



CHRISTINE DONG

RUBBISH: Fernando Aguilar, 9, says he had to clean César Chávez K-8 School in North Portland after he got in trouble for playing four square too aggressively. A Portland Public Schools official says the play amounted to bullying.

LITTLE JANITORS

PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS DEFENDS STUDENT DISCIPLINE ONE OFFICIAL COMPARES TO AN INMATE WORK CREW.

BY BETH SLOVIC bslovic@week.com

Domingo Martin spent three days in November and December at North Portland's César Chávez K-8 School cleaning the gym and collecting trash in the school's foul-smelling restrooms.

It wasn't his job—it was punishment. School officials say Domingo argued with another boy and threw a piece of kiwi fruit in the cafeteria. He was sentenced to this janitorial duty while other kids played at recess.

Domingo, a second-grader, is 7.

Parents at César Chávez say they only recently discovered many students have been forced to pick up trash on school grounds; scrub floors, walls and desks; and clean doorknobs.

The kids' offenses have included goofing off in class,

rolling their eyes at a teacher, and playing four square too aggressively.

Domingo was so humiliated he didn't tell his mother what the school was making him do.

"I was sad and angry," says Domingo's mother, Juana Diego. "It's not right to punish kids in this way."

César Chávez Principal Lavert Robertson defends the punishment, calling it "community service."

Experts on school discipline—including an assistant superintendent for the Portland Public Schools—call it completely inappropriate.

"If they throw food, they should clean it up," says Alicia Roberts Frank, an assistant professor of teacher education at Lewis & Clark Graduate School of Education and Counseling. "Cleaning beyond that, or for a behavior that is completely unrelated, like eye-rolling, is illogical."

Five mothers have approached *WW* with stories of what their children told them after César Chávez imposed cleaning duties on them during recess and lunchtime.

All of the mothers, speaking in Spanish, say they learned about the punishments after the fact, even though some of them say they learned about their children's misbehavior immediately from school officials. PPS's more established system of suspending or expelling students requires parental notification.

PPS Superintendent Carole Smith has put increasing pressure on schools to lower their discipline rates and end disparities in punishment between white and minority students. Principals now face performance evaluations that demand reductions in the number of students suspended or expelled from school.

But principals are largely on their own to determine how to fulfill Smith's mandate. That's in keeping with Smith's general approach of giving principals large discretion over their schools' operations.

A spokeswoman for PPS, Christine Miles, and a representative of the district's equity office in charge of school discipline, Rick Kirschmann, defended the program on behalf of Smith.

Asked why kids should clean their school as punishment for disruptive or disrespectful behavior, Kirschmann responded with a question: "Why do we see inmates picking up trash on the side of the freeway as the result of the crimes that they've done, which have nothing to do with littering?"

The parents' stories suggest César Chávez—where 57 percent of students are Latino—has embarked on a discipline strategy that goes way beyond anything in the district's Student Responsibilities, Rights and Discipline Handbook.

The handbook recommends timeouts and after-school detention as consequences for minor misbehavior; nowhere does it outline janitorial work as an acceptable form of punishment.

Miles and Kirschmann say the cleaning falls under "restitution," which is allowed under PPS discipline policy.

But restitution is defined in the discipline handbook as a response only to misbehavior that results in "damage, destruction or loss of property." It requires students and parents to pay to repair the damage—not clean schools.

César Chávez's three-page discipline plan—which it is required to keep on file at district headquarters—lists "restitution" as an option but doesn't define the term. The plan lists "school community service" as an option and defines that as either "behind-the-scenes lunch job" or "help custodian." (Principals aren't required to get PPS approval for their plans.)

César Chávez's alternative approach to discipline risks ruining kids' relationship with school, says Marta Guembes, a longtime education activist in Portland.

"They should be happy going to school, not frightened,"

CONT. on page 9