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Human Rights Group Issues Report on Degrading Treatment and Abusive Discipline in New York City and Los Angeles Public Schools

Findings Show Many Students Face Discrimination, Excessive Suspensions and Destructive Police Presence that Threaten their Dignity and Right to Education

LOS ANGELES – March 21, 2007. Middle and high school students in Los Angeles (LA) and New York City (NYC) are frequently ignored and mistreated in their classrooms, and subjected to harsh discipline policies that punish, exclude and criminalize them, according to a report by the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI).

The report, *“Deprived of Dignity: Degrading Treatment and Abusive Discipline in New York City and Los Angeles Public Schools,”* uses a human rights framework to document the mistreatment of students, and the use of suspensions, law enforcement and other punitive disciplinary strategies that ignore students’ educational and emotional needs. Schools with the most repressive policies are overwhelmingly under-resourced, overcrowded and primarily attended by low-income students of color, the report shows.

On February 27, 2007, the LAUSD Board of Education passed a new discipline policy aimed at reducing suspensions by creating positive behavior support systems to encourage a respectful and productive school environment. Elizabeth Sullivan, Education Program Director at NESRI, responded by saying:

“The new LA policy represents a positive step toward protecting the right to education for students. Based on our report’s findings, we urge the LAUSD to continue to work to end the use of excessive suspensions and law enforcement that threatens the dignity of students and their capacity to learn.”

Based on interviews and focus groups with over 80 students, parents and teachers in both cities, the report found that in NYC and LA:

- Students we interviewed reported that they are mistreated, ignored and discouraged from learning in the classroom. Half stated that their teachers *sometimes* or *most of the time* say things that humiliate or insult them, such as calling them stupid or ugly, or telling them they “belong in the ghetto,” and one third said their teachers *rarely* or *never* help them with their problems.
- Schools impose excessive suspensions for minor infractions, including being late to school, getting into arguments with students, or even giving a teacher “a look,” that add up to significant losses in learning. One quarter of senior high schools in the LAUSD have a suspension rate of over 20%, and in three high schools the rate is over 30%, or *one in three* students.
- Schools use formal and informal mechanisms to push students out of school, including expulsion, repeated suspensions, classroom removals, and opportunity transfers. One LAUSD parent reported that his child missed four months of school while awaiting placement as the result of an involuntary opportunity transfer. He required the help of a lawyer to get his son re-enrolled.
- Over half of students interviewed in NYC and LA said guidance counselors are *rarely* or *never* involved when they are disciplined, while two thirds said police were involved *sometimes*, *most* or *all of the time*.

- Two thirds of students reported they *never, rarely* or only *sometimes* feel safe with the presence of police, while one third felt threatened, many referring to the sight of loaded guns. Students reported that police have used excessive force, including “slamming” students to the ground and spraying mace.
- Teachers reported that police have removed students from their classroom, sometimes humiliating them in front of the class. Teachers complained about losing the ability to provide input into disciplinary actions or exercise discretion to help individual students with problems.

Parents and youth from a number of community-based organizations in Los Angeles volunteered testimonies for this report. In response to the report’s findings and recommendations, the organizations’ leaders call on the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) to continue taking bold, district wide steps to reduce the unnecessary and overzealous use of zero-tolerance discipline and law enforcement in schools, and to ensure the participation of students and parents in resolving disciplinary issues.

Earlene Elzy, a member of South Los Angeles parent group Community Asset Development Re-defining Education (CADRE), which rallied behind LAUSD’s new policy, added:

“School discipline affects all of our children -- when one child is humiliated or mistreated, it jeopardizes everyone’s self-confidence and ability to learn. We need LAUSD to keep moving in a new direction with us, and to make sure the recently-passed discipline policy is properly implemented.”

“**Deprived of Dignity**” proposes a human rights framework as an approach to reforming discipline in schools. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, an important human rights instrument that is widely adopted throughout the world, recognizes discipline as part of an educational process to develop the social skills of students, encourage learning, increase school attendance, and protect the dignity and safety of the child. The report identifies examples of effective human rights practices for school discipline, including mediation, counseling and restorative justice programs.

NESRI calls on the Board of Education and Superintendent David Brewer in LA, and Chancellor Joel Klein and Mayor Michael Bloomberg in NYC, to:

- **Implement whole school approaches** to creating welcoming school environments, including reducing class size, improving school facilities, and providing more guidance resources for students.
- **Prioritize counseling and preventive services** in disciplinary policies, and reduce the use suspensions and other exclusionary measures.
- **Remove armed police officers from schools** and establish special guidelines and better training for school safety officers with the participation of students and parents.
- **Expand training and resources for school staff** in behavior management and mediation, and create guidelines and enforcement policies for staff behavior, such as having mediators available to students.
- **Increase student participation** both in developing and implementing discipline and safety policies and in disciplinary processes, such as peer mediation programs, peer juries, and peer mentoring.
- **Ensure parent participation** in disciplinary decisions affecting their children and in developing policy.

The National Economic and Social Rights Initiative is a non-profit organization that works with organizers, policy advocates and legal organizations to promote human rights in the United States. The organization is funded by private foundations and individual donors.

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