

JUSTICE NEWS

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Justice Department Files Consent Decree to Prevent and Address Racial Discrimination in Student Discipline in Meridian, Miss.

The Justice Department announced that, jointly with the Meridian Public School District in Meridian, Miss., and private plaintiffs, it has filed a landmark consent decree to prevent and address racial discrimination in student discipline in district schools. If approved by the court, the proposed consent decree will resolve the department's investigation into complaints that the district unlawfully and disproportionately subjects black students to suspension, expulsion and school-based arrest, often for minor infractions. In the course of the investigation, the department found that black students frequently received harsher disciplinary consequences, including longer suspensions, than white students for comparable misbehavior, even where the students were at the same school, were of similar ages, and had similar disciplinary histories. The consent decree would amend a longstanding federal school desegregation decree enforced by the United States, which prohibits the district from discriminating against students based on race.

"The American dream is rooted in education. In Meridian, that dream has long been delayed by discipline practices that deny students access to education," said Jocelyn Samuels, Principal Deputy Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division. "We commend the Meridian Public School District for taking this huge step toward ensuring that its schools are safe and welcoming to all students and that education is a road to success instead of a pipeline to prison."

Under the consent decree, the district will take steps to create safe and inclusive learning environments in all Meridian schools, including providing students with supports and interventions before excluding them from school; limiting the use of discipline measures that remove students from the classroom; ensuring that discipline consequences are fair and consistent; establishing clear guidelines for when law enforcement intervention is appropriate; providing training to give teachers and administrators the tools necessary to manage their schools in a safe, effective and positive manner; and building data-driven monitoring and accountability systems.

"Punitive and discriminatory discipline policies prevent the promise of *Brown v. Board of Education* from being a reality today," said Gregory K. Davis, U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Mississippi. "This consent decree will help bring equal justice and opportunity back into reach for the children of Meridian."

The consent decree:

- Limits exclusionary discipline such as suspension, alternative placement and expulsion, and prohibits exclusionary discipline for minor misbehavior;
- Prohibits school officials from involving law enforcement officers to respond to behavior that can be safely and appropriately handled under school disciplinary procedures;
- Requires training for school law enforcement officers on bias-free policing, child and adolescent development and age appropriate responses, practices proven to improve school climate, mentoring and working with school administrators ;
- Revises policies at the district's alternative school to create clear entry and exit criteria and provide appropriate

supports to speed students' transitions back to their home schools;

- Requires enhanced due process protections in student discipline hearings;
- Expands use of a behavior and discipline management system known as positive behavior intervention and supports (PBIS) at all schools;
- Requires teachers and administrators to use developmentally appropriate tiered prevention and intervention strategies before removing students from instruction;
- Requires monitoring of discipline data to identify and respond to racial disparities;
- Requires training on all revised policies and procedures; and
- Implements measures to engage families and communities as partners in revising policies and as participants in regular school and community informational forums.

The division filed a related case against the Meridian Police Department, the Lauderdale County Youth Court and the state of Mississippi in October 2012, alleging that those defendants systematically violate the due process rights of students referred by the district. That case remains pending in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Mississippi.

The enforcement of Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, among other bases, in public schools is a top priority of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. Additional information about the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department is available on its website at

www.justice.gov/crt.

Related Material:

- [Meridian Consent Decree](#)

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Civil Rights Division