

April 22, 2021

Board of Trustees
Houston Independent School District
4400 West 18th Street
Houston, Texas 77092-8501

Dear HISD Trustee:

In May of 2020, HISD alum George Floyd, was tragically murdered at the hands of the Minneapolis police. As recently as April 2021, a black, 17-year-old student was killed in school by an officer in Knoxville, Tennessee.¹ These tragedies serve as constant reminders of the racism that black men, women and children face on a daily basis. However, these same tragedies can also serve as catalysts for change. HISD has the opportunity to take action and implement changes that can prevent these tragedies from permeating its schools and harming the students they serve. The undersigned organization is writing to urge the board to vote to adopt previously recommended changes to policing practices in the district before the next school year.

Over the past year, members of the HISD Board of Trustees and Superintendent Dr. Lathan have received recommendations to improve the district's policing practices. These recommended changes include, but are not limited to:

1. The elimination of the use of zip ties on students by police
2. The elimination of the use of pepper spray on students by police
3. The elimination of the use of restraints on students by police

Other recommendations include:

4. Prohibiting police from questioning students without a parent or guardian present
5. Increasing transparency of data regarding its school policing practices
6. Additional officer training around bias work

Among other recommended changes, these recommendations were submitted numerous times over the past year in writing, through virtual presentation at the board workshop on policing, and in meetings between trustees and justice-focused organizations. The Board of Trustees, The HISD Superintendent Dr. Lathan, and the HISD Police Chief have all been made aware of the harms of current policing practices and have subsequently been provided the information, tools and recommendations to mitigate current harm and prevent future harm. Despite support from board trustees, community members and the availability of resources in the district, **none of these recommendations have been adopted or implemented yet.**

These recommended changes are equally important for students with disabilities. Across the state, students with disabilities are disproportionately referred to the criminal justice system.

¹ <https://sports.yahoo.com/officials-said-black-student-killed-033519898.html>

These students had twice as many arrests in comparison to their representation in the student body. Specifically, a study published in 2016 found that 24% of school arrests were of students with disabilities while they only composed 9% of the student body enrollment.² This is an alarming trend and allowing police to continue to operate without any reform such as that outlined in the recommendations further escalates the issue.

Other districts have successfully begun implementing changes to their disciplinary and policing policies and practices. Dallas ISD was one of the first districts in the state to ban discretionary of out-school-suspensions in grades two or younger. DISD is also currently reconsidering its disciplinary practices and addressing racial equity across the district.³ In California, the Los Angeles Unified School District has eliminated its school police department completely and diverted funding for Black student achievement.⁴ HISD now has the opportunity to be the leader in school policing change in its schools and in the state. Adopting some or all of these recommendations will undoubtedly advance equity, and set a precedent.

In 21 days, on May 13, 2021, Superintendent Lathan can express the importance of these changes by placing them on the meeting agenda for a vote. We are not asking for the district to overhaul its police department, and this is not a matter of eliminating the presence of police officers in schools. These are minor, plausible changes that will have a major impact on the students in the district. We call on Dr. Lathan and the Board of Trustees to prioritize the safety and education of Houston-area students by placing district policing policy changes on the May 13th board meeting agenda, and voting to adopt these recommendations.

Sincerely,

Karmel Willis
Disability Rights Texas

² Deborah Fowler, et. al., *Dangerous Discipline: How Texas Schools are Relying on Law Enforcement Courts, and Juvenile Probation to Discipline Students*, (Dec. 2016).

³ <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/2021/03/23/will-dallas-isd-be-a-national-game-changer-by-banning-school-suspensions/>

⁴ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-02-16/lausd-diverting-school-police-funds-support-black-students>