

## Testimony Regarding School Safety

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Bipartisan Task Force on Gun Violence Prevention and Children's Safety

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Senator Boucher, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the School Security Working Group,

I am testifying today on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

We strongly believe that every child should have a safe public school to attend, and the state and local districts must take steps to improve school safety. However, **we urge caution in pursuing this important goal through an increased presence of police in schools.** National research on the connection between the presence of school resource officers and school violence is limited. The evidence is mixed; **the preponderance of research does not suggest that more police in schools keeps children safer.**<sup>1</sup> If districts and this task force wish to keep children safe, there are better, more effective ways to promote school safety.

It is important for policy makers to understand that increasing police presence in schools may result in **serious unintended consequences.** As far as we know, Connecticut does not collect data on which schools have police on premises. However, national data suggests that the **presence of police in schools coincides with increasing arrests of students, a majority of which are for minor infractions.**<sup>2</sup> The data we do have for Connecticut, which will be addressed more fully in a forthcoming report from Connecticut Voices, suggests that a large number of students in our state are being arrested for discretionary reasons and very few arrests result from weapons possession. Statewide, during the 2010-2011 school year, over 3,000 arrests occurred in Connecticut schools, of which **weapons-related incidents accounted for only 6%. Over one in ten arrests resulted from "school policy violations"** – low level offenses such as profanity, skipping class or detention, disrespect, and disruptive behavior.<sup>3</sup>

When police and the criminal justice system get involved in school discipline issues that were previously handled at the classroom or school administration level, the affected young people are at risk of being seriously harmed. Extensive academic and public policy research shows that arrests, including school-based arrests, have harmful long-term impacts on children.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of the literature, see "Education Under Arrest: The Case Against Police in Schools," *Justice Policy Institute* (November 2011): 9-12 [http://nijn.org/uploads/digital-library/Education-Under-Arrest\\_JPI\\_Dec-20-2011.pdf](http://nijn.org/uploads/digital-library/Education-Under-Arrest_JPI_Dec-20-2011.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> "Putting Armed Guards in Schools is Wrong Answer" *The Advancement Project* (January 15, 2013): <http://www.advancementproject.org/blog/entry/putting-armed-guards-in-school-is-wrong-answer>

<sup>3</sup> See, Sarah Esty, "Student Arrests in Connecticut", *Connecticut Voices for Children* (forthcoming, Winter 2013), on file at Connecticut Voices for Children.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., American Civil Liberties Union, "Hard Lessons: School Resource Officer Programs and School-Based Arrests in Three Connecticut Towns" (November 2008), p. 38 ("That large numbers of students of color are arrested at school is cause for grave concern, both for communities of color and for the community at large, given the powerful negative impacts arrest and prosecution almost invariably have on a young person's life: psychological and emotional trauma; educational disruption and increased risk of dropping out; diminished employment prospects; and of course the

Furthermore, significant research shows **pervasive and disturbing disproportionality** in exclusionary discipline practices, student arrests, and the juvenile justice system in Connecticut.<sup>5</sup> Our own analysis of State Department of Education data<sup>6</sup> suggests that the same students experiencing the greatest achievement gaps in our education system are also most likely to experience arrest in Connecticut schools:

- **Black children were nearly 4 times more likely to be arrested** in school than white children
- **Hispanic children were over 3 times more likely to be arrested** in school than white children
- **Boys were twice as likely to be arrested** in school as girls
- **Special education students were nearly 3 times more likely to be arrested** in school than regular education students
- **Children in the poorest urban areas were arrested 9 times more often** than students in the richest suburban areas
- Students who have struggled in traditional settings and **attend alternative or special education schools** meant to better help them succeed are **12 times more likely to be arrested in school** than their peers in traditional schools.
- Disparities are widespread, affecting children in nearly all districts. **In richer towns and poorer towns, urban, suburban, and rural areas, black and Hispanic children were more likely to be arrested than their white peers, and special education students were more likely to be arrested than their regular education peers.**

Well-intentioned efforts to keep children safe need not come at the price of pushing more children into the criminal justice system and exacerbating educational inequality.

If the state and districts do wish to increase the presence of law enforcement officers in schools, there are steps they should take to help mitigate these potentially problematic side effects:

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threat of incarceration, with its concomitant emotional and physical dangers.” [citing to academic and public policy literature]; Jennie Rabinowitz, “Leaving Homeroom in Handcuffs: Why an Over-reliance on Law Enforcement to Ensure School Safety is Detrimental to Children,” 4 *Cardozo Pub. L. Pol’y & Ethics J.* 153, 169-173 (March 2006) (describing research regarding harms to children of juvenile justice involvement, including stigmatization and job instability).

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Connecticut Voices for Children, “Missing Out: Suspending Students from Connecticut Schools,” (August 2008), pp. 13-17 (discussing disproportionality by race/ethnicity and special education status); American Civil Liberties Union, “Hard Lessons: School Resource Officer Programs and School-Based Arrests in Three Connecticut Towns” (November 2008), pp. 35-44 (discussing racial disproportionality in frequency of school-based arrests in West Hartford and East Hartford and finding that “the ED 166 data indicate that students of color who commit certain common infractions – for example, incidents involving the use of physical force, like fights, or incidents involving drugs – are more likely to be arrested than are white students committing the very same offenses.” ); Spectrum Associates Market Research, “A Second Reassessment of Disproportionate Minority Contact in Connecticut’s Juvenile Justice System” (May 15, 2009) (finding disproportionate minority contact in many decision points in Connecticut’s juvenile justice system, even when controlling for other factors); Office of Policy and Management, “Biennial Report on Disproportionate Minority Contact, Fiscal Years 2010-2011 (December 31, 2011) (discussing in detail data regarding disproportionate minority contact in Connecticut’s juvenile justice system and steps to reduce such disproportionality).

<sup>6</sup> See, Sarah Esty, “Student Arrests in Connecticut”, *Connecticut Voices for Children* (forthcoming, Winter 2013), on file at Connecticut Voices for Children.

- Incentivize or require police officers who are regularly present at schools to receive **training in understanding and responding productively to adolescent behavior**.<sup>7</sup> Encourage police departments to **choose officers with experience and interest in working with children** for placement in the schools.
- Require districts with police stationed in school to negotiate and sign a **memorandum of agreement (MOA) between the schools and the police department** that delineates the roles and responsibilities of teachers, administrators, other schools staff, and police officers in emergency situations and for daily activities. This MOA should include a graduated response model that helps ensure all parties have a shared understanding about what types of behaviors should be handled at the classroom, school, and police levels, and how they should respond to serious incidents.<sup>8</sup>
- Monitor data on student arrests at the school level in real time to ensure that arrests rates are not increasing with the presence of police. The State Department of Education should review student arrest data yearly to identify districts with high rates where additional interventions and supports may be needed.

Whether or not individual districts decide to increase the presence of security guards or police officers, all schools can benefit from efforts to create a healthier school climate, identify and diffuse escalating situations quickly and effectively, promote student access to mental health and special education services, and refer students to available community resources in crisis situations. To improve school safety and the wellbeing of students, the state should help support districts working to:

- **Ensure all school staff know how to access and appropriately utilize student supports in school and in the community**, including alternatives to arrest, such as **Emergency Mobile Psychiatric Services (EMPS)**. Districts can work with local governments and nonprofits to develop an **inventory of community resources** (particularly mental health, counseling, and substance abuse services) and instruct school staff about the availability of those options for students who they believe may have unmet needs, or are in crisis situations.
- **Improve school climate plans** to flexibly respond to student misbehavior, addressing the individual needs of the students involved and the particularities of the case, while also laying out clear sanctions for bullying and dangerous behaviors. Implement programs, such as **Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)**, that proactively intervene with at-risk students and promote positive behaviors in addition to fairly punishing misbehavior.
- **Increase the presence of social workers, school psychologists, counselors, and other professionals** who can help with early identification and service provision to troubled students and those with mental health needs before serious problems arise.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to answer any questions now or at your convenience.

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<sup>7</sup> The Office of Policy and Management offers a one day patrol officer training, “Effective Police Interactions with Youth,” held several times each year. For more information about the OPM training, visit the Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee’s website on the topic at <http://www.ct.gov/opm/cwp/view.asp?A=2974&Q=383618>.

<sup>8</sup> A sample MOA and graduated response model can be found on the Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee’s website: [http://www.ct.gov/opm/lib/opm/cjppd/cjjyd/programschoolpolice/moa\\_6-11.doc](http://www.ct.gov/opm/lib/opm/cjppd/cjjyd/programschoolpolice/moa_6-11.doc)