



Published by the New York Civil Liberties Union (<http://www.nyclu.org>)

Students, Educators and Advocates Call for an End to Aggressive, Excessive Police Presence in NYC Public Schools

October 10, 2007 --

Echoing testimony given during day-long City Council hearings on the over-policing of New York City's public schools, students and educators today gathered at City Hall and described their experiences coping with inadequately trained, overly aggressive NYPD personnel.

Both inside and outside council chambers, students and advocates from across the city denounced the hostile environment created by an excessive police presence in schools, appealed for accountability and oversight in school safety matters and offered alternative approaches to unchecked policing in city classrooms.

Biko Edwards, a former Samuel J. Tilden High School student, was slammed into a brick wall, sprayed in the eyes with Mace and arrested last January for being in the hallway without a pass. He endured more than 28 hours in police custody and suffered injuries requiring emergency treatment because he had missed the bell while speaking to his math teacher after class.

"Why are they arresting school kids while they're in school?," Edwards asked. "Tensions between students, teachers, principals and school safety agents wouldn't be as bad if school safety agents listened to students a lot more and pushed them around a lot less."

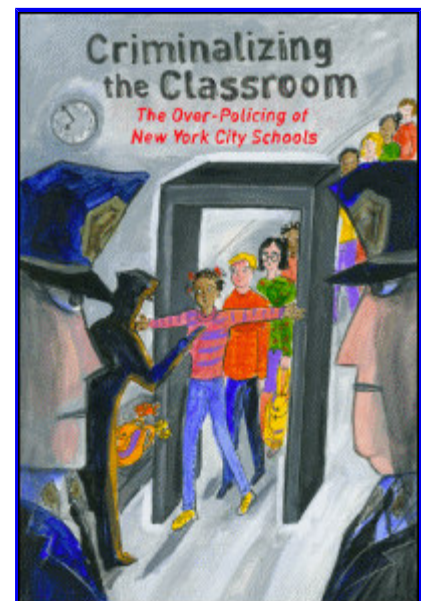
Since taking control of school safety in 1998, the NYPD has assigned more than 5,000 school safety agents and at least 200 armed police officers to the city's public schools. This massive presence would make the NYPD's school safety division the fifth largest police force in the country – larger than Washington DC, Detroit, Boston or Las Vegas.

Many youth advocates say the over-policing of their schools often puts students at risk. As documented in the NYCLU's recent *Criminalizing the Classroom* report, students say that school safety agents often abuse their authority, act belligerently and disrespectfully, and provoke students into confrontations.

There is no effective mechanism to hold school safety agents accountable for this misconduct, and the lack of oversight of police personnel in schools allows abuse to occur unchecked. Even with no effective process to report misconduct, the NYPD received more than 2,700 complaints since 2002 about police abuse in schools.

"Children have the right to learn in a safe environment, but making schools feel like jails promotes neither learning nor safety," said Donna Lieberman, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union. "When police personnel are not adequately trained to work in schools, they too often extend their authority beyond issues of safety and become hostile and even violent enforcers of cell phone prohibitions, dress codes and food bans. Being late to class or writing on your desk is never a criminal act, but our kids are getting arrested for it. The City Council must act quickly to address the over-policing of city schools."

The excessive police presence coupled with the general prison-like environment – every day, more than 93,000 New York



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• [Download now: Know Your Rights with Police in Schools \(PDF\)](#)

• [The NYCLU's testimony given before NYC Council](#)

City school children pass through a gauntlet of metal detectors, bag searches and pat downs – means that children’s education often suffers. Quinn James, a student organizer for the Urban Youth Collaborative, goes through metal detectors and is scanned by school safety agents every day as he enters high school.

“My school feels like a jail cell, which leads me to believe that the mayor, chancellor and police commissioner don’t think I can be a successful student,” James said. “My daily experience with police in schools is having a negative impact on my learning. I am constantly disrespected. I want and deserve to learn in a safe and respectful school environment.”

There are alternatives to over-policing. The Student Safety Coalition – an umbrella group that includes Advocates for Children, Correctional Association, Make the Road New York, National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, the NYCLU, Teachers Unite and the Urban Youth Collaborative – urges the City Council to:

- Pass the School Safety Act. This act would provide accountability, transparency and oversight by expanding the jurisdiction of the Civilian Complaint Review Board to accept complaints about school safety agents, creating a formal investigation and complaint process. The School Safety Act would also require quarterly reports by the Department of Education and the NYPD on school safety matters.
- Commission a study on successful school safety models, such as those initiated by Progress High School, Urban Assembly School for Careers and Sports, and the Julia Richman Education Complex, that have eliminated metal detectors and reduced the number and role of school safety agents.
- Invest money and resources in proven alternatives to policing that focus on prevention instead of punishment, such as conflict resolution and intervention training for school staff, classroom management training for teachers, guidance counseling, peer mediation and parental and community involvement programs.

“New York City has fallen behind other major school districts, like Chicago and Los Angeles, which have begun to embrace alternative disciplinary policies that guarantee students’ right to education and dignity in school,” said Liz Sullivan, education program director at the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI). “There are better ways.”

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