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OPINION

Steps Forward on School Discipline

Helping our kids strive and thrive

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

In many American schools the holiday celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday is used as an opportunity to teach children about his life and legacy. But in too many of those same schools, black and other non-white and poor children's extraordinary talents are still being wasted today.

Nearly three-quarters of black and Latino fourth and eighth grade public school students cannot read or compute at grade level. Long after legal segregation has ended black students are still most likely to be excluded from the classroom. When black students are so often left behind and pushed out it should not surprise us that black students are more than twice as likely to drop out of school as white students.

So I applaud the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice for



their recent action to address harmful school discipline policies that push so many thousands of the most vulnerable children out of school each year and into the juvenile justice and adult prison pipeline.

If the education system is to do its part in dismantling the cradle to prison pipeline and in replacing it with a cradle to college, career and success pipeline, we must end the current practice where children in the greatest need are suspended and expelled from school mostly for nonviolent offenses including tardiness and truancy.

I have never understood why you put a child out of school for not coming to school rather than determining why they are absent.

I hope the new set of resources released by the Departments of Education and Justice will help schools create positive, safe environments while relying less on exclusionary discipline tactics. These resources, officially known as "guidance," will help schools and districts meet their legal responsibility to protect students from discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin as required under

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

While the guidance offered is voluntary, school districts that fail to use effective strategies to address disparities in how discipline is applied could be subject to legal action from the Department of Education or Department of Justice.

As we recognize the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and so many other important hard won victories in the Civil Rights Movement this year, we must remember those victories could be lost without meaningful enforcement of the laws advocates fought so hard to win half a century ago.

The Children's Defense Fund has been speaking out against school discipline policies that continue to stack the odds against poor children and children of color for all of our 40 years.

Several of CDF's state offices have been mobilizing students, youths, parents, advocates, educators, community leaders, and coalition partners to ensure students are not unfairly punished and pushed out of school into the prison pipeline. The new guidance is a valuable tool for them and all parents and

communities.

While the guidance does not prohibit schools or districts from using any particular nondiscriminatory policy, it does call into question some policies that have historically excluded black and Latino students disproportionately and are of questionable educational value—including "zero tolerance" discipline policies which require mandatory consequences for certain infractions, and policies that prevent students from returning to school after completion of a court sentence, which compound the often discriminatory effects of the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Perhaps the most absurd and outrageous are policies which allow or require suspension or expulsion for students who have been truant—punishing children for being absent by forcing them to be absent.

The new guidance recommendations are valuable to everyone concerned about success for all of the nation's children—including students, parents, educators, and community members. They reiterate the longstanding right of parents to seek federal intervention on behalf of their children's civil rights.

If you are a parent and believe that your child has been discriminated against on the basis of his or her race, color, national origin, sex, or disability, file a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. Go to school board meetings and ask questions. Meet with your neighbors to learn about the experience of students in your community's schools.

With all of this information—what Dr. King called "collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive"—you can make your case in the media, organize around school board elections, reach out to local and state elected officials, and come together with others to demand change.

It's way past time to end child exclusion from the indispensable life-line of education. This time, like so many good laws and regulations, the true test of the value of this new guidance will be how well it is implemented. Let's all join in to make sure everyone has a stake in helping our children strive and thrive in school. Their future and our nation's future depend on it.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund.

He Challenged Us to Face Uncomfortable Truths

The life and legacy of Amiri Baraka

BY MARC H. MORIAL

On Jan. 9, with the passing of the prolific poet, playwright, essayist, and critic Amiri Baraka, one of the literary giants of the 20th century was called home. As we offer condolences to his wife, children and family, we remember the 79-year-old Baraka not only for his bold, inventive and iconoclastic literary voice, but also as a courageous social justice activist.

His ideas and work had a powerful impact on both the Black Arts and Civil Rights movements beginning in the 1960s.

Baraka was best known for his eclectic writings on race and class. He extended many of the themes and ideals of the 1960s Black Power movement into the realm of art, which he saw as a potent weapon of change; and like many good revolutionary artists, he sometimes went out of his way to offend the status quo. He has been



variously described as a beatnik, a black nationalist and a Marxist. But he was first and foremost a writer and social commentator of uncommon skill and insight.

His 1963 masterpiece, "Blues People," which explored the historical roots and sociological significance of the blues and jazz, has become a classic that is still taught in college classrooms today.

Almost every black and progressive writer and thinker of the 20th century shared a kinship, friendship or feud with Baraka. But, undergirding everything he wrote and stood for was his desire to lift up the downtrodden and disenfranchised, especially in his hometown of Newark, N.J.

As a testament to his broad influence, more than 3,000 people attended his funeral last Saturday at Newark Symphony Hall.

The actor Danny Glover officiated and noted Baraka's influence on his career. Cornel West called Baraka "a literary genius." Sonia Sanchez read a poem for him written by Maya Angelou. Speaking

at the wake the night before, Jesse Jackson honored Baraka as "a creative activist and change agent who never stopped fighting or working for the formula to create social justice."

Born Everett LeRoi Jones, the writer changed his name to Amiri Baraka in 1968 to reflect his embrace of Islam and the philosophy of Malcolm X. He attended Rutgers, Howard and Columbia, served in the Air Force and began his literary career in the 1950s in the Beat poet scene of New York's Greenwich Village.

His one-act play, "Dutchman," won the Obie Award as the best off-Broadway production of 1964. In 1965, he co-founded the Black Arts Movement in Harlem, infusing the Black Power movement with powerful artistic voices. His numerous awards and honors include his selection as the Poet Laureate of New Jersey in 2002 and his 1995 induction into the exclusive American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Controversy was a mainstay of Amiri Baraka's career. Ishmael Reed, another provocative poet and contemporary of Baraka re-

cently noted, "Amiri Baraka was controversial because his was a perspective that was considered out of fashion during this post race ghost dance, the attitude that says that because we have a black president, racism is no longer an issue, when the acrimonious near psychotic reaction to [Barack

Obama's] election only shows the depth of it."

Amiri Baraka always challenged us to face such uncomfortable truths – and we are better because of it.

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