

Research Brief

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# Safe and Participatory Public Schools



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Education, and Access

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John Rogers is an associate professor in UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies and the Director of UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education and Access (IDEA). He also serves as the faculty co-director of UCLA's Principal Leadership Institute. Rogers studies public engagement and community organizing as strategies for equity-focused school reform and democratic renewal. He draws extensively on the work of John Dewey to explore the meaning of, and possibilities for, democratic education today. Rogers is the co-author (with Jeannie Oakes) of *Learning Power: Organizing for Education and Justice* (Teachers College Press). Professor Rogers received his Ph.D. in Education from Stanford University and his B.A. in Public Policy and African American Studies from Princeton University.



# Safe and Participatory Public Schools

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The California State Assembly is presently considering AB 2034 which would prohibit school districts, county offices of education (COEs), or charter schools that elect to fingerprint volunteers from allowing individuals who have been convicted of specific sex, drug or violent offenses to volunteer in schools.

This policy brief aims to inform policymakers and the general public about research on two topics related to the proposed legislation: a) the racial mismatch between drug users and drug offenders; b) the importance of volunteering to school outcomes, including student safety.

## The Racial Mismatch between Illicit Drug Users and Convicted Drug Offenders

Federally sponsored household surveys conducted over a series of years have established that there is very little difference across racial groups in reported use of illicit drugs. In the 2008 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, whites were slightly more likely than African Americans to report illicit drug use in their lifetime (49% to 42%) while African Americans were slightly more likely than whites to report illicit drug use in the past month (9.8% to 8.5%). Whites also were more likely than any other racial group to report heavy use of alcohol.<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite roughly comparable levels of drug use, African Americans are several times more likely than whites to have been arrested and convicted of a drug offence.<sup>2</sup> For example, in California, African Americans are more than 3 times as likely as whites to have been arrested for a drug offence.<sup>3</sup>

The racial mismatch between illicit drug users and convicted drug offenders means that legislation excluding drug offenders from volunteering in public schools would have a racially disparate effect. A far higher proportion of African Americans than whites would be prohibited from volunteering, despite roughly comparable rates of drug use. Given the high levels of racial segregation in California public schools, restrictions on volunteering would be concentrated in a small number of racially isolated schools.<sup>4</sup>

## The Importance of Volunteering in Public Schools

Many Americans volunteer in their local public schools. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than one in four adults volunteered in education or youth service in 2009.<sup>5</sup> Volunteer rates for parents of public school children are even higher. In the most recent National Household Education Survey (conducted by the United States Department of Education), almost half of all parents reported volunteering or serving on a committee at their child's school.<sup>6</sup>



Volunteering in public schools, along with other forms of community and parent involvement, contributes to a number of valued educational and social outcomes. When parents and community members are engaged in schools, students like school more, stay in school longer, and perform better on a variety of achievement measures.<sup>7</sup> Volunteering also supports school improvement and informed democratic participation as parents and community members learn about school conditions and problems in the course of their volunteer work.<sup>8</sup> And, volunteers provide valuable labor that stretches the capacity of schools, particularly in periods of fiscal restraint.

Finally, it is important to note that volunteerism contributes to school safety. Volunteers can serve as another set of eyes on the playground and help create a clean and well-kept school environment—key factors in sustaining a sense of caring and school safety.<sup>9</sup> Further, the presence of volunteers inside of schools can foster “social closure” in which students hear the same behavioral expectations from educators and community members.<sup>10</sup>

## Policy Implications

What are the policy implications of research on racial disparities in drug convictions and the value of volunteerism to public education?

First, policymakers should avoid actions that will limit or discourage parents and community members from volunteering in their local public schools. AB 2034 would exclude a disproportionate number of African Americans from volunteering in public schools and these exclusions are likely to be concentrated in a small number of racially isolated schools that need strong parental engagement. Anecdotal evidence from Parent-Teacher organizations around the country suggests that the mere presence of exclusionary laws depresses parental volunteerism.<sup>11</sup>

Second, policymakers should support conditions that encourage parents and community members to volunteer in their local public schools. Volunteerism is enhanced when schools: a) create a welcoming environment; b) offer translation services; c) match volunteer opportunities with parents’ work and childcare schedules; d) provide volunteers with appropriate training and meaningful roles to play.

Third, policymakers should communicate the value of school volunteers to public education and the state. California stands to benefit from an expansion of school volunteerism. Policymakers should let the public know what an important role it can play in improving schools and reinvigorating civic life.



## Endnotes

- 1 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2009). *Results from the 2008 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings* (Office of Applied Studies, NSDUH Series H-36, HHS Publication No. SMA 09-4434). Rockville, MD. Accessed at <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/nsduh/2k8nsduh/2k8Results.cfm#2.3>
- 2 Comparable statistics on arrest and conviction rates for Latinos and Asian Americans were not reported.
- 3 Fellner, Jamie. (2009). *Drug Arrests and Race in the United States*. Human Rights Watch, New York, New York.
- 4 Rogers, J., Oakes, J., Fanelli, S., Medina, D., Valladares, S., Terriquez, V. (2007). *California Educational Opportunity Report 2007: The Racial Opportunity Gap*. University of California/All Campus Consortium for Research on Diversity and UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access.
- 5 Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2010). *Volunteering in the United States, 2009*. <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.t04.htm>
- 6 Herrold, K., and O'Donnell, K. (2008). *Parent and Family Involvement in Education, 2006–07 School Year*; From the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2007 (NCES 2008-050). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC. <http://www.sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>
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- 8 Rogers, J. (2004). "Creating a Public Accountability for California's Schools," *Teachers College Record*, 106:11:2171-2192.
- 9 Astor, R., Benbeneshity, R., Estrada, A. (2009). "School Violence and Theoretically Atypical Schools: The Principal's Centrality in Orchestrating Safe Schools," *American Educational Research Journal*. 46:2:423-461.
- 10 Noguera, P. (2001). "Transforming Urban Schools through the Social Capital of Parents," in Susan Saegert, Phillip Thompson, and Mark Warren (eds.) *Social Capital and Poor Communities*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. Pp. 189-212. See also: Warren, M. (2005). "Communities and Schools: A New View of Urban Education Reform," *Harvard Educational Review* 75:2:133-73.
- 11 "New Laws for Screening Volunteers," (2007). *PTO Today*. Accessed at <http://www.ptotoday.com/pto-today-articles/article/235-new-laws-for-screening-volunteers>.

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UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) is a research institute seeking to understand and challenge pervasive racial and social class inequalities in education. In addition to conducting independent research and policy analysis, IDEA supports educators, public officials, advocates, community activists, and young people as they design, conduct, and use research to make high quality public schools and successful college participation routine occurrences in all communities. IDEA also studies how research combines with strategic communications and public engagement to promote widespread participation in civic life.

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