

Holder, Duncan announce national guidelines on school discipline

By Donna St. George, Published: January 8

BALTIMORE — Bringing new attention to harsh punishments in schools, federal officials Wednesday urged educators across the country to move away from practices that suspend students for minor infractions and [disproportionately affect minorities](#).

“The need to rethink and redesign school discipline practices is frankly long overdue,” said Education Secretary Arne Duncan, speaking in Baltimore alongside Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. as the two leaders unveiled what were described as the first national guidelines on school discipline.

The event, at Frederick Douglass High School, was hosted in a city lauded for a major reduction in student suspensions in recent years. Federal officials also praised Maryland leaders for proposing reforms to state discipline policies, which are expected to come to a vote later this month.

Duncan told the crowd that racial discrimination in school discipline is “a real problem today — it’s not just an issue from 30 or 40 or 50 years ago.” He said the Obama administration is the first to provide national guidance on the issue.

Both Duncan and Holder emphasized that safety and order are a priority in schools but said too many resort to suspension, expulsion or arrest for problems that could be handled in more constructive ways.

Offenses that once landed students in a principal’s office now might land them in a police precinct, Holder said.

“Too often, so-called zero-tolerance policies, however well intentioned they might be, make students feel unwelcome in their own schools; they disrupt the learning process,” Holder said. “And they can have significant and lasting negative effects on the long-term well-being of our young people, increasing their likelihood of future contact with the juvenile and criminal justice systems.”

The toll of tough discipline is clear, the federal leaders said: Secondary schools suspend or expel 2 million students each year. “That’s a staggering amount of lost learning time and lost opportunity to provide more meaningful support,” Duncan said.

Nationally, he said, as many as 95 percent of out-of-school suspensions are for nonviolent offenses such as disruption, disrespect, tardiness and dress code violations.

“These are all issues that must be dealt with clearly, effectively and with a sense of urgency when they arise, but I

must ask: Is putting children out of school the best solution, the best remedy, for those problems?”

Duncan said that students should be removed from classrooms “as a last resort,” and only for serious infractions such as endangering the safety of other students or teachers.

The new guidelines come more than two years after Duncan and Holder [jointly created a federal initiative on discipline](#) with a focus on addressing the “school-to-prison pipeline” that links student offenses to judicial involvement.

Their effort followed [a landmark 2011 study](#) of nearly 1 million Texas students that associated suspensions with academic failure, dropping out and involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Many advocates and educators cheered the federal action.

“This is historic,” said [Judith Browne Dianis](#), codirector of the Advancement Project, a civil rights organization. “Disparities in school discipline have been documented since the 1970s, and we’ve never been able to get the federal government to step in and help stop it.”

Aimed at schools, school districts and states, the new guidelines are designed to promote best practices and help local officials comply with federal laws. They were released as part of a “guidance package” with multiple materials and an online compendium of discipline laws and regulations across the country.

[Students of color and those with disabilities](#) are disproportionately affected by discipline, federal data show. Among non-disabled students, African Americans are more than three times as likely as their white peers to be suspended or expelled, officials said.

“We must tackle these brutal truths head-on,” Duncan said. “It is the only way — it’s the only way — to change the reality that our children face every single day.”

The administration will propose \$50 million in grants to more than 1,000 schools to train teachers and staff in research-based strategies aimed at improving student behavior and school climate, officials said.

According to comprehensive Education Department data on the 2009-10 school year, Virginia suspended 7.9 percent of its students and Maryland 6.9 percent. Duncan noted Wednesday that South Carolina suspended 12.7 percent of its students — at the high end of the spectrum — while North Dakota suspended just 2.2 percent.

“That huge disparity is not caused by differences in children,” he said. “It is caused by differences in training, professional development and discipline policies.”

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