

**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:

- *“In sixth grade, my son’s teacher began to give him marks for anything she found disruptive. If you get 2 or 3 marks you get detention, but they don’t tell the parent that your son has detention. For talking in the classroom, kids get detention. My child had never had problems with other teachers. He ended up repeating 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Labeled ‘bad’, he has become very angry and begun to act worse.”*

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 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 of 3 suspensions were the parents 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 spiraling downward 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”: 27 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, and 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 preventive programs that operate on restorative justice principals.
  - Provide more training for parents and teachers on discipline policies.
  - Create a citywide parent oversight council 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 low income 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 parents 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 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 a suspension, each grade 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 yr getting 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;  $\frac{3}{4}$ 's of those through phone calls, and  $\frac{1}{4}$ , 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: 27 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 very likely to offer recess while the only neighborhood school in a low-income community that was represented at the forums that offered recess was Nicholson School where parents had organized and met with the Principal and were successfully in 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 School Discipline Code.**

Only 11 of 78 parents addressing a question about the communication of the Uniform School 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 two thirds of parents participating in the meetings acknowledged that they did not fully understand the Code.

### **Other parental experiences of school discipline problems.**

Many parents describe a downward spiral: their children misbehave in the classroom; they are given detentions as a punishment; they begin to be belittled by peers and 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 meetings. Parents overwhelmingly endorsed this platform. It calls for:

- End out of school suspensions.
- Re-instate recess and breaks in the school day.
- Institute preventive programs such as conflict resolution and restorative justice programs.
- Provide more training for parents and teachers on discipline policies.
- Create a citywide parent oversight council 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 more than 37% of the families had had a student suspended and, reinforcing *Catalyst’s* findings, these suspensions fell in the largest percentages on African-American families.

Collaboration on Social and Emotional Learning at University of Illinois-Chicago: “*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.**

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

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 classroom is 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 7<sup>th</sup> grade should be involved in <formulating> discipline policy.”*
- *“We need something like anger management, especially for boys, beginning at the Kindergarten level. And Art reintroduced to classrooms – stuff they <children> like!”*
- *“Older students could tutor younger students as a more positive <and effective> alternative to detention or suspension. Or provide community service, like helping clean the school. Parents could be invited to spend a day with their child in school as an alternative to suspension.”*
- *“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.”*