



NATIONAL ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RIGHTS INITIATIVE

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For Immediate Release

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Press conference on Wednesday, March 21 at 12:00 noon
on the steps at New York City Hall

Human Rights Group Issues Report on Degrading Treatment and Abusive Discipline in New York City and Los Angeles Public Schools

Findings Show Many Students Face Discrimination, Excessive Suspensions and Destructive Police Presence that Threaten their Dignity and Right to Education

NEW YORK – March 21, 2007. Middle and high school students in New York City (NYC) and Los Angeles (LA) are frequently ignored and mistreated in their classrooms, and subjected to harsh discipline policies that punish, exclude and criminalize them, according to a report by the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI).

The report, *“Deprived of Dignity: Degrading Treatment and Abusive Discipline in New York City and Los Angeles Public Schools,”* uses a human rights framework to document mistreatment toward students, and the use of suspensions, law enforcement and other punitive disciplinary strategies that ignore students’ educational and emotional needs. Schools with the most repressive policies are overwhelmingly under-resourced, overcrowded and primarily attended by low-income students of color, the report shows.

Elizabeth Sullivan, Education Program Director at NESRI and author of the report, said: *“In NYC, as Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein propose yet another re-organization of the school system, this report makes clear that any effort to improve the schools cannot succeed until there is an end to human rights violations taking place related to the mistreatment and exclusion of students.”*

A range of community-based organizations collaborated to collect testimonies for this report, including Make the Road by Walking, UPROSE and Sistas on the Rise in NYC. Based on interviews and focus groups with over 80 students, parents and teachers, the report found that in NYC and LA:

- Students report that they are mistreated, ignored and discouraged in the classroom. Half of the students interviewed stated that their teachers *sometimes* or *most of the time* say things that humiliate or insult them, such as calling them stupid or ugly, or telling them they “belong in the ghetto,” and one third said their teachers *rarely* or *never* help them with their problems.
- Schools impose lengthy and repeated suspensions for minor infractions, including being late to school, getting into arguments with students, or even giving a teacher “a look,” that add up to significant educational losses and push students out of school. In NYC Impact Schools in 2004, after harsher zero-tolerance policies were implemented, suspensions rose in one year by an average of 22 percent.
- Over half of students interviewed in NYC and LA said guidance counselors are *rarely* or *never* involved when they are disciplined, while two thirds said police were involved *sometimes*, *most* or *all of the time*.
- Two thirds of students reported they *never*, *rarely* or only *sometimes* feel safe with the presence of police, while one third felt threatened, many referring to the sight of loaded guns. Students reported that police have used excessive force, including “slamming” students against walls and to the ground.

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- Teachers and students reported that police have humiliated, handcuffed and removed students in their classrooms. Teachers complained about losing input into disciplinary decisions and the discretion to help individual students with problems.

Michelle Fine, Distinguished Professor of Psychology at CUNY Graduate Center said of the report, *"This significant report documents painfully a bi-coastal pattern of shaming, degradation and marginalization of students, educators and parents. Such practices are tearing at the heart of public education. This report is a call to action against the criminalization of urban youth. Young people in city schools yearn to be educated, not incarcerated. We can not continue to betray them."*

"Deprived of Dignity" 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.

Benjamin Tucker, **former Chief Executive in the Office of School Safety and Planning in NYC** said in the report, *"You need to look at the entire school environment – adding a few police officers and removing problem students doesn't fix safety problems in a school in the long-run."* Mr. Tucker said that improving school facilities and leadership was necessary *"to look for solutions to prevent problems rather than just reacting to them."*

On February 27, the Los Angeles Board of Education passed a new discipline policy aimed at reducing suspensions by creating positive behavior support systems to encourage a respectful and productive school environment. Elizabeth Sullivan said, *"The new LA policy represents a positive step toward protecting the right to education for students. We urge New York City public schools to take a similar step and hope for an end to the use of excessive suspensions and the misuse of law enforcement in both school districts."*

There is a growing human rights movement in New York City, with key organizations heading up legislative measures to address issues of city government accountability and discrimination. All of these actions point to the need for the city to adhere to the higher standard of international human rights law for all New Yorkers.

NESRI calls on the LA Board of Education and NYC Chancellor Joel Klein and Mayor Michael Bloomberg to:

- **Implement whole school approaches** to creating welcoming school environments, including reducing class size, improving school facilities, and providing more guidance resources for students.
- **Prioritize counseling and preventive services** in disciplinary policies, and reduce the use suspensions and other exclusionary measures.
- **Remove armed police officers from schools** and make them accountable to educators, as well as establish special guidelines and better training for school safety officers with the participation of students and parents.
- **Expand training and resources for school staff** in behavior management and mediation, and create guidelines and enforcement policies for staff behavior, such as having advocates available to students.
- **Increase student participation** both in developing and implementing discipline and safety policies and in disciplinary processes, such as peer mediation programs, peer juries, and peer mentoring.
- **Ensure parent participation** in disciplinary decisions affecting their children and in developing policy.

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. The organization is funded by private foundations and individual donors.

Speakers at the press conference include:

Elizabeth Sullivan, Education Program Director at NESRI and author of the report

City Council Member Robert Jackson, Chair of Education Committee

Yolanda Santos, parent at PS/MS 278, Former member of President's Council in District 6

Leslie Grant, a recent high school graduate and youth leader at Sistas on the Rise

Ramona Ortega, Director, Human Rights Project, Urban Justice Center

Donna Lieberman, Executive Director, New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU), The NYCLU and ACLU

released a report on March 18 "Criminalizing the Classroom: The Over-Policing of New York City Schools."