

***Remarks of Elizabeth Sullivan: Press conference on March 21, 2007 Release of Deprived of Dignity:
Degrading Treatment and Abusive Discipline in New York City and Los Angeles Public Schools***

Good afternoon. My name is Elizabeth Sullivan, I am the Education Program Director at the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI). We are here today to release our human rights report – Deprived of Dignity: Degrading Treatment and Abusive Discipline in New York City and Los Angeles Public Schools.

This report documents the pervasive mistreatment and abuse of students in almost two dozen high schools and middle schools serving communities living in poverty. Mistreatment, indifference and abuse are endemic in classrooms, discipline processes, and in interactions with safety officers and police.

There is a growing chorus of voices demanding a change to these violations against the dignity of children in NYC schools. In New York City, just in the last week the NYCLU released a report on the over-policing of schools, news stories exposed the abuse of special education students on school buses and sexual assault allegations have surfaced against custodial staff. Last month, the Public Advocate called for a greater commitment by the city to conflict resolution and other proactive measures to reverse the trend of abusive and punitive measures against students, and in the last year DRUM and the Urban Justice Center, released a report on the criminalization of South Asian Immigrant Youth.

As our report shows, in the classroom students reported that teachers called them stupid, tell them that they stink or that they look like an animal. This type of treatment is demoralizing and utterly incapacitates many students from learning.

Teachers that we spoke to said they struggle for respect in the classroom and from the administration where they must work in over-crowded and under-resourced conditions without support or training to manage their classrooms. They recognize that ill-treatment by fellow teachers must stop, but also realize that without more support teachers will lash out and students will continue to suffer.

Punitive and hostile treatment of students extends to disciplinary processes where students are repeatedly suspended and excluded for long periods of time from learning for minor misbehavior, such as being late or arguing with another student. These punitive policies virtually guarantee that many students will be pushed so far behind that they are pushed out of school all together.

Not surprisingly, given the overall punitive environment, safety officers and police are also regularly brought in or intervene themselves in minor disciplinary issues, often using police tactics normally reserved for criminals or violence, such as slamming students against walls and spraying mace to disperse bystanders.

These are not isolated incidents, this is happening to our young people every day. It is a human rights crisis that stems from a failure to recognize that standards of decency and dignity must become a top priority for the city's leadership, in particular Mayor Bloomberg and Joel Klein who have taken all authority and responsibility for what happens to our young people.

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