

The Southern Student Rights Appeal

A Continuation of *An Appeal for Human Rights* dated March 9, 1960

March 9, 2022

We, the students of Georgia, of such universities as Albany State University, Clark Atlanta University, Fort Valley State University, Georgia Institute of Technology, Georgia State University, Morehouse College, Spelman College, and the University of Georgia, alongside students from Georgia's primary education institutions, come forth now with unanimity of spirit. Like those of The Atlanta Student Movement who declared solidarity on March 9, 1960, we stand united on issues of humanity: education, voting access, and inclusivity—our inalienable rights as residents of this state of Georgia and citizens of the United States.

We pledge our shared responsibility to continue to champion human rights, as did those students who came before us to draft and execute *An Appeal for Human Rights*, which aimed to secure long-awaited rights and privileges. We believe their vision has not yet been realized. Although we have achieved much progress, we recognize that every day, our fellow Georgians—Black, brown, LGBTQ+, young and old—are in the streets, the press, and the ballot boxes fighting against conditions that should have been ameliorated decades ago. We join them, and our predecessors of 62 years ago, in this fight. Why? We are dissatisfied with education structures that fail minority students. We are dissatisfied with legislation that restricts our right to fair and representative elections. We are dissatisfied with the exclusion of any citizen of Georgia from all institutions from which they are entitled to enjoy. We appeal to our legislators, our country, and to you to demand change.

We hold that all people, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or class deserve the same rights and privileges. It is our duty to continue the fight to secure the unalienable rights promised in this nation's Constitution and stand against any unjust laws that may censor the truth, limit freedom of speech, restrict inclusivity or curtail access to voting. Now, we face an immediate urgency to act on the issues of unnecessary, uninclusive, and bigoted policies proposed by members of the Georgia General Assembly.

These policies seek to undermine our free speech, our intellectual freedom, our access to the ballot box, and our schools' gender inclusivity. Rather than learn from the woes of our past, legislators seek to remove discussion of it from our classrooms and to regress rather than progress. Our schools should be havens where all of Georgia's students can thrive—not spaces where politicians target marginalized youth for their own benefit.

We will not, nor have we ever, remain placid and submissive while rights that are morally and legally ours are stripped away and denied to us. Georgia's youth will not remain silent while those in power seek to more firmly entrench systems and structures designed to limit and disenfranchise us in this state and this country. We reiterate the words of students before us: we

cannot tolerate in a nation professing democracy and among people professing democracy, the discriminatory policies set forth by Georgia legislators.

Among the proposed policies in Georgia and in the United States against which we protest, the following are outstanding examples:

EDUCATION

(1) Georgia HB 1084 and SB 377, which would prohibit “divisive concepts” and seek to censor discussions of race, racism, and history amongst K-12 students, teachers, and administrators. HB 1084 would defund schools by allowing for the suspension of waivers and grants that provide additional necessary resources to Title I schools, whereas SB 377 would completely prohibit the topics of slavery, racial oppression or ethnic discrimination.

(2) Georgia HB 1, which would tie the hands of those whose job it is to protect students; instead, forcing them to allow hate speech to threaten and proliferate among diverse, protected campuses. While the bill is allegedly intended to protect freedom of speech, it instead limits students’ ability to speak out against the presence of radicalized hate groups in their schools and community.

VOTING ACCESS

(3) Georgia SB 325, SB 933, and HB 1317, which would repeal provisions for absentee ballot boxes, reduce the total number of absentee ballot boxes, and allow politically-motivated county officials to make broad interpretations about the requirements of absentee ballot boxes. Absentee ballot boxes are a necessary avenue of increasing voter access, especially to Black, brown and high-risk voters.

INCLUSIVITY

(4) Georgia SB 435, which would target Georgia’s transgender youth and prevent them from competing in sports programs that are designated for a gender different than they were assigned at birth. This policy would directly target marginalized children and further deprive an already vulnerable population.

WE HOLD THAT:

(1) The term “race” is a historical social construction, dating back to the 17th century, that provided or denied rights and privileges to a group of people based on skin color, physical features, genetics and kinship. The concept of race became a justification for European colonization and subsequent enslavement of people from Africa and for the mistreatment and subjugation of non-white races in America.

(2) The discussion of race and history as it impacts the lives of Americans today is not inherently divisive. It is vital to all our communities and the longevity of multiracial democracy to uphold students' right to read and learn.

(3) Gender and sexuality are essential and appropriate topics of conversation for Georgia's youth.

(4) The testimony, perspectives, and lived experiences of students should be valued and heard through accessible public forums, polls, and other means necessary before implementing a law that allegedly serves the interest of students.

(5) Voters should be able to freely cast their ballots without fear of intimidation or recrimination, and without such restrictions that are driven by political gain and not the promotion of democracy.

(6) A student's gender identity may not be the gender they were assigned at birth. Students should not face exclusion solely because their gender identity is not their assigned gender at birth. State-mandated discrimination against marginalized children is deadly policy—these are our children, our neighbors, our scholars, and our future leaders. Excluding and targeting queer and transgender youth is an attack on the most vulnerable among us.

We, the students of Georgia, are driven by past and present events to assert our position to the people of Georgia and to the ear of this nation. We will not allow Georgians to be lied to about our past, blinded to our present, or unprepared for the future. We will not allow Georgians' voices to be unheard at the ballot box. And we will not allow Georgia's youth to continue to suffer the same bigotry and hate we have been fighting for generations. Until our calls for equity, inclusivity, and voter access are heard, we will stand unified to denounce the bills sitting before the chambers of this general assembly.

We, therefore, echo a decades-old call to all people of authority—our State Representatives and Senators, our Governor, and our local officials; all leaders in civic life—our teachers, business owners, and community leaders; and all those of goodwill and high moral value to stand with us and against these proposed injustices.

We pledge, like those who come before us, to use all legal and non-violent means available to us to ensure that these discriminatory and disenfranchising policies do not pass.

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