

Chelsie Acosta: Making Black lives matter in education



By Chelsie Acosta | Special to The Tribune

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Black, Indigenous, Youth of Color (BIYOC) are policed and surveilled every day in classrooms across the U.S. by those entrusted with their care and education, teachers.

Utah statistics show BIYOC are suspended and referred to the juvenile justice system at a disproportionately higher rate than whites.

A 2017 report issued by Voices for Utah Children and the University of Utah's S.J. Quinney College of Law found that Black students are 4.1 times more likely to be suspended, followed by Indigenous students at 3.9, Pacific Islander and Latinx at 2.3 times the rate in Utah. In the same report, we see that Indigenous youths are 7.7 times more likely to be referred to law enforcement.

As activists have taken to the streets to protest racism and police brutality, missing are the protests in the hallways of every school and public education space. The dehumanization of BIYOC starts in the early years with teachers forcing the false narratives of meritocracy and grit.

BIYOC are shamed into believing their own cultural capital and corporal knowledge are not enough to survive the education industrial complex. The eerie similarities of the prison industrial complex to the education system can be seen through zero tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline practices. BIYOC are pushed out of school through exclusionary practices such as in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension and expulsion. BIYOC's dignities and futures are destroyed by white supremacy and neoliberalism feeding the prison industrial complex, similar to convict leasing in the past.

The use of law and order rhetoric embedded into the school discipline is frightening and pervasive.

BIYOC are profiled from the moment they are registered for school, similar to the application for employment by felons, "three strikes and you're out."

Intersectionality adds an almost concrete level of being placed into the school to prison pipeline. BIYOC, LGBTQ+, English language learners and being undocumented all increase the risk of being segregated, cuffed and thrown into the juvenile justice system.

Teachers must sit with the discomfort of our education system being as racist and dangerous as the criminal justice system. Although physically not as lethal, we are emotionally and mentally just as violent.

The practices we use in our classrooms and within the school walls determine whether a BIYOC will thrive or just survive. Teachers must reflect on their own implicit and explicit bias, and positioning within the school-to-prison pipeline. Teachers using punitive versus restorative practices are being called on to change their ideology and praxis. Teachers must become abolitionists within and out of the classroom. It is only then that teachers can truly preach, Black lives matter

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