

Up with pants and jobs

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A campaign to get young men to pull up their pants and stop flashing the world their underwear is a good initiative. And one that is long overdue.

New York State Senator Eric Adams recently introduced a campaign to deliver a message to kids: “Raise your pants, raise your image.” Through a video and billboards in Brooklyn, Adams is encouraging young people to choose pride over “self-imposed negative imagery” and advising kids to not surrender control of their own image.

This is a strong and welcomed message, especially considering that the dropped-down pants style originated from prison culture, not the most positive of sources.

But aside from kids pulling up their pants, we also hope this campaign provokes a larger discussion of underlying issues for young people. And the voices of youths should be at the front of this discussion.

Saggy jeans are not necessarily a conscious celebration of “thug life,” and they reflect a stark reality—the disproportionate rate of African American and Latinos tracked into the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

What we need to counterbalance easy sartorial critique is an inclusive message and policy commitment to young people: one that emphasizes that there is a place for them in a quality school and in the above-ground economy.

For starters, city and state officials should be working day and night to maintain summer youth jobs and after-school programs. This is critical. Even before this economic recession, the Community Service Society reported that nearly 170,000 of New York City’s young people, through the ages of 16 to 24, were neither working nor in school.

From New York to Albany, our legislators and leaders must also work overtime on a slew of bold criminal justice reforms—from breaking up the culture that has been allowed at Rikers Island, to implementing juvenile justice policies in the interest of kids, to shutting down virtually empty prisons upstate.

To raise the bar for kids, we must break down the bars that too often surround them.