



DIGNITY IN SCHOOLS

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July 8, 2016

Tracey Trautman
Deputy Director
Bureau of Justice Assistance
U.S. Department of Justice
810 7th Street NW
Washington, DC 20531

Dear Ms. Trautman:

The Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC) welcomes the opportunity to submit comments on the impact of the Law Enforcement Equipment Working Group's ("Working Group") May 2015 report - *Recommendations Pursuant to Executive Order 13688: Federal Support for Local Law Enforcement Equipment Acquisition*. DSC is a coalition of over 100 grassroots and education advocacy organizations from 27 states. We are committed to dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline by supporting the efforts of parents, students, advocates and educators to promote positive school climates where all students are in school and learning, not pushed out of school through zero tolerance discipline policies that criminalize student conduct.

DSC members applauded the Working Group's recommendation banning law enforcement agencies that solely serve K-12 schools from receiving "controlled equipment," such as specialized firearms and tactical vehicles. But, for the reasons stated below, we urge the Working Group to go further by ending the lending of military weapons and vehicles to *all* local law enforcement agencies, including those that serve schools. Additionally, we recommend that the Working Group ensure that local law enforcement agencies return any weapons they have already received and that the Department of Justice provide financial assistance to local law enforcement and school districts to return the equipment.

In the past year, the nation watched shameful videos of school police officers physically abusing students of color in cities across the country, including Baltimore, Maryland and San Antonio, Texas.¹ In addition to the excessive use of force by school police, there have been countless reports of students being arrested for minor infractions. For example, a Wake County, NC Public Schools police officer arrested seven students for having a water balloon fight.² Police presence in schools has a direct link to the criminalization of adolescent behavior that formerly would have been addressed through instructive, in-school discipline.³

¹ Colin Campbell, Baltimore school police officers charged with assault, misconduct in incident on video, The Baltimore Sun, March 9, 2016, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/crime/bs-md-ci-school-officers-charged-20160309-story.html>; Catherine E. Shoichet, Video shows San Antonio school police officer body-slammng student, CNN, April 7, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/04/07/us/san-antonio-school-officer-body-slam/>.

² Susan Ferris, North Carolina Complaint Alleges Excessive Force by Police in Schools, The Center for Public Integrity, January 24, 2014, <http://www.publicintegrity.org/2014/01/24/14158/north-carolina-complaint-alleges-excessive-force-police-schools>.

³ Dr. Monique W. Morris, Black Girls and 20 Years of Zero Tolerance Policies, Ebony Magazine, October 21, 2014, <http://www.ebony.com/news-views/black-girls-and-20-years-of-zero-tolerance-policies-943#axzz4DkhDzTmV>.

The introduction of military-style equipment and weapons on school grounds amplifies poor school climates and the criminalization of student behavior, and creates potentially life-threatening situations for students. DSC continues to be concerned about school districts having access to military weapons and Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles vis-à-vis local police departments. These weapons get to school districts not just through school district police departments, but also through other arrangements between districts and local law enforcement. Therefore, the only way to fully protect students is to remove these weapons from all local law enforcement agencies.⁴ It is imperative that the Working Group take steps to ban the transfer of military equipment to *all* law enforcement agencies, including those serving schools.

Furthermore, we call on the Working Group to ensure financial incentives for law enforcement agencies and school districts to return military equipment they have received. In many instances, the expense of returning such equipment is significantly burdensome, especially since military equipment is often in communities that are already strapped for education-related resources.

The good news is that at least one school district has taken steps to return military equipment despite the costs. A DSC member organization, the Labor/Community Strategy Center, recently won a victory resulting in the return of military equipment received by the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and the Los Angeles School Police Department (LASPD) through the U.S. Department of Defense's 1033 Program. The victory also included LAUSD/LASPD ending its involvement with the 1033 program. A prominent member of the LAUSD School Board and the Chief of the LASPD issued apologies, noting that after review and in response to sustained student and community protests, they felt their participation in the 1033 program hurt their relationship with the community and broke down trust they had built. As such, they wanted to not just return the weapons, but sever all relationship to the program.⁵

We thank you for this opportunity to comment and to urge action to end discriminatory and overly punitive discipline practices by law enforcement in our schools and communities. The education of our nation's children in positive school climates is central to ensuring successful educational outcomes. If you have any questions regarding this letter, please contact Natalie Chap, DSC Coordinator, at natalie@dignityinschools.org. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Dignity in Schools Campaign
(www.dignityinschools.org)

⁴ Molly Knefel, What Obama's New Military-Equipment Rules Mean for K-12 School Police, Rolling Stone, May 29, 2015, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/what-obamas-new-military-equipment-rules-mean-for-k-12-school-police-20150529#ixzz4Drl5hvDc>

⁵ Eric Mann, The Strategy Center – Finally – Gets the Tanks and M-16s Out of the LA School System, The Labor/Community Strategy Center, May 24, 2016, <http://www.thestrategycenter.org/blog/2016/05/24/strategy-center%E2%80%94finally%E2%80%94gets-tanks-and-m-16s-out-la-school-system>; Sonali Kohli and Howard Blume, L.A. schools have given up the last of their Defense Department-Issued rifles, The Los Angeles Times, February 23, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/local/education/lausd/la-me-edu-school-weapons-returned-20160223-story.html>.