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SOCIAL RIGHTS INITIATIVE

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245 Sullivan Street (at West 3rd Street, Manhattan), Furman Hall Room 216

Teachers' Survey Finds that Policing and Excessive Suspensions Undermine Learning, and Teachers Support Human Rights Approaches to Discipline

Report available at - http://www.nesri.org/Teachers_Talk.pdf

NEW YORK – October 22, 2008. Teachers in New York City public schools say that punitive approaches toward children, such as aggressive policing, suspensions and other reactive strategies, undermine the human right to education by failing to address the causes of conflict and criminalizing the school environment, according to a report by Teachers Unite and the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI).

In the report, “Teachers Talk: School Culture, Safety and Human Rights,” teachers call for preventive and constructive approaches to discipline that create positive school cultures, teach behavior skills and use conflict resolution. Among the largest threats to safety in schools, teachers cited overcrowding, lack of quality training for teachers, inadequate numbers of guidance counselors and social workers, and the lack of opportunities for teachers, students and parents to influence discipline policies.

Sally Lee, Executive Director of Teachers Unite said, “the observations shared by these teachers are powerful arguments for a new vision of safety in the schools where they work, and powerful indictments of the city's approach to education in general. Youth of color in particular, who make up over 85% of the student population in New York City, are criminalized in schools and denied their right to education by the lack of resources.”

Based on surveys of more than 300 middle and high school teachers in over 136 public schools across the city, as well as focus groups with more than a dozen teachers, the report finds that:

- Less than 45% of teachers said that exclusionary punishments, like suspensions, are effective. By contrast, over 80% of teachers said that conflict resolution, guidance counseling and mediation are effective for improving discipline and safety in school.

- Over 59% of teachers said that School Safety Agents (SSAs) only *sometimes* treat students with respect, and 13% said they *never* or *rarely* treat students with respect.
- Over 18% of teachers said they have intervened on behalf of students in incidents involving the police or SSAs. 42% of those teachers intervened because of harassment or disrespectful behavior on the part of police personnel towards students, or because they felt SSAs or police were instigating or escalating a conflict.
- In schools with permanent metal detectors, 67% of teachers said that students are *always* (23%) or *sometimes* (44%) late to first period class because of metal detectors.

“Teachers Talk” proposes a human rights framework as an approach to reforming discipline and improving school climate. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, an important human rights treaty 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.

In surveys and focus groups, New York City teachers call for policies and practices that protect these basic human rights standards and reflect a holistic approach to improving safety. Teachers call for smaller classes, more engaging curriculum, more access to guidance counselors and social workers, classroom management and conflict resolution training, mediation programs and restorative practices.

The report highlights positive models being used in three New York City public schools – Eastside Community High School in Manhattan, Banana Kelly High School in the Bronx and the James Baldwin School in Manhattan. At Eastside Community High School, for example, the 100% RESPECT Campaign involves students and staff in a process to discuss and define what respect means in their community. Six months after the campaign was implemented in the middle school grades, suspensions dropped by 45%.

Eastside Community High School was in the news a year ago when an incident between a student and a School Safety Agent escalated, resulting in the arrests of both the student and the principal who tried to prevent police from taking the student out the front door in handcuffs. In many schools in New York City that are working to create positive climates, the aggressive presence of police is undermining their efforts.

“The Department of Education needs to support every school in New York City in developing their own positive approach to discipline. New York City has fallen behind other major school districts, like Chicago and Los Angeles, which have embraced proactive citywide frameworks for discipline, like restorative justice and Positive Behavior Supports, that guarantee students’ human right to education and dignity in school,” says Elizabeth Sullivan, Human Right to Education Program Director at the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI).

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. Teachers Unite is a non-profit organization building a movement of public school teachers who play a critical role in working for social justice. Both organizations are funded by private foundations and individual donors.