

Wednesday, June 03, 2020

An Open Letter to Philadelphia City Council: Defund the Police and Invest in the Future of Black Families and Our City

To Mayor Kenney, City Council President Clarke, and to the members of Philadelphia City Council: We write this letter as educators invested in the future of this city and its constituents, with special consideration for our Black students and their families. Each of the undersigned teachers, principals, school leaders, and staff work diligently to create equitable and culturally-relevant educational spaces for Black children, to ensure that this population that has been historically underserved receives instruction that is worthy of their already divine being. We represent multiple organizations and institutions, yet, we come together as representatives of Black power and demanders of Black liberation, which have been too long denied for our neighborhoods and our city, and refuse to let the demand of social justice dissipate without REAL change and accountability.

As Educators, we have answered the call that exists in this city: to educate the minds of those whom without fault have been placed into a system which does not see them nor hear them. For many Black kids, when their names are spoken outside of their caring and nurturing familial settings, the city and the world views them as disposable, wild, and adult-like, hence worthy of over surveillance and under preparation. Thankfully, they have us: the teachers and educators who day-by-day remain staunch in our task to dismantle the inequitable livelihoods that exist towards our Black families. Many city leaders (including some of you), believe that for them and for many of us as Black people, struggle is all we know and we have become so desensitized to it, we are not aware of the inequities that exist: quite the contrary. We have been waiting for a moment such as this one to say: no more.

Black life in Philadelphia is hard. Philadelphia, like many other cities in this nation, is not the utopian society the media blasts to the rest of the world. Black people in this city continue to be over-policed, over-criminalized, and under-supported. The proposed budget released as part of the City of Philadelphia's "Five Year Financial and Strategic Plan," stating that it "prioritizes keeping Philadelphians, particularly [the] most vulnerable residents, safe, healthy, and educated while maintaining fiscal stability," is undoubtedly failing in its mission. Organizations such as the Philadelphia Student Union, #PhillyWeRise, Reclaim Philadelphia, The Action Network, and the Amistad Law Project have taken the releasing of the contents of this plan to the public; however, we as educators are here as both direct and indirect receptors to the glaring White and socioeconomic supremacy that exists in this plan. The predominance we speak of is particularly related to the damning plan of increasing funding of the Philadelphia Police Department.

The United States is rampant with inadequate localized and federal leadership, and the intensifying effects of a public health pandemic. At this time in which this letter is being penned, Black voices and cries all over this city are ringing out-loud, as they always have against tyranny and persecution. Historically, there is a clear aim of the Philadelphia Police Department to destroy Black livelihoods in the name of “law and order.” Passing this budget and increasing funding for the department will do little to nothing more than give allowance to continue to such indignity and further inflame the already burning distrust that exists between officers of the state and us, the community that you and your staff claim to serve. Now more than ever, it is important that all current and future plans for the city of Philadelphia be geared towards equity and staunchly against policing of any kind, lest the unrest that is being experienced currently will continue without shame. We are here holding you liable for what happens in our city. We acknowledge that the implementation of this plan will continue the damaging pattern of not only removing funds from needed services but also placing said funds into an organization continues to harass, damage, and violate our Black children and communities.

As educators who work directly with this community we argue that the \$14 million dollar budget increase for the Philadelphia Police Department is a direct antithesis to the work we do daily to empower our Black families. The mere fact that you all as leaders of this city have proposed such an increase is made worse when upon revealing what is being cut in order to help fund it. How DARE this city allocate more funds to police when 6% (\$15 Million) of funding for the School District is being cut?! It is bad enough that the police has the second most allocated funds all-around; to prioritize more funding to tyranny at the same time schools citywide are struggling and yet are still working persistently to provide households with the technology and infrastructure (eg. Laptop computers, internet service, food distributions, etc.) needed to support our Black students during this pandemic equates to failure. You are failing our families. Other entities that help our Black children and their families at least partly thrive in this city are being slashed in double-digit percentages: a 19% (\$9 Million) decrease in funding for the free library system; and a 19% (\$10 Million) decrease in funding for community college subsidies, a 19% (\$13 Million) decrease in parks and recreations funding. Other entities who may see financial hacking include our public health system which is getting an over \$8 million cut in its budget and an entire elimination of the \$4 million budget for arts and culture in our city.

It is THESE very entities that do what the Philadelphia Police Department THINKS of itself as doing: taking care of us (Black families). Free libraries take care of us. Arts, culture and recreation take care of us. Community Education takes care of us. Public Health systems, Behavioral Health systems, Public Housing systems, and Children and Family services take care of us. This is why we as teachers and school

leaders in Philadelphia have long called for the demilitarization of our schools: the removal of police presence and the increase of school counselors and other rehabilitative measures have resulted in greater care of our Black students. Our city landscape should follow suit: financially commit to less community policing and more community investment. Our next hope is that Philadelphia follows the lead of city leaders in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Charlottesville, Virginia, and Denver, Colorado and makes steps for schools to cut ALL ties with the Police Department. No more Police in our schools, arresting our Black children, streamlining them down the pipeline to prison.

We understand that a city that invests \$746 Million for its police force and a mere \$268 Million towards its public school system is failing our Black families. We understand that a city that invests \$746 Million for its police force and a mere \$61 Million towards its homeless services is failing our Black families. We understand that a city that invests \$746 Million and \$49 Million for its public library system is failing our Black families. We understand that a city that invests \$746 Million for its police force and a mere \$442 THOUSAND for Children and Family Services is failing our Black families. We understand a city that invests \$746 Million for its police force and \$90 THOUSAND towards Community Empowerment and Opportunity is failing our Black families. We are educators standing in support of Black families! SUPPORT BLACK FAMILIES!

We implore the leaders of this city to reconsider and acclimate funding within the budget in a Black-centered way. ALL increase in funding for the Philadelphia Police Department should be erased: the entity that is this department has not done its job in protecting and serving our city and our communities. There is no trust that exists between Black families and the police department nor the leadership of this city. To us, sitting idle and allowing for the increase of funding for this department means that we are excusing more injustice. If you all as city leaders care at all about the attempt to dispel the anger that currently exists in Philadelphia, you will not pontificate and further build a smoldering mistrust by a) funding a group that continues to display itself as a direct antithesis to the Black community b) defunding entities that us as educators need to effectively teach our Black children and that our Black families need sustain Black life.

We understand our responsibility as liaisons between city leaders and the Black families in which we serve. It is a mission that we do not take lightly nor for granted. And we will not allow for the work that we do be demeaned by willingly standing idle and watching this city continue to take from the most needed areas for our Black families and give to most frivolous and downright dangerous establishments that exist to work against them. The police have shown consistent disrespect for Black individuals and families. As an organization they have brutalized Black

peoples in our neighborhoods and at protests for our lives and dignity. We will not allow yet another supercharge towards their budget as doing so seems to facilitate and make room for more injustice. We demand that the Philadelphia Police Department is defunded. Some of us plan to attend and to testify at the public hearing on June 9th on the urgency of this demand, and the need for sensible funding of our Black communities. We say no more to the policing of our communities. We say no to an increased presence of officers in our city, our neighborhoods, our schools, and our lives. There is no protection or service that comes from that.

Mayor Kenney, City Council President Clarke, and the members of Philadelphia City Council: this is a call to action from us to you all as our city leaders to try and accomplish a real, meaningful, and lasting change for this city and us as educators, Black students, and Black families—to do something that which does not invoke anger nor hurt us change.

#DefundThePolice #PoliceFreeSchools #FundOurSchools #BlackLivesMatter

Signed,

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