

# **THE CAMPAIGN TO END THE SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE IN SOUTH BEND**

A report to members and supporters of the Community Forum for Economic Justice

April 4, 2017

## **I. Background**

The struggle for equal access to quality education for all children, especially for black and brown children, has a long history. This is true locally as well as nationally. Currently, there is a developing local movement that opposes what is known as the “School to Prison Pipeline.” Members of the Community Forum for Economic Justice are participating in that growing movement.

This report identifies some events of the past five years. It is not inclusive of all activities, nor does it describe the many years of community opposition to policies and practices that limited educational rights for students of color.

Five years ago, the South Bend Community School Corporation created the “Equity in Education Task Force” to address the disproportionate rate at which African-American students were being suspended and expelled from school.

Data on suspensions and expulsions was collected and disaggregated by ethnicity, disability and school building. Qualitative data was developed and shared with building administrators in order to demonstrate how policy, procedure, and practice in discipline and special education services impact outcome for students over time.

In October of 2013, Regina Williams-Preston, a member of the Equity Task Force and of the SBCSC Special Education Support Team, testified before the Interim Study Committee on Education of the Indiana Legislature.

Regina reported that in the previous school year, black students received 62% of out-of-school suspensions though they are 34% of the district’s enrollment. She described the connection between the academic achievement gap for black students in South Bend schools and the disproportionate rate at which they’re suspended. In the previous school year, black students missed millions of minutes of instruction.

Local education activist Debra Turner also testified before the Study Committee, expressing her concern with a student ticketing system in the SBCSC. School resource officers were issuing tickets with fines and court costs for discipline infractions. If fines weren’t paid and/or court dates were missed, the Bureau of Motor Vehicles was notified and students were denied driving privileges.

In October 2013, the program for the monthly meeting of the Community Forum for Economic Justice was titled “The Fight for Educational Equity.” Regina and Wilner Cusic, a program specialist for IN\*Source (a parent support group for families of children with disabilities) shared the data, described examples, and led a discussion of what is known as the “School to Prison Pipeline.”

At the Martin Luther King Day Celebration in January of 2014, one of the workshops was titled “Under Educated, Over Incarcerated.” Panel members included Regina and Oletha Jones, the Education Secretary of the South Bend NAACP.

In June of that year, a group of educators, parents, students and community allies spoke at a meeting of the South Bend school board about their experiences with disproportionate referrals to special education and overly punitive discipline. Their refrain: “Can you hear me now?”

## **II. Increasing community awareness**

Later that summer, community activists persuaded the South Bend Tribune to investigate ticketing in schools. As a result, three articles brought the issue into the mainstream and validated the concerns of advocates who had been working on this issue for decades.

It was a battle won. The BMV reexamined policies and issued an call to the estimated thousands of people who may have had suspended licenses from school offenses to come in and get their record cleared up (getting their driving privileges reinstated). In addition, the SBCSC vowed to end ticketing in schools for elementary and middle school students.

CAFÉ (Community Action for Education) held its first meeting in February of 2015. The mission of CAFÉ was to unite the efforts of parents, teachers and community allies to oppose practices and policies that support the pipeline from school to prison. CAFÉ continues to meet regularly to support and expand the growing movement for educational equity.

In March 2015, the Community Forum sponsored two programs on the school to prison pipeline, the first with a panel of experts and a second called “Next Steps – Solutions. Both were very well attended and engendered lively discussion.

On September 12, 2015, representatives from multiple organizations, including the Community Forum, organized a full day conference at IUSB called “Break the School to Prison Pipeline.” Panels and workshops included presentations by students, parents, educators, members of both the South Bend School Board and Indiana Legislature, and a wide variety of advocates for educational equity.

In November 2015, a forum was organized by the Community for Peace and Nonviolence and St. Augustine Catholic Church. The program was titled “School to Prison Pipeline: What Faith-based Organizations and People Can Do.”

In the summer of 2016, the Indiana NAACP held its annual Education Summit in South Bend and, supported by CAFÉ, the Community Forum and others, organized a full-day event that broadened the knowledge of and support for efforts to oppose the pipeline. Multiple candidates for the 2016 School Board election attended the Education Summit and multiple pre-election events included community discussion about the School to Prison Pipeline.

## **III. An examination of education policy**

In May of 2016, members of CAFÉ became aware of a new educational policy under consideration by the SBCSC Board of Trustees – Policy 5840, Criminal Organization and Criminal Organization Activity. This policy was developed in response to the requirements set forth in state legislation (Indiana Code 20-26-18, sec.2). We expressed our concerns with the South Bend policy that originally was scheduled for adoption in May.

An additional outcome of the Education Summit was an NAACP resolution, adopted by the SB NAACP and the Indiana NAACP, that addressed education policy. It concludes: *"THEREFORE BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that the NAACP calls for a moratorium on these State codes and the creation and implementation of further State codes or local disciplinary policies that address student disciplinary issues until they have been fully vetted with input from the community, parents, and teachers, and there is documentation that the proposed policies have been recognized as best practice."*

All School Corporation policies are reviewed yearly. Most are re-adopted for another year but sometimes one or more is revised or adopted for the first time. A new date for policy adoption was set for February 6, 2017. Again we communicated our concerns about 5840, but added our disagreements with a revised policy on Suspensions and Expulsions – Policy 5610.

On the one hand, the introduction to this second policy was revised to describe the removal of students from the classroom as "the most severe sanction that can be imposed on a student in this Corporation and one that cannot be imposed without due process since removal deprives a child of the right to an education." On the other hand, it mandated that the Superintendent report students who are being suspended for the second time, for whatever reason, to the Department of Motor Vehicles -- so that their driving privileges can be denied.

Community members spoke in opposition to one or both of these proposed policies at the four Board meeting held in February and March. Dr. Darryl Heller was invited by Superintendent Spells to address the Board of Trustees during the March 20<sup>th</sup> meeting and he included information on the School to Prison Pipeline in his presentation on Public Education and School Choice. You can read Dr. Heller's remarks at [http://communityforum.typepad.com/my\\_weblog/community-forum-viewpoints.html](http://communityforum.typepad.com/my_weblog/community-forum-viewpoints.html)

Additional public forums were organized by the Nu Black Power Movement on March 15, by Delta Sigma Theta Sorority on March 23, and by the American Association of University Women on March 29.

**At their March 20<sup>th</sup> meeting, the SBCSC Board of Trustees passed most of their educational policies but tabled Policy 5840 and Policy 5610, at least for the time being. This is another victory, but the struggle to oppose the School to Prison Pipeline continues.**