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RE: Prohibiting Classroom Removals of HISD's Youngest Students

Dear Members of the Houston Independent School District Board of Trustees:

We write to you as a united group of individuals and organizations dedicated to the fair and equitable treatment of students in Texas public schools. We urge you to vote in support of the Houston ISD proposal that would eliminate discretionary suspensions, expulsions, and Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP) placements for children in grades Pre-K through two, and limit such removals for students in grades three through five. At the HISD Board meeting on November 12th, this important proposal was amended—we strongly encourage you to return to the original proposal and ensure that it is adopted.

Adopting the original proposal would secure HISD's position as a forward-thinking, model school district, dedicated to using evidenced-based methods to support student safety and success. HISD could become one of the largest districts in the country, and the first in Texas, to adopt a policy that would so clearly address the harms of discretionary classroom removals, including missed classroom learning time, early labeling of students, and hardships for working families.

In addition to urging you to reconsider and adopt HISD's original proposal, we would like to take this opportunity to address several misconceptions about the use, and prohibition of, discretionary exclusionary discipline practices like suspensions, expulsions, and DAEP placements:

1. Remaining Children are Hurt by School Removals.

Some people believe that removing a student from a classroom benefits the children who remain behind. However, research shows that this is not true. Schools that have higher rates of suspensions and expulsions also have lower school climate ratings and report spending a disproportionate amount of time on student discipline.¹ Further, research demonstrates “a negative relationship between the use of school suspension and expulsion and schoolwide academic achievement, even when controlling for demographics

¹ See American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, *Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in Schools?: An Evidentiary Review and Recommendations*, *American Psychologist*, 854, Dec. 2008, citing Bickel, F. & Qualls, R., *The impact of school climate on suspension rates in Jefferson County Public Schools*, *Urban Review* (1980); Scott, T. M., & Barrett, S. B., *Using staff and student time engaged in disciplinary procedures to evaluate the impact of school-wide PBS*, *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* (2004).



such as socioeconomic status.”²

Research released in November, 2015, shows that a recent major reduction in discretionary suspensions in California correlates with higher district achievement.³ In the districts with reduced suspension rates, African American students experienced the most significant academic gains.⁴ It is important to note that this analysis does not even account for the reduction in suspensions that will occur as a result of California’s 2014 ban on removals of young children for the commonly-punished offense, “willful defiance.”

Psychology-based studies suggest that school expulsion and suspension practices are associated with negative educational and life outcomes.⁵ When educators remove children from class, they fail to address student misbehavior in a meaningful way, thereby setting the stage for future class interruptions and additional ineffective removals, thus amplifying the harms felt by all students. This is especially true considering that the vast majority of classroom removals are discretionary (based on Student Code of Conduct violations that do not actually threaten school safety) and are not mandated by Texas law.

² *Id.*, citing Davis, J. E., & Jordan, W. J., *The effects of school context, structure, and experiences on African American males in middle and high schools*, Journal of Negro Education, 63, 570–587 (1994); Raffaele-Mendez, L. M., & Knoff, H. M., *Who gets suspended from school and why: A demographic analysis of schools and disciplinary infractions in a large school district*, Education & Treatment of Children, 26, 30–51 (2003); Skiba, R. J., & Rausch, M. K., *Zero tolerance, suspension, and expulsion: Questions of equity and effectiveness*, in C. M. Evertson & C. S. Weinstein (Eds.), Handbook of classroom management: Research, practice, and contemporary issues (pp. 1063–1089), Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum (2006).

³ Losen, D. et. al, *Closing the School Discipline Gap in California: Signs of Progress*, The Center for Civil Rights Remedies, Nov. 2015, available at http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/resources/projects/center-for-civil-rights-remedies/school-to-prison-folder/summary-reports/ccrr-school-to-prison-pipeline-2015/ClosingtheGapCA15_UCLA6.pdf.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ United States. U.S. Department of Health And Human Services & U.S. Department Of Education: Joint Policy Statement On Expulsion And Suspension Policies In Early Childhood Settings (December 10, 2014), available at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/policy-statement-ece-expulsions-suspensions.pdf> (citing Lamont, J. H., Devore, C. D., Allison, M., Ancona, R., Barnett, S. E., Gunther, R. & Young, T. (2013). Out-of-school suspension and expulsion. *Pediatrics*, 131(3), e1000-e1007; Petras, H., Masyn, K. E., Buckley, J. A., Ialongo, N. S., & Kellam, S. (2011). Who is most at risk for school removal? A multilevel discrete time survival analysis of individual- and context-level influences. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 103, 223; American Psychological Association, Zero Tolerance Task Force Report (2008). An evidentiary review and recommendations.



2. Classroom Removals are Not a Necessary Tool for Educators.

A few educators argue that they need to suspend young children in order to maintain order in their classrooms, believing that removals of young children are an effective classroom management tool. However, **decades of research show that class removals are harmful to students**—there is no research that shows that the opposite is true. A “tool” is a method that works to address a problem. Suspensions and other removals do not work. They are not effective tools. They are methods whereby school districts can avoid dealing with underlying issues affecting the child or the district, such as unstable home environment, mental health issues, or other unmet student needs. These exclusions can cause immediate and future harms, especially for young children—who are in a particularly meaningful developmental stage—and children of color and children with disabilities, who are disproportionately impacted by discipline policies.

Houston ISD has proposed a tiered system of training and intervention methodologies that would reduce reliance on harmful discretionary school removals and provide educators with evidence-based training on effective student and classroom management. Funds and trained professionals have been designated as part of the district’s plan. These are the “tools” that educators should rely on for short- and long-term classroom safety and success.

3. Some Students Experience Removals at Disproportionately High Rates.

There is little debate around the data showing that young boys, African American children, and students with disabilities are punished and harmed by classroom removals at disproportionately high rates. We urge you to focus on the impact the Board’s policy decisions could have on certain young children. Currently, 70% of HISD suspensions issued to very young children go to African American boys. These students are feeling the well-documented effects of removals more than other students—“[y]oung students who are expelled or suspended are as much as 10 times more likely to drop out of high school, experience academic failure and grade retention, hold negative school attitudes, and face incarceration than those who are not.”⁶

As HISD Trustees, you have the power to change how all children are treated and correct a major systemic failure that is pushing students out of

⁶ U.S. Depts of Education & Health and Human Services, *Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings*, 2014, available at <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/policy-statement-ece-expulsions-suspensions.pdf>.



school. We urge you to reject discipline policies and practices that are known to harm children and instead encourage educators and administrators to embrace effective tools that support student success and improve school climate. We ask that you reconsider and adopt HISD's original policy concerning classroom removals of young students.

Please feel free to contact any of us with questions.

Sincerely,

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