

# Find Freedom in the Classroom

A Love Letter to My Babies' Teachers

**Crystal Laura**

Hi there.

I don't think we've yet had the pleasure of meeting. This world is small, though, and I've recently been struck by wanderlust, which is to say that there is a real possibility our paths might cross and my babies—the ones I birthed—may one day be your students.

So let us assume they will, and that this isn't an academic book chapter at all, but rather a love letter penned especially for you.

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Dear Comrade,

Welcome back to school! I'm Crystal Laura, Zachary and Logan's mom. I know that we'll soon have an opportunity to get better acquainted, but I thought to write and tell you more about me and what I care about to begin the school-family connection straightaway.

In addition to mothering my boys, I teach teachers and principals in the College of Education at Chicago State University. As part of my university work, I travel often to lecture and lead professional development trainings on critical issues in urban education. Recently, I left the boys for a couple of days to spend time with older youth—kids of fifteen and sixteen, who live in New York City, on Rikers Island.

The name precedes it. Rikers Island covers 413 acres of land in the middle of the East River between Queens and the Bronx, adjacent to the runways of LaGuardia Airport. Sitting on that land is a complex of jails: ten of them. It is one of the world's largest correctional institutions—it's a penal colony, really—and from what I hear, it's one of world's worst, too. It is notorious for abuse and neglect of people who are locked up there. You might remember the story that surfaced a couple of years ago of Kalief Browder, who spent three years on Rikers waiting for a trial that never happened—two of those three years in solitary confinement—and he was so deeply impacted by his experiences there that two full years after he left the Island, and after Jay Z and Rosie O'Donnell and others donated materials and funds to get his life back in order, he hung himself.

There are over 11,000 other men, women, and children on Rikers—the youngest of them are mandated to attend school. That means that we also have colleagues on Rikers—general grade-level teachers, special education teachers, counselors, social workers, paraprofessionals, principals, and district staff—who work with incarcerated students behind the walls.

On the first day of the visit, I toured the school sites on Rikers—sat in on classes, met with young people, asked the adults some questions, really became a student of that place—and then on the second day, I gave a reflective talk to our colleagues about what I learned. What I told them was this: Without question, our current systems need complete overhauls; but, in the meantime, they can work wonders—what one counselor called acting as a “cool drink of water in hell”—and with proper training, a strong network of support, and whole lot of conviction, they can make great strides toward rethinking, reimagining, redesigning altogether how we approach harm, healing, and justice.

I see you like I saw them, as a cool drink of water in what is, quite frankly, for some young people hell. I see this letter as our first real opportunity to put our heads together about how to better understand and radically shift the hellish context within which many students find themselves.

So, I don't want to blow this opportunity. I don't want to waste it by going on and on about issues that you are likely already fully aware of. I want to touch on some things that you might not regularly engage in discussions about. As you begin this school year, I want to seize this little moment to help you frame your thinking about your intentions and purpose for teaching.

## I WONDER . . .

I wonder if you know that as a teacher, you are either engaged in incarceration prevention or incarceration expansion. Incarceration prevention or incarceration expansion. It's just that real.

Because here and now, in the twenty-first century, we are seeing and experiencing an age of mass incarceration, a time when, as the professor Marc Lamont Hill (2016) argues, the prison is our go-to mechanism of isolation and containment, the central way that we adjudicate disputes, and the primary site where we deal with social trauma and social dilemmas.

Right now 1 in 31 American adults is under some form of correctional control—meaning incarcerated, on parole, or on probation. 1 in every 31. More than 2 million men and women are locked up in the United States—including my twenty-three-year-old brother—and besides the extraordinary number of incarcerated people, an even bigger problem is that we think that's normal. Today our nation cages more of its people than any other country in the world, more Black folks than were enslaved 165 years ago. This is the contemporary context, and I wonder if you know that.

But it's important for us, as educators, to stay alive to our expanding prison nation. Not just when somebody escapes and not only when we catch a marathon of those juicy, addictive documentaries—*Snapped*, *Drugs, Inc.*, *Lockdown*, or—if you're old school—*Cops*. It's crucial for us to pay attention to prisons partly because in our profession, we ourselves are parties to barricading people in them. It's true. On every measure of academic attainment—earning a diploma, a GED, or some form of postsecondary education—those who are incarcerated lag behind us in the free world. They have lower literacy levels, fewer marketable skills, and a greater prevalence of disability. With regard to education and schooling, incarcerated people are often those who once needed the most from their teachers and somehow got the least.

I wonder if you know that and if you are keeping your eyes open wide to our current situation, which is largely defined by jails and prisons that are so full of brown and black bodies that most everyone who knows what I'm talking about and has good sense is practically begging schools to stop feeding them.

## THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

I want to say a bit about the school-to-prison pipeline because it strikes a special chord in me every time I meet someone—someone in the field of education, especially—who has never heard of the phrase. Now I suspect that this wouldn't

apply to you. I imagine that uncomfortable, justice-oriented conversations are certainly happening in your classes and in your school. But ask a classroom teacher, a director, a principal, a parent, or school board member who is not well-versed in critical issues of urban education about the school-to-prison pipeline, and you can expect little more than a polite nod and smart use of context clues. I'm just saying. No offense, I've gotten that "I don't know what you're talking about, but something tells me I should" response more than a few times.

I often assume that the problem is one of semantics. Let's be honest, the term "school-to-prison pipeline" is not exactly part of everyday lingo, and even across activist circles, the mind-blowing idea that kids get funneled from systems of education to systems of juvenile and criminal justice has actually been captured by a number of other nifty metaphors. Off the top, I can think of three: one is the "schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track," another is the "cradle-to-prison pipeline," and a third is the "school-prison nexus." Write those down: schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track, cradle-to-prison pipeline, and school-prison nexus. In the interest of time, I will discuss only the first one, but all three of these school-to-prison pipeline derivatives, if you will, highlight the fact that our profession is hardly the great equalizer that it's hyped up to be. I want you to remember that these expressions are like close cousins not twins—and this distinction is important because if we are to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, which we will, then we've got to be clear about not only our language, but how we are directing our efforts and where to seek support.

### SCHOOLHOUSE-TO-JAILHOUSE TRACK

For example, if you are deeply concerned about the ways in which school-based policies and practices help young people along to jails and prisons, then—in addition to reading my book, *Being Bad: My Baby Brother and the School-to-Prison Pipeline*—you have to take a look at reports published by the Advancement Project. The Advancement Project is a multiracial civil rights organization founded by a team of lawyers who have taken on a variety of social issues, including redistricting, voter protection, immigrant justice, and the on-the-ground realities of zero tolerance.

By now, zero tolerance in our schools and workplaces is as common as dirt, but some of us are too young to remember how things got this way. In the early 1990s, a spike of juvenile homicides led to public panic, fueled by a racially coded media frenzy around teenage "superpredators." This was followed by the passage of federal and state laws to mete out sentences. This sequence of events could have easily gone over our heads, but the staff at the Advancement Project, and others, started putting out reports that help us understand what it means when school adults have zero tolerance for children and youth in their buildings.

To understand what it means when school adults have zero tolerance for young people is to first acknowledge that as absolute as zero tolerance sounds, we aren't equally intolerant of all kids. Of course, I won't argue that we should be, but why is it that poor students, students of color, LGBTQ students, and students with disabilities so frequently get the short end of the stick?

I remember one spring semester I taught a teacher education course on urban ed policy, and the topic of "bad kids" emerged as a particular favorite among my students. Most everyone wanted to know how to run a tight ship, stay sane, and keep safe with so many "troublemakers" and "class clowns" in Chicago public schools. Whenever I pushed people to unpack the beliefs embedded within this kind of philosophy and everyday language, things always got ugly. Public schools were equated with city schools, city kids with cultural poverty and dysfunction. The stock stories commodified by the mainstream media—the news, Hollywood films, cable network television, and the music industry—about pathological and dangerous youth poured out in my classroom. And the grapevine, with its salacious tales from the field, was tagged as proof positive that some children will inevitably fall through the cracks.

As lively as these discussions were, no one ever seemed to want to talk about the connections between how we think and talk about children and how we treat them in social and academic contexts. A hush usually fell over the crowd when I suggested that demonizing ideology and discourse enables a whole web of relationships, conditions, and social processes—a social ecology of discipline—which works on and through the youth who rub against our understanding of "good" students. Granted, these were young, preservice teachers who had very little, if any, direct experience with children in urban schools. So, I'm guessing that part of their silence was rooted in ignorance. It's also true, however, that challenging and unlearning what we assume we know about people, places, and things is uncomfortable and that finagling around contradictions and tensions of implicit and explicit bias is easier than diving into and grappling with these ideas. But that's exactly what we educators ought to be doing, diving into the wreckage.

Because if we don't, then we will continue to build schools like "Rosa Parks Elementary," a fake name for a real place, where educational researcher Ann Ferguson (2001) found that Black male students of ten and eleven years old were routinely and openly described by school adults as "at risk" of failing, "unsalvageable," and "bound for jail." Help me out here: sticks and stones may break my bones, but what? Words will never hurt me. Bull\*%!#. Yes, they will.

Because when our perceptions are so profoundly distorted that we can think and talk about our students in these ways, then we have no trouble acting accordingly. In a room of thirty students, with precious few resources to go around, and with the

alphabet soup of standardized tests never far away—we have no space, no patience, zero tolerance for “misbehavior.” The problem, of course, is that what counts as “misbehavior” depends.

Black boys, for example, are often refracted through cultural images of Black males as both dangerous and endangered, and their transgressions are sometimes framed as different from those of other children. Black boys are what Ann Ferguson (2001) calls, “doubly displaced”—meaning, that as Black children, they are not seen as childlike, but “adultified”; their misdeeds are “made to take on a sinister, intentional, fully conscious tone that is stripped of any element of childish naivete” (p. 83). As Black males, they are often denied the masculine dispensation that White male students get as being “naturally naughty”; instead, Black boys are discerned as willfully bad (p. 80).

So we put them out of class and out of school. We suspend them. We punish them excessively, usually for minor offenses, like talking about a Hello Kitty bubble gun, hugging a friend, and chewing a pop tart into the shape of a gun. In Chicago, where I live and work, zero tolerance policies in the district’s schools were abolished in 2006 in favor of restorative justice approaches to harm and healing, but still the number of suspensions has nearly doubled since then. Black boys in my hometown are five times more likely to be suspended than any other group of students in the city’s public school system. Black boys comprise 23 percent of the district’s student population, but amount to 44 percent of those who are suspended and 61 percent of those who are expelled. Black boys are the only group of Chicago Public School students whose suspension rates are higher in elementary school than in high school.

Chicago has its issues. Chicago is the epicenter of neoliberal school reform, the third-largest school district in the country and one of the few without an elected school board. We’ve had over one hundred neighborhood school closures since 2001 and an eightfold increase in money going to charters. At the same time, 126 schools don’t have libraries. You know what, don’t get me started. School politics in Chicago is for another letter.

Let’s be clear—wherever you work or live likely has its issues too. But the problem is much bigger than where we work because when we have zero tolerance for our kids, we not only suspend them, but we expel them. We not only suspend and expel them, but we arrest them—in schools, we have cops or school resource officers on deck (as we saw in South Carolina), and we’ve constructed booking stations in the school buildings to make school-based arrests easier, faster, and more efficient.

When we have zero tolerance for our kids, we lose all concept of kids being kids—wiggling, jumping, giggling, fidgeting somehow gets diagnosed and labeled and

medicated. And when that doesn't work, we beat them. Yes, beat them—with canes, straps, paddles, and yardsticks. Corporal punishment is still allowed in twenty states.

When we have zero tolerance for kids and their “misbehavior,” we even fine them. Back home, Noble charter school collects about \$200,000 annually from student discipline fees, including \$5 per infraction for things like missing a button on your shirt or being seen with a bag of chips; add that to the revenue from a summer behavior class at \$140 per registrant and you've got yourself a promising fundraiser on the backs of the poor, Black students, and their families.

And if the kids for whom we have zero tolerance have not yet dropped out, we transfer them to other schools or counsel them toward programs like the Job Corps, what has been called the U.S. Department of Labor's boarding school for the “bottom of society” and what I would argue is an intermediary or pit stop in the schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track.

I could go on, but I think that you get the point, which is that these school policies and practices are systems of surveillance, exercises of power used to continuously and purposefully monitor poor youth and youth of color (Foucault, 1977/1979). I am a Black woman, a mother of two beautiful Black sons, so you'll understand why I am particularly attuned to the ways that schools wound Black boys. Black boys are unevenly punished and tracked into educational disability categories in their early years, practices that tend to reinforce the very problems they intend to correct. And although this is enough to make reasonable people want to holler, even more insidious is when those under surveillance internalize the experiences and labels assigned to them, when they believe the exclusion and isolation have been defensible, and when they learn to condition themselves. Then, Black boys who have been sorted, contained, and then pushed out of schools become Black men—men whose patterns of hardship are pronounced and deeply entrenched—men who constitute nearly 50 percent of the adult males in prison—men who have been well primed for neither college, career, nor full participation in our democracy, but instead for punitive institutionalization.

This is what the “schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track” tries to show us.

If you are moved by this—this brief description of how school policies and practices nudge youth to drop out—then I hope you'll consider grounding your approach to teaching in dismantling the schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track and in reframing your work in such a way that the school is not a place of punishment, that the school doesn't label more people ID and LD than it does PhD and JD, that the school is not the primary gateway to menial labor, the streets, and permanent detention. I think your job is to yearn for and create the kinds of schools that folks don't need to

recover from. I want you to look at your position as disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline and as engaging in antiprison work.

I am happy to support you in this endeavor. Let's make time to talk soon.

All love, always.

Crystal

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### Love Letters

P.S. What do you think of responding to my love letter with one of your own? It'd be helpful for you to put in writing who you are, what you care and wonder about, and how you plan to collaborate with parents to find freedom in the classroom. Try addressing the letter to someone—maybe me, or a parent whose son you

currently teach—to remind yourself that this is not an abstract activity or busy work, but rather a conscious effort to engage in thoughtful dialogue with a real-life comrade who wants as much for Black boys as you do. When you are ready, share your letter with whomever it concerns and watch the seed grow.