We Failed Nigel (and Jamel, and Carl, and McKenzie): Black Kids Deserve To Grow Up Too!

Testimony Submitted to the Congressional Black Caucus Emergency Taskforce on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health by David J. Johns, Executive Director of the National Black Justice Coalition & Doctoral Student, Teachers College, Columbia University

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I want to begin by thanking you, Congresswoman Watson Coleman, for your leadership and vision in establishing the Congressional Black Caucus Taskforce on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health.

I am humbled and honored to be on this panel and to lead the work of the National Black Justice Coalition (NBJC). NBJC is the nation's only civil rights organization uniquely and unapologetically focused on the intersections of racial justice and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and same gender loving (LGBTQ/SGL) equality.

I am the architect of the #TeachTheBabies movement, a campaign to enroll all caring and concerned adults in supporting the learning and development of children and youth from "minority" communities in the ways that are typically reserved for white children. Anyone who knows me, knows that I care deeply about our babies. Beyond caring about our babies, I also take the time to listen to them.

Among the greatest rewards of my life is traveling the country, and sometimes the world, to engage in conversations with students. Often students speak about how they feel ignored and dismissed by current school policies and the professionals responsible for their implementation. I spent nearly a decade as a senior policy

advisor on Capitol Hill exploring ways to improve policies to better meet the needs of students most neglected and ignored. Before assuming leadership of NBJC, I served as the Executive Director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans under the leadership of Barack H. Obama. In these roles, it was my primary objective to center and celebrate the voices, experiences, and recommendations of students and to support adults in listening to and then responding to their recommendations.

As a doctoral student at Columbia University, I am pursuing a research project to better understand how schools shape the experiences of students from both racial and sexual minority communities. In both my conversations with students and through my academic research it has become clear that while many of us can recall a childhood filled with joy, for students who are LGBTQ/SGL—really for any student considered "different," childhood, and school more specifically, can be terrifying.

According to the Human Rights Campaign nearly 80% of LGBTQ/SGL teens report feeling depressed. Data suggests that LGBTQ/SGL youth experience violence and bullying nearly twice as much as children who are or are presumed to be heterosexual. 74% of LGBTQ/SGL students report feeling unsafe, bullied, and harassed in schools throughout the country according to GLSEN. LGBTQ/SGL students are five times more likely to attempt suicide compared to their heterosexual peers.

Imagine being a racial and sexual "minority" student in public schools today. There is active legislation attempting to determine which bathrooms transgender students can use. States are restricting the rights of LGBTQ/SGL adults to adopt children, which impacts LGBTQ/SGL youths' expectations of their future. All of this and we barely discuss the impact that hate crimes and regressive policies have on their mental health or success in school. Too many anti-LGBTQ/SGL policies and attitudes communicate the following message: "WE DO NOT WANT YOU. YOU DO NOT BELONG." These messages have deep meaning for young people especially and can negatively impact their mental health. **Students who do not feel safe and affirmed cannot be expected to demonstrate what they know and learn.** This is not news. We know that when students are not supported, they disengage and dropout, which can impact life opportunities like the ability to earn a family sustaining wage.

We also know what being supportive of our babies looks like. Less than three weeks ago, the unconditional support that Gabrielle Union and Dwyane Wade publicly displayed for their son Zion garnered national news attention. Parents' unyielding and unconditional love for a young person perceived as being "different" in a society that privileges white heterosexual identity and expression was noteworthy because it was a Black family remaining resolute in loving a Black child who also may be LGBTQ/SGL (the politics of policing the sexual identity and gender orientation of children and youth deserves to be addressed elsewhere). There are lessons here that can be applied to benefit students in public schools across the country. Teachers, staff, and administrators can partner with parents and families, including those not defined by blood or law, to ensure all students feel supported and included in our classrooms and within the school community. Schools and communities can also work better together to celebrate diverse histories and experiences, so all our students feel seen and have the space to explore and express the fullness of who they are.

Conversely, we also know what happens when our babies do not feel safe and are not feel supported. On April 18, 2019 I learned about one of my brothers, Nigel Shelby. Nigel is a fifteen-year-old Black boy from Huntsville, Alabama who died by suicide after being bullied and harassed at school for being gay.

Shortly after learning about Nigel, I was contacted by a student who said they recently contemplated suicide after being jumped in a bathroom by students who called them a "faggot who deserved to die." I cried. I'm talking a heart heavy, cheeks burning, struggling to catch your breath cry. I cried because I thought about Nigel, and Jamel Myles and Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover. Jamel Myles died by suicide following reports of anti-gay bullying after coming out at school. His mother has been quoted as saying: "My child died because of bullying." Jamel was nine-years-old. Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover is a sixth-grader, from Massachusetts, who liked to read and play football. Carl was bullied for being gay and died by suicide.

I also cried while thinking about McKenzie Adams a nine-year-old beautiful and brilliant Black girl, also from Alabama, who died by suicide after racist bullying and taunts of "kill yourself." McKenzie excelled in math and, like most kids, enjoyed riding her bike and playing video games with her friends. She should have been free to develop her skills as an engineer rather than dealing with racially motivated abuse in school. McKenzie reminds us that it is not just our boys who are struggling

with the consequences of adults failing to provide safe, affirming, and holistic support in schools.

All of the data tells us that hate crimes are on the rise and that bullying is rampant in our schools but too often we push past these statistics and ignore the stories behind them. Stories of children who deserve the love, support, and protection needed to figure out who you are and how you want to show up in the world.

Black children deserve to grow up too, all of them! The fact that I have to say that makes my stomach turn and my head throb. But the sad reality is that we have so much more work to do to ensure that people acknowledge that Black children deserve to thrive. Beyond acknowledging this fact, we also must do the work required to end bullying, harassment, and abuse in schools.

In response to the unique challenges Black LGBTQ/SGL students face we often tell them to hold on. We tell them that "it will get better." However, unless we actively work to increase support for and to remove the stigma surrounding mental health, things will not change. Unless we pass legislation and provide trainings and supports to increase cultural competence for adults working with children, youth, and young adults, it will not get better.

In honor of Nigel, Jamel, Carl, McKenzie and so many other children whose stories we may never know we need to act urgently to pass federal legislation, like the Equality Act, to ensure there are clear and consistent civil and legal protections provided to people based on sexual identity and gender orientation. States, like Alabama, that lack anti-bullying legislation should move to pass meaningful policy and support lasting implementation swiftly.

We need more mental health professionals and school counselors who understand child development, are equipped to provide culturally competent care, and are able to properly address issues of bias and bullying. In far too many schools across

the country security officers outnumber school counselors.[12] Schools and school districts must make investments that have been proven to be effective for the students they serve. Schools and school districts should provide cultural competency training that acknowledges intersectionality, to anyone with the ability to nourish Black childhood, create safe space, and catch our babies when they need a soft place to land. Teachers and school leaders must be aware of and possess the language and skills needed to support the mental health of ***all*** students. The National Black Justice Coalition is proud of our work to equip caring and concerned adults, including teachers and school leaders, with the support needed to better meet the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of all students—especially Black LGBTQ/SGL students. We offer ourselves as a resource to schools, districts, and communities who want to engage in this critically important work.

This is our work. Every young person deserves to know that they are perfect and that the only mistakes made, are by adults who know better and fail to take action to improve schools, communities, and our country.

On behalf of our babies, I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the record and participate in both this conversation and the work that will follow.

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[1] "The American School Counselor Association recommends a student-to-student counselor ratio of 250:1. According to the most recent data, only three states meet that recommendation. The national average is 491:1, while in California and Arizona, it's 822:1 and 941:1, respectively. In far too many schools, security officers outnumber school counselors." - The Atlantic: https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/09/the-neglected-link-in-the-high-school-to-college-pipeline/500213/

[2] According to a report released by the UNCF, "African American students are 1.2 times as likely as white students to attend a school where there is a sworn law enforcement officer, but no school counselor." With regard to cultural competency and mental health, schools should implement cultural competency training in order to discuss and address issues including implicit bias and the disparate impact of school policies on students from minority communities. https://www.uncf.org/wp-content/uploads/reports/Advocacy_ASATTBro_4-18F_Digital.pdf