

## **A Parent-Led Victory in the Fight to End Pushout in Los Angeles Schools June 2007**

*“She also failed English because the teacher keeps kicking her out of class.”*

*“I was sent out of class and I missed two classes. I was sent to the Dean’s office where I didn’t do anything. I just sat there.”*

*“I had a B, but because I was suspended it dropped to an F. The teacher encouraged me to enroll in continuation school.”*

*“They acted like they did not want him there anymore.”*

Testimonials like these, from parents and students in South Los Angeles public schools shed light on the tragedy beneath the so-called “dropout crisis” – an educational system where the lack of positive supports for students and teachers results in actions that hurt already disenfranchised members of the community.

This spring, community organizing groups in South Los Angeles are celebrating a major victory: The adoption of a new, positive, and proactive discipline policy within the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD).

LAUSD is the second largest school district in the nation with over 730,000 students. African American and Latino students make up 85 percent of total district enrollment. But the disciplinary record is skewed: 92 percent of all suspensions are of African American and Latino students, according to data from the 2005-06 academic year. Among African American students, suspension is nearly 2 ½ times greater than their rate of enrollment in the district.

There is a common perception that a contingent of disruptive students with multiple suspensions renders numbers like these “artificially” high. But how the district *defines* and *identifies* student misbehavior, and the characterizations made of the students themselves under such a system, reveals the institutional racism under girding it.

### **Changing a Verb Better Identifies the Crisis**

In 2006, Community Asset Development Re-defining Education (CADRE), an independent, South LA-based parent membership organization, launched a long-term parent-led human rights campaign to stop the pushout crisis impacting South LA youth. CADRE’s first two-year goal was to reduce suspensions, especially in the Local District 7 region of LAUSD where CADRE focuses its work. In order to make the case for policy changes, CADRE set about making South LA parents’ stories and demands for change heard through grassroots human rights documentation and a community “people’s hearing”.

For three months in early 2006, CADRE organizers, parent-leaders and volunteers spent Saturday mornings going door-to-door in targeted neighborhoods to identify households in

which a student had been suspended from a South LA school. When these households were identified, CADRE asked to speak to the parent, and with their consent, proceeded to ask questions that generated important details of their children's experiences, including violations of the international human rights standards of dignity, education, and participation.

- *Do you think that suspension was a fair punishment?*
- *Was your child treated in a respectful manner while he/she was being disciplined?*
- *How did the suspension impact your child's academic progress in school?*
- *Is there something the school could have done to prevent the suspension? What?*
- *Why is the school suspending your child repeatedly?*
- *Did the school take into account your opinion in deciding to suspend your child?*

Over three months, CADRE documented the experiences of nearly 50 families. At the same time, CADRE created a survey to interview students who had not finished regular high school. Nearly 120 such youth were identified and interviewed.

Through their grassroots process, CADRE found preliminary evidence that what many decry as a *dropout* crisis in South LA is instead a *pushout* crisis.

Through their documentation work, CADRE identified key institutional practices in local schools which contribute to pushout:

- *A series of classroom and school removals, that when repeated over time, have the cumulative effect of dismantling educational access;*
- *Suspensions are used as the disciplinary response of first resort;*
- *Involuntary transfers to other schools provide a "fast track" to push students out of school by circumventing the due process requirements necessary for expulsion;*
- *Students lose significant learning time during such transfers, after which many students stop going to school altogether;*
- *Parents were often not informed of classroom removals or suspensions, and were prevented from participating in the determination of appropriate disciplinary measures for their children.*

CADRE found wide resonance with these findings among their members as well as the broader community. Indeed, organizing work in other cities such as Denver also confirms that zero-tolerance and other heavy-handed school district policies are having a negative impact on *all* students, and disproportionately on students of color. CADRE began to build alliances with other local education organizing groups, parent groups, and attorney-advocates around the school discipline/pushout issue, such as LA Voice – PICO, InnerCity Struggle, Parents for Unity, and Public Counsel education attorneys.

### **The Campaign Moves to a Policy Demand**

While CADRE was in the streets documenting discipline policies and their impacts within the Los Angeles schools, they, along with LA Voice – PICO and Public Counsel also submitted a public records access request to review LAUSD's policies, practices, and data surrounding involuntary transfers, known in LAUSD as "opportunity transfers." In April 2006, LAUSD staff

notified CADRE and LA Voice – PICO that a new district-wide student discipline policy was being drafted to address the systemic changes being identified through the research and documentation work.

CADRE parent leaders closely analyzed the draft policy and compared it with their documentation and survey findings. While the policy did not address every aspect of pushout, CADRE came to the conclusion it did enable the necessary, fundamental philosophical shift in school discipline to move schools away from pushout. The proposed LAUSD policy amounted to a new guiding framework of “positive behavior support” for all LAUSD schools to follow and implement through their site-based discipline plans (“Positive behavior support” is a research-based and proven alternative to zero-tolerance approaches to student discipline. For additional background on positive behavior support, see [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org)).

Components of the new framework included proactive student support to prevent behavioral problems, school-wide modeling of appropriate behaviors, development of appropriate discipline strategies and alternatives to suspension, professional development for teachers, collaborative problem-solving involving parents and community resources, data collection, monitoring, and site-based accountability.

Word that LAUSD was working on a new framework and policy for discipline provided the opening for CADRE’s documentation and organizing work to lead to immediate, systemic policy change. While simultaneously preparing to release their findings and campaign demands, CADRE also began meeting with school board members and leadership of the local teachers union, United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), in order to mobilize institutional support for the new discipline policy. In particular, UTLA’s support was going to prove crucial to the policy’s eventual passage, since the proposed framework directly confronted the uneven discipline practices of teachers and the discretion they normally exercise in student discipline decisions.

On June 14, 2006 CADRE held a South LA People’s Hearing to present their findings and ensuing human rights and policy demands to LAUSD. CADRE’s media work led to a front-page advance story appearing the day of this event in the nation’s largest Spanish newspaper, *La Opinión*.

In front of over 100 community members, CADRE parent leaders and a few of their children shared testimony from the documentation interviews and key survey findings. Then, leaders demanded that LAUSD ensure the:

- *Right to Dignity – by creating positive behavior support plans that meet students’ needs and guiding principles for behavior that apply to adults and students.*
- *Right to Education – by reducing suspensions, transfers, and classroom removals, and ensuring that students who are suspended receive educational services.*
- *Right to Participation – by ensuring that parents participate in the development of discipline policies and the decision to suspend their children.*

Next, CADRE demanded that the LAUSD Board of Education immediately adopt the new district-wide student discipline policy as the first step in meeting these human rights.

The parents' presentation was followed by formal responses from a newly-elected school board member interested in discipline policy reform, a progressive teacher from a local middle school and an attorney-advocate with extensive experience in representing families in discipline appeals. Each of the three respondents validated the stories they heard and echoed support for the new policy, pledging to be CADRE's allies in the policy advocacy phase of their campaign.

### **Final Steps to Victory**

CADRE faced an uphill battle in getting the new policy passed. After the People's Hearing, the vote on the discipline policy was postponed due to a lack of support among key school board members and the eventual hiring of a new district superintendent. In the interim, CADRE continued to work with core leaders and active members to strengthen its call for positive behavior support. The entire concept, they found, was controversial, as it challenged popular perception that school discipline needed to get *tougher* and *harsher* rather than more supportive of students, in order to be effective.

During the summer and fall of 2006, and into early 2007, CADRE held demonstrations in front of the district offices; organized parent testimony before the Board of Education; collected letters of support from national advocates and experts; continued meeting with LAUSD staff and UTLA to finalize the policy; met with individual board members and the new superintendent; mobilized allies for the day of the vote; and placed a media story on the issue in advance of the vote.

The turning point came when the *Los Angeles Times* published a story featuring CADRE's perspective on the pushout crisis, and which framed and emphasized the proposed policy's foundation of positive behavior support. The response to the media story revealed that extreme discomfort from the teachers union and some school board members about a prevention-based approach continued to persist underneath the surface. This set off another round of last-minute negotiations with school district staff, school board members, and the teachers union, with CADRE influencing from the periphery. In fact, this lack of consensus postponed the policy vote for another two weeks.

Revisions were made that addressed the concerns of the teachers union while preserving the policy's framework of positive behavior support. CADRE continued to participate in a broad effort to bring a wide range of constituencies on board, including school system administrators and personnel, the teachers, Board members, community groups and advocates. On February 27, 2007 the Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Education unanimously passed the new district-wide student discipline policy – one of the most proactive, comprehensive, and progressive of any major urban school district in the nation.

The new policy is entitled, "Discipline Foundation Policy: School-wide Positive Behavior Support." Using positive behavior support as its foundation, LAUSD's policy is structured so that all district schools will have the support and tools to implement tailored, site-based discipline plans that include the following strategies:

- teaching, modeling, and reinforcing appropriate behaviors;
- involving all stakeholders, especially parents, in collaborative and early intervention to de-escalate inappropriate behaviors;

- supporting students' needs and addressing root causes of misbehavior;
- setting up consequences that are fair, age appropriate, and match the misbehavior being addressed;
- utilizing alternatives to suspensions and transfers; and
- using data to monitor impact and maintain accountability

## **New Policy Signals a Culture Change**

All LAUSD students, regardless of which school they attend, should now be able to receive more support when their behavior interferes with their learning. In other words, the policy creates the opportunity and expectation that behavior problems will be *prevented*, identified earlier, and resolved as much as possible without removing students from classrooms or the school, through suspensions or any other means. The policy also requires schools to involve parents much earlier when behavior problems start and do not improve, in order to avoid more serious consequences. Children at every school will have more support to stay in school and learn.

As this policy is implemented, over time it has the leverage to make schools more welcoming, positive, supportive of children and parents, and focused on keeping all students in school so that they graduate. Changing discipline policy is like changing the environment in a school and how everyone treats each other, children AND adults. Although the discipline policy deals mainly with student behavior, it will also encourage teachers and administrators to work with parents, to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and to deal with conflict in a more productive manner. And, there will be the tools and data to hold everyone accountable for doing so.

“This is a watershed moment in LAUSD,” says Maisie Chin, director of CADRE. In an era of escalating criminalization of youth, people of color and families with the lowest incomes, more and more students are being labeled “disruptive” and removed from schools. Under the auspices of “school discipline” and “school safety,” removal of students from classrooms and schools is often the punishment of first resort.

In the face of public pressure to intensify zero-tolerance practices rather than focus on prevention and supportive intervention, LAUSD’s adoption of this new policy is a significant step towards educational justice, especially in low-income communities of color.

CADRE knows that the work is not done: the policy will only be as strong as its implementation, and the community’s participation in monitoring it.

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*For a copy of LAUSD’s new policy, please go to <http://sped.lausd.net/sepg2s/pdf/bulletin/BUL-3638.0.pdf>.*

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