



Thursday » March
22 » 2007

N.Y., L.A. schools security hell, report says Students treated 'like criminals'

Steven Edwards

CanWest News Service

Thursday, March 22, 2007

NEW YORK - Public school in New York or Los Angeles can be more like boot camp, students say in a wide-ranging disciplinary study released yesterday.

Teacher put-downs and police-enforced security measures have turned getting a public education in large parts of these cities into a hell for many kids, argues the lobby group behind the survey.

In *Deprived of Dignity*, the National, Economic & Social Rights Initiative cites a slew of UN human rights conventions it says are flouted by many schools in New York and Los Angeles.

While the group does not deny the need for discipline, it argues the response to student misbehaviour is often over the top.

"Constructive discipline teaches valuable lessons," writes Elizabeth Sullivan, the report's author. "But across the nation, schools have increasingly implemented ? 'zero-tolerance' policies [that] include harsh punishments for simple misbehaviour, such as school fights and altercations, nonviolent offences and even talking back to teachers."

Zero-tolerance for street crime became official policy in New York in the 1990s under Mayor Rudy Giuliani, whose celebrated police chief, Bill Bratton, argued cracking down on minor infractions like jumping over a subway turnstyle would stop young people graduating to more serious offences, and occasionally catch some real villains. The murder rate fell by 50% over several years.

Mr. Bratton later became police chief in Los Angeles, where he introduced the same crime fighting tactics.

But Ms. Sullivan says such an approach is harmful when applied in schools.

"These disciplinary practices fail to address the root causes of school violence," she said. "Studies ... have shown that suspensions and other harsh discipline can contribute to pushout and dropout.

The report is likely to be of keen interest to educators in Canada, where zero tolerance for such serious infractions as weapons possession or drugs usage is applied against a backdrop of codes of conduct.

"We're constantly concerned with making sure students are able to learn in a safe environment," said Ted Whiteland, president of the Canadian Association of Principals.

"We're on the lookout for ideas that we might be able to adopt -- and ones we may need to avoid," he said.

For years New York and Los Angeles have stationed safety officers and armed police in schools.

One in five middle and high schools in New York have metal detectors, while a 1996 survey shows half of public high school students in Los Angeles must pass through them to attend class.

The survey found students feel police and safety officers are "intervening in everyday disciplinary issues and treating young people like criminals for behaviour that would not be considered criminal in any other setting."

One 17-year-old female Hispanic 11th grader told how "security just grabs the students and gets them out of class, literally like a bouncer."

A 17-year-old 12th-grade African American student said, "They look down on us like we have no opinion. It's like, are we in school, or are we under surveillance?"

Teachers in New York must adhere to a citywide discipline code, which is harshest in a few "impact schools" identified as having the biggest crime problem.

In such schools, repeat offenders become "Spotlight Students" who can be placed in off-site detention centres if they fail to shape up.

In Los Angeles, individual schools develop their own disciplinary rules. Some use informal removals to punish students "without a genuine disciplinary process," Ms. Sullivan writes, saying this leads to suspensions for infractions as subjective as a "bad attitude."

© National Post 2007

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2007 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.