December 18, 2009

Dear Representative:

We, the undersigned members of the Dignity in Schools Campaign and other civil rights and education organizations, proudly support the Positive Behavior for Safe and Effective Schools Act (H.R. 2597), which would fund efforts that create positive learning environments and help keep children in school. We urge you to co-sponsor this important legislation.

The Dignity in Schools Campaign is a national coalition of educators, parents, students, and policy advocates united to challenge the systemic problem of unnecessary suspensions, expulsions and arrests in our nation's schools and to advocate for the right of every child to a quality education and to be treated with dignity.

Ineffective and harmful school discipline practices severely impact schools’ ability to educate our children. Students cannot learn, and teachers cannot teach, unless they feel safe; yet, our current approach to discipline has the effect of pushing students out of school and teachers out of the profession.

The Positive Behavior for Safe and Effective Schools Act (PBSESA) offers an immediate way to improve educational outcomes for our students by providing schools the tools they need to improve school climate. The PBSESA would enable schools to use Title I funds to implement evidence-based approaches, such as Positive Behavior Supports (PBS), which is a process proven to reduce school discipline referrals, support improved academic outcomes, and improve perceptions of school safety. Over 9,000 U.S. schools are currently implementing PBS and seeing improved academic results and reduced misbehavior. For example, an elementary school in Illinois decreased its suspensions by 85% and improved its students’ test scores after just two years of implementing PBS. The PBSESA would also establish an Office of Specialized Instructional Support Services within the Department of Education to support implementation of PBS and similar approaches.

The need to improve school climates has never been more pressing. Our public schools are suspending and expelling students at a rate nearly double that of 1974. Each year, over three million students are suspended and over 100,000 are expelled nationally. African-American students (nearly 3 times as likely to be suspended and 3.5 times as likely to be expelled) and Latino students (1.5 times as likely to be suspended and twice as likely to be expelled) bear a disproportionate burden of these punishments when compared to their white peers, while students with disabilities are suspended and expelled at a rate roughly twice that of their non-disabled peers.

Many of these harsh punishments are consequences for what used to be considered minor misbehavior. In Alabama, an African-American high school student was sent to alternative school for “drug use” after taking Motrin to relieve menstrual cramps. In New York, a biracial middle school student was arrested for writing “okay” on her desk. In New Mexico, an 8-year-old Latino student was arrested after throwing a basketball at another child.

www.dignityinschools.org
The effects of these practices are devastating. Research shows that repeated suspensions and expulsions are strong predictors of school dropout and juvenile incarceration. A national survey of teachers leaving the profession found that nearly half listed school discipline as a reason for leaving. Our schools suffer when experienced teachers leave. Our communities and economy suffer when students do not graduate.

The PBSESA will reduce unnecessary reliance upon suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement by providing schools the support needed to improve school climate. Schools can use PBSESA funds to train teachers in effective classroom management techniques and establish school-wide frameworks for improving discipline. As the climate of our schools improves, students’ test scores and student and teacher morale will as well.

Positive approaches to discipline are necessary to provide children with an education aimed at their full academic, social, and emotional development. We urge you to cosponsor the Positive Behavior for Safe and Effective Schools Act to give our schools the tools they need to support our children.

If you have any questions, please contact Matthew Cregor with the Dignity in Schools Campaign at alternatives@dignityinschools.org or Deborah J. Vagins, ACLU Legislative Counsel at dvagins@dcaclu.org or (202)715-0816.

Sincerely,

Advent United Church of Christ (OH)
Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program
American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD)
American Association of University Women (AAUW)
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)
American Counseling Association
American Psychological Association
Asian American Justice Center
Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law
California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation
Children’s Defense Fund
Children’s Law Center of Massachusetts
Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School
EdLaw Project (MA)
Education Law Center-New Jersey
Education Law Center-Pennsylvania
Gwinnett Parent Coalition to Dismantle the School to Prison Pipeline (Gwinnett STOPP) (GA)
JustChildren Program, Legal Aid Justice Center (VA)
Justice Policy Institute
Law Offices of Andréa Marcus (CA)
Leadership Conference for Civil Rights (LCCR)
Los Angeles Chapter, National Lawyers Guild
NAACP
NAACP Legal Defense & Educational Fund, Inc.
National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)
National Economic & Social Rights Initiative
National Education Association (NEA)
National PTA
National Women’s Law Center (NWLC)
Ohio Poverty Law Center
Public Counsel Law Center (CA)
School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA)
South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center
South Carolina Autism Society
Southern Poverty Law Center
Texas Appleseed
United Church of Christ Justice & Witness Ministries
University of Oregon Institute on Violence & Destructive Behavior
University of the District of Columbia, David A. Clarke School of Law, Juvenile & Special Education Law Clinic
Youth Advocacy Department of the Committee for Public Counsel Services (MA)
Youth Ministries for Peace & Justice

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