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National Association of Social Workers

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DATE: April 10, 2013  
TO: House Health, Education & Welfare  
RE: In Support of H-5754: Method to analyze data regarding the imposition of school discipline, focusing on whether discipline imposed has a disproportionate impact on students based on race or ethnicity.

In my professional opinion, out of school suspension is the most ineffective method of discipline on the books, so to speak. In my career I have worked over 20 years in various settings with at-risk youth. For 17 years I developed and operated an alternative elementary, middle and high school, for three years I was engaged as a Director (Principle ) of a public alternative middle/high school. Also during all those years, I also contracted services with public schools to work with at-risk students who had received numerous suspensions from schools.

Through my professional experiences, I have come to several conclusions:

**1. Suspensions do not do have significant impact on behavior.** During my tenure, I implemented what I called the “Natural Consequence System”. Before a consequence could be applied the disciplinarian had to answer yes to three questions. First, **did the consequence directly relate to the targeted behavior.** Second, **did the consequence have a reasonable chance of changing the behavior?** Last, **could the consequence be carried out?** If one did not answer “yes” to all three questions, then the consequence was inappropriate, except in situations where safety was of concern or the consequence was not in the control of the disciplinarian.

In all my years under the above criteria, out of school suspensions were almost never used and only for safety reasons. They were not needed.

**2. Out of school suspensions are ineffective with the vast majority of students.** Out of school suspensions seldom change the targeted behavior and only increases the animosity of the student, parents and community. If students, who have a tendency to react to perceived injustices to their situation by “acting out” in school, they will most likely “act out” in the community when out on suspension.

**3. Out of school suspensions not related to safety concerns are, in many cases, in direct conflict with the basic premise of a free and effective public education.** If a child is not in school, they are not learning.

In my opinion, we should have a “**near Zero Tolerance**” for out of school suspensions. In most cases, they are not about the child, but about the inability of the system to find alternative effective consequences that are geared to improve the student’s learning experience. I do not speak from lack of experiences. I have worked literally with hundreds of the most difficult situations involving student behavior and school systems and have almost always found effective alternatives. As for the purpose of this bill, I also can vouch that out of school suspensions do occur at a higher rate with minorities as well as students who live in poverty.

All life has value at all times. Pushing students away from the very thing they need most, education, only will reenforce an attitude already ingrained in them; that they are “not wanted” and not valued! The combination from these two factors, at such a formative age, results in a much greater burden to society and to an absolute waste of potential in the individual student.

Respectfully Submitted,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Richard N. Harris".

Richard N. Harris, LICSW  
Executive Director