

Access Youth program description 2016

Access Youth was founded in 2009 and the services we have provided to over 1,400 youth in the nation's capital since then. During this time, it has become clear to us that one of the key factors holding youth back from achieving their potential is the array of ineffective and excessively punitive policies and institutions that comprise the school-to-prison pipeline. For at-risk youth in the nation's capital, there are too many points where youth can be derailed from achieving a quality education, and funneled into the justice system, by making minor mistakes. Access Youth focuses our services at three of those key points: when they exhibit a pattern of excessive absences from school, when they are at risk of suspension for minor misbehaviors, and when they are arrested for first-time, low-level offenses.

RMYP has helped Access Youth develop and implement a program that addresses one of those key points: the Mediation as an Alternative to Suspension program, a first-of-its-kind program in DC in which we partner with some of the district's highest-suspending and most disadvantaged public high schools. To reduce unnecessary suspensions, we provide students who experience interpersonal conflict an option that seeks to actually resolve the problem and prevent future issues, rather than simply remove the student from school and subject them to the array of negative outcomes associated with out-of-school suspension.

After serving 100 youth in our first full year at two schools, we are beginning to see an increasing sense of urgency and momentum, both locally and nationally, to reduce the use of these punitive approaches that push students out of school, and instead shift toward more restorative and effective methods of addressing student behavior – like those employed by Access Youth.

RMYP's support was critical to our ability to implement this program in its first Pilot year, and will remain so as we move to our second full year of the program. Though interest in and demand for our program has only increased, and we are well equipped to strengthen our program and impact in the next year, our funding for the program has been cut, which means every dollar of financial support counts. We will use the funds to ensure that we are still able to provide the Mediation as an Alternative to Suspension program in both H.D. Woodson and Ballou high schools. Without RMYP funding, we will likely have to scale back and only offer the program at one of these two schools, and only serve 50-65 youth, rather than another 100 youth this year who would otherwise be suspended and this is just a fraction of students who may be eligible for our services. In an average school year, hundreds of students at just these two DCPS high schools would be eligible for our program.

From the beginning, the implementation of this program was understood to be a multi-year process, starting with providing direct services to meet the immediate needs of the school to reduce suspensions and demonstrate the effectiveness and positive impact of restorative, rather than punitive approaches. The next phase is to continue offering these services to students while broadening the school's commitment to restorative school discipline. Fortunately, Access Youth and other advocacy partners have succeeded in helping the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) understand the importance of restorative justice, and DCPS has begun to embrace this shift by investing in capacity-building efforts at certain schools focused on providing restorative justice training and technical support to teachers and staff at several schools, including Ballou. We have been a key partner in this effort, not only through the direct services offered through our Mediation as an Alternative to Suspension program, but also by helping to facilitate and coordinate the broader effort to expand restorative justice at these key DCPS schools. Despite all of this interest and movement, the school system and our key funders of this program from last year have experienced significant budget cuts this year – and so has our program.

Without ACCESS' programs, there is simply no systematic effort being made to help these students avoid the host of negative outcomes correlated with suspension including: weaker academic skills, higher dropout rates, and higher rates of involvement with the juvenile justice system. Instead, because of ACCESS, a small portion of these youth, facing pivotal and vulnerable moments in their young lives, receive an opportunity to reflect on their challenges, address the root causes of their behavior and make a positive, lasting change of course through our school-based interventions.