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School Unions Question Safety, Discipline Shifts

JAMES HARNEY



MICHAEL MULGREW: We're not in a perfect world.

A midsummer fight scene erupted last week when new de Blasio administration school-safety and school-discipline reforms drew heated criticism from the heads of three education unions.

On July 21, the Mayor's Office, in conjunction with the Department

of Education, the NYPD and the City Council, announced new initiatives “to promote safe schools and end overly punitive school-discipline policies.”

Disciplining the Youngest

Specifically, disruptive students in kindergarten through second grade will no longer be suspended, but instead disciplined with “more age-appropriate” techniques.

In addition, a policy establishing “a clear protocol for the removal or addition” of metal detectors in city schools will be implemented. NYPD reporting on in-school arrests, summonses and incidents in which students are handcuffed will be expanded and more than \$15 million will be allocated to provide at least 50 more schools with mental-health services over the next three years.

“Students feel safest when lines of responsibility and rules are crystal-clear,” Mayor de Blasio said. “[The newest] reforms ensure that school environments are safe and structured.”

Citing a reduction of more than 50 percent in school-related arrests by the School Safety Division and patrol officers from the 2010-2011 to the 2014-2015 school years, and a drop of nearly 80 percent in summonses issued to students by the School Safety Division in 2014-2015 as compared to 2010-2011, Police Commissioner William J. Bratton proclaimed that “New York City schools are earning excellent marks when it comes to safety. They are some of the safest places in the city.”

Crime Down, Too

Elizabeth Glazer, Director of the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice, added, "As we have re-worked disciplinary policies to...avoid unnecessary arrests and suspensions, we have also seen school-based index crime fall an impressive 35 percent since 2011."

Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña called the reforms "steps forward in our commitment to ensuring all students are provided with a learning environment that is safe, supportive, inclusive and equitable." And Julia Zuckerman, Principal of P.S. 513, the Castle Bridge School in Manhattan, said "suspensions further marginalize and punish children who need to learn how to be included."

Unions Leaders Critical

But the announcement was not universally hailed; on the contrary, Michael Mulgrew, president of the United Federation of Teachers, Ernest Logan, head of the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators, representing Principals in city schools, and Gregory Floyd, President of the Teamsters Local 237, representing School Safety Agents, roundly panned it.

"In a perfect world, no child under the age of eight would ever be suspended, every child having a discipline crisis would have the proper interventions by adults," Mr. Mulgrew wrote in a letter dashed off to Schools Chancellor Fariña.

"Unfortunately, children who are in crisis and who are disrupting

classrooms are not going to be helped by this plan to ban suspensions in grades K-2, and neither will the thousands of other children who will lose instruction as a result of those disruptions,” he added.

“We strongly believe that if the DOE properly managed existing programs, the number of suspensions for students under the age of eight would be greatly diminished,” Mr. Mulgrew continued. “Better management would also result in more schools developing a positive culture of discipline and respect. Given the DOE’s poor track record in this area, we cannot support the plan at this time.

Where Are the Resources?

The union leader further noted that the new plan “claims that the DOE will provide schools with additional resources to address the challenges created by banning suspensions. We are skeptical these new supports will materialize. Claiming supports are in place does not mean that they are.”

In a statement released Thursday, CSA President Logan said his union also “fundamentally disagrees with the just-released Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline report.

“The Department of Education wants to put the cart before the horse,” Mr. Logan said. “Under these reforms, Principals would be stripped of disciplinary tools before measures, like restorative-justice training, and necessary personnel, i.e. counselors and psychiatrists, are in place to offer chronically misbehaving students

the services they need to modify their behavior.”

“If the DOE is serious about reforming the disciplinary code, it must provide school leaders with the tools they need to maintain an orderly learning environment, not take them away,” he said. “CSA believes hamstringing a school administrator’s ability to take appropriate action against students who violate a school’s disciplinary code ultimately harms the offending student, the student body and the institution.



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Principals Knows Best

“Principals, Assistant Principals and educational administrators’ familiarity with their staff and students’ histories make these school leaders the best arbiters of what disciplinary action suits the offense, the circumstances under which the offense occurred, and the student involved,” the CSA statement concluded.

Mr. Floyd of Local 237 was highly dubious of the city’s claims that in-school crime, arrest, suspension, and summons numbers had all

dropped sharply in the past five years.

“From the beginning of the Mayor’s term, the [Leadership Team] on School Climate and discipline has been reducing metal detectors in schools,” he said. “But the Police Commissioner and the Schools Chancellor have control over what statistics the public will see.”

Citing a recent incident at Boys and Girls High School in Brooklyn in which administrators allegedly covered up the gang rape of a female student by five football players in a school locker room, Mr. Floyd said: “What this tells us is when you don’t report crime, it doesn’t exist, and when you under-report crime, crime statistics are low. That’s what’s happening here.”

The Wrong Target

The union local executive further referred to reports earlier this year that the numbers of weapons being brought into city schools had increased.

“The answer to that was to threaten School Safety Agents with disciplinary charges if they reported, recorded or took pictures of weapons,” Mr. Floyd said. “This [new metal-detector protocol] is another tactic being used by the administration to make sure the public does not know what is going on in our schools.

“They’re playing with fire,” Mr. Floyd said of the de Blasio administration. “Unfortunately, there’s going to be an incident in which someone will be killed or badly injured as a result of these

policies. This is going to put the students, Teachers and School Safety Agents at risk.”

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