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# OPINION

## Purpose is to Educate Not Exclude Children

### Decriminalizing school discipline

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN



I believe the purpose of public schools is to educate not exclude children and to help identify and meet child needs, not make children serve adult convenience, self interest, and systems.

So huge reforms are required in school discipline policies and practices across our nation as school pushout has worsened in past decades with the criminalization of children at younger and younger ages aided and abetted by school expulsion and suspension policies which funnel children into the prison pipeline often crippling them for life.

Nationally, the number of secondary school students suspended or expelled during a school year increased about 40 percent from 1 in 13 in 1972-73 to 1 in 9 in 2009-10 although we know suspensions are more harmful than helpful to children.

Schools with higher suspension and expulsion rates have worse school climates, lower student academic achievement, and are often less safe. Racially discriminatory school discipline policies contribute to the cradle to prison pipeline crisis with a black boy born in 2001 having a 1 in 3 chance of going to prison

in his lifetime and a Latino boy a 1 in 6 chance of the same fate.

The March 2014 report from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights included troubling findings on how unfair and excessive school discipline policies can be beginning as early as preschool. But there is some encouraging news. Some school districts are significantly reforming their discipline policies and, more fundamentally, how they view and treat children by moving away from harsh and exclusionary policies toward more positive and restorative approaches that improve discipline outcomes and keep children in school.

The Children's Defense Fund applauds such school district actions and hopes that districts across the country will follow.

The Los Angeles Unified School District, the second largest in the country, has the largest school police force in the nation closely followed by New York. Of approximately 9,000 arrests and tickets issued to Los Angeles children in the 2011-12 school year, 93 percent involved black and Latino students.

In May 2013, after years of struggle, community organizing, and advocacy by many organizations — the school board adopted sweeping policy reforms. It eliminated suspensions for the subjective catch-

all category known as "willful defiance" and directed all district schools to implement PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports) and restorative justice programs to ensure students access to schools that reflect caring, inclusive, safe, and healthy learning environments.

The district will stop issuing citations for most campus fights and many other minor infractions. School police will follow a step-by-step formula that should result in students being referred to off-site counseling, mental health services, or other school- and community-based solutions for offenses that until now sent them to court or probation.

Juvenile Court Judge Donna Groman said about the new protocol: "Juvenile court should be the last resort for youths who commit minor school-based offenses. The education system is better equipped to address behaviors displayed at the school level through restorative justice and other alternative means."

I agree with Judge Groman and applaud the Los Angeles district and hope we can promote their new policy both nationally and statewide as a model response. Youths with serious attendance problems are being sent to counselors instead of courtrooms in a return to common sense. I have never understood why we exclude children from school for not coming to school rather than finding out why they

are not coming to school.

We know what works and what doesn't work for children and need to place the highest priority on keeping students in school, safe, and learning. Engaged students and communities working with committed educators are showing that change is more than necessary — it's possible. It is critically important that public schools entrusted with educating and preparing children for college, work and life stop feeding them into the juvenile and criminal justice systems with zero tolerance policies especially for nonviolent offenses like tardiness and truancy or catchall subjective offenses like disruption or disrespect. Denying a child an education is hardly in the child or society's best interest.

As our nation's children become majority non-white in 2019, greater sensitivity and awareness of the children being taught is essential and precautions must be taken so that "differentness" of race, gender, culture, and special needs or gifts are better understood and respected.

No child is expendable and every child deserves a right to learn and grow up to be the best they can be. We must increase the positive momentum that is building so once again schools educate children, help meet their individual needs and prepare them for the future.

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

## Improve the Conditions for Low Wage Workers

### We're all in this together

BY TIFFANY WILLIAMS

Lolita Lledo spends all day talking on her cell phone, texting, and checking her Facebook page, though not for the reasons you might think.

As the associate director of the Pilipino Workers Center in Los Angeles, she relies on social networking to keep in touch with home care workers.

These caregivers help seniors and people with disabilities to bathe, dress, and prepare food, allowing them to thrive in their own communities rather than go to nursing homes.

Many of the people Lledo works with were nurses, teachers, and engineers in their home countries. Now they're working long hours in isolation and typically earn only about \$21,000 a year.

Lledo's group provides logistical and emotional support. It's

also organizing caregivers to improve labor conditions in one of the nation's most precarious lines of work. The Fair Labor Standards Act exempts their industry from minimum wage and overtime protections.

The "companionship exemption" dates back to 1974, a time when the kind of care workers do in homes nowadays was done in institutions. Last year the Department of Labor finally issued new regulations — but delayed implementation until January 2015.

Private home care agencies and other industry groups are lobbying for an even longer delay and

have sued the Department of Labor to permanently block the protections altogether.

The International Franchise Association, which represents everything from 7-11 to KFC, is leading the charge. Why? Because home care happens to be one of the most profitable lines of work for franchises.

Realizing how much they have in common, low-wage workers from a variety of industries are joining together to demand a living wage, bringing many consumers along with them.

Organizers like Lledo have realized that pitting workers against consumers won't solve the "care

crisis." That's because both sides of the working relationship are in trouble. Home care workers can't afford to put food on the table, and seniors are already struggling to get Medicaid to cover all the hours of home care they need.

Lledo and I work together through Caring Across Generations — a national effort to align worker rights, disability rights, and senior rights organizations into a unified campaign. We believe that most families would pay more if they could afford it.

Consumer advocates say better pay and working conditions in the industry would translate into less turnover and higher quality

care.

In the retail industry, big box stores pay so little that many workers stocking their shelves rely on public assistance programs like food stamps to cover their basic needs. That means taxpayers are actually subsidizing low wages for those workers. The same is true for nearly half of all U.S. home care workers.

From coast to coast, low-wage workers are sparking change by getting consumers to join their efforts.

Tiffany Williams works for the Global Economy Project at the Institute for Policy Studies.

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