



Mississippi Coalition for the Prevention of Schoolhouse to Jailhouse

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MISSISSIPPI ROUTINELY PUSHES YOUTH OUT OF SCHOOL AND INTO THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM, SAYS NEW REPORT ON STUDENT DISCIPLINE

Civil Rights Groups Unveil Findings on the Dangers of Extreme School Policies and Recommend Alternative Solutions

January 17, 2013 – Jackson, MS - The extreme student discipline practices that led the Department of Justice to sue one Mississippi County are far more widespread than previously thought, cites a new report from a coalition of civil rights organizations.

Titled *Handcuffs on Success: The Extreme School Discipline Crisis in Mississippi Public Schools*, the report details how extreme school disciplinary practices harm tens of thousands of Mississippi students who are removed from school every year for minor misbehaviors, such as violating dress codes and mouthing off to teachers. Many are criminalized in the process. It also shows how this approach likewise harms teachers, law enforcement officials, community members at-large, and the state's economy.

In October 2012, the U.S. Department of Justice filed suit against officials in Meridian, Mississippi for operating a school-to-prison pipeline. Through a pattern of arresting and incarcerating students, even for minor school infractions, investigators found that Meridian children were routinely pushed out of school and into the criminal justice system. The report finds that the scope of this devastating problem is much bigger, plaguing schools across the entire state of Mississippi.

Authored by Advancement Project, ACLU of Mississippi, Mississippi State Conference of NAACP, and Mississippi Coalition for the Prevention of Schoolhouse to Jailhouse, the report highlights numerous cases from across the state. In Holmes County, for example, a five-year-old child was driven away from school in a sheriff's car for wearing shoes with red and white symbols in violation of a dress code. Police reportedly arrested and threatened bodily harm to a half dozen DeSoto County students for arguing on a school bus. Other findings include:

- Mississippi's graduation rate is the 6th lowest among the 50 states, a distinction that is tied to high rates of suspension, expulsion and arrests. Across the state, the districts with the highest number of out-of-school suspensions have the lowest metrics of academic success.

- Overly harsh discipline policies can trigger a cycle of crime. Young people who are removed from school are less likely to have adult supervision and more likely to drop out – factors that have been shown to increase the chances of future misbehavior by youth.
- From 1990 to 2007, Mississippi’s penal system expanded by 166%, and the State’s correction costs have increased by well over \$100 million a year in the last decade.

“We encourage Mississippi legislators and education officials to consider commonsense, tested policies that improve school quality, public safety and economic prosperity,” said Judith Browne Dianis, Co-Director of Advancement Project and longtime advocate for an end to extreme school discipline policies. “Implementing a graduated approach to discipline, and using non-punitive measures focused on preventing misbehavior by providing supportive interventions, have been proven to reduce suspensions and expulsions while creating safe, effective learning environments for our youth.”

The advocacy groups are working with lawmakers to right the ship with proposed legislation. Some Mississippi school districts are doing the right thing, and best practices must be embraced and shared in a comprehensive strategy at the state level.

“The needless criminalization of Mississippi’s most valuable asset – its children – must be dealt with immediately by school leaders and the communities they serve,” said ACLU of MS Program Director, Nancy Kohsin Kintigh. “Zero-tolerance policies were originally designed to protect students from individuals who pose a threat on school grounds. Instead, they are being used to send children home for trivial things that should be solved in the principal’s office.”

MS NAACP President Derrick Johnson added, “The Department of Justice investigation into Meridian Public Schools put a spotlight on the school to prison pipeline in Mississippi. We have been working with these partnering organizations and lawmakers to find solutions to this process, and we believe the recommendations from this report help us to move in the right direction.”

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Founded in 1909, the **NAACP** is the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization. Its members throughout the United States and the world are the premier advocates for civil rights in their communities, conducting voter mobilization and monitoring equal opportunity in the public and private sectors.

The mission of the **ACLU of Mississippi** is to defend the inalienable human rights and freedoms guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution, especially the Bill of Rights. The ACLU of MS meets its mission through litigation, advocacy, public education and community organizing. The ACLU of MS Youth Justice Project is one of the largest in the nation, empowering Mississippi’s children to know their Constitutional Rights and become leaders in their schools and communities.

Advancement Project is a multi-racial civil rights organization. Founded by a team of veteran civil rights lawyers in 1999, Advancement Project was created to develop and inspire community-based solutions based on the same high quality legal analysis and public education campaigns that produced the landmark civil rights victories of earlier eras. Advancement Project works "on-the-ground," helping organized communities of color dismantle and reform the unjust and inequitable policies that undermine the promise of democracy.

The **MS Coalition for the Prevention of Schoolhouse to Jailhouse** is an intergenerational alliance of more than 65 statewide and local organizations formed in 2003 across traditional barriers of race and class to dismantle the pipeline from schoolhouse to jailhouse and promote positive behavior intervention strategies to keep students in school. The Coalition crafted the Juvenile Justice Reform Acts of 2004 and 2005 adopted by the legislature to eliminate the abuse of incarcerated children, to enforce the rights of incarcerated children to a public education, and to promote community-based alternatives to incarceration of children at facilities far from their families.