



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.

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.
 - 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 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.

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.

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 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 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.