UNCOVERING THE INSTITUTION PRESENTS:

A DREAM DEFERRED

THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT OF SCHOOLS
EDUCATION CENSORED
SCHOOLS, DISCIPLINE, & CONTROL
STEREOTYPES

A PROJECT BY YOUTH IN ACTION AND BROWN UNIVERSITY'S CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF SLAVERY & JUSTICE
A STUDY OF THE SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE
In 1903 W.E.B. Du Bois was concerned with thinking through the Black experience and identity in America, both North and South. In his text, Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois posed the question, “how does it feel to be a problem?” What does it mean to have your body read visually as criminal, as negligible, as mindless? Today, a person of color cannot think about the American Dream without simultaneously thinking about the systems of discrimination and injustice that impede that dream. The “dream” is about not just physical but about equal freedoms afforded to citizens. For Du Bois, education was just as much of an indicator of freedom as political and civil rights. In 2017, students are still trying to fully realize the American Dream but more importantly Du Bois’ dream of education liberation.

During the the first week of August 2016, eleven high school students from Youth In Action moved onto Brown’s campus for a week of Uncovering the Institution, a program at the Center for the Study of Slavery & Justice. During the week, students engaged in discussions concerning the American Dream using four guiding pillars: optimism, individual liberty, freedom from fear and economic opportunity. For many of the students, the American Dream was closely to their education. Through the course of the week students considered the struggle between power and freedom that shapes the educational system. How does the school-to-prison pipeline impact students of color in the state of Rhode Island today? How might students of color exist and function in a society and system that that views them as a “problem”? We hope this exhibition serves as a space for reflection about how the built environment, discipline, curricula, and stereotypes continue to challenge young people of color in the state’s public education system.
The role of structure and design in determining the boundaries of our freedoms and our bodies.
School facilities and buildings have a major impact on the education that students receive. In Providence educational institutions are in disrepair. There are missing ceiling tiles, leaks during rain storms, mold in the staircase, broken furniture, and limited heating and cooling throughout the building.

From 2012-2013, 1,493 schools were closed in the United States due to budget cuts. Schools in the nation are closing at an alarming rate while funding for prisons grow. Rhode Island is one of eleven states that spends more money on prisons than on higher education.
Classical High School, one of Rhode Island’s most renowned public schools, was designed in a brutalist style of architecture. These raw concrete structures, made of cement, emerged in the 1950s as the popular style of government and institutional buildings alike, including prisons. The cement walls make the classrooms very hot in the summer, and very cold in the winter. Some students describe the dimness of its exterior as a “curious contradiction to the supposed brilliance of the roughly 1,200 students who walk its halls.”
Without knowledge of our history...

we are like a tree without roots

MY Story

#OurSchoolsOurHistory
EDUCATION CENSORED

Examining censorship and surveillance as tools of power and control
The state’s school department and administration at the local level also have great influence over the curriculum and dress codes - both serve to control and restrict the student body. Multicultural studies are often excluded from the curriculum, leaving out historical and cultural stories that reflect the student body makeup. In the state of Rhode Island, inmates who participate in the Petey Greene Program can register to take vocational training courses at the Community College of Rhode Island, however, not one law course is provided. The censoring of curricula is strategic in preparing young people for prison and keeping inmates in line. In our current racial climate, students organized and rallied in 2016 for ethnic studies to be included in the Providence Public School curriculum. Currently students and administration are working collaboratively to create courses that are culturally relevant to young people in the city.
The first dress code was implemented into school systems in 1969. As a result, schools gained the ability to limit student expression in an attempt to promote “a safe environment” and prevent interference with schoolwork and discipline. In Rhode Island schools, regulations say what type of clothing students wear affects their attitude toward themselves, others, and school in general. Students in the Providence Public School system receive a free planner, which includes a copy of the Code of Conduct. The dress code section of the handbook lays out what is considered appropriate attire for school, however, the ‘distraction free’ dress codes disproportionately targets young girls of color and students of the LGBTQ community.
EDUCATION, DISCIPLINE, & CONTROL

When our bodies are under siege
Identified from the start as a “problem”, students of color experience the public school system as a site of discipline and control. In some states, police officers have charged students as young as seven years old with “disrupting” the classroom environment. For minor offenses such as using a cell phone or having a temper tantrum in a kindergarten class, students have been handcuffed or even arrested. This type of labeling and discipline facilitates a pipeline into the juvenile “justice” system. In some Providence public schools, random locker checks have occurred. These checks create a sense of imprisonment in one’s own learning environment. Students become use to having their property searched, even though that violates their Fourth Amendment right.
Nationally, Black students make up 16% of the student body but experience suspension at a rate of 32-42% and an arrest rate of 31%. Out-of-school suspensions are used far too often in public schools, targeting students of color with subjective offenses. The American prison system practices an identical system of racial profiling, targeting Blacks, Southeast Asians, and Latinos. Black inmates make up 37% of the nation’s prison population while only representing 12.2% of the population. Furthermore, a majority White administration in both institutions sends a particular message to young people about race and power. In the American prison system, 71% of prison guards are White, this compares to the 61% of White teachers in Rhode Island schools.
STEREOTYPES

When reputation and reality are working against one another and in the wake young people are branded with a stereotype that can determine their future
Stereotypes are mapped onto young people even before they enter the school’s doors. According to the 2017 Best School Districts in Rhode Island ranking, the Barrington Public school district is ranked number one, while Providence Public Schools lag behind as twenty-fifth in the state. While Barrington received an A in academics and a C- in diversity, Providence Public Schools were given the same grades in reverse. This lower rating led to increasing demands to pass standardized testing on top of an already demanding workload for many students. Rankings such as the one above creates a more negative reputation for Providence Public Schools, leaving very little room for optimism among students and teachers. Over time high schools in the city have been given nicknames such as “Hope for the Hopeless” (Hope High School) and “Central for the Mental” (Central High School), stigmatizing any student that attends and graduates from those schools. These conditions help to create a situation where many students think that failure is inevitable.
The school to prison pipeline is directly related to zero tolerance policies that thrive in failing, segregated and inadequately resourced schools, resulting in students of color being more vulnerable to dropping out. The quickest and most common solution to dealing with the “problem” student is to remove them from class. A simple visit to the principal’s office has been replaced with direct arrest in the school and or police reporting and tracking. This growing pattern of punishing students instead of educating them makes it nearly impossible for students to receive a quality education on equal terms. In the era of mass incarceration we must ask ourselves, how did we allow the line between schools and the legal system to become blurred and what new American Dream do young people imagine today?