



Week of April 9-13, 2012

## Government's Concern for Racial Disparities is 'Back in Business'

by UCLA IDEA

In California schools, African-American male students with disabilities are far more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts, according to a new report by The Center for Civil Rights Remedies at the Civil Rights Project/*Proyecto Derechos Civiles* at UCLA.

This report is significant because it illuminates how some groups of young people are subject to unconscionable discrimination. It's also important to place the report in the context of recent history. In 1968, the federal Office of Civil Rights Data Collection began collecting data on disparities in the way schools treated students in regards to their rights and opportunities—including how different groups of students were disciplined. The George W. Bush administration suspended this data collection, and little was done to collect information to inform the public or policymakers about the status of students' education rights.

Two years ago, Russlynn Ali, who heads the Obama administration's education rights office, announced, "We are back in business," and pledged that the administration would be paying close attention to "racial disparities in the availability and quality of high-school college-preparatory classes and on the differences in how students of different races are disciplined in public schools."

The UCLA Civil Rights Project, relying on newly released data from the Office of Civil Rights, looked at nearly 500 districts, and reported its findings in *Suspended Education in California*. The report reveals that more than 400,000 students were suspended from school at least once—and more than 750,000 total—during the 2009-10 year. Minority students and those with disabilities were suspended up to five times the rate of their counterparts. When the two are combined, the picture looks even worse. In San Bernardino City Unified, 59 percent of African-American male students with disabilities were suspended. By contrast, 14 percent of white students without disabilities were suspended.

The California Senate and Assembly are both considering bills to address school discipline, including collecting more data, using alternative disciplinary measures before resorting to suspensions, and addressing behaviors in schools with high suspension rates overall and/or for particular subgroups, like race.

A current focus on zero-tolerance policies and an overreliance on suspensions for "willful defiance"—which can include talking back, being tardy, missing homework—is receiving particular attention. "We know what happens. A kid who doesn't have to be suspended, who is suspended, stays home, falls further behind in school, is unsupervised, has a much greater chance of dropping out, and becomes a statistic," said Sen. Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento, whose SB 1235 would require schools with suspension rates of 25 percent or higher to implement alternative discipline measures. SB 1235 made it out of Senate Education Committee Wednesday.

-more-

For links to news articles, read *Themes in the News* online.

[www.ucla-idea.org](http://www.ucla-idea.org)



# THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of April 9-13, 2012

Page 2

Another bill in process, AB 2242, would prohibit students from being suspended from school for lesser offenses of "willful defiance."

The progress is welcome news to a number of community groups and civil rights organizations that have been pushing for a "restorative justice" approach over zero-tolerance policies. ***Redefining Dignity in our Schools*** is a report by Public Counsel, which looked at Los Angeles Unified's implementation of "School-Wide Positive Behavior Support." When fully implemented, activists hope this evidence-based approach can result in a 60-percent reduction in disciplinary problems and suspensions, by focusing on behavior, interventions and corrective responses. Creating safer and more inclusive school environments may also lead to improved academic achievement, reduced dropout rates and higher teacher retention.

Helping schools reach these new goals, the California Endowment announced Thursday a \$1 million fund to help school districts implement alternative measures and strategies to reduce suspension rates. A website will be created to provide tools, research and best practices.

####