

UYC demands: A Respectful and Supportive School Culture

We wait in lines every morning to walk through metal detectors, get talked down to by safety agents at best and harassed at worst, and feel disrespected and like criminals instead of students. Instead of letting our teachers or principals handle minor incidents, safety agents get involved in everything from being late, to talking in class, to uniform violations. This makes us feel like we are in jail, not in school. There is plenty of evidence to support our experiences and therefore our demand for **A Respectful and Supportive School Culture.**

A 2009 study by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, The New York Civil Liberties Union, and Make the Road New York entitled, “Safety with Dignity: Alternatives to the Over-Policing of Schools” pointed to the fact that in many city high schools, a respectful and supportive school culture does not exist:ⁱ

- Many high school students are subjected to metal detectors, zero tolerance policies, and police street tactics
- Metal detectors and the related routine of body scans and bag searches increase student/police interactions, expand police involvement in enforcement of school rules, and create flashpoints for confrontation
- The vast majority of incidents in which school safety agents (SSAs) become involved are disciplinary matters that should be handled by educators under the supervision of the school principal
- The current system fails to define the respective responsibilities of educators and SSAs in school discipline matters and results in grave confusion for police personnel, educators, parents and students

The reality is that student discipline in many of the New York City’s neediest schools is aggressive, intolerant, and harsh. These forms of discipline are simply ineffective: not only do they fail to correct behavioral issues; they damage schools’ ability to educate their students.ⁱⁱ Yang (2009) found that the higher the exclusion rate (the rate by which students are punished and removed from the classroom), the lower the inclusion rate (the rate by which students matriculate to higher education), and that these are key indicators in the assessment of overall school climate.ⁱⁱⁱ On the other hand, whole school positive behavior support has been found to be associated with a decrease in discipline problems (office referrals and school suspensions) and an increase in academic performance.^{iv}

In New York City high poverty high schools have higher student suspension rates than low poverty schools. In 2008, high poverty schools had a 7% suspension rate compared to a 5% suspension rate at low poverty schools.^v

Furthermore, results of a 2010 UYC survey of over 2,000 high school students reveal that:

- **59%** of students somewhat or strongly agreed to seeing adults “playing favorites;” letting some students get away with things they would punish others for
- **Half** somewhat or strongly disagreed that school safety agents (SSAs) speak respectfully to students
- **37%** said that SSAs often or always get involved in the wearing of clothing/items prohibited by school rules
- **40%** said that SSAs often or always get involved in lateness to class or school
- **34%** somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that SSAs physically touch students without reason
- **37%** said that SSAs often or always get involved in verbally disruptive behavior in class
- **42%** said their school does not have, or they haven’t heard of, an adult mediation program
- **31%** said their school does not have, or they haven’t heard of, a peer-to-peer mediation program
- **32%** said that conflict resolution at their school is little or not effective
- **38%** said that suspensions are little or not effective
- **40%** said that arrests are little or not effective

The city’s teachers also attest to the lack of a respectful and supportive school culture. A 2008 study by the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative and Teachers Unite entitled, “Teachers Talk: School Culture, Safety and Human Rights” interviewed over 300 middle and high school teachers in over 130 public schools in New York City.^{vi} Teachers noted that punitive approaches toward children, such as aggressive policing, suspensions and other reactive strategies, actually undermine the human right to education by failing to address the causes of conflict and criminalizes students instead. The study found that:

- **Almost 43%** of teachers said they have only some or no influence over discipline and safety policies, but **86%** said they should have a lot or the most influence
- **Less than 45%** of teachers said that suspensions are effective
- By contrast, **over 80%** of teachers said that classroom management training, conflict resolution, guidance counseling and mediation are effective or very effective for improving discipline
- **Over 59%** of teachers said that SSAs only sometimes treat students with respect, and **13%** said they never or rarely treat students with respect
- **64%** of teachers said that armed NYPD officers in the school building never or rarely make students feel safe
- In schools with permanent metal detectors, **over 91%** of teachers said that students are never, rarely or only sometimes treated with respect when they go through metal detectors
- **67%** of teachers said that metal detectors sometimes or always make students late to first period class

In light of these facts supporting our experiences, our specific proposals regarding our demand for **A Respectful and Supportive School Culture** include:

- ✓ Alternatives to zero tolerance policies and the policing of schools, such as the implementation of non-punitive approaches to discipline, including restorative justice programs, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) programs, and peer mediation programs
- ✓ Principals be granted the authority to remove school safety agents and armed police officers from their buildings, to intervene in student arrests, and to decide how school safety agents are deployed in their buildings
- ✓ The development of supportive and nurturing school environments that would eliminate metal detectors, armed police officers, and safety agents from our schools
- ✓ School safety agents be trained on how to build relationships with students and de-escalate conflicts rather than being trained to work with criminals; and students play a role in the training of safety agents
- ✓ Implementation of a system where safety agents are held accountable for misconduct by the school community, inclusive of students; or the development of a system of accountability for safety agents by a third, unbiased party
- ✓ Transparency in regard to school discipline
- ✓ The elimination of student profiling based on religion, immigration status, or sexual orientation
- ✓ Reduction of any policies that remove students from the classroom/learning environment

ⁱ Ofer, U., Jones, A., Miller, J., Phenix, D., Bahl, T., Mokhtar, C. and Madar, C. (2009). Safety with Dignity: Alternatives to the Over-Policing of Schools. Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, New York Civil Liberties Union, and Make the Road New York. New York City. 55pp.

ⁱⁱ Phenix, D. , Mokhtar, C. and Bahl, T. , 2009-05-25 "Positive School Discipline: Seven Instructive, Real-World Cases from New York City" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the The Law and Society Association, Grand Hyatt, Denver, Colorado.

ⁱⁱⁱ Yang, K.W. (2009). Focus on Policy: Discipline or Punish? Some Suggestions for School Policy and Teacher Practice. Language Arts, Vol. 87, No. 1.

^{iv} Luiselli, J.K., Putnam, R.F., Handler, M.W. and Feinberg, A.B. (2005). Whole-school positive behavior support: Effects on student discipline problems and academic performance. Educational Psychology, (25)2/3, 183-198.

^v Suspension data is for the 2007-08 school year, from the NYSED, Information and Reporting Services, 2009 New York State School Report Cards.

^{vi} Elizabeth Sullivan, E. and Keeney, E. (2008). Teachers Talk: School Culture, Safety and Human Rights. National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, and Teachers Unite. New York City. 52pp.