Students rally to confront harsh school discipline

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Students and advisers from five Sacramento area high schools joined in a virtual rally Wednesday – with kids from Los Angeles, Fresno and Oakland schools – as part of the National Week of Action to raise awareness about the overuse of extreme school discipline.

The rally connected more than 100 students, parents and community activists via live video feed to discuss recent trends in suspensions, expulsions and other harsh punishments in California schools.

According to data from the California Department of Education, there were 235,033 students enrolled in public schools in Sacramento county in the 2010-11 school year.

There were 47,678 suspensions and expulsions issued that same year – a 20.2 percent suspension/expulsion rate by enrollment, which is about a third higher than the state average of 11.7 percent.

Students from Grant High School, Sacramento High School and New Tech High School also attended the rally to share experiences of harsh discipline at their schools with other students and parents who have had similar experiences.

“It’s time to stop the criminalization of students and start looking at ways to help students,” said Lea Luellen, a senior at Inderkum High School in Natomas.

Luellen is the president of the Black Student Union at Inderkum, a student organization that encourages students to take leadership roles in their school and in their community.
“I was expelled for getting in a fight at school,” said Darrell Brown, a 19-year-old former Sacramento High School student.

Brown said he was defending his sister against another boy who was touching her inappropriately – but no one in the school administration took that into consideration before expelling him from school.

By the time he returned to classes after his expulsion, he was so far behind that his grades plummeted. Brown ended up dropping out of school.

The greatest impact of such harsh discipline policies has been on African American students, Darryl White, Black Parallel School Board Chairman, said Wednesday.

According to Carl Pinkston, secretary for the Black Parallel School Board, data for Sacramento City Unified School District schools shows that 38 percent of all suspensions in the district in the 2010-11 school year were African American students. The second highest percentage was Latino students at 35 percent. White students make up 11 percent of the total.

“This is a nationwide trend, and it is the same trend we are seeing here in Sacramento,” White said.

The school shootings at Columbine High School in Colorado in 1999 made the nation look at school kids in a new way, White said.

The response to the Columbine tragedy was a new policy aimed at preventing any weapon from ever reaching a school campus.

At the time, schools were reluctant to change the way they did things, White said, so the government found a way to encourage schools to go to a zero tolerance policy: they sent money to support new zero tolerance policies in the schools.

A zero tolerance policy gives school administrators and teachers authority to set strict discipline policies for infractions related to weapons, drugs or disruptive school behavior that creates a danger to others.

White said that, although the zero tolerance policy program was well-intended, the implementation was inconsistent. Each school district handled the policy in a different way – some more strictly than others, White said.

Schools took the new zero tolerance policy to new levels and started suspending students for a variety of reasons, most of them unrelated to guns.

White, a former high school principal, said his administration experience is full of examples of overuse and even abuse of the policy.
“Some of the incidents that we hear about are amazing,” White said. “Some teachers would suspend a kid for drawing a picture of a gun in class, or for not turning in medicine to the office that they brought to school.”

White recalled one student who had been suspended for pointing a fish stick at a teacher and saying “bang.”

“Zero tolerance has gotten crazy,” White said. “It’s gotten stupid. Zero tolerance policies take all the gray area of what’s best for students, or giving any thought to what kind of student the kid is overall.”

According to The California Endowment, a private, statewide health foundation, California schools average more than 720,000 suspensions and expulsions each year – an amount nearly double the rate in Texas, which has recently come under fire for it’s suspension rate statistics.

Recent data shows that extreme discipline policies are common even for nonviolent offenses like tardiness, which historically would have warranted little more than a trip to the principal’s office.

“Twenty years later,” White said, “we discovered that suspensions had doubled. More than that, we found that only 2 percent of those suspensions were related to weapons.”

White said there is a perception among teachers that African American students will be more difficult, so to ensure they don’t have to deal with behavior problems in the classroom, teachers are a little more heavy-handed with those students.

“I don’t think a lot people realize its an issue,” said Spenser Bradley, a senior at Inderkum High School. “People just think that this is the way school is.”

“I was walking down the hall one time and a teacher stopped me, saying she thought I smelled like weed,” said Jonathan Harvey, a senior at Inderkum. “She smelled my hands and took me to the principal’s office and I was expelled. It was ridiculous – who gets expelled for smelling bad?”

Once a student is expelled, it’s almost impossible to overturn the decision.

“The school has almost absolute authority,” White said. “There is generally nothing a parent can do short of going to court, and a lot of parents can’t afford to do that.”

Gabriel Brower, a senior at Grant High School, said stereotypes can be misleading. Characterizing individual students based on a broader stereotype is not only unfair but – more often than not – it’s going to be a mistake.

“People say that, because my uncles were in jail or my cousins were in gangs that I’ll end up that way too,” Brower said. “But I’m my own person. I can rise above my environment. If no one looks at me as an individual, they aren’t seeing the real me, they’re seeing what they expect me to be.”
Brower said that, after two years in high school making 3.5 to 4.0 grade point average, teachers finally started to realize his potential.

Brower gives credit for his success to “powerful programs” at his school that encourage kids to excel.

Pinkston recommends a “proactive” approach to school discipline, including a “restorative process” aimed at reintegrating kids into schools instead of leaving them outside of the walls of education.

“In Sacramento, this effort is about starting a conversation about the issue,” White said. “Hopefully we can start getting adults involved in the conversation.”

Pinkston said he hopes events like Wednesday’s rally will encourage a major movement to change government policies to help schools address the issue of zero tolerance.

White and Pinkston are compiling a full report on suspension and expulsion trends specific to Sacramento school districts, White said, and the report will be available later in the year.

Suspension and expulsion rates by school district and by individual school can be looked up at the California Dept of Education website here.

http://www.sacmentopress.com/headline/58266/Students_rally_to_confront_harsh_school_discipline

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