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Senator Durbin Holds Hearing On Ending The School-To-Prison Pipeline

Hearing Focuses On The Overuse Of School Discipline And Juvenile Court Referrals

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Washington, D.C.--(ENEWSPF)--December 13, 2012. Assistant Majority Leader Dick Durbin (D-IL), Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights, held a hearing yesterday on the school-to-prison pipeline. The first-ever Congressional hearing on the matter investigated the troubling increase in the number of young people sent to the juvenile delinquency system as a result of relatively minor school discipline issues.

“For many young people, our schools are increasingly a gateway to the criminal justice system. This phenomenon is a consequence of a culture of zero tolerance that is widespread in our schools and is depriving many children of their fundamental right to an education,” Durbin said. “The current system puts kids on a path into the adult justice system for minor infractions. I hope today’s hearing can initiate reforms to better discipline our students without forcing them out of the classroom and into a courtroom.”

Since the 1990s, many students nationwide have been pushed out of the classroom and into the courts for relatively minor, non-violent offenses. Concerns about school violence and a growing awareness of bullying led many schools to hire police and institute “zero-tolerance” policies. This resulted in a dramatic increase in suspensions, expulsions, and even in-school arrests for misbehavior that is normal for school children. For example:

- An 11 year-old in Florida who was caught with a cell phone in class received a five-day suspension.
- A 12 year-old student was suspended for more than 20 days for infractions like chewing gum and talking in class.
- A high school honors student in Texas living apart from her parents and helping to support multiple siblings with both a full- and part-time job, was arrested for missing class and forced to spend the night in jail. This young girl was left distraught and concerned about a criminal record that could always haunt her.

Suspensions, expulsions, and in-school arrests lead to kids being out of the classroom, and a troubling increase in the number of young people sent to the juvenile justice system. According to one leading study, students who were suspended were two times more likely to repeat a grade and three times more likely to be involved with the juvenile justice system.

Once kids enter the criminal justice system, they are more likely to fail in school, which in turn increases their chances of ending up back in the criminal justice system in the future. This is a cycle with increased public safety risks for everyone in the community. And the pipeline is expensive. The costs of policing schools and unnecessarily housing juveniles in detention are enormous.

This “school-to-prison pipeline” also wastes scarce government resources on ineffective policies and has led to striking racial disparities. Over 70 percent of students in school-related referrals to law enforcement are African-American or Latino. Nationally, African-American students are three times more likely to be suspended, and four times more likely to be expelled, than their white peers. Students with disabilities are suspended at more than twice the rate of students without disabilities. And gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth are more likely to be disciplined and arrested than their peers.

Testifying at today’s hearing were: Rep. Bobby Scott, U.S. Congressman, Virginia; Rep. Danny Davis, U.S. Congressman, Illinois; Deb Delisle, Assistant Secretary, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education; Melodee Hanes, Acting Administrator, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice; Michael DeWine, Ohio Attorney General and former U.S. Senator from Ohio; Steven Teske, Chief Judge, Clayton County Juvenile Court, Clayton County, Georgia; Edward Ward, Youth Leader, Blocks Together, Chicago, Illinois; Judith Browne Dianis, Co-Director, Advancement Project; and Andrew Coulson, Director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom. Copies of their testimony are attached.

Video of the hearing can be viewed at www.judiciary.senate.gov