

Girls Inc. Network-Wide Policy & Advocacy Platform

At Girls Inc. we are committed to a girl-centered advocacy approach that is grounded in the experiences of the girls¹ in our network. We lift up girls' voices and give them opportunities to advocate on issues that matter to them, in their communities and beyond, and encourage them to be civically engaged. As part of our dedication to social justice, we also bring intersectional, racial justice, and trauma-informed lenses to our work, and advocate for policies and practices that combat systemic racism, sexism, and other social and economic barriers to girls' success. Sixty-two percent of the girls we serve come from households earning \$30,000/year or less, and 78% identify as girls of color.

Our direct service and advocacy work are linked, and each fuels the other. Across the United States and Canada, we partner with schools to provide the mentoring relationships, safe spaces, and evidence-based programming that are proven to help girls succeed. They become leaders, find their voices, and learn to advocate for themselves and others. Our advocacy focuses on policies and practices that support girls' health and wellness and foster school climates that are conducive to learning for all students, particularly those from underserved communities and those who face discrimination and other obstacles because of their race, color, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or religion.

Girls Inc. envisions a world where girls and all youth have what they need to grow and flourish, in school and beyond. Our vision includes schools as a source of strength for students, supporting girls' health and wellbeing and providing a safe and inclusive environment where girls and all youth can learn and thrive.

The Girls Inc. Girls' Bill of Rights states:

- *Girls have the right to be themselves and to resist gender stereotypes*
- *Girls have the right to express themselves with originality and enthusiasm*
- *Girls have the right to take risks, to strive freely, and to take pride in success*
- *Girls have the right to accept and appreciate their bodies*
- *Girls have the right to have confidence in themselves and to be safe in the world*
- *Girls have the right to prepare for interesting work and economic independence*

These rights should be guaranteed to *all* young people, regardless of where they are from or what they look like.

¹ Girls Inc. welcomes cisgender girls, transgender girls, non-binary individuals who experience gender-based oppression, and those who are exploring their gender identity or expression during their time at Girls Inc. The Girls Inc. national position is that our member organizations may not discriminate or exclude girls from our programming based on their gender identity or gender expression.

To that end, the Girls Inc. Network, with input from our girls, adopts the following advocacy priorities and recommendations:

1. **Sexual Health, Safety, and Autonomy** - At Girls Inc., we work to ensure girls have the skills, knowledge, and support to take ownership of their sexual health and make decisions to help them lead fulfilling, safe, and healthy lives. Their bodily autonomy is critical to their dignity as human beings and their right to be safe in the world.

Research shows that age-appropriate comprehensive sex education in grades K-12 delays sexual initiation, encourages safer choices, fosters social and emotional learning, helps prevent homophobia, supports healthy relationships, and reduces intimate partner violence.² Yet only 18 U.S. states require sex education to be medically accurate, and abstinence-only programs are misleading, ineffective, and harmful.³ As a result, students encounter a patchwork system, where the quantity and quality of sex education they receive vary widely by state, school district, and in some cases classroom and classroom.

Next, it's long past time for society to recognize that menstrual hygiene is vital to the health and wellbeing of a huge segment of our population. In the U.S., one in four teens have missed school due to a lack of access to safe and affordable menstrual products,⁴ and Medicaid does not cover the cost of these basic health necessities because they are considered a "luxury."⁵

Finally, in the U.S. about seven in ten girls experience sexual harassment at some point in high school,⁶ and one in four girls will experience sexual violence before she turns 18.⁷ Girls of color experience higher rates of sexual violence than girls overall.⁸ More than

² Kantor, Leslie et al., Sex Education: Broadening the Definition of Relevant Outcomes. Journal of Adolescent Health, December 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.guttmacher.org/article/2020/12/sex-education-broadening-definition-relevant-outcomes>

³ Guttmacher Institute, Sex and HIV Education: State Laws and Policies (June 1, 2021). Retrieved from <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/sex-and-hiv-education>

⁴ THINX, PERIOD, and The Harris Poll. State of the Period: The widespread impact of period poverty on U.S. Students (2019). Retrieved from https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0795/1599/files/State-of-the-Period-white-paper_Thinx_PERIOD.pdf?455788

⁵ Goldberg, Emma. "Many Lack Access to Pads and Tampons. What Are Lawmakers Doing About It?" The New York Times, January 13, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/13/us/tampons-pads-period.html>

⁶ Espelage, D., Low, S., Anderson, C., & De La Ru, L. (2014). Bullying, sexual, and dating violence: trajectories from early to late adolescence. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/246830.pdf>

⁷ Finkelhor et al. (2014). The Lifetime Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse and Sexual Assault Assessed in Late Adolescence. Journal of Adolescent Health. Retrieved from <http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/9248.pdf>

⁸ National Women's Law Center. (2017). Let her learn: stopping school pushout for girls who have suffered harassment or sexual violence. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://nwlc.org/resources/stopping-school-pushout-for-girls-who-have-suffered-harassment-and-sexual-violence/>

eight in ten LGBTQ+⁹ students experienced harassment or assault at school.¹⁰ In Canada, girls are more than four times as likely to experience sexual violence than their male peers,¹¹ nearly two-thirds of LGBTQI2S+¹² students reported feeling unsafe at school, and over half of LGBTQI2S+ youth experienced verbal harassment due to their gender expression.¹³ Sexual harassment and violence affect students' physical and mental health as well as their ability to do well in school.¹⁴ Schools should be places where all students can grow and learn with the help of supportive adults, yet many students who come forward to report incidents of harassment and violence are ignored, disbelieved, and even punished.

a. Promote access to comprehensive sex education & sexual health services

- i. Advocate for schools to provide youth with age-appropriate, medically accurate and complete, non-shaming, and LGBTQ+ inclusive sexuality education that gives them comprehensive information about how to prevent unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections and includes education on consent and healthy relationships.
- ii. Support improved access for young people to quality and culturally-responsive sexual health care services.

b. Advance menstrual equity

- i. Advocate for resources to be provided to schools to make menstrual products accessible in bathrooms.
- ii. Urge Medicaid to cover the cost of menstrual products.
- iii. Push for elimination of the "tampon tax" on menstrual products.

c. Combat sexual harassment & violence

- i. Protect and help schools comply with legal and policy prohibitions against sex discrimination and harassment (including explicit protections for LGBTQ+ youth) to effectively address harassment and violence and

⁹ We use the term LGBTQ+ in this document, which stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, "plus" other marginalized sexual or gender identities not captured in the LGBTQ combination of letters. We acknowledge that the LGBTQ acronym is not exhaustive of all of the identities in the queer community, such as intersex, pansexual, two-spirited, and asexual, and that the English language is continually evolving to include words for the ways that people identify. We utilize the "plus" symbol to indicate our acknowledgement and inclusion of all other identities.

¹⁰ GLSEN: The 2019 National School Climate Survey. Retrieved from https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NSCS19-FullReport-032421-Web_0.pdf

¹¹ Rotenberg, Cristine. 2017. Police-reported sexual assaults in Canada, 2009-2014: A statistical profile. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2017001/article/54866-eng.htm>.

¹² [The term LGBTQI2S+ used in this Canadian statistic stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer \(or Questioning\), Intersex, and Two-Spirit "plus" other marginalized identities.](#)

¹³ Taylor, Catherine & Peter, Tracey. (2011). Every class in every school: The first national climate survey on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian schools. Final report. Toronto, ON: Egale Canada Human Rights Trust. Retrieved from <https://egale.ca/every-class/>.

¹⁴ National Women's Law Center. (2017). Let her learn: stopping school pushout for girls who have suffered harassment or sexual violence. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://nwlc.org/resources/stopping-school-pushout-for-girls-who-have-suffered-harassment-and-sexual-violence/>

ensure student survivors get the support they need to continue their education.

- ii. Prevent sexual harassment and violence (including teen dating violence and child sex trafficking) by expanding access to age-appropriate comprehensive sex education and training for school staff to identify signs of trauma and victimization.

2. **Mental Health and Wellness** - Only about 15% of children from low-income households in the U.S. receive the mental health services they need, and even fewer complete treatment.¹⁵ Girls are about three times as likely as boys to experience mental illness.¹⁶ More than 1 out of 5 high school girls in the U.S. seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year,¹⁷ And high school students who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual were over three times more likely than straight-identified students to contemplate suicide.¹⁸ Youth of color are more likely to experience adversity in childhood, and face disparities in access to diagnosis and treatment.¹⁹ Almost one quarter of Canadian girls ages 15-17 report high levels of daily stress,²⁰ and from 2000 to 2011, suicide was the third leading cause of death for girls in Canada ages 10 to 14 and the second leading cause of death for girls ages 15 to 19.²¹ Indigenous girls in Canada experience alarmingly high levels of depression, suicide, and addiction.²²

Girls Inc. affiliates report that natural disasters, COVID-19, economic instability, racial injustice, social unrest, immigration raids, and increases in hate crimes and discrimination have contributed to trauma and mental health concerns for girls. Mental health is as important as physical health and there should be no shame associated with having a problem and needing help, yet girls report that there is still a stigma associated with seeking support.

¹⁵ Hodgkinson, S., Godoy, L., Beers, L.S., & Lewin, A. (2017). Improving Mental Health Access for Low-Income Children and Families in the Primary Care Setting. *Pediatrics*, 139(1). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2015-1175>

¹⁶ Breslau, J., Gilman, S.E., Stein, B.D., Ruder, T., Gmelin, T., & Miller, E. (2017). Sex differences in recent first-onset depression in an epidemiological sample of adolescents. *Translational Psychiatry*, 7(5), e1139–e1139. <https://doi.org/10.1038/tp.2017.105>

¹⁷ Kann, Laura, et al. (2018). Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance, United States - 2017. *Surveillance Summaries*. MMWR, 67(8), Table 44. Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/ss/ss6708a1.htm?s_cid=ss6708a1_w

¹⁸ 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved from <https://nccd.cdc.gov/youthonline>.

¹⁹ Leary, Kimberlyn, Ph.D., *Mental Health and Communities of Color*, Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, Initiative on Gender Justice & Opportunity (2020). Retrieved from <https://genderjusticeandopportunity.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Mental-Health-and-Communities-of-Color.pdf>

²⁰ Bushnik, Tracey. (2016). The health of girls and women in Canada. Chart 14. In *Women in Canada: A gender-based statistical report*. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/14324-eng.htm>

²¹ Hudon, Tamara. (2017). The girl child. In *Women in Canada: A Gender Based Statistical Report*. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/14680-eng.htm>

²² Canadian Women's Foundation. Retrieved from <https://canadianwomen.org/the-facts/barriers-for-girls/>

- a. **Increase access to mental health and wellness support for children in underserved communities.**
 - i. Push for funding for more school-based mental health professionals and services, including screening, treatment, and outreach programs.
 - ii. Promote greater access for school staff and students to suicide awareness and prevention programs as well as eating disorder awareness and prevention programs.
 - iii. Advocate for improved identification of children and families who have experienced trauma, including in schools, in the juvenile justice system, and in communities.
 - iv. Strengthen laws, policies, and funding for programs that promote trauma-informed practices, training, and healing-centered engagement.
 - v. Promote continued access to telehealth services.
 - b. **Combat the persistent stigma surrounding mental health issues and treatment.**
3. **Equitable Access to Education** - Every girl should have equal opportunity to succeed, and the discrimination that girls face due to the intersection of their race and gender can negatively impact their academic achievement, self-esteem, and overall wellbeing. Unfair school discipline policies and practices disproportionately harm girls of color, girls with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ youth and push them out of school. For example, in the U.S., Black girls are 5.5 times more likely than their White peers to be suspended from school, often for minor, subjective offenses based on race and sex stereotypes.²³ LGBTQ+ students in K-12 settings also have a higher rate of exclusionary and punitive discipline than their non-LGBTQ+ peers.²⁴ These challenges girls face during childhood and adolescence can have ripple effects later in life, impeding their educational and career success. Additionally, girls of color are more likely to attend under-resourced schools with less experienced teachers, less sophisticated equipment, textbook shortages, and a dearth of higher-level math and science classes. The “digital divide”—the gulf between those who have ready access to computers and the internet, and those who do not—exacerbates inequities in access to education, especially when schools have to rely on remote learning to educate students during a pandemic or other school interruption.

Kids deserve better, and Girls Inc. can partner with schools to illuminate realities and seek solutions that create safe, effective, and stress-free learning environments. Girls of

²³ National Women’s Law Center. (2017c). Let her learn: stopping school pushout for girls of color. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <https://nwlc.org/resources/stopping-school-pushout-for-girls-of-color/>

²⁴ GLSEN: Civil Rights Principles for Safe, Healthy, & Inclusive School Climates, at 8 (2021) (citing Greytak, E.A., Kosciw, J.G., Villenas, C. & Giga, N.M. (2016)). *From Teasing to Torment: School Climate Revisited, A Survey of U.S. Secondary School Students and Teachers*. New York: GLSEN). Retrieved from <https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/GLSEN-Civil-Rights-School-Climate-Principles-03-2021.pdf>.

color report high levels of motivation to graduate high school and continue their education, and want help from trusting adults to reach these goals. Graduating from college significantly reduces the risk of unemployment and increases earning power,²⁵ yet is out of reach for so many due to financial barriers and discrimination.

a. Push for reforms to school discipline policies and practices.

- i. Encourage schools to adopt positive approaches to discipline that address the underlying causes of student behavior instead of punishing the behavior.
- ii. Advocate for changes to punitive dress codes that criminalize girls' bodies and hairstyles or textures commonly associated with a particular culture, race or national origin.
- iii. Shift focus from school-based law enforcement to increasing the presence of mental health providers, training staff on trauma-informed practices, and implementing evidence-based programs like Restorative Justice practices or Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports, as well as creating more social and emotional learning opportunities.
- iv. Clarify, where police must be on campus, that law enforcement is there to protect the building from outside threats, not to treat students as threats; that non-violent disciplinary offenses should be handled by school administrators, not police; and that officers will get annual training on implicit bias, trauma, child development, and other relevant topics.
- v. Ban the use of corporal punishment in schools and stop the overuse of seclusion and restraint, which disproportionately harms students with disabilities.

b. Increase access to postsecondary education.

- i. Advance access to postsecondary education opportunities for young women regardless of their identities and status, such as race, sex (including sexual orientation, gender identity, and pregnant or parenting status), disability, immigration status and/or socioeconomic status.
- ii. Push for the elimination of financial and systemic barriers to an affordable, quality postsecondary education that includes essential student supports, so postsecondary opportunities will be as universal, accessible, and affordable as high school and all students will have what they need to complete their education.

c. Improve access for girls and other underrepresented groups to meaningful opportunities to pursue career paths that lead to economic independence, including science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) learning and other

²⁵ [National Center for Education Statistics. 2017](#) and [Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2017a](#).

workforce development opportunities and internships, as well as leadership development.

- d. **Increase funding to bridge the digital divide, for social and emotional learning (SEL), and for out-of-school-time programs and mentoring opportunities** that provide youth in underserved communities with academic enrichment, social and emotional learning, knowledge about healthy living, opportunities for physical activity, and interpersonal skills.
4. **Civic Engagement and Voting Rights** - A democracy is stronger when more voices are heard and everyone is engaged. Girls Inc. prepares girls to be civically engaged members of society and we encourage all eligible voters to participate in our democracy. Every issue we work on depends on electing leaders who care about and are ready to tackle the wide-ranging problems affecting girls and their communities.
- a. **Promote high quality, sustained civic education** in schools, for grades K-12.
 - b. **Support free and fair elections** in which all voters are able to fully participate in the democratic process.
 - c. **Promote policies that make it easier** for people to register to vote and cast their ballots.
 - d. **Protect the rights of communities** that have historically been excluded from freely voting and resist voter suppression.

With so much at stake, we must work together as a network, with girls, to move society forward. Girls' fundamental rights—to be safe and healthy, to have equal opportunities to grow and learn, to express themselves freely—continue to be challenged in ways that threaten the most vulnerable and harm all of us in the long run. To be sure, this work is not easy. But the hopes and dreams of our girls are too important and powerful to be denied.

At Girls Inc., both our programming and advocacy focus on helping girls become healthy, educated, and independent, and inspiring all girls to be strong, smart, and bold. Centering the voices of the girls we serve, including our national [Teen Advocacy Council](#), we give girls the platform and tools to push for social change. Join us at girlsinc.org.

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