[DATE]

Dear Superintendent,

We are organizations that work with youth, parents, and community members concerned about the impact of out of school suspensions and expulsions on students in the School District. The District suspends and expels significant numbers of students. [[1]](#endnote-1) According to the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, children with disabilities, African-American children, and low-income children continue to be disciplined at disproportionate rates in this district.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Exclusionary discipline has negative consequences for kids and communities. It is strongly correlated with reduced academic achievement and high school graduation rates.[[3]](#endnote-3) Suspension and expulsion may have that effect here: School District’s data shows that recently African-American students graduated at a mere 68% when the overall graduation rate was 89%. Exclusionary discipline is associated with negative school climate and disconnection to school for all students, but particularly for students of color and other students already marginalized in the education system.[[4]](#endnote-4) And, students who are suspended or expelled are more likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system.[[5]](#endnote-5)

We hope that the School District will take affirmative, districtwide steps to address this crisis. We urge the School District to create policies and procedures that support every school in the district in building positive, proactive systems to address student behavior, reducing the reliance on exclusionary discipline.

Young people, particularly adolescents, sometimes engage in disruptive and even destructive behavior. Students and teachers should strive to create a productive and safe educational environment. However, exclusionary discipline is not an effective mechanism to create such an environment. First, misbehavior in adolescents is not a product of a character deficiency or innate “badness.” Misbehavior occurs because adolescents are wired differently than adults. Adolescents are highly vulnerable to the prospect of immediate rewards (particularly peer attention), undervalue negative risks, and are much more likely to engage in risky and thoughtless behavior when they are together in groups.[[6]](#endnote-6) Second, the adolescent brain is malleable and young people can be taught skills to help adapt their behavior, like mindfulness, self-control, empathy, and perseverance.[[7]](#endnote-7) Punishment (suspension and expulsion) is often less appropriate and effective than support with this age group.[[8]](#endnote-8)

School District can and should implement districtwide behavioral interventions that better suit the needs of developing brains. Districts in Washington and nationwide have implemented various forms of school and districtwide behavioral support systems and seen remarkable results. For example:

* In Oakland Unified School District, more than 88% of teachers in participating schools reported that restorative practices were helpful in managing difficult student behaviors, and participating schools reported decreased suspensions (and reduced racial disproportionality), along with higher reading scores and higher graduation rates.[[9]](#endnote-9)
* Broward County, Florida adopted a comprehensive amendment to its discipline code and created alternatives to suspension including counseling and services. Initial reports indicate that overall disciplinary incidents dropped 30% and more than 90% of students who completed the alternative programs had no further disciplinary incidents.[[10]](#endnote-10)

School District should commit to developing policies that replace exclusionary discipline with evidence-based practices that address student behavior while keeping students engaged in education and on track to graduate. Those policies must be responsive to the needs of students of color and students with disabilities, and implemented with sufficient training and supports to teachers and families.

We respectfully request that School District commit to a districtwide goal of reducing exclusionary and disparate discipline. An important first step would be convening a group of stakeholders and community groups to revise current disciplinary policies to limit the offenses leading to suspension and expulsion and develop policies prioritizing positive behavior systems and restorative practices. The individuals below and representatives from the organizations below would be happy to participate in that process. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

1. *See* Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, *K-12 Data and Reports: OSPI Performance Indicators – Data and Analytics*, <http://k12.wa.us/DataAdmin/PerformanceIndicators/DataAnalytics.aspx>. The School District reported that 4.2% of students were suspended or expelled in 2015, a rate higher than the state average. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *See* Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, *K-12 Data and Reports: OSPI Performance Indicators – Data and Analytics*, <http://k12.wa.us/DataAdmin/PerformanceIndicators/DataAnalytics.aspx>. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *See, e.g.*, Robert Balfanz *et al*, *Sent Home and Put Off-Track: The Antecedents, Disproportionalities, and Consequences of Being Suspended in the Ninth Grade* (Dec. 2012), [http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/resources/projects/center-for-civil-rights-remedies/school-to-prison-folder/state-reports/sent-home-and-put-off-track-the-antecedents-disproportionalities-and-consequences-of-being-suspended-in-the-ninth-grade/balfanz-sent-home-ccrr-conf-2013.pdf](http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/resources/projects/center-for-civil-rights-remedies/school-to-prison-folder/state-reports/sent-home-and-put-off-track-the-antecedents-disproportionalities-and-consequences-of-being-suspended-in-the-ninth-grade/balfanz-sent-home-ccrr-conf-2013.pdf%20) (finding based on a longitudinal cohort study of tens of thousands of high school students that each suspension decreases the likelihood of graduation or post-secondary education and increases the likelihood of drop out). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Brea L. Perry, *The Overuse of Suspension in American Public Schools Threatens the Success of All Students* (discussing results of a large comparative study),<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2015/01/05/the-overuse-of-suspension-in-american-public-schools-threatens-the-success-of-all-students/>; American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools?, American Psychologist 854 (Dec. 2009), <https://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/zero-tolerance.pdf>. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *See, e.g.,* Christine Christle *et al*, *Breaking the School to Prison Pipeline: Identifying School Risk and Protective Factors for Youth Delinquency*, Exceptionality (2005). 13: p. 69-88. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Michael N. Tennison and Amanda Pustinlinik, *And If Your Friends Jumped Off a Bridge, Would You Do It Too? How Developmental Neuroscience Can Inform Legal Regimes Governing Adolescents*, Indiana Health Law Review (2015), <http://clbb.mgh.harvard.edu/and-if-your-friends-jumped-off-a-bridge-would-you-do-it-too-how-developmental-neuroscience-can-inform-legal-regimes-governing-adolescence/> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Anya Kamenetz, *Q&A: Plumbing the Mysteries of the Teenage Brain* (October 2014) (discussion with Dr. Laurence Steinberg, author of *Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence*), <http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2014/10/04/351187049/q-a-plumbing-the-mysteries-of-the-teenage-brain> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health*, Policy Statement on Out of School Suspension and Expulsion* (Pediatrics March 2013), *available at* <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/131/3/e1000> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. David Yusem and Barbara McClud, *Restorative Justice in Oakland* *Schools* (September 2014), at iv-vi, <http://www.ousd.org/cms/lib07/CA01001176/Centricity/Domain/134/OUSD-RJ%20Report%20revised%20Final.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Joan E. Collins, *The PROMISE Program Case Examples: From Get Tough to Solution Building*, International Journal of Solution-Focused Practices (2015); Michaelle Valbrun-Pope, *PROMISE for Broward County Students Eliminating the School to Jailhouse Track*, Presentation to the Council of Great Schools (October 2014), <https://edwires.org:8443/download/attachments/7143934/INTO%20THE%20FOLD-BROWARD.pdf?api=v2>. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)