people they serve. With the right tools and information, nonprofits in Chatham County can make advocacy work for their individual organizations and the greater community.
2. Organizations engaging in systems-change should track and measure change. To effect lasting systems-change, it's critical to understand what's needed to achieve the outcomes at scale (i.e., shifts in funding flows, changes in policies, organizational collaborations, and improvements in professional practices). By adopting this practice and codifying it organizationally, it becomes easier to chart explicitly desired systems-change outcomes and what it takes to achieve them. By incorporating more qualitative data, shifting mindsets about what constitutes valuable evidence, and being increasingly comfortable with contribution rather than attribution, organizations can begin to build and share more concrete road maps to policy changes.<sup>25</sup>
3. Organizations should aim to “be the change” by cultivating internal and personal abilities to examine, grow and change. Systems-change is not possible without shifts in the individual and collective “habits of mind” that have become entrenched in the ways we operate. How often do we hear, “that can’t be done here?” Adaptive capacity—the ability to seek new information, identify connections, examine bias and stereotypes, and make ongoing changes—needs to be built at three levels: individual, team, and organizational. Adopting this rule means helping foundation leaders and staff build self-awareness of existing strengths and limitations and gain a breadth of perspective. Adaptive capacity can also help create flexible and agile teams that learn, shift, grow, and lead to changing organizational structures, processes, and systems that can support an adaptive way of working.<sup>26</sup>

### Resources

- ▶ Bolder Advocacy: [bolderadvocacy.org/advocacy-defined/](http://bolderadvocacy.org/advocacy-defined/)
- ▶ “Fostering Systems Change,” in Stanford Social Innovation Review. (2015):
  - ▶ [ssir.org/articles/entry/fostering\\_systems\\_change](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/fostering_systems_change)

<sup>25</sup> Gopal, S., & Kania, J. (2015, June). Fostering Systems Change. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Retrieved from [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/fostering\\_systems\\_change](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/fostering_systems_change)

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



## 2 Chatham County's child-serving institutions embrace a healing-centered, whole-village approach to building a climate of community healing, achievement, and thriving.

### Fertile Ground

The Chatham County Juvenile Court, the SCCPSS, and numerous community partners (including Deep Center) are working independently and concertedly to urge child-serving institutions to shift from a dominant culture of punishment and discipline to one of healing, care, and transformation. The goal is to ensure Chatham County's children are afforded dignity, their full humanity, and the supports they need to heal, grow, and thrive, despite the systemic barriers to their well-being. The Juvenile Court and SCCPSS, in partnership with many community organizations, are collaborating on innovative programs and assets (i.e., the Court's Work Readiness and Enrichment Program and Front Porch. SCCPSS's Early Learning Center at Henderson E. Formey, Jr. School). These new undertakings share a core recognition that the approach should be holistic, address the needs of the whole village, and admit that the policies and protocols of child-serving institutions oftentimes do more harm than good. The burden of change, therefore, cannot reside only with young people. Adult stakeholders need training and support to reflect on their own trauma and challenges, to understand how they might be passing on their hurt, and to be given the opportunity to heal themselves and adopt a new restorative practices-focused toolkit for responding to young people.

These collaborations have garnered unprecedented technical and financial assistance from funders and experts around the nation, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Forward Promise, Flourish Agenda, Restorative Response Baltimore, and many more. In an increasingly visible way, Chatham County is emerging as a hub of innovative, progressive reform.

### The Challenges

Old stories get retold in new ways, from one generation to the next. However, old institutions, by nature, resist even incremental change, let alone transformation. Some institutions in Chatham County hold fast to the original intent behind their design: to control black communities. Given the structural resistance to doing things differently, we cannot expect change to occur unless we empower people inside institutions to have the hard conversations that change requires. This means rethinking how power flows and who makes the decisions and openly questioning the purpose of long-accepted hierarchies and chains of command. It matters whom we allow to speak, how we create safety for honest and sometimes ugly and unflattering reflection, and how we extend grace while encouraging people to undo and rethink mechanisms of harm. Oppressive structures incentivize unjust behavior, and good people trying to do right can do bad things inside such systems. Although in these conversations we foreground and honor lived experience, our truths in this work must reach beyond who we are and where we grew up. The truths that fuel our transformation must also include a critical understanding of how history, structural inequities, and intersectional harms impact individuals, pass through generations and be reproduced time and time again.

Moreover, institutional transformation requires new skills, new support structures, new expertise, and new investments. Regarding funding, as of this writing, proposed budget cuts by Georgia's governor Brian Kemp paint a troubling picture for the availability of the most basic resources required to maintain existing services, let alone improve them. The governor is advocating for tens of millions of dollars in cuts to child welfare and related family-support programs that are already starved for resources, thereby pushing the funding burden onto local municipalities.

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*The burden of change, therefore, cannot reside only with young people.*

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## The Proposals

Following the lead of the SCCPSS and the Chatham County Juvenile Court, child and family-serving institutions across the county should embrace a healing-centered whole-village approach to building a climate and culture of community growth and thriving young people. Deep's recommended methodology, inspired by Dr. Ginwright's radical healing framework,<sup>27</sup> makes room for the positive assets of Savannah's culture, context, and history and aims to nurture relationships that improve the organizational climate and support individual and community wellbeing. This framework includes addressing not just the needs of young people and individual adults but those of the whole village as well as the policies that define, sustain, and hinder that village. To use Dr. Ginwright's language, effective policies support young people by boosting their "culture, agency, relationships, sense of meaning, and aspirations." To this end, we recommend Chatham County's youth- and family-serving institutions address the following:

1. Implement supports for adult service-providers and offer training services on healing-centered positive behavioral responses.
2. Create more safe spaces for youth to voice and hold power inside of institutions, where youth use their lived experiences to reflect and provide feedback on policies.
3. Create more safe spaces for adult staff members to voice and hold power inside institutions, enabling staff members to use their lived experiences to reflect and provide feedback on institutional policies.
4. As part of an inclusive community conversation, leverage the lived experiences of adults and youth to review and reform institutional policies to support the wellbeing of youth and adults inside these institutions.

**NOTE:** We reference here the need to create "safe spaces" when doing this work. A "safe space," in Deep's definition, is a neutral place where people from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives can come together without titles, hierarchies, uniforms, and/or other signs of status or power. Through co-constructed community agreements, they set the terms of their mutual respect and co-learning. Then, around issues of their choosing, they honestly and bravely share lived experiences; discuss challenges, opposing viewpoints, and harms; and collaborate on solutions. In a truly safe and brave space, people can share their hearts and minds with kindness and respect, and without fear of harm or reprisal. This process can lead to real, actionable, and transformative change.

<sup>27</sup> Ginwright, S. (2018, May 31). The Future of Healing: Shifting From Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@ginwright/the-future-of-healing-shifting-from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-634f557ce69c>



# 3 Abolish economic sanctions for youth in the juvenile justice system.

## Fertile Ground

The Chatham County Juvenile Court is leading the way in substantive policy and cultural reforms that rehumanize systems-involved youth and, when addressing their needs, account for their challenges and the stories behind their actions. While the Court does not currently track data on cash bail and restitution, anecdotal data suggests the current culture of reform has resulted in the limited use of these harmful practices. Implementing our recommendations could fully institutionalize restrictions on cash bail and restitution.

## The Challenges

Cash bail and restitution represent significant financial barriers for young people and their families.

Restitution, as part of sentencing in a criminal case, involves ordering a defendant to compensate the victim for losses suffered as a result of the crime.<sup>28</sup> Each state has a law mandating that convicted defendants pay restitution to their victims. Public policy favors imposing restitution as part of a sentence to force the offender to answer directly for the consequences of the crime; however, the process often imposes a significant financial burden on low-income families.<sup>29</sup> Cash bail is an antiquated, haphazard two-tier system that allows counties to set bail for misdemeanors, cater to individual subjective values, and target the poor and communities of color.<sup>30</sup>

Cash bail detainees are legally innocent and not convicted of any crime, yet they represent the majority of people in jails—locked away and further punished for not being able to afford the bail price.

Plainly put, when young people and their families are subject to economic sanctions as opposed to evidence-based

accountability practices, like community conferencing or risk-based sentencing, they are more likely to suffer.

Juvenile cash bail and restitution numbers are not tracked well in Georgia and not at all in Chatham County. Unlike the number of adults impacted by cash bail or victim's compensation, juveniles detained by cash bail or families experiencing financial hardship due to restitution are in a situation we have yet to examine. This hidden problem adds to many of the structural reasons for the unnecessary incarceration of young people, especially young men of color.<sup>31</sup>

Georgia is one of 19 states and U.S. territories that have statutes or court rules expressly allowing for the use of bail with children in juvenile courts.<sup>32</sup> Chatham County is a specialized example of the desperate need for juvenile justice reform. As of 2018, Chatham County incarcerates the second-highest number of youth in the state of Georgia, with Fulton County,<sup>33</sup> the state's most populous county, leading. Chatham County has nearly twice the number of court-involved youth as any other county in Georgia. Between 2014 and 2016, some 2,554 Savannah youth aged 18 and under were arrested. Of those arrested, 80% were black and 72 percent were boys. In 2018, 1,191 youth were referred to juvenile court as delinquents; 65% were black males from high poverty neighborhoods and schools. These racial disparities are consistent with studies from other states, as well as nationwide studies, which show that pre-trial detention practices disproportionately affect youth of color.

Across the U.S., there are 48,000 youth in juvenile facilities. More than two-thirds (69%) are 16 or older. Troublingly, more than 500 confined children are no more than 12 years old and are detained due to cash bail.

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (1985). *Guide to Juvenile Restitution* (NCJRS Publication No. 98466). Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/98466NCJRS.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> Martin, K.D., Smith, S.S., & Still, W. (2017). *Shackled to Debt: Criminal Justice Financial Obligations and the Barriers to Re-Entry They Create* (Executive Session on Community Corrections Paper No. 4). Retrieved from Harvard Kennedy School website: [https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/wiener/programs/pcj/files/shackled\\_to\\_debt.pdf](https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/wiener/programs/pcj/files/shackled_to_debt.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> Jones, C.E. (2013). "Give Us Free": Addressing Racial Disparities in Bail Determinations. *N.Y.U. Journal of Legislation and Public Policy*, 16(1), 919-962. Retrieved from <http://www.nyujlpp.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Jones-Give-Us-Free-16nyujlpp919.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> Legis 50/The Center for Legislative Improvement. (1980). *Bail for Juveniles in the 50 States* (Legislative Technical Assistance in Juvenile Justice Report No. 1). Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/70710NCJRS.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> Georgia Legal Ages Laws. (n.d.). Retrieved from FindLaw website: <https://statelaws.findlaw.com/georgia-law/georgia-legal-ages-laws.html>

<sup>33</sup> Niles, A.D. (2018). Quick Facts 2018. Decatur, Georgia: Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice. Retrieved from [https://djj.georgia.gov/sites/djj.georgia.gov/files/related\\_files/document/QuickFacts2018\\_6\\_3V%28e96%29.pdf](https://djj.georgia.gov/sites/djj.georgia.gov/files/related_files/document/QuickFacts2018_6_3V%28e96%29.pdf)



## The Proposals

1. Chatham County begins tracking and making public the amount of young people (juveniles 16 and under) who are imposed cash bail and/or restitution at any point in their court process.
2. Chatham County adopts a unified internal policy that they will not impose cash bail or restitution on juveniles and instead codify evidence-based and risk-based sentencing.
3. Chatham County continues to uphold best practices by adopting the best standard operating procedure<sup>34</sup> to ensure youth have access to legal counsel and quality representation in delinquency hearings, as recommended by the American Bar Association.
4. Both Chatham County and the City of Savannah adopt a public resolution (as recommended by the American Bar Association) that prohibits the use of financial conditions or collateral in any form for the release of a juvenile in pre-trial status for crimes based on evidence-based and risk-based sentencing.

<sup>34</sup> American Bar Association. [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Zt6mMNZ61Bwb5WyEVdD\\_ROic1j7yu\\_1J/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Zt6mMNZ61Bwb5WyEVdD_ROic1j7yu_1J/view)

<sup>35</sup> GA Code § 15-11-507 (2014).

<sup>36</sup> For example, Georgia's statute says, "All children alleged to have committed a delinquent act shall have the same right to bail as adults." Yet, the two juvenile defenders from Georgia surveyed reported that in their jurisdictions, juvenile court judges do not advise children of their statutory right to bail.

## Key Findings

1. Where bail is a legal "right,"<sup>35</sup> it is often used more as a punishment for low-income families who simply cannot afford to pay for release.<sup>36</sup> Courts regularly impose unaffordable bail amounts on youth and their families. Georgia is one of 19 states where bail is permitted in juvenile court. In practice, defendants in 13 states reported that bail is imposed on children and their families with varying frequency.
2. Courts too often impose bail or restitution as a means of ensuring detention, as opposed to finding other evidence- and case-based options. Furthermore, the way Georgia law is written, judges are given the option to impose cash bail, thus making it a practice determined by individuals, not a codified institutional practice. Bail also encourages youth to plead guilty and waive their right to trial, thus leading to unnecessary incarcerations.
3. Bail and restitution contribute to the disproportionately high number of youth of color being detained—away from their families, communities, and opportunities—and places a financial hardship on already struggling families.
4. Juvenile bail numbers are not tracked, unlike the number of adults impacted by cash bail. Similarly, there is scant evidence or aggregated data on how often restitution is used in Chatham County courtrooms.



## Solutions and Wins

1. On June 1, 2019, New York City adopted a policy that makes accused teens eligible for release without bail while they await adjudication, thereby adding to the 13,000 youth that have been placed in the Supervised Release Program since Mayor de Blasio expanded it in 2016. While New York lawmakers passed the bill, other states like New Mexico, New Jersey, and Washington, DC, have created systems where judges almost never use cash bail, though it technically remains on the books.
2. Bail reform is increasingly viewed as a positive move by communities across America, not only as a social justice issue but as an economic issue. Though Georgia as a state has lagged in recent years in passing more thorough state legislation, its cities have begun taking it upon themselves to pass localized legislation in Atlanta, Calhoun, Macon and Athens. However, these reforms are primarily issued at the adult offender level. The drilling down of a juvenile-based policy is a must, given the differences in legal status.

<sup>37</sup> *Stack v. Boyle*, 342 U.S. 1 (1951).

## Resources

- ▶ **National Juvenile Defender Center.** *A Right to Liberty: Reforming Juvenile Money Bail*
- ▶ **National Juvenile Defender Center.** *A Right to Liberty: Resources for Challenging the Detention of Children*
- ▶ *Stack v. Boyle*, 342 U.S. 1 (1951): The United States Supreme Court ruling in which bail proceedings were deemed to be used as a way to keep people out of jail until a trial has found them guilty, not in jail until it is *convenient* to give them a trial. Also, bail amounts were instructed to be set at figures no higher than the amount needed to ensure the defendant's presence in court. Unreasonably high bail amounts were identified as a violation of the defendant's 8th Amendment rights.<sup>37</sup>
- ▶ **American Bar Association:** *Resolution and report* against the use of bail with children.
- ▶ **The American Bar Association Juvenile Justice Center and the Southern Center for Human Rights.** *Georgia Assessment: Georgia: An Assessment of Access to Counsel and Quality of Representation in Delinquency Proceedings (August 2001)*





## 4 Reimagine policing.

### Fertile Ground

A coalition of willing, reform-minded leaders in Chatham County are developing alternatives to court-involvement for young people. Chatham County's law enforcement officials have been part of these conversations and are partners on key initiatives, including the adoption of restorative responses like community conferencing and the Front Porch: a multi-agency resource center intended to divert youth from court and connect them to services.

### The Challenges

Deep's research<sup>38</sup> discovered that Savannah's young people do not feel safe around our city's police officers. Furthermore, research makes clear that "tough on crime" policing strategies and "zero-tolerance" school discipline policies disproportionately harm youth of color and other marginalized communities to alarming degrees.<sup>39</sup>



### The Proposal

1. Police, including SROs, undergo trainings and learning that enable them to:
  - › address their own trauma and how they might pass on their trauma in their interactions with young people,
  - › understand and undo implicit bias,
  - › engage with youth, as equals and without their uniforms, to deepen compassion and empathy.
2. SCCPSS prohibit SROs from responding to non-violent *Code of Conduct* violations.
3. The City of Savannah, as part of the annual budgeting process and with input from the community, form a year-long committee made up of citizens charged with researching youth safety and law enforcement from the perspective of young people, especially systems-involved youth. Seventy-five percent of committee members should be youth or young adults (ages 14-25) and their adult citizen allies. This committee will make recommendations for the FY21 City of Savannah budget. (To create a safe space for frank conversation, members of law enforcement and the criminal justice system should not be affiliates of this committee.)

*Young people feel de-humanized by police interactions. They are not treated with kindness and genuine concern for their wellbeing.*

<sup>38</sup> University of Georgia College of Education. (2019, March). *Brief from Deep Center's Youth Summit: Focus Groups on Police Training*. Savannah, Georgia: Deep Center.

<sup>39</sup> Advancement Project, Alliance for Educational Justice, Dignity in Schools Campaign, NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (2018, March). *Police in Schools Are Not the Answer to School Shootings*. Retrieved from Advancement Project website: <https://advancementproject.org/resources/police-schools-not-answer-school-shootings/>





## Key Findings

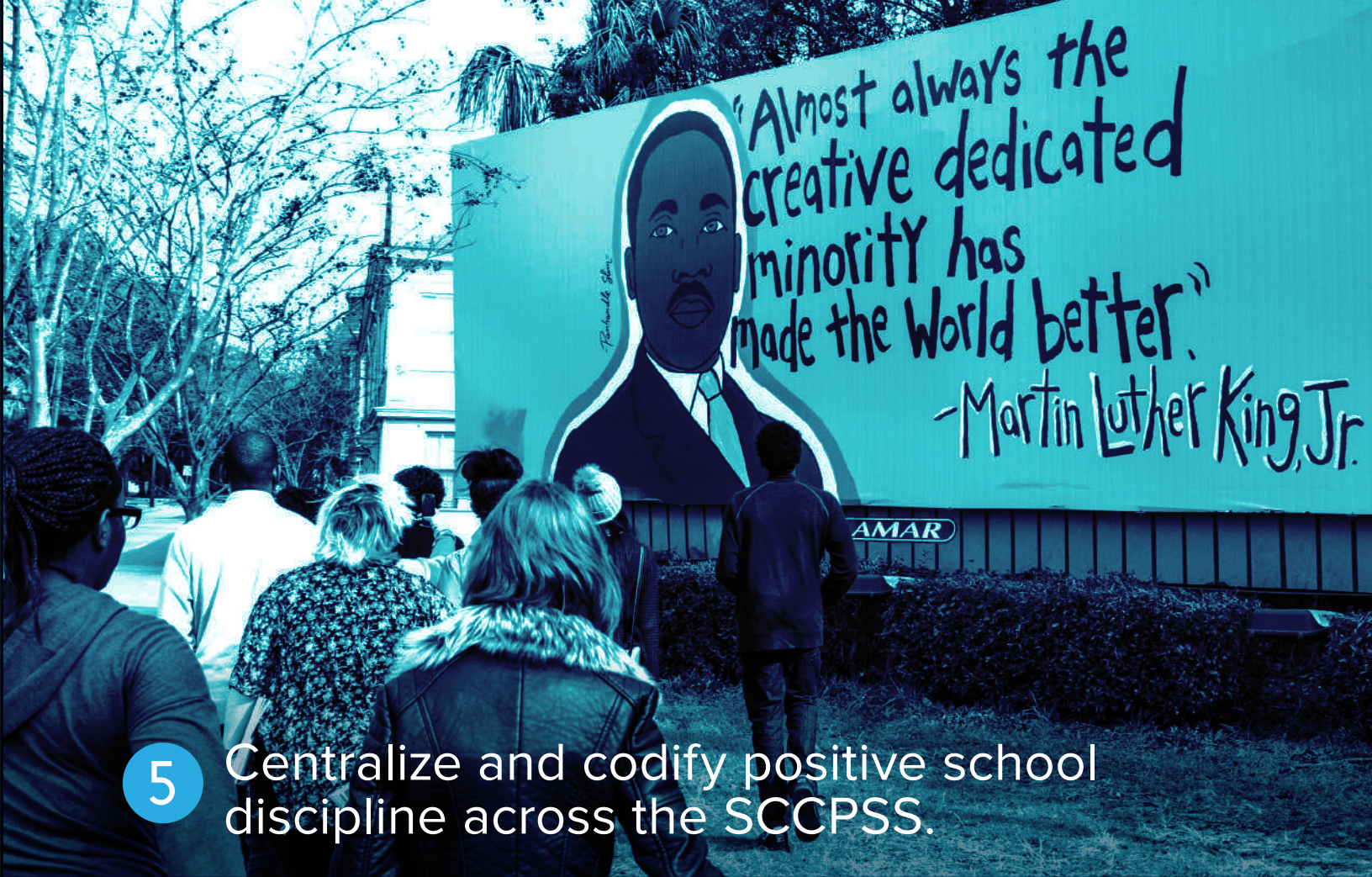
1. As part of the YPAR process, Deep hosted a focus group with 40 young people, aged 14-19, who represented various marginalized communities and identities. This is what our research found:
  - › Young people feel de-humanized by police interactions. They are not treated with kindness or genuine concern for their wellbeing.
  - › Police make young people feel unsafe, and officers do not account for power dynamics when engaging with them. Examples of these power dynamics vary widely: angry tone of voice, physical stance that reflects view of young people as a threat (i.e., hand on gun), and failing to listen to or acknowledge the responses of young people.
2. These findings conform with the broader trends we are seeing in schools across the county: the criminalization of marginalized youth.
  - › The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund reported that from 2012-14, black students accounted for 39% of arrests made by SROs, but they made up only 12-13% of the student population.<sup>40</sup> Not surprisingly, interaction with law enforcement also increases the chance for arrest. The same report notes that disparities in arrests are correlated with an increase in the presence of SROs. This last detail is concerning for SCCPSS, which, between 2014-18, has increased spending on SROs from \$3.3 million to \$4.8 million (a whopping 45%).<sup>41</sup>
3. National studies have shown that specific practices have been successful in reducing the impact implicit bias has on interactions between marginalized youth—and young people in general—and law enforcement.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (2017, November). *Locked Out of the Classroom: How Implicit Bias Contributes to Disparities in School Discipline*. Retrieved from Dignity in Schools Campaign website: [https://dignityinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Bias\\_Reportv2017\\_30\\_11\\_FINAL.pdf](https://dignityinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Bias_Reportv2017_30_11_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> Savannah-Chatham County Public School System Department of Budgeting Services. (2018) *2018 Adopted Budget*. Retrieved from SCCPSS website: <https://spwww.sccpss.com/fin/bud/Documents/FY18%20Adopted%20Budget/FY18%20Adopted%20Budget%20Book.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (2017, November). *Locked Out of the Classroom: How Implicit Bias Contributes to Disparities in School Discipline*. Retrieved from Dignity in Schools Campaign website: [https://dignityinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Bias\\_Reportv2017\\_30\\_11\\_FINAL.pdf](https://dignityinschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Bias_Reportv2017_30_11_FINAL.pdf)





5

## Centralize and codify positive school discipline across the SCCPSS.

### Fertile Ground

As noted in the introduction, SCCPSS's current administration *has* a “whole-village” approach, which has done away with formal “zero tolerance” policies, significantly lowered the number of court referrals, and implemented programs that promote the healthy and equitable development of children across the district. Now is the time to further codify, centralize, and refine school discipline policies to create accountability for and incentivize positive approaches to school discipline. By doing so, the district can reduce the chance of discipline disparities, reduce the usage of suspension, re-direct resources and time to alternative classroom management skills—rather than management of in-school suspensions (ISS)—and improve social, emotional, and academic outcomes for students who would normally be punished.

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*The SCCPSS Student Code of Conduct, in particular, contains language that is vague and, as such, can be subject to the biases and whims of staff on the ground.*

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### The Challenges

**Discipline Policies:** SCCPSS has formally done away with the harmful “zero tolerance” policies of a more punitive era, yet “zero tolerance” attitudes persist in some staff members. As SCCPSS principals are largely in control of how discipline plays out in specific schools, students in different schools can experience a wide range of responses to behavior. Students of color, especially working-class black boys and girls, are the ones most likely to be harmed by ambiguities in the discipline policy. The SCCPSS Student *Code of Conduct*, in particular, contains language that is vague and, as such, can be subject to the biases and whims of staff on the ground. Among other consequences, vague language in the *Code* can amplify the negative impacts of staff members' implicit biases and lack of cultural competencies.

**Tribunal Process:** When students are threatened with disciplinary actions by SCCPSS, the deck is often stacked against them especially for families of limited means and students in foster care. While the district often comes to tribunal hearings represented by an attorney, students and their families can rarely afford one of their own. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that students and their families are not always afforded due process in these disciplinary proceedings.



## The Proposals

1. Revise SCCPSS's Student *Code of Conduct* using the Dignity in Schools Campaign's *Model Code* as a guide. Here are some key revisions we suggest:
  - › Eliminate vague *Code of Conduct* language describing behavior infractions that allow for biased, subjective disciplinary practices (i.e., “disrespect,” “willful defiance,” “insubordination,” “classroom disruption.”)
  - › Disallow suspensions for minor infractions.
  - › Make data pertaining to offenses and their corresponding disciplinary actions publicly and readily accessible through timely online publication and easily understood language.
2. Reform SCCPSS's Disciplinary Tribunal Process
  - › Eliminate the policy requiring parents or caregivers to notify the school district if an attorney will be present at the disciplinary hearing. (Currently, the policy is that notice is to be provided to SCCPSS within 48 hours.)
  - › As practiced in many other districts, the SCCPSS attorney should only be present if the child has legal representation as well.
  - › School administrators should notify the student of their right to not write or sign any written statements at the time of the offense.
  - › SCCPSS should include more robust language in the *Code of Conduct* about the disciplinary hearing process, including a statement regarding the student's right to present evidence and be represented by an attorney. This information, including Hearing Office contacts, should be more accessible and included on the district website.
  - › SCCPSS should provide resources on the benefits of utilizing an advocate or attorney throughout this process as well as contacts to secure one.
  - › Notice of disciplinary hearings for foster children should be sent to the student's Division of Family and Child Services (DFCS) caseworker, foster placement, and DFCS administrator per the recommendations of Georgia Appleseed Center for Law and Justice.
  - › Create a reform-minded coalition comprised of the Savannah Bar Association, Georgia Legal Services Program, private law firms, and other invested organizations, that can fund a pool of salaried and pro bono attorneys who can serve as a resource for families going through the SCCPSS disciplinary process.



## Key Findings

**Discipline:** Current discipline policies allow for localized school climates where working-class youth of color and other marginalized youth are disproportionately harmed. With SCCPSS being the second highest referer to court after the police department, ambiguities in SCCPSS policies are resulting in far too many youth—*especially black boys and girls*—entering the school-to-prison pipeline.

- ▶ According to data reported by SCCPSS to the Georgia Department of Education's 2018-19 Student Record Data Collection System, there were three leading incident types among the 10,039 total incidents across all public schools, including the school within Savannah Regional Youth Detention Center:
  1. 3,992 counts of “other student incivility”
  2. 1,916 counts of “disorderly conduct”
  3. 1,735 counts of “fighting”
- ▶ Similarly, the data revealed the top three disciplinary actions undertaken by the district (not disaggregated by “incident type”), of the district's total **9,686** disciplinary actions.
  1. 5,920 counts of out-of-school suspension
  2. 2,851 counts of ISS
  3. 560 counts of “other discipline action”



► An internal audit of SCCPSS reported that the high number of out-of-school suspensions are a reflection of limited resources and funding provided to the schools, which result in “an increase in the ‘catch-all’ data categories like ‘disruption’ or ‘other’ that may range from throwing a potato chip in the cafeteria to name-calling.”<sup>43</sup>

► The 2018-19 Georgia DOE data findings are useful, but they do not show which types of disciplinary actions are taken for different types of incidents. The 2010 SCCPSS internal audit gives a better idea of what that could look like.<sup>44</sup>

► “Disorderly conduct” is a term used by the Georgia State DOE, not SCCPSS. *What does that mean?* There is no consistency when it comes to understanding and responding to behaviors that could fall under “disorderly conduct,” despite the district having to report “disorderly conduct” numbers to the state. Here are some of the offense categories that school administration and faculty can select when writing a referral for student discipline:

1. 4,542 Classroom disruption
2. 3,791 Refusal to carry out instructions
3. 3,066 Rude/Disrespect

4. 2,295 Inappropriate language
5. 2,228 Dress code violation
6. 1,245 Disturbance/Hall/Other
7. 44 Gang related behavior
8. 22 School Disturbances

**Tribunal Process:** When a child is suspended for more than ten days or faces expulsion, they participate in a disciplinary hearing conducted by the Hearing Office. By law, a child is entitled to an attorney, but this right is rarely exercised in Chatham County. An attorney ensures that the disciplinary hearing is being conducted impartially and that a complete and accurate administrative record is established. However, the attorney for SCCPSS attends all tribunal hearings—even when the child does not have an attorney present. This creates an imbalance of power.

Limited information is provided to families in the *Code of Conduct* and on the SCCPSS website concerning the disciplinary hearing process. Information regarding the process is mailed ten days prior to the hearing, which provides families with eight days or less to plan a course of action and understand the process. Further, SCCPSS does not provide any additional resources to assist with this process, such as access to pro bono attorneys, a resource guide, or other services.

<sup>43</sup> Savannah-Chatham County Board of Education Internal Audit Department. (2015, September 24). *Report on In-School Suspension*. Retrieved from SCCPSS website: [https://spwww.sccpss.com/board/audit/Documents/2016/In-School%20Suspension%20Report%20to%20Board%2010.7.15%20\(Revised%20DAS-REMI\).pdf](https://spwww.sccpss.com/board/audit/Documents/2016/In-School%20Suspension%20Report%20to%20Board%2010.7.15%20(Revised%20DAS-REMI).pdf)

<sup>44</sup> Savannah-Chatham County Board of Education Internal Audit Department. (2011, March 10). *Responses from Teachers and Paraprofessionals-Student Behavior Survey*. Retrieved from SCCPSS website: <https://spwww.sccpss.com/board/audit/Documents/2011/Audit%20Discipline%20Attachments%2011.03.10.pdf>



## Solutions and Wins

**Discipline:** The Dignity in Schools Campaign’s *Model Code*<sup>45</sup> is a comprehensive outline of suggested language, policies, and practices that preserves the rights and dignities of students, teachers, parents, and administrators alike. Their recommendations are grounded in research and best practices from across the country. One of those recommendations calls for the elimination of minor and subjective offenses, as previously mentioned. For instance:

1. The 2014 “School Discipline Consensus Report” by the Council of State Governments calls for Codes of Conduct to clarify, as much as possible, any ambiguous “catch-all” terms to reduce disparities in discipline.<sup>46</sup>
2. In 2014, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice stated that district usage of broad offenses, such as “acting in a threatening manner,” produce disparities in school discipline.<sup>47</sup>
3. The U.S. Department of Education states that “suspensions don’t work” for anyone, citing extensive data which shows they actually **increase** dropout rates, heighten suspension rates, and reduce academic achievement. They advocate for “effective alternatives to suspension” when addressing punishable behaviors.<sup>48</sup>

These suggestions are backed by the findings of an audit<sup>49</sup> of the SCCPSS’s ISS practices, which revealing the following inconsistencies:

1. “...the District does not provide guidance to high schools or middle schools regarding the development and implementation of in school suspension in their schools.”
2. “Discipline data of students assigned to ISS may not be coded accurately by the schools...”
3. “...schools need to ensure that their ISS programs are not just ‘holding tanks’ that are poorly conceived and inadequately staffed.”
4. “Ideally, schools should develop programs to help students and teachers resolve conflicts to reduce the need for suspensions.”

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*“Ideally, schools should develop programs to help students and teachers resolve conflicts to reduce the need for suspensions.”*

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### Resources

- ▶ Dignity in Schools Campaign’s *Model Policies to Fight Criminalization* (2018)
  - › [dignityinschools.org/take-action/model-school-code/](http://dignityinschools.org/take-action/model-school-code/)
- ▶ Georgia Appleseed Attorney Training Manual:
  - › [gaappleseed.org/media/docs/representing-students.pdf](http://gaappleseed.org/media/docs/representing-students.pdf)
  - › [gaappleseed.org/media/docs/student-tribunal-guide.pdf](http://gaappleseed.org/media/docs/student-tribunal-guide.pdf)
  - › [gaappleseed.org/media/docs/schooldiscipline.pdf](http://gaappleseed.org/media/docs/schooldiscipline.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> Dignity in Schools Campaign. (2013, October). *A Model Code on Education and Dignity*. Retrieved from <http://dignityinschools.org/take-action/model-school-code/>

<sup>46</sup> Morones, A. (2014, June 3). Report Outlines Ways Schools Can Rework Harsh Discipline Policies [Blog post]. Retrieved from [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/2014/06/new\\_report\\_released\\_on\\_reforming\\_school\\_discipline.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/2014/06/new_report_released_on_reforming_school_discipline.html)

<sup>47</sup> Blad, E. (2014, January 8). New Federal School Discipline Guidance Addresses Discrimination, Suspensions [Blog post]. Retrieved from [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/2014/01/new\\_federal\\_school\\_discipline\\_guidance\\_addresses\\_discrimination\\_suspensions.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/2014/01/new_federal_school_discipline_guidance_addresses_discrimination_suspensions.html)

<sup>48</sup> U.S. Department of Education. (2017, January). *School Climate and Discipline*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html>

<sup>49</sup> Savannah-Chatham County Board of Education Internal Audit Department. (2015, September 24). *Report on In-School Suspension*. Retrieved from SCCPSS website: [https://spwww.sccpss.com/board/audit/Documents/2016/In-School%20Suspension%20Report%20to%20Board%2010.7.15%20\(Revised%20DAS-REMI\).pdf](https://spwww.sccpss.com/board/audit/Documents/2016/In-School%20Suspension%20Report%20to%20Board%2010.7.15%20(Revised%20DAS-REMI).pdf)



## 6 Expand affordable mental health care.

### Fertile Ground

SCCPSS Superintendent Dr. Levett has made mental health care for students and training for staff a priority. Under her leadership, SCCPSS has significantly increased access to mental health care for students, developed partnerships to leverage community resources, and hosted trainings in positive response methods for staff. Efforts include specialized training for staff in identifying and addressing mental health concerns as well as partnerships with the Curtis V. Cooper Mobile Clinic, the Front Porch, the Georgia APEX program.

Regarding statewide assets, the Georgia APEX program, a key provider of mental health care for youth, released its three-year findings in 2018.<sup>50</sup> The report states that in its first three years (August 2015 to June 2018), the program served 8,705 Georgia students who had previously not received mental health services. Furthermore, APEX served 88% of Georgia schools with mental health initiatives promoting student wellbeing as well as parent and staff education. The program showed 85% of schools that engaged in providing school-based mental health services sustained community partnerships over the three years, and 88% of the schools engaged in school-wide mental health prevention initiatives that promoted student wellbeing, as well as parent and staff education.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Center of Excellence for Children's Behavioral Health, Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, Georgia Health Policy Center, Georgia State University: Andrew Young School of Policy Studies (Year 3) August 2017 to June 2018) Retrieved from [https://dbhdd.georgia.gov/sites/dbhdd.georgia.gov/files/imported/DBHDD/Home/APEX\\_Year%203%20Brief%20%26%20Years%201%20to%203\\_Summary\\_01.2019.pdf](https://dbhdd.georgia.gov/sites/dbhdd.georgia.gov/files/imported/DBHDD/Home/APEX_Year%203%20Brief%20%26%20Years%201%20to%203_Summary_01.2019.pdf)

<sup>51</sup> Center of Excellence for Children's Behavioral Health, Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, Georgia Health Policy Center, Georgia State University: Andrew Young School of Policy Studies (Year 3 | August 2017 to June 2018) Key Summaries. Retrieved from <https://ghpc.gsu.edu/2019/03/04/georgia-apex-program-releases-year-3-findings/>

### The Challenges

Deep's youth researchers found increasing mental health needs and limited access to mental health resources in Chatham County to be a major barrier to students' wellbeing. Additionally, trauma due to systemic pressures is likely a driver of behaviors that, when misunderstood, are one of the impetuses for the over-disciplining of children with mental health challenges. While we celebrate SCCPSS's recent increases in mental health care, county-wide we are still not meeting the needs of our children. We urge the county, city, and state to uphold their fair share of the responsibility of meeting children's mental health needs, and we recognize that SCCPSS is a practical nexus for creating access to mental health care. Currently, 23 SCCPSS social workers are shared between 57 schools, resulting in a ratio of 1:1,656 students—a woefully low number for a crucial staff role that connects students to vital services, including mental health care. Though SCCPSS counselors also provide some gatekeeping to mental health care, their efficacy is hindered by their limited numbers (125, for a ratio of 1:304), and our research found a lack of clarity among students and families about the nature of their role.

Compounding the need and placing even more of a burden on our local schools, the Georgia governor Brian Kemp's proposed FY20 budget recommends massive cuts to child healthcare, welfare, and related services:

- ▶ \$13 million in reduced funding for child and adolescent mental health services
- ▶ \$1.4 million in cuts to school nutrition grants
- ▶ \$23 million in reductions to adult mental health services
- ▶ \$12.6 million in cut grant-based funding, including \$1.67 million in cuts for trauma care alone
- ▶ \$12 million in cuts to child welfare services
- ▶ \$4 million taken from Medical College of Georgia Hospitals and Clinics



## The Proposals

1. SCCPSS clearly defines the roles of school counselors and social workers for students and caregivers and provides their contact information to all students at the beginning of the school year.
2. SCCPSS increases the number of social workers to meet the recommendations of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW).
3. SCCPSS increases the number of school counselors to meet the recommendations of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA).
4. SCCPSS expands the Georgia APEX Program to provide mental health support in all schools.



## Key Findings

1. NASW recommends that school social work services should be provided at a ratio of one school social worker to each school building serving up to 250 general education students or a ratio of 1:250 students. When a social worker is providing services to students with intensive needs, a lower ratio, such as 1:50, is suggested.
2. The ASCA recommends a school should provide a ratio of one counselor serving up to 250 students or a ratio of 1:250 students.
3. In 2019, SCCPSS rolled out the Georgia APEX Program in six schools—Brock Elementary, Largo-Tibet Elementary, Low Elementary, Hubert Middle, Mercer Middle, and Beach High. No data has been collected yet, but the program has been successful in other districts<sup>52</sup> since its inception in 2015.

<sup>52</sup> Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, Center of Excellence for Children's Behavioral Health. (2019). *The Georgia Apex Program: School-Based Mental Health Services* (Program Evaluation Year 3). Retrieved from [https://dbhdd.georgia.gov/sites/dbhdd.georgia.gov/files/imported/DBHDD/Home/APEX\\_Year%203%20Brief%20%26%20Years%201%20to%203\\_Summary\\_01.2019.pdf](https://dbhdd.georgia.gov/sites/dbhdd.georgia.gov/files/imported/DBHDD/Home/APEX_Year%203%20Brief%20%26%20Years%201%20to%203_Summary_01.2019.pdf)



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