



for
ahkeem
a documentary film

DISCUSSION GUIDE

www.ForAhkeemFilm.com

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////// LETTER FROM THE DIRECTORS

The journey of creating *For Ahkeem* began with our desire to expose the injustice of the school-to-prison pipeline, which we know disproportionately affects children of color living in already marginalized communities. Over the last 40 years, zero-tolerance school discipline policies have led to children being funneled out of school and into the judicial system in record numbers, robbing countless students of the education they deserve, undermining their futures during their formative years, and leaving them with little to no recourse.

When we were connected to Judge Jimmie M. Edwards, who was attempting to buck the trend by sending the children in his St. Louis juvenile courtroom back to school—a school he created specifically for this purpose—we were intrigued. We thought his school would be a fascinating place to shine a light on the school-to-prison pipeline. Then we met 17-year-old Daje “Boonie” Shelton and the film came into focus. She was candid, courageous and charismatic from the start. She wore her heart on her sleeve and had a strong desire to tell her story, her way. We very quickly forged a pivotal collaboration with her that resulted in this film.

For us, *For Ahkeem* is ultimately about this extraordinary young woman who never gives up. Like her mother, she is one of the millions of Black women and girls who are doing their very best to keep their heads above water, to not falter even though the weight of the world is on their backs. In many ways, her story is a microcosm for the lives of countless young Black women across the country. Too often, our society continues to place the blame on the individual—dismissing Daje as a “bad kid” for example—instead of taking an honest look at how institutional and structural forces box in the lives of so many people of color. Daje exemplifies the strength, resilience, and awareness many Black teenagers must embody to transcend the myriad systemic obstructions blocking their paths to adulthood.

Through telling a deeply personal story about what it means to live your life when you’ve been labeled a “bad kid” since kindergarten, we hope *For Ahkeem* will be a catalyst for discussions about the ways underserved children are being pushed out of school and into the juvenile and criminal systems in communities across our nation. We believe that we can, and we must, do whatever we can to end this cycle.

Jeremy S. Levine & Landon Van Soest
Directors, *For Ahkeem*
May 2018



////// LETTER FROM DAJE SHELTON

I was at school one day when Judge Jimmie Edwards, our principal, came and got me out of class. He said someone wanted to talk to me and I was like, “Uh, what did I do now?” because I was always getting in trouble. But then we went downstairs, met the film crew and we ended up talking for three or four hours. I was just letting everything out; it was like a therapy session.

We talked about growing up, the first time I got in trouble when I was in kindergarten, and about all the most important and traumatizing events in my life. After that, stuff just began to evolve. I had a son, the Mike Brown incident happened, the father of my children went to jail at 17 years old—a lot of stuff happened that we didn’t expect, but all that made it even more important to pursue the documentary.

I always liked going to school, but I was a class clown so I was always getting put out of class or suspended for such stupid little things. It made me feel like I was never going to accomplish anything because when you miss school, you miss classwork, and if you miss classwork and your grades sink, then a whole bunch of stuff just falls out of place.

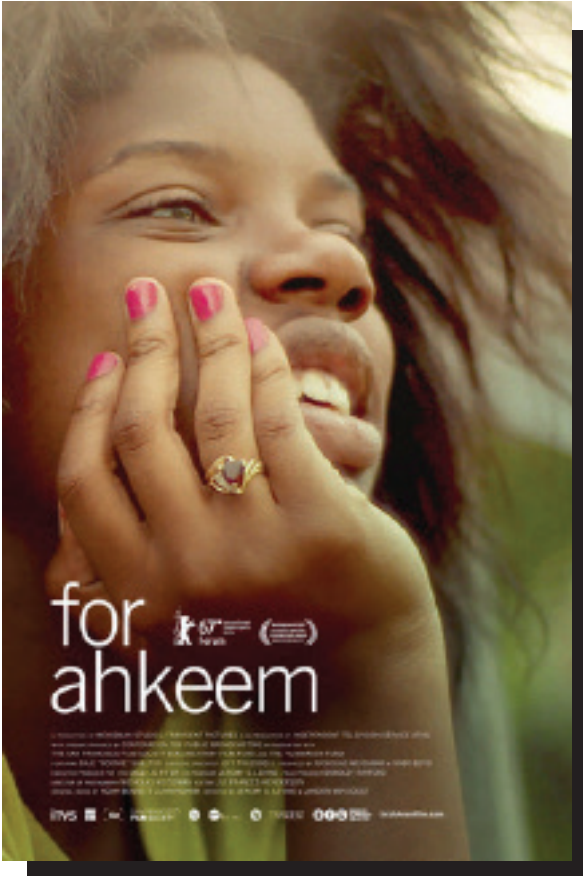
I was angry when I had to go to the Innovative Concept Academy, but I think that school made my life better. Since then, I’ve changed my life around completely. Now, I’m enrolled in college and just finished my first semester. I am working toward a major in ultrasound technology. I now have two children, Ahkeem and Ahlexas, and they’re both doing great.

When we show the film to people from all walks of life it feels good, because I never knew that my little story could have this effect. Now, I feel like I have the power to change a lot of people’s lives. When you feel like you’ve run out of options, you have nowhere else to go but up. I had people tell me that I wasn’t going to graduate from high school, but I graduated. It was tough, but I did it. Don’t let anybody tell you that you can’t do something if you want to do it. That’s what I tell my kids and I always want them to carry that strength and drive throughout their whole lives.

Daje Shelton
May 2018



////// THE FILM



Beginning one year before the fatal police shooting of a Black teenager in nearby Ferguson, Missouri, *For Ahkeem* is the coming-of-age story of Daje Shelton, a Black 17-year-old girl in North St. Louis.

After she is expelled from her public high school, a juvenile court judge sends Daje to the court-supervised Innovative Concept Academy, an alternative high school that offers her one last chance to earn a diploma. Over two years, we watch as Daje struggles to maintain focus in school, attends the funerals of friends killed around her, falls in love with a classmate named Antonio and navigates a loving but tumultuous relationship with her mother.

As Antonio is drawn into the **criminal justice system** and events in Ferguson just four miles from her home seize the national spotlight, Daje learns she is pregnant and must contend with the reality of raising a young Black boy in a world that seems to have been set up so that many Black youth like her will fail.

Through Daje's intimate story, *For Ahkeem* illuminates challenges that many Black teenagers face in America today, and bears witness to the strength, resilience, and determination it takes to survive.

Year: 2017 **Length:** 90 minutes
Contact: www.forahkeemfilm.com
team@forahkeemfilm.com

"People [have] been labeling me a bad kid all my life. You don't have to really do nothing, people just expect it. So you start to expect it of yourself."

- Daje Shelton

The Film Team

Directors

Jeremy S. Levine
Landon Van Soest

Executive Producer

Jeff Truesdell

Producers

Iyabo Boyd
Nicholas Weissman

Editor

Lily Henderson

Field Producer

Brad Rayford

Original Music

Noah Bennett
Cunningham

Director of Photography

Nicholas Weissman

Featuring

Daje Shelton
Tammy Moore
The Honorable Judge
Jimmie M. Edwards
Quinton Jackson

Antonio Shumpert
Dr. Michael Triplett
Jolene Dixon
Jean Anne Dodge
Ahkeem Shumpert
Alandon Pitts
Shunta Chatman
Dana Harris-gipson



CONVERSATION STARTERS

Before or after a screening of *For Ahkeem*, the following short scenes and film subject update exploring key themes from the film can be used to stimulate in-depth discussion among a youth group. Facilitators who can encourage and contextualize the conversation are useful here!

CHAPTER 1: DAJE IN COURT (0:00 - 4:15)



Key themes: juvenile justice system, school discipline, alternative schools

- Judge Edwards shares that he is “getting ready to make a decision” about Daje’s life. What things do you think the Judge should factor into his decision-making process?
- What do you know about alternative schools or programs like the one that Daje is sentenced to after being told she can no longer attend school within the Missouri public school system?
- What are some factors (people, services, programs or otherwise) that could’ve helped Daje avoid being expelled from her other school?
- What positive or negative outcomes do you think might stem from Daje being removed from her regular school?

CHAPTER 3: DAJE AND HER MOM (9:25 - 12:08)



Key themes: poverty, joblessness, incarceration, intergenerational trauma, school-to-prison pipeline

- What do you think that Daje’s mom is trying to convey to her in this scene?
- How do you think that the educational journey that Daje’s mom experienced might have influenced or compounded Daje’s own journey?
- Daje’s mom clearly supports and encourages her. What are some of the circumstances and systems that might limit the positive influence of her efforts?

CHAPTER 5: DEATH OF A FELLOW STUDENT (18:25 - 22:40)



Key themes: gun violence, trauma, grief, trauma-informed practices

- What are some of the side effects of living, parenting or teaching in a community plagued by gun violence and poverty?
- Do you have a classmate, friend or family member who has been killed or injured by gun violence? How do you think that this has impacted your day-to-day life and behavior?
- Antonio, Daje’s boyfriend, speaks about the fact that he believes he might die at a young age.

“Many staff members were unaware that some of the students that they teach and with whom they have established relationships were secretly dealing with trauma. The movie helped build empathy and compassion for students that suffer from traumatic experiences and confirmed for our staff that the most effective strategy when working with students impacted by trauma is to provide genuine love, unwavering support and encouragement.”

- Dr. Edward M. Johnson Jr., Principal, Brentwood High School

DAJE AND ANTONIO UPDATE (AS OF MAY 2018)

Daje is happily enrolled in college in St. Louis, MO in an ultrasound technician program. She chose her future career because of a friendship forged with her own ultrasound technician. Daje and Antonio now have two children together, Ahkeem and Ahlexas. They strive to provide a happy and comfortable home for their children even though their circumstances don't make that easy. Since the filming of *For Ahkeem*, a probation violation led to Antonio being incarcerated again. He was transferred to a prison too far for Daje to visit him during her second pregnancy. He served two years of a seven-year sentence and when he was released in early 2018, he was finally able to meet two-year-old Ahlexas for the first time.

- Is there anything that surprises you about how Daje and Antonio's lives are now?
- What do you think are some of the barriers that Daje must continue to overcome in order to succeed in her college program? How do you think this differs from or is similar to her high school experience?
- Antonio's experience is a prime example of how difficult it can be to escape the criminal justice system once you have initial contact with it through an arrest, conviction or period of incarceration. Do you know anyone who has also been in and out of the correctional system since their teens?

"When I finally watched the film, I wanted nothing more than to hug Daje and let her know that it is okay and she is okay. I say this from experience because I ended up okay – actually more than okay, working for President and Mrs. Obama at the White House for almost eight years. Looking at headlines, it is easy to see how the stigma attached to young Black girls still exists. I don't know why I was naive to think it didn't. For Ahkeem moved me to start focusing more on the narrative labeling about young Black girls who are too loud, too sassy or too grown, as some may say. I started to have open conversations with young girls – even taking some to see For Ahkeem – about how they are beautiful, assertive, bold and courageous. How they can use their voices for good, as I had. I encourage everyone to see For Ahkeem. It may have you questioning if Daje needs to change or the system needs to change."

- Deesha Dyer, Former White House Social Secretary



THE ISSUES

While *For Ahkeem* showcases the often-overlooked story of just one Black teenage girl and her friends and family, their experiences are not uncommon within many communities across the United States. Through this glimpse into their lives, we gain insight about the intersection of a number of urgent national issues: the countless number of students being forced out of school and into the justice system; the racial disparities in discipline that lead to Black students being expelled or suspended three times as often as White students¹; and the ways that traumatic experiences can negatively influence academic achievement.

////// THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

By all available measures, the United States incarcerates its youth at a much higher rate than any other country in the world, with 130,000 youth being incarcerated each year.² Alarming, for many students the point of entry into the **juvenile or criminal justice system** is their classroom. The term **school-to-prison pipeline** is a metaphor for a complex blend of policies and practices that contribute to a student being funneled out of the public education system and into **juvenile or criminal justice systems**. In *For Ahkeem*, we see two examples of this beginning with Daje being removed from her traditional school and placed in the court-supervised **alternative school**, the Innovative Concept Academy. In Antonio's case, we watch as he becomes disengaged from his schooling, becomes incarcerated, and navigates the justice system without adequate legal support. There are many factors that contribute to and maintain the **school-to-prison pipeline** and its impact on students. Here, we will detail three of the most well-documented components: the enforcement of **zero-tolerance** disciplinary policies in schools; the use of **exclusionary discipline** that removes or reduces the opportunity for students to learn; and the criminalization of misbehavior in schools.

"You know what bothers me? Black kids in Missouri get suspended and expelled from school more than any kids in the whole United States of America. This is real. I'm frustrated. I'm trying to keep you out of the [justice] system. The reason we have this school is to keep you out of the system, not put you in the system. It's not a game."

- Judge Jimmie M. Edwards

ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICIES

Beginning in the late 1990s, as part of the "war on drugs" and an effort to reduce school violence, many schools instituted so-called **zero-tolerance** policies. These policies sought to discourage student misbehavior through the use of harsh and often exclusionary punishments that remove students from their learning environment, including suspensions, expulsions, school-based arrests or **alternative school** placements, without regard to the circumstances or severity of the incident. These punishments were often administered equally for serious incidents, such as possession of a weapon or a violent act, and more minor ones such as missing class, being out of uniform, or other incidents interpreted as disobedience.

Since the late 1990s, these policies have contributed to startling trends. From 1974 to 2000, for example, out-of-school suspensions nearly doubled and rose from 1.7 million students annually to upwards of 3.1 million students annually.³ Further, recent estimates indicate that one in three students will be suspended at some point between kindergarten and 12th grade.⁴ And while schools and school districts have the responsibility of maintaining safe learning spaces for students and staff alike, **zero-tolerance** policies have been found to create a climate that is counterproductive to learning. Essential questions remain: Do harsh disciplinary policies change student behavior for the better?⁵ What are the long-term consequences of these policies for students? And does the documented potential for negative outcomes for students grossly outweigh any potential benefits?

EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE

Zero-tolerance disciplinary policies are linked to exclusionary responses to student behavior—namely suspensions, expulsions or school-based arrests. Across the United States, schools have begun to rely increasingly on **exclusionary discipline** for even minor and nonviolent behavioral infractions. In the 2011-2012 school year alone, out of an estimated 49 million enrolled students, approximately 3.45 million students were suspended at least once and approximately 130,000 students were expelled.⁶ While there is little evidence that these disciplinary responses result in any positive outcomes for a student or learning environment, the potential for negative student outcomes has been well documented.

In particular, acts of **exclusionary discipline** have been shown to decrease academic engagement among punished students. This, in turn, can lead to an increased risk of a student falling behind academically due to lost class time. Students who are excluded from the

classroom for out-of-school suspensions may wind up spending that time without adult supervision, potentially leading to further misbehaviors.

Unsurprisingly, there is also a strong correlation between being suspended and dropping out of school all together.⁷ Consider that a student with three or more suspensions by their sophomore year is five times more likely to drop out than other students,⁸ and that in the academic year that follows a suspension or expulsion, students are almost three times more likely to come into contact with the **juvenile justice system**.⁹ There are also racial disparities evident in who drops out with Black and Hispanic students dropping out at almost twice the rate of White students.¹⁰

In addition to the negative impact that dropping out often has on a student's academic and professional opportunities, failing to graduate

from high school is also often a clear indicator of future incarceration. High school dropouts are 3.5 times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested and more than eight times as likely to be incarcerated in the future.¹¹ A U.S. Department of Justice study regarding the intersections of education and correctional justice found that 75 percent of state prison inmates, 59 percent of federal inmates, and 69 percent of jail inmates had not completed high school.¹²

In *For Ahkeem*, Daje and her classmates are students of an **alternative school**, called the Innovative Concept Academy. While definitions of **alternative schools** or programs vary quite widely across states, this typically describes an educational setting that may or may not be designed to adequately address the needs of students whose needs, for one reason or another, were deemed as out of alignment with those addressed in a traditional school. Often alternative education serves students whose academic performance is at risk and while many are state-run, some are private, for-profit companies that operate outside of common educational accountability standards. Again, racial disparities are evident here; studies have shown that students of color are disproportionately represented in **alternative school** cohorts.¹³ While in some cases **alternative schools** or programs serve as a substitute for **exclusionary discipline**, it is clear that they are also often just another form of exclusion and punishment that may not take into account the types of educational services a student might need to thrive.



CRIMINALIZATION OF BEHAVIOR AND DISCIPLINE IN SCHOOLS

Alongside the rise in **zero-tolerance** policies in schools, there has been a transformation of how school discipline is addressed and by whom. In 1975, only one percent of schools reported having a member of law enforcement (commonly referred to as **School Resource Officers**, or **SROs**) onsite. Today, 24 percent of elementary schools and 42 percent of high schools have **SROs** onsite and, notably, schools with majority Black and Latino students are even more likely to have **SROs** present than that national average.¹⁴ In these schools, it is common for students to be referred to the **SROs** for minor, nonviolent misbehavior that previously would have been handled by a school staff member. This is a practice that effectively outsources school discipline in a way that can have serious and lasting consequences for Black students, who are more than twice as likely as their White classmates to be referred to law enforcement or arrested for their behavior while at school.¹⁵ As is seen in *For Ahkeem* through Antonio's story, just one encounter with the criminal justice system can limit someone's opportunities to thrive. In his case, he is rejected from a program that would have offered him the job readiness training and support that he desperately needed as a young father who was no longer attending school. His felony conviction, where he was tried as an adult and not a juvenile, will no doubt continue to impede upon his future and perpetuate the generational cycle of criminalization, incarceration and lack of economic opportunities that both Daje and Antonio are victim to.

Parents, educators and advocates in marginalized communities have long pushed for an increase in trained staff such as counselors, psychologists, social workers and **trauma** specialists within their schools—staff that would provide students with an opportunity for care, support and rehabilitation in place of discipline. For example, the New York City public school system—the largest in the United States—has more than 5,100 **SROs** in its schools, compared with just 3,000 guidance counselors and 1,500 social workers.¹⁶ Despite community pressure, school-based policing is the fastest-growing area of law enforcement¹⁷ while the national student-to-counselor average has remained virtually the same for over a decade, with each counselor expected to service an average of 482 students!¹⁸ And while there is no evidence illustrating that **SRO** presence is effective, some studies have shown that the presence of law enforcement undermines efforts to create a learning environment that feels safe and supportive.¹⁹ Further, **SROs** have contributed to the increasing number of juvenile arrests across the country—a trend that mirrors the rise of mass incarceration reflected in the broader American society.

"I wanted to share the documentary For Ahkeem with my staff because of recent "achievement gap" data that we've started to closely examine and the fact that there is a perception that some of our African American students appear a bit disenfranchised by our school program. These concerns led me on a personal mission to find a way to expose our staff to the hardships and circumstances that some of our students face. For Ahkeem depicts the struggles, perseverance and plight of young people stuck in a poverty system that is very difficult to overcome and provides insight about experiences that may occur outside of school that could very well impact what we see at school. It is my hope that showing the movie provided a starting point and safe space for dialogue."

- Dr. Edward M. Johnson Jr.,
Principal, Brentwood High School

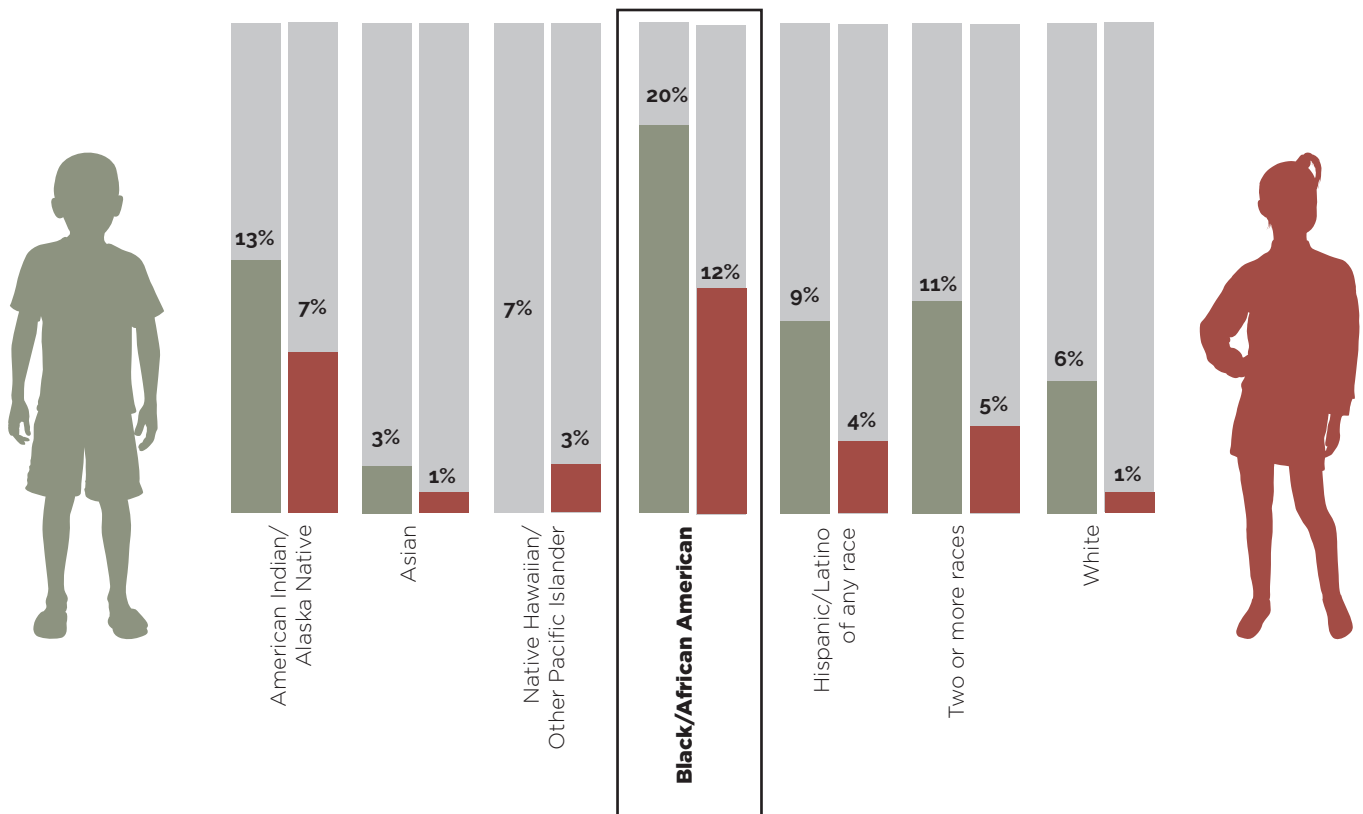
////// RACIAL DISPARITIES IN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

For many people, it can be hard to imagine a preschooler or kindergartener being suspended or expelled from their school; but Daje is certainly not alone in her experience with around 250 young children being suspended or expelled every day.²⁰ Reports have painted an alarming picture of how discipline is administered in schools, beginning in preschool and continuing in K–12 classrooms. Findings have shown that discipline is more harshly and more frequently used against already marginalized student groups: students of color; students with disabilities; and students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer/questioning (LGBTQ). An analysis by the U.S. Department of Education released in 2014 has revealed that Black students are expelled or suspended three times as often as White students.²¹ Notably, this analysis also showed that Black girls are expelled or suspended at double the rate of White boys and six times that of White girls.²²

"I was five and I was in kindergarten and I got suspended for something so stupid and little."

- Daje Shelton

STUDENTS RECEIVING OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS BY RACE/ETHNICITY AND GENDER




SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2011-12.


Counter to discriminatory narratives, these disparities cannot be explained by a higher overall number of misbehavior demonstrated by students of color. It is clear that both implicit and **explicit biases** influence the differences in disciplinary outcomes for Black and White students and in their analysis, the U.S. Department of Education summarized that, “In our investigations, we have found cases where African-American students were disciplined more harshly and more frequently because of their race than similarly situated White students. In short, racial discrimination in school discipline is a real problem.”²³


It is also worth noting that public discourse regarding the **school-to-prison pipeline** and the negative impacts of **exclusionary discipline** have often spotlighted the experiences of boys, and boys of color in particular, even though understanding the experiences of girls of color is critically important amid the increasing rates of incarceration seen among girls and women.²⁴ In fact, until recently, public discourse regarding the way girls of color were subjected to discipline was limited as stakeholders overlooked the unique ways that race and gender intersect to influence the educational journey of a girl of color. Consider how **implicit biases** related to characteristics commonly seen as feminine, such as being quiet and passive, could trigger harsher disciplinary actions against girls of color who may be perceived unfairly and stereotypically as loud and more defiant.²⁵ Some studies have also shown that children of color are generally viewed as older or less innocent than their White peers,²⁶ which could influence an educator’s perception of a student’s responsibility for their actions. Understanding these biases is crucial because many of the behaviors for which students may be punished require an educator or **SRO** to make a subjective decisions about what constitutes an act of disrespect, disruption or noncompliance.

You probably have strong opinions about race or gender that you can articulate easily—but have you considered the unconscious attitudes, feelings and stereotypes that you have about others based on those characteristics? We ALL have implicit biases that influence the way we treat each other. The [Harvard Implicit Association Test](#) might push you to think deeply about some of yours.

INEQUITABLE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

 Black students represent **48% of preschool children** suspended more than once

Black students are expelled or suspended **3 times as often** as White students 

 Students of color make up **49%** of the student population but **62%** of school-based arrests

THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

In the United States, 64 percent of children will have at least one traumatic childhood experience that may have lasting effects on their learning and behavior.²⁷ This rate is likely to be higher among vulnerable and marginalized communities. Historically, **trauma** has been largely absent in conversations about student behavior and academic achievement; though studies show that without intervention, traumatic experiences in childhood and adolescence can greatly impact a student's learning and behavior.²⁸ In *For Ahkeem*, we see a range of **traumas** that are common in marginalized communities like Daje's. Among other distressing events, Daje and members of her community contend with being witnesses to or victims of gun violence; the chronic chaos of joblessness and financial instability; the absence of loved ones due to death or incarceration; unplanned teenage pregnancy; and encounters with law enforcement and the **criminal justice system**.

"I lost hella people. I got shot, too. People be like, 'How can you still be acting the way you act?' My head is effed up. People just don't know."

- Daje Shelton

TEENS AND GUN VIOLENCE



An average of **4 people** under the age of 18 are **shot to death every day**

16 people under the age of 18 are **treated in a hospital emergency department** for a gunshot wound **every day**



Despite a long history of school discipline that has not emphasized the importance of treating or responding to **trauma**, since the early 2000s, a number of schools and school districts have been publicly rethinking disciplinary policies and incorporating alternative strategies for restorative, as opposed to **punitive**, disciplinary responses. This **trauma-informed** model assumes that with early intervention, staff support and opportunities for growth, students can have their needs met and potential bolstered in a learning environment that supports them.

A restorative approach includes practices that aim to build supportive, healthy relationships between students, educators and other school staff in an effort to prevent or remedy student misbehavior while encouraging a more positive general school climate and culture. **Restorative practices** allow students who may have committed a misbehavior or behavioral infraction to take responsibility for their behavior by connecting with the individual(s) affected, taking action to repair any harm done and collaborating on the changes necessary to avoid a similar infraction in the future. **Restorative practices** also represent the mindset that many misbehaviors can be handled within the school

community, as opposed to through **SROs**, **exclusionary discipline** or the justice system. **Restorative practices** come in many forms and can include²⁹:

Restorative justice: Focuses on righting a wrong committed and attempting to repair any harm done. The goal is to repair relationships and provide an opportunity for all parties to share with one another how a situation impacted them.

Peer juries: Students with a behavioral infraction would be assessed by other students trained as student jurors to collectively discuss why the infraction occurred, who was affected, and how the referred student can repair the harm caused.

Community service: Allows for students to attempt to rectify or counteract their misbehavior by providing some meaningful service to the wider community that also contributes to their own individual growth.

Peer mediation: A conflict resolution model that allows trained students to help other students resolve differences.





DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

For youths, educators, school staff and a general audience, the following questions can be used to prompt a deeper exploration of the key themes in *For Ahkeem* and how they relate to us all.

SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

1. What parts of *For Ahkeem* and Daje's story resonated most with you? Why?
2. Have you personally experienced the **school-to-prison pipeline** or seen it at work in the life of a classmate?
3. Have you ever noticed a discrepancy in the way you were disciplined for misbehavior vs. the way one of your classmates was disciplined? What types of things do you think influenced that discrepancy?
4. How is Daje's educational journey similar or dissimilar to your own? To people in your community?
5. Who are the stakeholders that you think need to be involved in changing the **school-to-prison pipeline** in your school, school district or state?
6. Did you notice that Antonio was in an adult court even though he was only 17 years old? Was this surprising to you? Why or why not?
7. Why wasn't Antonio allowed to sign up for the job training program? What other types of challenges do you think Antonio may face as a formerly incarcerated person and/or as someone with a felony conviction?

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

1. Do you think that alternative programs or schools like the one Daje is placed in by Judge Edwards are a good idea? Why or why not?
2. What policies and practices do you think were helpful to Daje at her **alternative school**? Can you think of any additional practices or policies that might have been helpful to her?

TRAUMA AND TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES

1. What do you think are some of the circumstances that might have contributed to Daje getting in trouble at school?
2. How does Daje demonstrate resilience in her day-to-day life? How does Antonio? Daje's mom?
3. What **restorative policies and practices** are you aware of at your own school? Are there any that you wish existed that aren't already in place?
4. *For educators and school staff:* Typically, how much do you think you know about your students' backgrounds, experiences of **trauma** and lives outside of the classroom? Do you tend to learn this information from the student themselves? A parent/guardian? Other school staff?
5. *For educators and school staff:* At your school, do you use **trauma-informed** responses to address misbehavior or are **zero-tolerance** policies more often at play?

ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICIES AND EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE

1. How do **zero-tolerance** policies disrupt opportunities for students to learn?
2. What are some of the disciplinary policies in your school? Which ones do you think contribute to a positive learning experience? Which ones detract from a positive learning experience? Do you know what steps would need to be taken to improve them?
3. Do you have any ideas for alternatives to **zero-tolerance** policies?
4. What do you think about the fact that **exclusionary discipline** can be utilized as early as preschool? Can you describe other ways to handle misbehavior in very young children without disrupting their opportunities for learning?
5. Do you think that it is important for educators and other decision-makers to consider their own **implicit biases** and how these might impact the way they view their students? Why or why not?
6. In what ways do you think **implicit biases** might impact the way educators and school staff treat their students?
7. *For educators and school staff:* What are your district's core values around discipline and behavior management? Do your school's processes and responses align with those values day-to-day?

LAW ENFORCEMENT IN SCHOOLS

1. Are there police officers or **School Resource Officers (SROs)** in your school? How do you and your classmates or colleagues feel about having them or not having them in your school? Do they/would they make you feel safe? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think that some advocates strongly believe that schools need more counselors and psychologists instead of more **SROs**? How do you think that this might change a school's learning environment?
3. *For educators and school staff:* If your school does not use **SROs**, what do you and other staff members do to maintain a safe and supportive learning environment? If your school does use **SROs**, how do you find that they contribute to or detract from a safe and supportive learning environment?

"Willard Alternative High School kids know the undercurrent of the For Ahkeem story all too well. The demographics and location are different, but the poverty, shame and labels are the same. Showing For Ahkeem was absolutely the right thing to do as it offered a platform to deep conversations with our students about the similarities, the differences, the challenges, the support, the systems that work or don't, and the bias teens experience on a daily basis."

- Melissa Madsen, Program Coordinator, Willard Alternative High

RACIAL AND GENDER-BASED DISPARITIES IN DISCIPLINE

1. Black girls are expelled or suspended at a rate of 12 percent, which is higher than girls of any other race or ethnicity and double the rate of White boys. Is this surprising to you? Why or why not?
2. Do you think that there are any challenges that Daje experienced specifically because she is a girl? A student of color?
3. What do you think are some of the factors that contribute to students of color being more likely to receive harsh punishments for misbehavior than a White student exhibiting the same behavior?
4. Have you seen evidence of this racial or gendered treatment in your own life or the life of a family member, fellow student or colleague?





TAKE ACTION

Here are a few of the ways that you can partake in the movement to disrupt the **school-to-prison pipeline** and ensure that the young people around us have the opportunity to develop and succeed.

WHAT WE CAN ALL DO

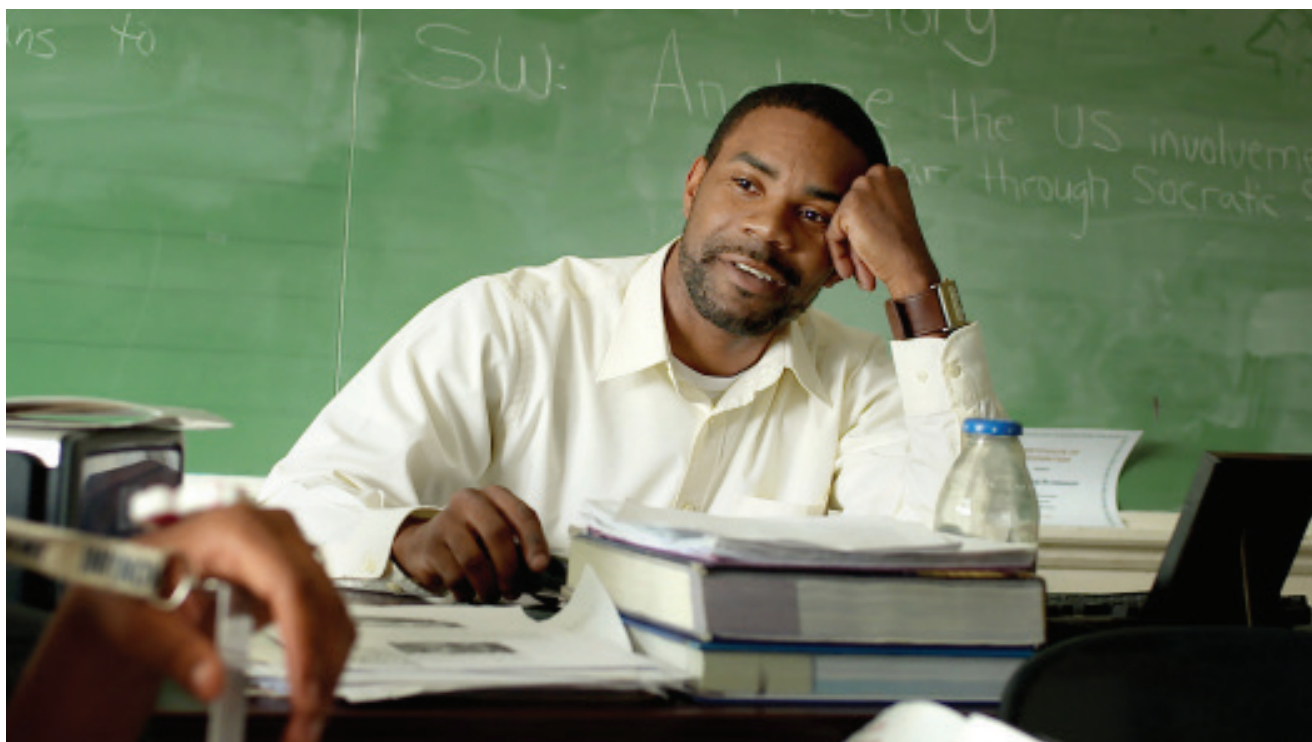
- Get in touch with the leaders of your local school board. For starters, you can attend a public school board meeting where you can comment on the decisions being made, ask questions of your own and call attention to the things that are important to you like ending zero-tolerance policies and overhauling exclusionary discipline.
- Parent-teacher and parent-teacher-student associations or organizations across the nation are actively working to make every child's potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children. Reach out to your local association who may already be working on disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline or encourage them to address it if they aren't yet.
- Check out the Dignity in Schools campaign and resource guide advocating for "Counselors not Cops" to support efforts that bring staff with trauma-informed practices into our classrooms.
- Join people around the nation by participating in the annual National Week of Action Against School Pushout each fall.
- Organizations like Big Brothers Big Sisters of America offer support for young people by providing them with professionally supported, one-on-one relationships with volunteer mentors.
- Learn more about what you can do to End Zero Tolerance policies in our nation's schools. Successful campaigns in districts throughout the country can serve as a guideline for your city or town.

WHAT YOUTH CAN DO

- Be ready to advocate for yourself and your classmates, if needed, by knowing your rights when dealing with SROs or other members of law enforcement. Start with the ACLU's Know Your Rights documentation and then conduct some additional research of your own about the rights in your specific state, as these can vary.
- In some states, school boards have student representatives on their board. Learn whether your state is one of them and take part!
- Take some time to read your school's student handbook and learn about the specifics of their discipline policy. Think about the ways it does or doesn't reinforce the school-to-prison pipeline. Discuss any thoughts or concerns with your friends, parent(s), guardian(s) or school staff.

WHAT SCHOOL STAFF CAN DO

- Review the Department of Education's [Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline](#) which outlines action steps for improving school climate, setting clear and fair discipline policies and encouraging the continuous improvement of these policies.
- Seek out professional development opportunities that will help you to continue to hone the skills needed to interact with students from different racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds. For example, the [American Federation of Teachers](#) has suggested **implicit bias** training for school staff as part of their recommendations for bolstering positive school disciplinary efforts.
- Challenge the members of your administration to conduct and share annual reports on the total number of disciplinary actions that push students out of your classrooms based on gender, race and ability.
- Advocate for your colleagues to take the ACLU and DoSomething [Safe Classrooms Pledge](#) which supports a positive school climate where everyone can feel physically, emotionally and socially safe.





RESOURCES

"The film enabled our staff to have rich, authentic and courageous dialogue as a school community. Students and staff were able to express their thoughts and feelings and make personal connections from their own lives to the movie. It was very interesting seeing how perspectives play a huge role in how we view or, in some cases, label members of our school community."

- Dr. Edward M. Johnson Jr., Principal, Brentwood High School

////// GLOSSARY

Alternative School

An educational setting and/or program that offers educational and related services outside of a traditional school environment. They may or may not be designed to accommodate educational, behavioral, and/or medical needs of children and adolescents who are not adequately addressed in a traditional school environment. These can be stand-alone facilities removed from a traditional school or a program housed within a traditional school.

Criminal Justice System

A series of organizations involved in apprehending, prosecuting, defending, sentencing and jailing those involved in crimes—including law enforcement, attorneys, judges, courts of law and prisons.

Exclusionary Discipline

Any form of correcting disobedience through a punishment that removes or excludes a student from their typical educational setting. In-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions and alternative school placements are the most commonly used methods of exclusionary discipline.

Explicit Bias

A term referring to the conscious and deliberate features of prejudiced judgment and social behavior.

Implicit Bias

A term referring to relatively unconscious and relatively automatic features of prejudiced judgment and social behavior.

Juvenile Justice System

A series of organizations involved in apprehending, prosecuting, defending, sentencing and jailing minors involved in crimes—including law enforcement, attorneys, judges, courts of law and prisons. Typically, a minor refers to someone between 10 and 18 years of age, but the upper age of eligibility varies by state.

Punitive School Discipline

Responses that aim to inflict punishment for undesired behaviors through suspensions, expulsions and school arrests, often depriving students of opportunities to learn.

Restorative Practices

Practices that promote supportive, healthy relationships among students, educators and other school staff in an effort to prevent or remedy student misbehavior while encouraging a more positive general school climate and culture.

School Resource Officer (SRO)

A school resource officer, by federal definition, is a career law enforcement officer with sworn authority, who is deployed by a police department or agency in a community-oriented policing assignment to work in collaboration with one or more schools.

School-to-Prison Pipeline

A metaphor for a complex blend of policies and practices that contribute to a student being funneled out of the public education system and into juvenile and criminal justice systems. Some of the key policies and practices that created and maintain the school-to-prison pipeline include zero-tolerance policies mandating harsh punishments for both minor and major infractions; exclusionary discipline such as suspensions, expulsions or arrests; and the presence of law enforcement, known as School Resource Officers (SROs) in schools.

Trauma

The emotional and behavioral response that follows a distressing or life-threatening event.

Trauma-Informed Approach

A program or system that acknowledges the signs, symptoms and impact of trauma and integrates knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures and practices.

Zero-Tolerance

Policies and practices that became widely adopted in schools in the early 1990s and mandated the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances or situational context.

////// FURTHER STUDY

Books and Scholarly Writing

- [Are We Closing The School Discipline Gap?](#) By Daniel Losen, Cheri Hodson, Michael A. Keith II, Katrina Morrison, and Shakti Belway
- [Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity](#) by Ann Arnett Ferguson
- [Breaking School's Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement](#) by Tony Fabelo, Michael D. Thompson, Martha Plotkin, Dottie Carmichael, Miner P. Marchbanks III and Eric A. Booth
- [Bullies In Blue: The Origins and Consequences of School Policing](#) by Megan French-Marcelin and Sarah Hinger
- [Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#) by National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee
- [Civil Rights Data Collection: Data Snapshot \(School Discipline\)](#) by U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights
- [Climate Change: Implementing School Discipline Practices that Create a Positive School Climate](#) by Jessica Cardichon and Martens Roc
- [Disrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline](#) by Sofia Bahena, North Cooc, Rachel Currie-Rubin, Paul Kuttner, and Monica Ng
- [Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood](#) by Jamila J. Blake, Rebecca Epstein, and Thalia González
- [Helping Traumatized Children Learn Vol 2: Creating and Advocating for Trauma-Sensitive Schools](#) by Susan Cole, Anne Eisner, Michael Gregory, and Joel Ristuccia
- [How Well Are American Students Learning?](#) by Tom Loveless
- [Project Implicit: Implicit Association Test](#) by Mahzarin Banaji, Tony Greenwald, and Brian Nosek
- [Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools](#) by Monique W. Morris
- [Restorative Practices: Fostering Healthy Relationships & Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools](#) by Restorative Practices Working Group
- [School-to-Prison Pipeline](#) by Sarah E. Redfield and Jason P. Nance
- [Suspended Education: Urban Middle Schools in Crisis](#) by Daniel Losen and Russell J. Skiba

News and Reportage

- [American Federation of Teachers: Understanding Implicit Bias: What Educators Should Know](#) by Cheryl Staats
- [The Atlantic: Does Exposure to Violence and Trauma Impact Students' Education Prospects?](#) By Janell Ross
- [The Atlantic: How the School-to-Prison Pipeline is Created](#) by Carla Shedd
- [The Atlantic: How School Suspensions Push Black Students Behind](#) by Alia Wong
- [The Huffington Post: Black Girls Are 7 Times More Likely to Be Suspended Than White Girls: Report](#) by, Taryn Finley.
- [NPR: When Schools Meet Trauma With Understanding, Not Discipline](#) by Mallor Falk and Eve Troeh
- [The New York Times: Government Watchdog Finds Racial Bias in School Discipline](#) by Erica L. Green
- [ProPublica: School Segregation, the Continuing Tragedy of Ferguson](#) by Nikole Hannah-Jones
- [Riverfront Times: Missouri Has Largest Racial Gap in the U.S. for Out-of-School Suspensions, ACLU Says](#) by Katie Hayes
- [Vice: Biased Discipline Policies Put Black Girls on the School-to-Prison Pipeline](#) by Nia Decaille
- [Vox: The hidden racism of school discipline, in 7 charts](#) by Libby Nelson

Digital and Multimedia

- [ACLU: How Did School Safety Get So Dangerous](#) (Video)
- [Department of Education: The Hidden Cost of Suspension: How can kids learn if they're not in school?](#) (Interactive)
- [Economic Policy Institute: Inequality Is](#) (Interactive)
- [KPCC: Teaching Through Trauma: How poverty affects kids' brains](#) by Annie Gilbertson (Podcast)
- [National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments: Safe Place to Learn](#) (Multimedia)
- [PBS NewsHour: Are some U.S. school discipline policies too punitive?](#) (Video)
- [Race Forward: Implicit Bias](#) (Video)
- [This American Life:](#)
 - [The Problem We All Live With - Part One](#) (Radio)
 - [The Problem We All Live With - Part Two](#) (Radio)
 - [Is This Working?](#) (Radio)

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