



"We Are Criminalizing Young People"

Senate hears testimony on the suspension, expulsion and arrest of students for minor offenses.

By Jonathan P. Hicks – December 12th, 2012

The alarming number of students who are suspended, expelled and arrested for minor school offenses was the topic of testimony at a Senate committee hearing in Washington on Wednesday.

Speaking at a Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights, Judith Browne Dianis, co-director of the Advancement Project, discussed how the number of students in the so-called school-to-prison pipeline are affected by being arrested and incarcerated.

“We have a crisis in this country in the way we are criminalizing young people at an early age,” Dianis said, in an interview with BET.com. “Instead of being nurtured, too many young people, especially children of color, are being suspended or expelled for things that have nothing to do with school safety.”

She said that children who are prosecuted are “more likely to drop out and more likely to end up in the criminal justice system and are likely to live in poverty for the rest of their lives.”

The hearing was chaired by Sen. Dick Durbin, a Democrat from Illinois, and attended by more than 350 students, parents, civil rights advocates and other community organizations.

Others who testified included Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine, Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education Melodee Hanes, Andrew Coulson from the Cato Institute and Edward Ward, a former student in Chicago Public Schools.

The growing number of young students who are suspended and expelled and turned over to the criminal justice system has been receiving increasing national attention. Now known widely as the school-to-prison pipeline, the practice has involved the arrests of

young students for non-violent, relatively minor infractions. In some cases, Dianis and others point out, children as young as six have been handcuffed and arrested by police officers for having temper tantrums.

In Mississippi, for example, federal civil rights attorneys are suing the city of Meridian and others for allegedly denying students their constitutional rights and for incarcerating them for minor offenses.

The defendants include Lauderdale County, judges of the county's Youth Court and the State of Mississippi Division of Youth Services.

Roughly 6,000 students, more than 85 percent of them African-American, attend kindergarten through 12th grade in a dozen schools in the Lauderdale County School District.