

Why Boston Students Created A 'Know Your Rights' App

Why Boston Students Created A 'Know Your Rights' App

By: [Peter Balonon-Rosen](#) | June 16, 2015

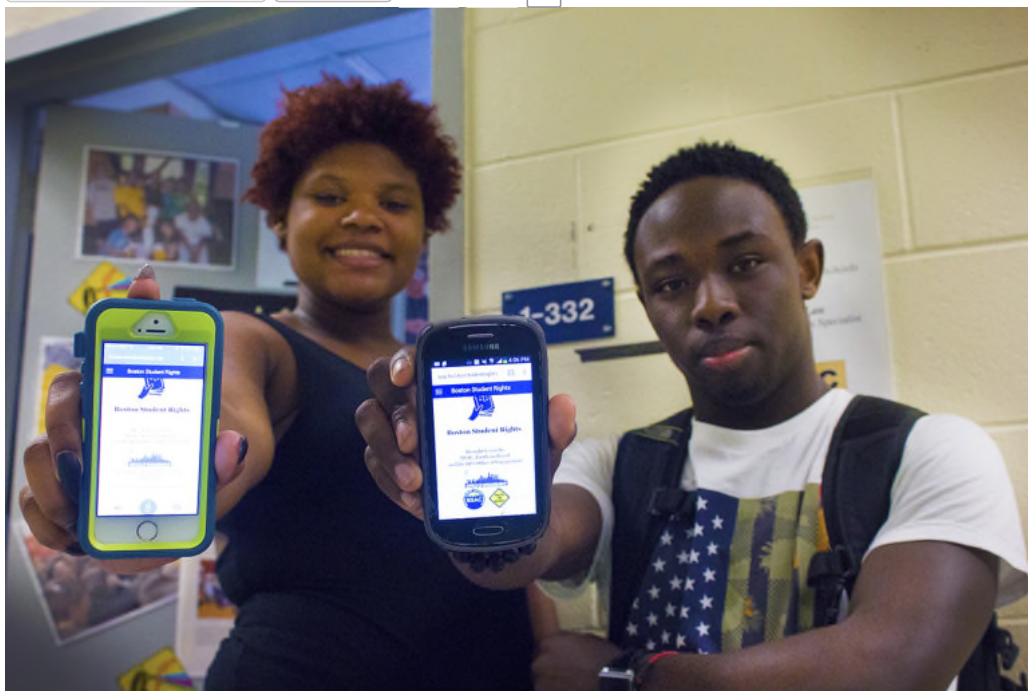
Follow @LearningLabMA

920 followers

Like

Share

45k



Boston Student Advisory Council president Glorja Wornum, left, and BSAC member Ayomide Olumuyiwa show off the Boston Student Rights app in the hallway of Madison Park Technical Vocational High School. (Peter Balonon-Rosen/WBUR)

BOSTON — A group of Boston Public School students have turned to the power and popularity of technology to empower peers to be aware of their rights while in school.

They've recently released the website and mobile phone app [Boston Student Rights](#), which presents the district's student code of conduct in a condensed, simplified format. It includes information on subjects ranging from types of suspensions to cellphone policies, LGBTQ students' rights, teacher evaluations and dress codes.

Most importantly, the app also shares information on proper school discipline processes, highlights students' own rights and responsibilities as laid out by state law, and lists out legal aid resources available for students.

"You can't defend yourself anywhere if you don't know the type of rights that you have," says Ayomide "Ayo" Olumuyiwa, a senior at John D. O'Bryant High School in Boston and one of the students who helped create the app.

By educating fellow students on their rights, Olumuyiwa hopes the app can help disrupt what he says is a legacy of harsh discipline practices in urban schools that can risk pushing students out of school and toward jail, a process known as [the school-to-prison pipeline](#).

"We chose an app because we're the generation of phones," says Olumuyiwa. "Like, we all have our phones for everything, so an app is just one click away."

The app will be available for Android on Google Play this week and can currently be accessed on any device through [a website](#). It's believed to be the first app in the nation dedicated to protecting students' rights in discipline processes.

'Literally Not Legal'

Olumuyiwa is a member of the [Boston Student Advisory Council](#), or BSAC, the group that created the app. BSAC is a citywide body of elected student activists that work to address student-identified issues in the district. They are co-administered by Boston Public Schools Office of Engagement and Youth on Board, a Somerville based nonprofit.

For years BSAC has focused on promoting fair, equitable school discipline processes in the district. This year, they decided educating students on their own rights would hold school staff accountable to honoring those rights.

So they decided to create an app that lists out information according to categories.

"The school-to-prison pipeline, student rights and responsibilities, suspensions, expulsions, legal aid resources, alternative discipline and restorative justice," says Glorja Wornum, BSAC president and a senior at Edward M. Kennedy Academy in Boston. "And you're able to click on any one of those tabs and it'll open you up to another page. And once you're in another page you're able to scroll up or down to read on information that could help you."

Why Boston Students Created a 'Know Your Rights' App

The app lays out the code of conduct in a simplified language that students say is more accessible and understandable than the formal presentation in the district's policy handbook.

For instance, it tells students that school staff must try alternative types of discipline before suspending a student, that they are innocent until proven guilty, and that at a suspension hearing students have the right to call witnesses to testify on their behalf.

And the app lists out what may be considered a suspendable offense, something that Wornum says is important for students holding staff accountable.

"If it's not here in this app, because this app is entirely cited by BPS, if it's not here then you shouldn't be doing it," Wornum says.

"Yeah we had a team of 12 angry lawyers actually read thru this and say this is the stuff, if any school tries to go against this it's not legal," agrees Olumuyiwa. "Literally not legal."



Glorya Wornum, left, and Ayomide Olumuyiwa chat while on their phones in front of the Boston Student Advisory Council's offices at Madison Park Technical Vocational High School. (Peter Balonon-Rosen/WBUR)

Unequal School Discipline Practices

All of the information in the app reflects the Boston Public Schools' code of conduct, which was recently updated to reflect [a Massachusetts school discipline law](#). Chapter 222 as it's commonly referred to, took effect in July 2014, and was implemented to reduce excessive punishments and removals from classrooms.

Elizabeth McIntyre, an Equal Justice Works fellow at Greater Boston Legal Services (GBLS), says she regularly receives calls from parents or students who have a gut feeling that a student's rights were not respected at school, but aren't aware of what rights they actually have.

"We have these laws that are supposed to combat the school-to-prison pipeline," says McIntyre, who is sponsored at GBLS by Staples and Boston law firm Wilmer Hale. "The bigger problem is that often people just don't know about those laws and they're just not always followed. If students know what the laws are, then they can advocate for themselves."

This school year McIntyre has represented over 50 students from Boston Public Schools or Boston area charter schools, most of whom, she says, have had their rights violated. Since September, she's prevented 124 days of unlawful suspensions for those students.

According to Boston Public Schools, about 7,000 Boston students were suspended either in-school or out-of-school during the 2013-2014 school year. A disproportionate number of those suspensions fall on students of color — about 1 in 5 black students and 1 in 7 Latino students were suspended, compared with 1 in 50 white students.

The trend is similar across the state. According to [a study of Massachusetts school discipline during the 2012-2013 school year](#), black students received 43 percent of all out-of-school suspensions and 39 percent of expulsions, despite making up less than 9 percent of students enrolled.

And [studies](#) show repeated school discipline can push students out of school and lead to repeated arrest and incarceration.

School discipline and [educational](#) disparities along race lines mirror a stark reality of the criminal justice system: Only 7 percent of Massachusetts residents are black, yet [28 percent](#) of the people behind bars in Massachusetts are black.

A Transformation

Tina Marie Johnson, a staff member who oversees BSAC, was a BSAC member herself for three years before she graduated from Madison Park Technical Vocational School in 2009. She says she's seen many of her former classmates face repeated school discipline, drop out and wind up in jail.

Their first interaction with the law enforcement often came at school.

In 2008, Boston Public Schools [ranked 12th in the nation](#) for most full-time law enforcement personnel in any school district in the country. It was a time, she says, when police were the enforcers of school rules.

"We were, like, 'This is school! What are police officers doing in my school? Why are they coming to my classroom to take me away?,'" Johnson says.

Self-described as thoughtful, yet goofy and rebellious in ninth grade, Johnson had regular run-ins with school police and was frequently suspended from school. The offences were numerous — including skipping class in the hallways, not listening to teachers, and leaving the building when she wasn't supposed to. They were all acts, she says, that gave her a sense of self-control in a school environment that felt like a prison.

Why Boston Students Created a 'Know Your Rights' App

"I was skipping outside once and the police chased us all the way down the football field. And there was this fence and everyone jumped over the fence but I could not jump over this fence," says Johnson, laughing. "So, like, they're getting closer and closer and I'm like, 'Oh my God, guys what am I going to do?!' But luckily there was like a hole, like a little space, and I crawled through it out of the fence."

Offenses like this became such a common occurrence that Johnson soon faced expulsion. Suspensions, she could hide from her mother, but she knew she wouldn't be able to hide an expulsion.

She made a plea to a school administrator who struck a deal with her — if Johnson attended a month of BSAC meetings, the expulsion threat would be waived.

While initially hesitant, when Johnson began to attend BSAC meetings she found like-minded students advocating for policy changes in the district, a venue to channel her rambunctious energy and, ultimately, a sense of empowerment.

"It just changed my life. My voice matters and I'm smart and that's important. And if I don't advocate for myself, no one else will," Johnson says. "I have to prove that young people are deserving of being treated like the brilliant human beings that they are."



Tina Marie Johnson meets with the Boston Student Advisory Council during an after-school meeting. (Peter Balonon-Rosen/WBUR)

The Revolution Will Be Digitized

Now, Johnson leads the very group that changed her life. She works with Youth On Board as a special projects coordinator for BSAC.

In a sunny room on the fourth floor of Boston's Madison Park Technical Vocational High School, Johnson meets with students for a BSAC meeting that occurs twice a week. On today's agenda are discussions of a student-led forum on high-stakes testing, a push to enact a moratorium on out-of-school suspensions and their new Student Rights app.

"App update! Six-hundred and fifty five downloads so far!," says Becca Holland, a senior at Boston Latin Academy, to the other students gathered around the large table.

"Wool!" cheer the other group members.

Students have been promoting and spreading the word about the app among peers. They've plastered their schools with stickers advertising the app, handed out postcards and wristbands with information, and taken to social media.

They're also getting a boost from some central office staff impressed with the app. Among them: incoming Superintendent Tommy Chang. He was at the app's release party, downloaded it on the spot and [tweeted](#) about it to his followers.

"They've been able to create this app that is addressing one of the most important issues, which is not our dropout problem, but our push-out problem in urban school systems," Chang says. "I'm just super proud to work with youth in this way."

Students hope that their peers will be educated and empowered by using the tool that's created for students, by students.

These young activists know [the revolution will not be televised](#). But if they have anything to do with it, the school revolution *will* be digitized.



[Massachusetts' School-To-Prison Pipeline, Explained](#)

The use of exclusionary school discipline leads can have lasting effects that push students toward the criminal justice system [Read More →](#)