

**REPORT FROM THREE COMMUNITY FORUMS HELD APRIL 2005
TO GAIN PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL DISCIPLINE**



**Stopping the Downward Spiral
for Our Children /
Redirecting the School-to-Prison Pipeline**

Presented to

CPS President Michael Scott on May 20, 2005

from POWER-PAC

Parents Organized to Win, Educate, and Renew – Policy Action Council



Plug into the Power of PARENTS

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Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew – Policy Action Council (POWER-PAC): Report to CPS President Michael Scott on Three Community Forums Held to Gain Parents’ Perspectives on School Discipline

Chicago Public School parent:

- *“My son never had any problems in school until the 6th grade. In 6th grade, his teacher began to give him marks for anything she thought disrupted the classroom. It seemed to him like he was the only kid she ever noticed doing anything wrong. If you got 2 or 3 marks, you got detention, but they don’t tell the parent that your son has detention. My child never had problems with other teachers, but this teacher made him feel like he was a bad kid and that he never did anything right. He began to believe it and it lowered his self-esteem. He became really angry and began to act worse. He ended up repeating 6th grade. In that one year, he went from a really good student to an angry, disruptive kid”*

Other comments from parents:

- *“My son was suspended for kissing a girl.”*
- *“My foster daughter was suspended for cursing in Spanish; she doesn’t speak Spanish.”*
- *“My child was suspended for coming in late for lunch; she had been meeting with a teacher.”*
- *“My niece was suspended from kindergarten for 5 days for fighting in the lunchroom.”*
- *“My child, who has ADHD, was suspended for fighting, but what she really needs is an IEP and perhaps an alternative school; the school just does not know how to handle her.”*

SUMMARY

These are just some of the experiences reported by parents at three community forums hosted by Parents Organized to Win, Educate, and Renew - Policy Action Council (POWER-PAC) this past April – on the West Side, the South Side, and the Near Northwest Side – to gain their perspectives on school discipline problems and solutions. In all, 160 adults participated. Participating parents’ experiences with school discipline suggest considerable opportunities for improvement. In brief:

- 37% of the families had had a child suspended; and more than 4 out of 5 of those families thought the suspension was not appropriate and not handled well. In more than 2 out of 3 suspensions, the parents were not notified appropriately of the suspension – instead they heard from their child, from another parent, or only learned of it after the fact. In a quarter of those who were notified, it was because the parent happened to be in the school when the suspension occurred.
- Parents describe a progression of ineffective practice that feels like a downward spiral for their children as the children go from “bad to worse”, with boys particularly being harmed. First, many parents commented that schools “do not know how to deal with their energy”: 28 of 33 elementary schools represented by the parents have no recess; teachers struggle to

deal with boisterous children. Children are given detentions and become labeled “bad”, events that increase hostility and alienation. Suspensions follow and, later, grade repetition and dropout.

- Parents are not engaged as partners in the process of creating disciplined learning environments in schools. They are not notified directly of problems with their children. Only 1 in 10 reported that someone had ever attempted to explain the Uniform Discipline Code to them.
- Parents recognize the difficulties educators face: they acknowledge that some schools are seriously out of control, and they are as concerned about school safety as they are about just school discipline. They seek greater collaboration with educators in building safe and effective schools.
- Participating parents overwhelmingly support POWER-PAC’s five major recommendations for school discipline reform, which are:
 - End out of school suspensions.
 - Re-instate recess and other breaks in the school day.
 - Institute restorative justice and prevention programs such as conflict resolution.
 - Provide more training for parents and teachers on discipline policies.
 - Involve parents (and youth) in oversight and accountability.

Background information about POWER-PAC and the Community Forums.

POWER-PAC is a citywide group of parent leaders from Austin, Englewood, West Town, and other Chicago communities that works to improve the quality of their children’s schools and communities, founded nearly two years ago. POWER-PAC is staff supported by Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI). POWER-PAC has been particularly successful in improving safety in and around public schools and in increasing after and community school programs, with parent volunteers and parent leaders highly involved in both.

Within the past year, POWER-PAC launched its *Elementary Justice Campaign: Redirecting the School-to-Prison Pipeline*. Parent leaders identified overly punitive – and counterproductive – school discipline practices as a significant problem that endangers their children’s futures, and they developed the *Elementary Justice* campaign to make school discipline practices fairer and more productive in Chicago Public Schools. Believing also that there is significant room for improvement in school discipline practice and after meeting with POWER-PAC leaders, CPS President Michael Scott asked the POWER-PAC parents to convene other parents citywide so that he could gain a better sense from them the extent of the problem and what can be done to resolve it.

POWER-PAC parent leaders developed the agenda for the forums and created the questions used to gather the data presented in this report. They were also trained as “listening group” leaders and acted in this role at the forums, for the expressed purpose of gaining parent’s perspectives on school discipline practice.

Location, participation, format

Three meetings were held, at which 160 parents participated.

- April 14 – West Side /Austin Town Hall
 - 68 Total Attendance – 50 adults in the “listening sessions”
- April 28 – North-Northwest Side / Association House of Chicago
 - 91 Total Attendance – 70 adults in the “listening sessions”
- April 28 – South Side / Southwest Women Working Together
 - 62 Total Attendance – 40 adults in the “listening sessions”

POWER-PAC distributed flyers about the community forums at over 30 elementary schools. The forums were listed in the calendar of several community papers. POWER-PAC members also invited the following organizations to attend and inform parents regarding the forums: Albany Park Neighborhood Council, Bethany Hospital, Bethel New Life, Blocks Together, Circle Family Care, Designs for Change, Hope for Youth, Logan Square Neighborhood Association, Loretto Hospital, Mary McDowell Settlement House, Northwest Neighborhood Federation, Sankofa Safe Child Initiative, Southwest Women Working Together, Southwest Youth Collaborative, Southside United, Trinity Resources Unlimited, West Side Health Authority, West Side Holistic Family Services and West Town Leadership United.

In all, 160 adults with children in 43 Chicago Public Schools participated in the forums. Of them, 59% were African American, 29% of Mexican descent, 9% Puerto Rican and the remaining 3% included: 2 Guatemalan, 1 Filipino, and 1 white.

As mentioned above, the format of the forums was established and guided by POWER-PAC parents themselves, utilizing COFI’s tried and true methods for engaging parents fully in the decisions that affect them. The forums began with introductions and “story telling” – a brief statement of why each parent came to the meeting. POWER-PAC leaders then led three focused discussions in small “listening groups” – 1) inviting specific experiences and comments on suspensions, 2) determining the extent to which schools help parents understand the Uniform Discipline Code and use recess (which POWER-PAC feels is an important discipline problem prevention strategy), and 3) inviting experiences and comments on any other school discipline issue parents wished to raise. The forums concluded with a discussion of POWER-PAC’s recommendations for change, inviting parents’ ideas for strengthening and prioritizing these recommendations.

FINDINGS FROM THE FORUMS

Parents' perspectives on suspensions.

Out of school suspensions were widely used in the schools parents' children attended. Of the participants, 37% reported having a child suspended from school. Children were suspended for fighting (26%), cursing or talking back (13%), hitting (10.5%), disturbing other children (10.5%), misbehaving in the lunch room (8%), defacing public property (5%); a few children were suspended for very grievous (possessing weapons, dealing drugs) and less grievous (not finishing homework, not having a pass) offenses.

These suspensions were not distributed equally across the different races represented at the forums. 52% of African-American parents reported that at least one of their children had been suspended, of which only 6% of the parents thought that the suspension was the appropriate way to handle the situation. Additionally, Puerto Rican children were suspended more often than their counterparts of Mexican descent. 33% of Puerto Ricans reported having a child suspended, while only 10% of the families of Mexican descent reported at least one of their children had been suspended.

Participating parents expressed great concern about school safety and the legitimate need of schools to control the children in their care. But they raised several serious reservations about out-of-school suspensions:

1. Suspensions are inimical to the goals of educational institutions. As one parent said, "How can my child learn if he is not in school?"
2. Suspensions are counterproductive. Many parents observed that suspensions contributed directly to their children's alienation from school and ultimately to school failure. One parent: "Following each suspension, my child's self-esteem goes down. He once was an over-achiever, now he does not care. His grades have gone down. This is the 1st year he is getting an F."
3. Suspensions of kindergarteners and others in the early grades are not age appropriate: children at that age cannot connect the behavior to the "discipline".
4. Children lack due process in the decision to suspend. Several parents said that the decision to suspend their child was simply the result of "he said/she said", and they firmly believed that their child had not committed the behavior that led to the suspension. Only 7 parents thought their children's suspensions were handled appropriately. One parent's experience: "It <the suspension decision> is one sided: the child is reacting and you aren't dealing with his reaction."
5. Parents are not appropriately notified of suspensions or engaged in actions to prevent their occurrence. Less than a third of the parents whose children were suspended were appropriately notified; three-fourths of those through phone calls, and one-fourth because they were at the school when the suspension occurred. "I found out about my son's suspension from his sister: she was humiliated when it was announced in front of the entire student body."

Length of school day and recess.

Many participating parents found their children's schools unable to manage the energy levels of their very normal children. A particular concern is the long, sedentary, controlled school day: all of the schools represented had six hour or nearly six hour school days and very few structured in time for physical and social activity away from the classroom.

Of critical concern was the lack of recess: 28 of 33 elementary schools attended by parents' children did not offer recess. Our findings showed that magnet schools and schools in more affluent and white neighborhoods were much more likely to offer recess than neighborhood schools in low-income communities of color. Of the schools represented, one of the few neighborhood schools that offers recess is the Nicholson School in Englewood where parents organized and met with their Principal – successfully getting recess reinstated this school year.

Another concern was “silent” lunchrooms where children are not allowed to talk during lunch. In short, parents recognize that these two practices are developmentally inappropriate and believe that they directly give rise to unruly behavior.

The Uniform Discipline Code.

Only 14% of parents addressing a question about the communication of the Uniform Discipline Code said that a school official had tried to explain the Code to them; this conversation typically occurred after their child had been accused of some infraction.

Nearly 2/3rds of parents participating in the meetings acknowledged that they did not fully understand the Code. Even the title given to the Discipline Code evokes confusion as many parents think the “Uniform Discipline Code” deals only with what the children wear to school.

Overall feedback of parents on school discipline.

Many parents describe a downward spiral: their children misbehave in the classroom; they are given detentions as a punishment; peers begin to belittled them and they are regarded by teachers as “bad”; and they become angry and alienated, giving rise to worse behavior and to school failure. Parents of special needs children were particularly articulate about this spiral:

“My child was excited about a field trip, but when she gets to school she is told she can't go because she ‘probably will cause trouble’. Teachers tried to get her out of the school play because of her behavior in other classes (she is labeled as ‘bad’ and has ADHD). My child needs an IEP and additional services, not this. And all the time she is having problems in school, I am there, as a volunteer, and no one talked to me.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

POWER-PAC parents had developed a five-point platform for change that they invited feedback on from parents participating in the April forums. Parents at the forums overwhelmingly endorsed this platform and expanded on its ideas. It calls for CPS to:

- End out of school suspensions.
- Re-instate recess and breaks in the school day.
- Institute restorative justice and prevention programs such as conflict resolution.
- Provide more training for parents and teachers on discipline policies.
- Involve parents (and youth) in oversight and accountability.

1. End out-of-school suspensions.

POWER-PAC believes that the Uniform Discipline Code is too punitive of a School Discipline Policy especially for elementary school children. It does not focus enough on educating the children about their behavior, correcting the behavior, and “restoring justice” or “repairing the harm.”

The first step in changing the Uniform Discipline Code is to end the over-dependence on out-of school suspensions, except as a last resort where the safety of the students or school staff are at stake.

Catalyst, December 2004, Suspensions Up in CPS: *“Chicago elementary schools are cracking down on discipline problems by suspending a record number of students. Between 1994 and 2003, the number of elementary students who were suspended more than doubled to over 20,000. African-American students made up the largest disproportionate share of the suspended students.”*

The community forums found that more than 37% of the families had had a student suspended and, reinforcing Catalyst’s findings, African-American families had the largest percentage of the suspensions.

Collaboration on Social and Emotional Learning at University of Illinois-Chicago (CASEL) On-Line Newsletter, March 2005: *“Critics of student suspension say it is a reactive and ineffective approach that fails to address the root causes of misbehavior. They argue that prevention practices that give students skills for handling conflict, classes that encourage parents to provide consistent discipline at home, an engaging curriculum, a good school climate, and clear behavioral expectations at school are a more effective approach.”*

Anytime a child is suspended out-of-school, he or she is not learning and, for many, being out-of-school may be putting them more in harms way. Suspensions create a downward spiral for too many children ending in academic failure and drop-out.

We urge the Chicago Public Schools to create an in-school suspension/detention policy and other alternative discipline policies that allow children to continue to learn even when they are away from the classroom.

Parents suggested the following alternatives to suspension:

- *“Students could be assigned to do restorative community service (such as repainting a wall that a student defaced) rather than being given a suspension.”*
- *“Instead of giving the child a suspension, parents should be allowed to spend the day with their student.”*
- *“Students should be given in-house suspension, where they actually learn instead of just sitting there.”*

2. Reinstate recess and other breaks in the school day.

POWER-PAC supports giving elementary school children the time to socialize and exercise during recess in order to prevent behavior problems that lead to discipline issues. Parents believe that, if children are given time to “let off some steam”, they will be better learners and less disruptive in the classroom. Teachers will also have a break so that they can be more refreshed as they teach.

We urge the Chicago Public Schools to find a way to reinstate recess in all elementary schools across the city and make this CPS policy, rather than leaving it up to each individual school. By working together with the Chicago Teacher’s Union, principals and teachers, the school day should be expanded citywide to allow for breaks in the school day, including recess and expanded physical education, music and art classes.

A recent study by Catalyst, found that 90% of CPS elementary schools don’t have recess, whereas 30 years ago recess was a school norm, and still is in the more affluent parts of the city. Catalyst also found that schools that have expanded their day to include recess have seen positive changes. Charlotte Stoxstell, Principal of Bethune Elementary School which recently reinstated recess, stated, *“There’s more teaching and learning going on in the afternoon. The teachers aren’t tired. The kids aren’t tired.”* (Catalyst, April 2005.) This policy will benefit both teachers and students in the long run.

As the pressure for students to do well on standardized tests has increased, the pressure on students and teachers has increased. Students spend more time drilling for the tests and this means less time for creativity and expression. Students can become disengaged and need breaks, such as recess and gym class to use their physical energy. They also need classes such as music and art to foster their creative intelligence and teach them multiple ways of self-expression.

Apart from recess, lunchtime is one of the only times where children are encouraged to socialize and learn social skills. But, we found that many children end up in the discipline process because of incidents that happen in poorly supervised lunchrooms and the response of some schools has been to implement “silent lunches” that ban students from talking at lunch. Part of learning is social and emotional learning. Silent lunches make school more like a prison than an educational institution. **We urge the Chicago Public Schools to ban silent lunches in schools and ensure that all lunchrooms are staffed and monitored effectively.**

Finally, in some schools, parents noted that, while there is no regularly scheduled recess for children, teachers have the option to “grant” recess as they see fit. Teachers then use recess as an incentive for behavior. If the students are well behaved they are allowed to go out for recess. If they are not well behaved they lose that opportunity. Parents believe this is often counterproductive and counter-intuitive since providing recess serves as an outlet for children’s energy and contributes to better behavior in the classrooms.

3. Institute restorative justice and prevention programs such as conflict resolution.

POWER-PAC believes that discipline policies within the Chicago Public Schools place too much emphasis on punishment instead of on educating the student on the harm they caused and helping them correct and repair the situation.

We ask CPS to begin pilot testing discipline prevention programs, such as conflict resolution and restorative justice programs, that help students understand the consequences of his/her behavior and teach them the skills they need to avoid taking those actions again. We urge CPS to work with POWER-PAC to identify schools where CPS can fund and implement these pilot programs and demonstrate the impact of prevention and restorative justice approaches on elementary school discipline.

It is important to begin as early as kindergarten teaching students appropriate ways to deal with their feelings and conflict resolution skills. This will give them the tools to be in control of their actions and to handle conflict without resorting to behavior not acceptable in the classrooms.

One program POWER-PAC has identified that we believe is a good model of a discipline prevention curriculum is *Peace Games* out of Boston: *“Peace Games is built on the foundation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)... The guiding principal of both Peace Games and SEL is that raising children’s awareness of their emotions - and how to communicate them – will help them become more caring and conscientious people. Peace Games’ develops this emotional awareness through structured and engaging activities that focus students on celebrating diversity and resolving conflict in nonviolent ways.”* (Greater Good, Fall 2004, Gaming the School System.)

In addition to prevention programs, schools need to teach students to recognize the harm that their behavior causes when they act out and how to repair that harm. Discipline should focus on the students learning these skills rather than being punished. “Restorative Justice” programs, like the peer juries and peer mediation that are offered in some CPS high school and peacemaking circles teach children about the consequences of their behavior and help them learn from their mistakes. As Robert Spicer of Community Justice for Youth Initiative, a restorative justice program stated, *“Children need to learn from their mistakes and understand that they are not the mistake.”*

4. Provide more training for parents and teachers on discipline policies.

POWER-PAC believes that parents should be more educated on the Uniform Discipline Code so that they can understand the process and insure that all parties are following the process.

While parents and administrators work together to revise the Uniform Discipline Code, careful attention should be paid to making the language easier to understand for parents. In addition, training on the Uniform Discipline Code should be offered to all parents and students throughout the city and it should be mandatory for all school staff.

The number of parents that haven't read or don't understand the UDC is alarming. More than 2/3rds of the parents present at the forums reported that they do not understand the Code. It becomes especially difficult for parents to communicate with teachers and administrators if they aren't speaking the same language. The language in the UDC needs to be made more parent-friendly so that people of all educational backgrounds can communicate about the education of their children.

Another reason why very few parents fully understand the discipline code is because it has never been explained to them. Only 14% of the parents had received training on some portion of the Uniform Discipline Code in their whole time as parents of Chicago Public School students. It is necessary to have training for parents in which CPS provides the materials, outlines and trainers so that the trainings are standard for parents throughout this city. CPS should ensure that this training occurs across the city.

In addition, administrators and educators should be trained on the Uniform Discipline Code. This should be mandatory for all teachers and principals. Parents suggested this training be held together with parents. If all adults involved in a situation are trained on the UDC it will be easier for parents and administrators to communicate regarding their child's discipline and for parents to ensure that the proper steps are being taken with their child.

5. Involve parents (and youth) in oversight and accountability

POWER-PAC believes that parents can and should play a vital role in setting, reviewing and overseeing discipline policies and that they bring a unique perspective to discussions about discipline. Parents and youth should be involved in the revision of the Uniform Discipline Code and creation of policies that, as seen in this report, have drastic effects on their families and lives.

Parents noted that presently there is very little accountability for teachers and administrators in adhering to the Uniform Discipline Code. The policies are enforced very differently from school to school and, many times, from situation to situation even in the same school. All too often teachers and principals ignore the first steps in the Uniform Discipline Code and jump to the more severe punishments. Suspensions, expulsions and calling the police are too frequently the first steps in disciplining even our youngest children.

POWER-PAC urges the Chicago Public Schools to establish oversight and accountability structures that include parents (and youth) at the citywide, regional and school levels. CPS should regularly provide data to Local School Councils, parents and the community on discipline for each school (for example, monthly reports to the LSC). Parents can thereby help ensure that each school follows the steps described in the Uniform Discipline Code.

Many parents also noted a lack of due process for their children, reporting that many times their child was reacting to the behavior of other children, but only their child was punished. POWER-PAC recommends that, as part of the Uniform Discipline Code, schools are required to speak with all children and adults involved in any incident prior to disciplining them.

And, as the report shows, 2/3rds of parents whose children were suspended were not informed directly by the school. Parents too often learn that their child is having discipline problems too

late in the process. CPS should put into place a system to ensure that all parents are fully informed of any disciplinary action their child has received – early in the process.

Additional recommendations from parents at the community forums:

- *“The school should send a piece of paper home with the child that says exactly what happened with the child, how the school plans to discipline the child. The parent must sign this sheet and send it back to school. If they disagree they can tell the school this. The parent also should have to make right what is wrong. For example, if the child breaks a window the parent is responsible for this.”*
- *“The teachers, staff and students should have an agreement or contract that they will treat each other with respect. The teachers need to listen to what the children are saying and investigate their side of the story. Teachers should have their own code of discipline, to punish them if they do not follow the rules. Teachers absent over 20 days (giving rise to too many substitutes) should be sanctioned.”*
- *“Over-crowding of classrooms is a problem for discipline, as are non-stop substitute teachers (several parents mentioned this problem) and the difficulty in getting good teachers to come to our communities. Teachers need training on social, emotional, societal problems. We also need classroom assistants in all classrooms.”*
- *“We need greater parent, student, and community involvement in discipline. Students beginning at the 7th grade should be involved in <formulating> discipline policy.”*
- *“We need something like anger management, especially for boys, beginning at the kindergarten level. And art classes reintroduced to classrooms – stuff they <children> like!”*
- *“We need much more training for teachers and for security in dealing constructively with children and on effective school and classroom management. And we need more teachers and security who understand and/or live in our communities.”*