

My name is Paula Akakpo. I am an 11th-grade student at Math and Science Academy, a representative on the Minnesota Youth Council, and a young Black woman. And I am here today in support of HF 922, HF 947, and HF 416.

I do not have any personal experiences with the juvenile justice system. But, I see the way that kids of color are treated by the system, and that worries me. I worry a lot about my cousin who is in 1st grade. My cousin is a caring young boy. He loves to hug people. He's really curious and has a lot of energy. He's never quiet and always on to the next thing. He laughs at almost anything. I recently taught him how to play Monopoly, and though he does not understand the money, he now wants to play all the time. My cousin is also an immigrant from Burkina Faso, and as a Black student in his school, I am concerned. I worry because there are cultural differences and issues of race, which make his teachers see him differently. Teachers say he talks too much and he's too jumpy. He has a hard time paying attention in class; this makes me worry about how the juvenile justice system might impact him later.

There is a lack of humanity in our system and so much fear about Black children, which gets weaponized. I worry that people will see my cousin as a threat, but he's not one. He's just a little kid. He only becomes a threat if people make him out to be one. Kids like my cousin won't be able to grow up successfully if they are constantly seen as a threat, especially when they're doing things that are normal or what other kids are doing. My cousin shouldn't ever be made to feel like something is wrong with him. I don't want any child feeling that way.

In schools and the juvenile justice system, I wish people would stop entering the conversation with the thought that there is something inherently wrong with these kids. We all want students to follow the rules. But it's important to allow for growth.

Juvenile justice has always been a critical passion of mine, not just because it impacts people around me. It also impacts how I act myself. As a young Black woman, I often have to code switch and feel I have to be overly polite to not be seen as an angry stereotype. If I am not presenting my best self constantly, I feel like I'll be seen as a negative representation of my entire race. I am an individual who makes mistakes just like everyone else, just like the kids who get caught in the juvenile justice system.

Even though I've never been to juvenile court, or a detention center, or a correctional facility, I care about what happens to the kids who are there. Everyone deserves the right to an education and to spaces where they have community. We all have the right to places for learning, growth, and connection. The kids in the juvenile justice system deserve nourishment and positive environments and shouldn't have that taken away from them because of inherent bias or the feelings of lawmakers who don't know them. Passing these bills is a big first step in making sure all children have the rights they deserve.