



New York City Comptroller
John C. Liu

NEWS RELEASE

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LIU TO DOE: STOP CRIMINALIZING OUR KIDS

Report Proposes Solutions for Plague of Middle-School Suspensions

NEW YORK, N.Y. – City Comptroller John C. Liu today warned that the Department of Education’s (DOE’s) short-sighted and damaging policy of suspending hundreds of middle-school students each week is promoting alienation and a higher dropout rate, not better behavior.

The Comptroller released a report today, “The Suspension Spike: Changing the Discipline Culture in NYC’s Middle Schools,” which offers a blueprint for replacing the DOE’s failed zero-tolerance policy with restorative justice practices that help middle-school students stay in school and remain on the path to college and career readiness.

“This report demonstrates the sad reality that the stop-and-frisk atmosphere, which presumes that men of color are guilty until proven innocent, begins as early as age 11. Children ages 11 to 14 are still learning how to manage their own feelings and behavior. The DOE’s policy of removing them from their classrooms for even small infractions teaches them nothing and may in fact worsen their conduct,” Comptroller Liu said. “Researchers have found that such suspensions often lead to higher dropout rates and other bad outcomes. We need to stand by our kids and give them the guidance they need, not make them feel like criminals.”

The report found that New York City middle schools suspended an average of 100 students a school day in the 2011-2012 school year. Almost all of those suspended were either black or Hispanic. It also found that middle-school students received 68 percent more suspensions than high-school students.

The report warns that misuse of School Safety Agents, who currently report to the New York City Police Department, has resulted in student arrests for minor infractions such as writing on a desk. This over-criminalization of school-based offenses risks putting students on the path to future incarceration, also known as the school-to-prison pipeline.

The report urges that middle schools adopt a restorative justice approach to discipline that combines added support with high expectations and accountability. These approaches not only give students ways to understand and make amends for negative behavior but also seek to reduce the severity and frequency of future incidents, create a more positive school climate, improve educational outcomes, and help keep students on the path to high school graduation and beyond.

The report recommends:

- Training educators in restorative justice – DOE should pilot an approach known as “whole-school climate change” at the 30 schools with the greatest number of suspensions.
- Hiring more middle-school counselors and social workers to reduce the student-to-counselor ratio to 250:1 and the student-to-social worker ratio to 400:1, as well as provide targeted interventions for students with behavior issues.
- Eliminating suspensions for minor infractions and those that last for more than 10 days.
- Empowering principals to oversee school discipline – including the School Safety Agents now under the authority of the NYPD – in order to emphasize education over incarceration.

“The Suspension Spike: Changing the Discipline culture in NYC’s Middle Schools” is the sixth comprehensive study in Comptroller Liu’s “Beyond High School NYC” initiative, which seeks to increase the proportion of New Yorkers with higher education to 60 percent by the year 2025 through strategic investments in public education.

The full report can be downloaded at:

http://comptroller.nyc.gov/bureaus/opm/reports/2013/NYC_MiddleSchools_Report.pdf

The executive summary can be downloaded at:

http://comptroller.nyc.gov/bureaus/opm/reports/2013/NYC_MiddleSchools_Summary.pdf

The 1CentreStreet.com blog post about the report can be accessed at:

<http://1centrestreet.com/policy/why-middle-school-matters/#.UeVmfh3viCc>

“The DOE has just scratched the surface of making improvements to its broken school-discipline system. This report examines the often-forgotten middle-school years, showing how ‘zero tolerance’ during vulnerable times in student development can damage students’ progress and their chance for success. Our students can’t afford to keep waiting for meaningful change,” said **Johanna Miller, Interim Advocacy Director, New York Civil Liberties Union.**

“The Comptroller’s report provides sensible, forward-thinking recommendations that could actually reduce problem behavior in the critically important middle-school years. Serious consideration should be given to these proposals,” said **Kim Sweet, Executive Director, Advocates for Children of New York.**

“The recommendations in this report to expand restorative practices, increase the number of counselors and social workers, and end suspensions for minor misbehavior are critical. The DOE needs to take action now to revise the City’s Discipline Code to require the use of positive interventions before suspension and eliminate suspension for behaviors like defying authority. These changes are essential to protect students’ human rights to education and dignity,” said **Liz Sullivan-Yuknis, Education Program Director, NESRI and Dignity in Schools Campaign-NY.**

“The International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) wholeheartedly supports the recommendations of the New York City Comptroller’s office contained in this report. The data demonstrates that restorative practices and other allied approaches to school climate offer a powerful new vision for pro-social development and discipline in schools. The Comptroller’s office is showing tremendous vision in their commitment to youth. Our children deserve safe school communities where they can learn, thrive, and realize their potential to become productive citizens,” said **John Bailie, Assistant Professor and Director of Continuing Education, International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP)**.

Background:

For more on the “Beyond High School NYC” initiative go to:

<http://www.comptroller.nyc.gov/bureaus/opm/beyond-high-school.shtm>

Previous reports from the Comptroller’s education initiative:

“Beyond High School: Higher Education as a Growth and Fiscal Strategy for New York City”:

<http://www.comptroller.nyc.gov/bureaus/opm/reports/2012/Higher-Education-Report-FINAL.pdf>

“The Power of Guidance: Giving High School Students the College Counseling They Need”:

http://www.comptroller.nyc.gov/bureaus/opm/reports/2012/Power_of_Guidance_Oct_PDF.pdf

“No More Rubber Stamp: Reforming New York City’s Panel for Educational Policy”:

http://www.comptroller.nyc.gov/bureaus/opm/reports/2013/NYC_NoMoreRubberStamp_v24_Jan2013.pdf

“Bridging the Digital Literacy Divide”:

<http://www.comptroller.nyc.gov/bureaus/opm/reports/2013/Bridging-the-Digital-Literacy-Divide.pdf>

“The \$4 Billion Deficit: Ratcheting Up Investment in Early Childhood Education”:

<http://comptroller.nyc.gov/bureaus/opm/reports/2013/NYC-Early-Childhood-Education-Report.pdf>

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