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New Data Shows Decrease in Suspensions, but Students, Parents and Teachers Say Numbers are Still Too High

New York, NY – New York City public schools reported 69,643 suspensions in the 2011-2012 school year, according to new Department of Education data released Friday afternoon. The figure represents a 5.2 percent decrease from the 73,441 suspensions reported in 2010-2011, which may reflect recent revisions to the DOE’s Discipline Code and efforts to train teachers on positive disciplinary approaches. However, the rate of suspensions is still more than double what it was at the beginning of the Bloomberg administration.

While the decrease shows progress, the number of suspensions is still too high, and students of color and students with disabilities are still being disproportionately suspended from school. There are also concerns that some schools are under-reporting suspensions.

“It’s great to see that suspension numbers are down, but the truth is that there’s so much more work to be done to stop disproportionate numbers of students of color and students with disabilities from being pushed out of school,” said Leia Petty, a guidance counselor at a New York City public high school and member of Teachers Unite. “As a guidance counselor, I know that suspensions do not prevent or deter the behavior that students are being suspended for—it’s a quick fix and everyone knows it. What we really need is more training and support for school staff who want to implement alternatives, like restorative practices, that keep school communities safe.”

Summary of Data:

- 69,643 Total Suspensions in 2011-2012 school year, a 5.2% decrease from 73,441 in 2010-2011
- 13,258 Superintendent Suspensions (6 or more days) in 2011-2012, an 11.9% decrease from 15,055 in 2010-2011
- Black students receive 52.8% of suspensions, but comprise only 28.1% of the student population
- Students with disabilities receive 32.3% of suspensions, but comprise only 12% of the population

“The decline in suspensions over the past year is a step in the right direction, but the rate of suspensions for 2011-12 school year is more than double what it was at the beginning of the Bloomberg administration,” said New York Civil Liberties Union Executive Director Donna Lieberman. “Black students comprise 28 percent of the student population, but 53 percent of suspensions. Students with special needs also continue to suffer disproportionately from excessive suspensions. If the mayor is truly committed to his Young Men’s Initiative, he will pay close attention to this data and take meaningful steps to reduce the number of suspensions that are associated with educational failure and involvement in the criminal justice system.”

In recent years, the DOE has reduced the number of infractions for which students can be suspended, yet the Discipline Code still lists 25 infractions that can result in a suspension of up to one year. While the Discipline Code lists counseling and restorative practices as options schools

may use, principals and other school staff are not required to use alternative approaches before resorting to suspensions and other harsh disciplinary tactics.

“Students should not fear going to school and being targeted by the Department of Education and the New York Police Department,” said Cheyanne Smith, a 16 year-old junior at the Bushwick School for Social Justice. “Suspensions and arrests do NOT work, this has been proven. My school, the Bushwick School for Social Justice, is taking the right steps to ensure that we are keeping students in school by implementing positive approaches to discipline, including peer mediation, conflict resolution, and fairness committees. Such approaches should be implemented in all schools in NYC. They DO work!”

The Dignity in Schools Campaign-New York (DSC-NY) is calling for a 50% reduction in suspensions by September 2013 and for the DOE to end all suspensions for minor behavior infractions, like defying authority, shoving or pushing listed in Level of 3 of the Code, and to end long-term suspensions of more than 10 days. DSC-NY is also calling for requirements that schools use positive interventions before they can suspend a student and for resources and training to support principals and teachers in implementing positive approaches to discipline, especially in those schools with high suspension rates.

The Student Safety Act that Mayor Bloomberg signed into law on January 6, 2011, requires the DOE and NYPD to report quarterly to the City Council on various measures of student safety. The new data was provided to the City Council, but it fails to provide a complete picture on the use of suspensions in city schools.

“We are concerned that these numbers are likely inaccurate as there is a problem with under-reporting, especially of principal’s suspensions that range from one to five days,” said Liz Sullivan of the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative. “In our experience, some administrators do not report all of these shorter suspensions. In addition, the DOE did not provide the total number of suspensions for schools where there were less than 10 suspensions. We urge the Department of Education to share this data with the public so we can have a full understanding of what is happening with our students.”

The DSC-NY coalition calls for citywide funding and implementation of positive, school-wide approaches to discipline that improve school climate, reduce conflict, and increase learning. Members include: Advocates for Children of New York, American Friends Service Committee-NY, Brooklyn Movement Center, Center for Community Alternatives, Children’s Defense Fund-New York, Coalition for Asian American Children and Families, Coalition for Gender Equity in Schools, Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM), Future of Tomorrow, Make the Road New York, Mass Transit Street Theater, National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI), New Settlement Apartments Parent Action Committee, Pumphouse Projects, Sistas and Brothas United, Teachers Unite, The Sikh Coalition, Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC), Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, Youth on the Move, and Youth Represent.

Visit <http://www.dignityinschools.org/dsc-ny> for more information.

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