

Guembes says. “I’m appalled.”

Lavert Robertson took over as principal at César Chávez school in 2012, one year after the district named the K-8 a “beacon” school for its work to combat racial biases that undermine student achievement.

PPS statistics show César Chávez under Robertson’s leadership has dramatically reduced its rate of suspensions and expulsions. Three years ago, 12.6 percent of its students received such discipline, one of the highest rates in the district. Last year, only 4.1 percent of students were expelled or suspended.

The so-called “community service” program was launched this fall, for the 2014-15 school year, parents say.

Robertson defends the practice. “I’m very confident with what we’re doing at César Chavez,” he tells *WW*. He calls the newspaper’s questions about the practice “misguided.”

Angel Humphrey is a former full-time physical education teacher at César Chávez who runs the community service program. She also defended community service, saying parents who criticized the program had never seen it in action.

“I’m the only person who’s ever seen it firsthand,” she says.

Except for the children.

Laura Sosa Ortega’s son Fernando is a 9-year-old fourth-grader at César Chávez. He was made to pick up paper off restroom floors, clean Humphrey’s office, and scrub desks for one week. His actions that led to the punishment? He says he got in trouble for forming an alliance with other skilled four-square players so they could win.

“You’re not supposed to team up,” Fernando explains, “because it’s a game for everybody to play, not just people who are good.”

It’s harder for him to explain how cleaning the school helped repair relationships with students whose feelings he may have hurt on the four-square court.

“I had to clean other people’s garbage instead of other people cleaning it themselves,” he says.

Adds Fernando’s mother, “What he did wasn’t severe

## “SHE’S STILL SO LITTLE. DISCIPLINE THE KIDS, BUT NOT THIS STRONGLY.” —CATARINA SEBASTÍAN, PARENT

enough for them to do this.”

Mark Freimark, who spent 25 years as a PPS custodian, called César Chávez’s program “totally out of bounds.”

Freimark says having students clean up messes they’ve made or repair damage they’ve done—cleaning walls they’ve written on, for example—makes sense. But forced work for other infractions sends the wrong message.

“That means cleanup is a punishment,” Freimark says, “and cleanup isn’t a punishment.”

César Chávez’s custodian declined through a union representative to comment for this story.

School officials told parents that children are kept out of view of other students when they’re cleaning. But parents tell *WW* that’s not the case. They say the punishments are humiliating for students, who have had to perform tasks in front of other kids.

Cecilia Ortega Martinez says her 6-year-old daughter burst into tears after finding her 9-year-old brother picking up trash at school. He’d been accused of making crude gestures with a banana. (The boy says he was laughing at others, not making the gestures himself.)

Ortega Martinez says the punishment only served to shame her son and make him feel unsettled in school. “He doesn’t want to go,” she says. “He’s afraid.”

It’s not clear what precautions the school is taking to keep kids safe from health hazards such as germ-infested restroom surfaces and industrial cleaning products.

Miles, the district spokeswoman, says children are supervised and given gloves and only soapy water as a cleaner. She also says parents are informed of punishments through phone calls or letters.

Viridiana Aguilar says her son told her school officials gave him a cleaner that smelled like chemicals, even though he has asthma. He had been suspended for hitting two girls and was ordered to pick up trash in restrooms and clean Humphrey’s office even after he returned to the school, she says.

Catarina Sebastián’s daughter, 8-year-old Patricia, covers her face and looks down at the ground when she describes how Humphrey made her wipe down doorknobs with a spray-on cleanser one day during recess.

Her infraction? The second-grader rolled her eyes at a teacher who had asked her to move away from another girl, she says.

“She’s still so little,” her mother says. “Discipline the kids, but not this strongly.”

Roberts Frank, the Lewis & Clark professor, says inappropriate punishment could backfire. “The idea is to foster empathy and mutual understanding rather than resentment and revenge-seeking behavior,” she says.

Aside from defending the program, Principal Robertson did not respond to an emailed request for an interview.

At least one administrator for the district, however, has said the César Chávez program is wrong.

Antonio Lopez, a former César Chávez principal and current assistant superintendent for the district, tells *WW* that the school’s community service program is not OK. Lopez says he was contacted by a concerned César Chávez parent last week and that he has told Robertson, the school’s principal, to end the program.

“If it is happening, then it needs to stop,” he says. “Consequences like that are not appropriate.” *WW*



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