



Southern Poverty Law Center

Press Release

'Race to the Top Fund' Offers Schools Opportunity to Improve Discipline

November 24, 2009 - Schools struggling with student dropouts and discipline problems have an opportunity to tackle those issues with innovative programs funded by federal grant money, the Dignity in Schools Campaign and Southern Poverty Law Center said today.

In passing the federal stimulus last winter, Congress gave the U.S. Department of Education an unprecedented \$4.35 billion to reward state efforts to close the achievement gap and meet the stimulus' goals. The final guidelines for the "Race to the Top Fund" note the department's particular interest in efforts aimed at improving school climate, as research shows that such efforts can improve academic achievement, school attendance and graduation rates.

The department has offered school-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) as an example of a discipline approach that can be funded by a "Race to the Top" grant. The SPLC and the Dignity in Schools Campaign are urging states to take advantage of this opportunity to include PBIS, as well as restorative practices and other proven approaches, in their grant applications. A fact sheet about "Race to the Top" grant guidelines is available [here](#).

"At a time when our schools are squeezed for money in this difficult economy, this is a remarkable opportunity to help students and teachers by bringing innovative and proven approaches into classrooms," said Matthew Cregor, an SPLC attorney and member of the campaign. "The Department of Education has taken a significant step in giving educators the tools they need to address some of the most serious issues facing schools today."

The Dignity in Schools Campaign is a national coalition of advocates, organizers, youth, parents and educators advocating for children's human right to a high quality education and challenging the systemic problems caused by harsh zero-tolerance discipline policies. The SPLC is a nonprofit civil rights organization based in Montgomery, Ala.

The Department of Education's suggestion of using Race to the Top funds for school-wide PBIS follows studies that have shown PBIS can reduce discipline problems, improve school safety and support improved academic achievement. PBIS efforts can also be funded through the federal stimulus' State Fiscal Stabilization Fund as well as Title I and IDEA Recovery Funds.

At a PBIS school, good behavior is supported by everyone from the principal to the custodian. When misbehavior occurs, it is addressed in a smarter way than under zero-tolerance policies. More than 9,000 schools across the nation use PBIS. More information about PBIS can be found at www.pbis.org.

Such an innovative approach is needed in many schools across the country. Since 1973, the rate of students suspended at least once during the school year has more than doubled, researchers have found. That translates into more than 3.3 million students being suspended at least once during the 2005-2006 school year, according to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR). More than 100,000 students were expelled during this time. When the American Psychological Association (APA) reviewed popular zero-tolerance discipline policies in 2006, it found no evidence that suspension, expulsion or zero-tolerance policies resulted in improvements in student behavior or enhanced school safety.

The APA cited research showing that such practices have negative effects on student academic performance. School suspension is a moderate-to-strong predictor of school dropout. And schools with high suspension rates score lower on state accountability tests, even when adjusting for demographic differences.

A negative school climate also affects teachers. A 2005 national survey of teachers leaving the profession found that 44 percent of teachers and 39 percent of highly qualified teachers listed school discipline as their primary reason for leaving.

In light of these dismal statistics, several educational, mental health and civil rights groups urged the Department of Education to include funding for approaches to improve school climate in the Race to the Top program.

The groups included the American Psychological Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, the Dignity in Schools Campaign, the Children's Defense Fund, the Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the American Civil Liberties Union and the Southern Poverty Law Center.

For information on the Dignity in Schools Campaign, visit www.dignityinschools.org.