

September 19, 2007

Honorable Kathleen Babineaux Blanco
Governor of the State of Louisiana
Office of the Governor
PO Box 94004
Baton Rouge, LA 70804-9004
[cc: District Attorney, U.S. Attorney and School Superintendent]

Dear Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco,

As a group of organizations and individuals deeply concerned with dignity in public schools, we applaud the actions of Louisiana's Third Circuit Court of Appeals last Friday which vacated the conviction of Mychal Bell. Yet we remain deeply concerned about reports surrounding the recent events in Jena, Louisiana. We ask you to investigate and monitor the cases facing the Jena 6 and to take action to improve school climate and access to quality education for all students in Louisiana.

The unfortunate circumstances facing the Jena 6 are an extreme manifestation of the destructive disciplinary policies that plague public schools in Louisiana and around the country. These children aged 15 to 17 were arrested for a school fight in December 2006 where no weapons were used and no serious injuries resulted. We understand that consequences must be imposed for their actions. However, this punishment is excessive and will irreparably damage their educational, professional and personal lives. Schools should be a place where children receive consequences for their actions that constructively address misbehavior without denying them access to education. Instead, these boys were thrust into the justice system. Mychal Bell has already spent 9 months in jail while undergoing criminal proceedings. Allowing any remaining criminal proceedings against the Jena 6 to continue would constitute a gross violation of these students' human rights to education and dignity.

Furthermore, steps should be taken to address the degrading school climate that gave rise to racial tensions and the fight for which the students were charged. The fight came as a result of racially charged incidents that began when an African American student challenged the *de facto* segregation of the high school by asking permission to sit under the "white tree" on the school's campus. Historically, only White students sat under this tree. School officials told him to sit where he liked. The next day three nooses hung from the tree. The Superintendent later classified this act as a "prank." School officials must be held accountable for creating a welcoming school environment where racist and other degrading behaviors are not tolerated. School staff should be trained to help students openly discuss and work to overcome bias and disrespectful behavior. We call on you as Governor and on the Superintendent to make a statement condemning the hanging of the nooses.

It is vitally important that you investigate the severe course of punishment for the Jena 6 and take steps to address the hostile environment found in schools.

Sincerely,

Christine Agaiby, Alternatives, Inc.

Andrew K. Block, Jr., JustChildren Legal Director, Legal Aid Justice Center

Maisie Chin, Community Asset Development Re-defining Education

Bernardine Dohrn and Monica Llorente, Children & Family Justice Center,
Northwestern University School of Law

Jim Freeman and Monique Dixon, Advancement Project

Sally Lee, Teachers Unite

Daniel Losen, Senior Education Law and Policy Associate, Civil Rights Project, UCLA
(for identification purposes only)

Ellen Raider, Independent Commission on Public Education (ICOPE)

Dr. Rodney Skager, Graduate School of Education, University of California Los Angeles

Lori Turner and Sarah Schriber, ACLU of Illinois (for identification purposes only)

Elizabeth Sullivan, National Economic and Social Rights Initiative

Susan Sandler, Justice Matters!

Jonah Zern, Education Not Incarceration

*For purposes of identification only these individuals are members of the Dignity in Schools
Campaign.*