

SAFETY WITH DIGNITY



Alternatives to the Over-Policing of Schools



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The New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) is one of the nation's foremost defenders of civil liberties and civil rights. Founded in 1951 as the New York affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union, we are a not-for-profit, nonpartisan organization with eight chapters and regional offices and nearly 50,000 members across the state.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University is a national policy-research and reform support organization with offices in Providence and New York City. Our focus is on improving conditions and outcomes in urban schools by helping to build systems that coordinate educational supports and services—at school, at home and in the community—to provide all children with equitable opportunities and high-quality learning experiences.

Make the Road New York promotes economic justice, equity and opportunity for all New Yorkers through community and electoral organizing, strategic policy advocacy, leadership development, youth and adult education, and high quality legal and support services.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

S*afety with Dignity: Alternatives to the Over-Policing of Schools* examines six New York City public schools that are successfully maintaining safety while simultaneously promoting a nurturing school environment. This report explores the methods employed by these schools, including the tangible and intangible qualities that have contributed to their success. It concludes with practical recommendations to help the New York City Department of Education (DOE)—and urban school districts across the country—replicate their successful approaches to discipline and security.

These six schools share a number of significant characteristics. Like schools that employ some of the most draconian discipline policies, these schools all serve at-risk student populations. None currently has metal detectors, although some did at one time. Yet each provides a safe and successful learning environment, as evidenced by significantly higher than average attendance, student stability and graduation rates, as well as a dramatically lower than average incidence of crime and school suspensions.

While every school requires a school safety policy unique to its specific characteristics and educational philosophy, the core principles of safe and nurturing learning environment are universal:

- dignity and respect for all members of the school community;
- authority and responsibility for discipline residing with educators rather than police personnel;
- strong and compassionate leadership;
- clear lines of authority and open lines of communication between administrators, teachers, police personnel and students; and
- unambiguous, fair rules and disciplinary procedures.

To maintain safety in a nurturing learning environment, school districts must reexamine their use of zero tolerance policies; ensure educator control over school discipline; and foster com-

munication and understanding of school disciplinary policies among all stakeholders in the community, including students, educators, parents and School Safety Agents (SSAs).

The purpose of this report is to demonstrate that there are viable, real-world alternatives to metal detectors, zero tolerance policies, and police street tactics that simultaneously promote educational success and student safety.

This report makes the following recommendations to the DOE:

1) Discourage the installation of metal detectors.

High schools in New York City are currently under tremendous pressure to install or retain metal detectors. Many teachers and principals, however, doubt the efficacy of scanners in reducing violence in schools; they also believe metal detectors create a penal environment that interferes with teaching and learning. Metal detectors and the related routine of body scans and bag searches increase student/police interactions, expand police involvement in enforcement of school rules, and create flashpoints for confrontation. Schools can create safe learning environments without metal detectors.

Should a school choose to install metal detectors, it should do so only for a finite period after a careful review of alternatives, and only with the approval of the local parent council.

2) Restore discipline responsibilities to educators.

The vast majority of incidents in which SSAs become involved are disciplinary matters that should be handled by educators under the supervision of the school principal. To the extent SSAs are present in schools, New York City must adopt a clear governance structure—ideally in the form of a memorandum of understanding—that outlines the roles and responsibilities of Police Department and DOE personnel, and recognizes the principal as the primary authority. The current system fails to define the respective responsibilities of educators and SSAs in school discipline matters and results in grave confusion for police personnel, educators, parents and children alike.

3) Assign fewer School Safety Agents to patrol schools.

The responsibilities of SSAs should be limited to serious violations of the penal law.

The number of police personnel patrolling New York City's schools should, therefore, be reduced significantly. This should generate financial savings that can be applied to expand guidance, social work, and other support services to respond to disciplinary issues in ways that strengthen the educational environment and avoid excessive reliance on law enforcement tactics and the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

4) Mandate alternatives to harsh discipline.

Schools throughout the United States have begun to implement positive alternatives to harsh discipline policies, and have succeeded in reducing suspensions and dropouts. The DOE should mandate trainings for all school staff in restorative justice practices—a conflict resolution method that focuses on providing opportunities for all sides of a dispute to define the harms caused by an act and devise remedies—and implement such programs in all city schools.

5) Ensure students' voices in school rules.

Allowing students an authentic voice in a participatory school democracy leads to greater student ownership over school rules, a greater sense of belonging to the school community, and a greater willingness to comply with the code of conduct. The DOE should develop protocols for schools to ensure that students are given a meaningful voice in school rules.

6) Institute transparency and accountability in school safety practices.

Oversight of police practices in the schools is essential to both the safety and well-being of students, and to the maintenance of the public's trust and confidence in the Police Department and the DOE. The DOE and NYPD must release to the public raw data that will allow New Yorkers to determine the effectiveness of school safety practices. Moreover, SSAs, who have the authority to stop, search and arrest students, should be subject to the same oversight as police officers. The city should expand the jurisdiction of the Civilian Complaint Review Board to accept complaints of abuse by SSAs. Moreover, the DOE should allocate 1 percent of its current school safety budget to fund the expansion of the jurisdiction of the Civilian Complaint Review Board.

7) Provide support services for students' nonacademic needs.

Medical, mental health and social services connect students to the larger school community and address students' non-academic challenges before they become a basis for behavioral problems in the classroom.

The DOE should seek ways to foster connections between individual schools and medical and social services providers to offer students medical and mental health care and resources to access public assistance, housing, child care, counseling and other social services.