



May 31, 2023

United Nations Permanent Forum on People of African Descent

Re: National Center for Youth Law's Written Statement on Systemic Racism and Educational Equity

Submitted via pfpad@un.org

Dear Chairwoman,

The continued dehumanization of people of African descent is especially egregious in the many forms in which it harms children and is perpetuated in education systems. The National Center for Youth Law uses litigation and policy advocacy to dismantle and disrupt systems that harm youth from historically marginalized backgrounds. Many of these systems have a disproportionate, negative impact on Black youth and were founded in anti-Black racism.

Although this testimony focuses on harm to children in the United States, the global erasure of Black people from the historical narrative consistently undermines calls for justice and reparations. It further makes possible the dehumanization that upholds the ongoing enslavement and murder of Black people globally. We call on this Forum to investigate and address efforts to erase the history of people of African descent from education systems in the United States and across the world.

In the United States, there is a growing political movement to erase the full and accurate history of people of African descent. This movement is especially dangerous as it deploys tactics such as banning books and silencing discussions of historical facts regarding race and racism in classrooms – censure measures associated with genocidal regimes.

The attack on how history is taught in schools is intentionally designed to prevent an entire generation of children from recognizing how the past continues to shape present inequities. Without this context, the over-policing of Black children in schools and the extreme disparities seen in school discipline and academic performance between Black children and their peers appear to indicate an inherent flaw in the abilities and character of people of African descent, rather than the clear result of sustained systemic oppression.

The present reality of Black people in the United States stems from 400 years of enslavement followed by systematic legal and extra-legal oppression. Policy measures that prevent the teaching of this history and its bearing on the present, set the stage for increased racial division and sustained social, mental, and physical harm for people of African descent.

The campaign for education censorship policies is in part backlash to the social progress that occurred after the 2020 murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and in part the continued legacy of racism. As a result of the devaluing of Black life demonstrated by these murders, schools across the United States implemented new programs to teach children how to be anti-racist and about the importance of diversity. Currently, over 17.7 million children across the United States live in areas potentially impacted by policies that seek to reverse these measures.

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These censorship policies not only threaten to undermine racial progress but also threaten the U.S. legal and Civil Rights Protections created in the last 60 years. Further, these policies, and the rhetoric that surrounds them, contravene Human Rights protections.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that every child should have access to an education and that education should promote understanding and tolerance among all racial groups.¹ This can never be achieved where schools, en masse, are used to propagate misinformation and socially and politically “other” people of African descent.

The National Center for Youth Law calls on the forum to take up the following:

1. To use your position as an advisory body and council to advocate for the extension of the International Decade for People of African Descent
2. Recommend that all nations commit to making schools safe spaces that protect the telling of the full and accurate history of people of African descent in their nation and globally.
3. Recommend that nations prioritize developing schools as spaces of inclusion that affirm the inherent value of all students, including students of African descent.
4. Draft a UN Declaration on the Rights of People of African Descent that calls on nations to eliminate the banning of books, history, and scholarship of and about people of African descent in all systems of education.

The National Center for Youth Law supports the Permanent Forum on People of African Descent’s efforts to address systemic racism and advance educational outcomes for children of African descent.

About the National Center for Youth Law

For more than 50 years, the National Center for Youth Law has worked to center the voices and experiences of youth blocked from educational, health, and social well-being opportunities, particularly Black youth and youth of color, LGBTQ youth, disabled youth, immigrant youth, and youth in child welfare and juvenile justice systems. The National Center for Youth Law convenes the Education Civil Rights Alliance, a diverse and experienced group of organizers, educator organizations, community groups, professional associations, and civil rights organizations that are committed to protecting the civil rights of marginalized students, especially Black and Brown students.

Sincerely,

The National Center for Youth Law

¹ United Nations. (1948). *Universal declaration of human rights*.
<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>