

For Immediate Release:
April 17, 2009

Contact: Matt Cregor (334) 328-7580

Advocates Urge Education Secretary to Improve School Discipline, Achievement Through Stimulus Funds

A coalition of groups promoting alternatives to harsh zero-tolerance school discipline policies has asked the U.S. Department of Education to encourage school districts to invest federal stimulus money in Positive Behavior Supports (PBS), restorative practices and other innovative approaches to improve student behavior and achievement.

Led by the Dignity in Schools Campaign, the organizations made the request in a letter to Education Secretary Arne Duncan. The letter, sent this week, outlined several steps to encourage the use of stimulus funds for effective programs that improve student discipline, achievement and school safety.

Twenty-four advocacy groups and 41 individuals signed the letter.

Over the past decade, schools have increasingly taken a zero-tolerance approach to discipline, relying heavily on remedies like suspension and expulsion. But, the letter states, “[S]tudies by the American Psychological Association and others failed to find any evidence that the use of zero tolerance, suspension, and expulsion leads to improvements in student behavior or school climate.”

It adds: “Helping schools find alternatives to ineffective discipline is critical to ensuring that all students have the right to full development and that students and teachers are in safe and productive classrooms.”

The letter urges the department to include PBS and restorative practices on its “smart list” – a list containing examples of programs school officials can fund with stimulus money. That list, offered as additional guidance to school officials, is expected to be released today.

The Department of Education has previously cited PBS – a research-based approach that has been shown to cut down on discipline problems, improve school safety and support improved academic achievement – as a program that can be funded with stimulus money. At a PBS school, good behavior is taught and modeled by everyone from the principal to the custodian. Students are praised for good behavior while discipline problems are addressed in a smarter way than under zero-tolerance policies.

Restorative practices is another proven approach to building positive school climate and increasing student engagement that is highlighted in the letter. Through restorative practices, schools engage students in creating and enforcing school norms and rules, and use collaborative responses to wrongdoing that emphasize accountability and repairing harm. It also engages students in pro-active academic planning and goal-setting.

The letter notes that discipline practices that remove students from the classroom harm educational outcomes and disproportionately affect students of color, students with disabilities,

students in poverty and English language learners, and asks the Department of Education to reward efforts that reduce both the achievement gap and disciplinary disparities.

The following are among the 24 organizations that signed the letter: Advocates for Children, the American Psychological Association, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law, the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute, the Children's Defense Fund, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., the National Association of School Psychologists, the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, and the Southern Poverty Law Center.

The letter and a complete list of participating organizations and individuals can be found at http://www.dignityinschools.org/files/DSC_ARRA_Letter_EDSecretary.pdf.

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