

# Dignity in Schools Campaign

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A PROJECT OF THE EDUCATION SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE  
CHILDREN'S RIGHTS LITIGATION COMMITTEE OF THE AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION  
IN COLLABORATION WITH STAKEHOLDERS FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY

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## Working together to ensure that children are treated with dignity and fairness in schools

The Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC) unites advocates, parent and student organizers, educators, and lawyers from across the country to **reframe the debate around school discipline** from one that favors the punishment and exclusion of children who have been failed by unsafe and underperforming schools, to a **human rights** perspective that respects the right to education, and advocates for child-centered, dignified reform to **keep children in school**. Too many children are being denied their right to an education because school policies and practices fail to protect their dignity and push children out of school. This has resulted in unacceptably high dropout rates around the country. Our aim is to expose systemic problems in our nation's school systems and provide concrete solutions to improve our collective response to a culture of removal and punishment and to **end pushout in schools**.

### Find out more about the Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC)

- What is pushout?
- What is a human rights perspective?
- DSC Goals and Activities
- Working Group Members

## Children are being pushed out of school

**Pushout** happens when youth are removed (or remove themselves) from a regular school setting as a result of policies and practices that discourage them from remaining in classrooms and on track to receive a regular diploma. We recognize that the problem is broader than any one issue and encompasses much more than simply “zero tolerance” policies, suspension and expulsion rates, or due process procedures. We have found that there are many more policies that can result in a child being pushed out of school. Through the research that we have collected, we find that these practices include:

- Unwelcoming school environments and a lack of relevant and engaging curricula which alienate students and discourage them from attending school;

- Encouragement of low-performing or under-credited students to transfer to a GED program or other alternative setting;
- Under-resourced and over-crowded schools where students do not have access to academic counseling and supportive relationships with teachers to help keep them in school;
- Zero tolerance and other exclusionary discipline policies which remove students from school, such as repeated and excessive suspension and expulsion; placement into low-quality alternative school programs; police intervention and referrals to the juvenile justice system;
- Exclusion of expelled (and sometimes suspended) students from any educational services during the term of the expulsion (or suspension);
- Failure to use effective prevention and intervention for misbehavior, such as counseling, mediation, and positive behavioral support methods, that can address students' needs and keep them in school; and
- The exclusion of students and parents from the development of local school policies and disciplinary processes, as well as due process violations.

## Challenging pushout from a human rights perspective

DSC believes that schools are pushing children out of school by placing arbitrary rules before their education and treating children as “problems” to be dealt with rather than human beings in need of guidance and respect. We believe this stems from a societal failure to recognize education as a substantive right that should not be denied to any child. International human rights treaties, like the Convention on the Rights of the Child, recognize that all children have the right to an education aimed at their “*full development*.” Education must ensure “*that essential life skills are learnt by every child...such as the ability to make well-balanced decisions; to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner; and to develop a healthy lifestyle, good social relationships and responsibility*” (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child). School discipline is an essential part of teaching these necessary behavioral and life skills. In order to do that, discipline must be carried out in a way that protects the dignity of the child, that is just and fair, and that keeps children in school.

The problem of effectively disciplining youth and keeping them in school is multi-faceted – it is legal, social, political, and cultural. We hope to shift the discussion about school discipline to a discussion about equality, dignity, and human rights as opposed to violence, rules, test scores and the criminalization of youth. We feel that this framework more accurately addresses the many aspects of pushout.

## A child-centered approach

DSC believes that effective schools create emotionally and physically safe conditions under which staff can teach, guide, and encourage students to develop their intellectual and interpersonal abilities. Schools are social communities and learning is a social activity. In addition to teaching students to achieve academic success, the educational mission of a school must include teaching students how to develop interpersonal skills so that they can effectively resolve conflicts and accept responsibility. By using restorative rather than reactive discipline and positive behavior support methods, schools could demonstrate respect for children as humans and both restore and renew their goal of making children's education the focus of their mission.

## Dignity in Schools Campaign

### Goals and Objectives:

- To bring together stakeholders who have worked against pushout to better define the problem and to discuss the many issues that are a part of pushout.
- To reframe the problem as a human rights violation stemming directly from the absence of a substantive right to an education.
- To obtain support from educators who are against pushout.
- To develop and present viable alternatives and/or solutions to pushout.

### Activities:

- **Tele-Conference Call Series** - The DSC organizes tele-conference calls that bring advocates, educators, activists and lawyers together from around the country to engage in discussion and debate around pushout and school discipline and to develop strategies for working together. To get involved email [Rosa Hirji](mailto:Rosa.Hirji@dsc.org). Previous tele-conference calls include:
  - **Lessons Learned In the Movement Against Zero Tolerance**, September 26, 2006  
*Bernardine Dohrn, Northwestern University School of Law*  
*Dan Losen, Harvard Civil Rights Project*  
*Hon. Dora F. Olivo, Texas House of Representatives*  
*Sally Lee, Teachers Unite & New York Collective of Radical Educators*  
Discussion about whether there is a connection between zero tolerance practices and the *pushout & dropout* crisis. Speakers presented a history of zero tolerance, the connection

between discipline and the dropout crisis, how it has been manifested in New York, and attempts at reforming zero tolerance in Texas.

- **A Paradigm Shift: Reactive Discipline to Proactive Discipline – “A Proposal to Transform Discipline in the Los Angeles Unified School District,”** May 9, 2006  
*Rochelle Montgomery, Associate General Counsel, LAUSD*  
*Hector Madrigal, Director of Pupil Services, LAUSD*  
Discussion of a school district’s attempt to create a proactive discipline policy based on positive behavior supports. Some participants subsequently wrote letters of support to the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Board of Education.
  
- **Alternatives to Zero Tolerance Policies: Discussions Towards a Model School Discipline Code,** December 1, 2005  
*Nancy Riestedberg, Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning*  
*Liz Sullivan, National Economic and Social Rights Initiative*  
Discussion of two alternative perspectives on school discipline: restorative justice and human rights.
  
- **IDEA '04 and School Discipline: Is the use of zero tolerance and school removal appropriate in the discipline of students with special education needs?** July 7, 2005  
*Jose L. Martin, Esq., Richards Lindsay and Martin*  
*Sherri S. Sobel, Referee, Los Angeles County Juvenile Court*  
*Russell Skiba, Ph.D., Indiana University School of Education*  
Discussion on the appropriateness of the new law, the legal and practical implications for discipline, and the impact of public comment on the proposed regulations.
  
- **Research Project** - The DSC is developing a website to share information about the pushout problem and build alliances for combating pushout among advocates, educators, activists and lawyers across the country. To get involved email [Liz Sullivan](mailto:Liz.Sullivan@ednet.edu). We are working on three projects to gather information for the website:
  - *Research on Pushout* – we are compiling summaries of research studies, news articles and advocacy reports to better understand how and why students are being pushed out of school and to explore the link between discipline and pushout.
  
  - *Research on Effective Alternatives* – we are compiling summaries of data-based studies and guides on effective school and district models that prevent pushout and take positive approaches to discipline, and developing analysis for how the frameworks of human rights

and restorative justice can inform positive alternatives for schools.

- *Research on Legal and Advocacy Strategies* – we are gathering information at the local level from advocates, organizers, educators and lawyers about effective policy, legislative and organizing strategies for how to combat pushout.
- **National Conference** – The DSC is planning a national conference to expand on our initial conversations around pushout, to present the research we have gathered and highlight current work, and to develop solutions through a collaborative process.

## Who participates in the DSC campaign?

The DSC has a Working Group made up of advocates, educators, lawyers and organizers from around the country who help to shape the work and direction of the DSC. Working group members participate in conference calls to plan campaign activities and can get involved in our active projects. For more information on how you can get involved send an email to [Rosa Hirji](#) or [Liz Sullivan](#).

The Working Group includes:

Christine Agaiby, J.D., Alternatives, Inc., [www.alternativesyouth.org](http://www.alternativesyouth.org)

Zenaida Alonzo, Law Project of the Chicago Coalition For the Homeless

Sarah Biehl, Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago

Angela A. Ciolfi, JustChildren

Jim Freeman and Monique Dixon, Advancement Project, [www.advancementproject.org](http://www.advancementproject.org)

Rosa Hirji, Chair of Education Subcommittee, and CADRE, [www.cadre-la.org](http://www.cadre-la.org)

Monica Llorente, Bluhm Legal Clinic at Northwestern School of Law

Daniel Losen, Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, [www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu](http://www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu)

Ellen Raider, Independent Commission on Public Education, [www.icope.org](http://www.icope.org)

Susan Sandler, Justice Matters!, [www.justicematters.org](http://www.justicematters.org)

Liz Sullivan, National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI), [www.nesri.org](http://www.nesri.org)

Lori Turner, Equal Justice Works Fellow

Jenny Weisz, Tufts University

Wallace C. Winter, Legal Assistance Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago