

NASSP Supports Obama Administration's Classroom Discipline Guidelines

● The Obama administration issued new guidelines in January on classroom discipline, saying that well-intentioned zero-tolerance policies too often result in overzealous punishment for students, especially for minorities and those with disabilities.

US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and US Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. released a 35-page report that recommends ways to reduce arrests and keep discipline measures within the school rather than involve law enforcement, which the administration says should only be used as a last resort.

"The widespread use of suspensions and expulsions has tremendous costs," Duncan wrote in a letter to school officials. "Students who are suspended or expelled from school may be unsupervised during daytime hours and cannot benefit from great teaching, positive peer interactions, and adult mentorship offered in class and in school."

In US schools, Black students without disabilities were more than three times as likely as their White counterparts to be expelled or suspended, according to government civil rights data collection from 2011–12. Black students made up 15% of the data collection but accounted for more than a third of students suspended once, 44% of students suspended more than once, and more than a third of students expelled.

Recommendations also include ensuring that school staff members know that they bear responsibility for handling routine student discipline instead of security or police officers and encouraging schools to train all personnel in classroom management, conflict resolution, and methods to reduce classroom disruptions.

NASSP Executive Director JoAnn Bartoletti offered the following statement on the release of the Dear Colleague *Letter on the Nondiscriminatory Administration of School Discipline*:

"NASSP strongly supports the Obama administration's guidance on nondiscriminatory discipline. NASSP is proud to have been part of the process to develop the guidance and to incorporate the voices of several principals into the conversation. Principals accept the responsibility to foster a culture and climate in which all students feel valued. Yet, while school leaders do not seek to discriminate, the data reveals a shortcoming in the equitable application of discipline. The new guidance provides a systematic process that allows principals to objectively assess the administration of discipline in their schools. By disaggregating their own discipline data, principals can assess equity according to not only race but also gender, sexual orientation, and other subgroups.

"The principal's greatest weapon against discrimination is the principle of personalization, in which every student is known and valued in the school, a cornerstone of NASSP's *Breaking Ranks*

Framework for School improvement. Programs, activities, and events that enhance student academic performance take priority, but that academic growth can occur only in a supportive school environment—a culture that promotes the students' sense of belonging to the school, helps them take ownership of their learning, and values them as important members of the school community. This type of personalized learning environment can increase attendance, decrease dropout rates, decrease disruptive behavior, and eliminate the need for a punishment-focused discipline system.

"Schools that already emphasize personalization as an operating principle will discover that the proposed guidance is inherent in their policies and procedures. We hope that all schools will take advantage of the guidance to renew a focus on relationships—at the student, teacher, and parent levels—without which no real learning can take place." **NL**