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PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Board Establishes Policy to Further Improve School Climate and Reduce School Suspensions

February 26, 2014 (San Francisco) – At its general meeting on February 25, the San Francisco Board of Education unanimously approved a policy aimed at further improving school climate at all San Francisco Unified School District schools and reducing student suspensions.

The Safe and Supportive Schools Policy sponsored by Commissioner Matt Haney states that SFUSD is committed to addressing disproportionality and disparities in the issuance of office referrals, suspensions, expulsion referrals, and expulsions, all of which result in lost instructional time, and taking affirmative steps to support its school-site leadership, teachers, staff, and parents to support students in the classroom.

“We believe strongly in creating a culture district-wide that is supportive of all members of our community,” said Haney. “In order to effectively reduce the number of out-of-classroom referrals and suspensions now, it is imperative to provide targeted support that empowers teachers who most need to build effective instructional and classroom management tools that can be exhausted before referring a child out of the classroom.”

The Safe and Supportive Schools policy calls for resources for teachers including professional development (PD) for Restorative Practices, working with students impacted by trauma, de-escalation techniques, cultural competency, relationship building, communication skills, working with students with special needs, and prioritizing schools with the highest behavioral needs.

Superintendent Richard Carranza supports the new SF Board of Education policy.

“Excluding students from school is not the best way to deal with behavior issues,” said Carranza. “We are 100 percent committed to deepening and extending our practices of positive tiered behavioral interventions and alternatives to suspension in order to increase instructional time and reduce racial disparities.”

SFUSD leading the way in improving school climate and reducing suspensions

SFUSD has been a statewide leader in several research proven practices that have led to improvements, including Restorative Practices, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, and Trauma Sensitive Practices. The systemic changes underway in SFUSD have resulted in reductions in overall suspensions throughout the district by over 30 percent from 2009-2010 to 2012-2013.

In 2009, the SF Board of Education adopted a resolution “In Support of a Comprehensive School Climate, Restorative Justice and Alternatives to Suspensions & Expulsions,” which called for implementing Restorative Practices across the district. Since this policy was passed,

over 2,500 SFUSD educators have attended Restorative Practices trainings. SFUSD's Restorative Practices program received the 2013 Golden Bell Award from the California School Boards Association.

This year SFUSD, along with eight other school districts, was granted a federal waiver from the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. In its waiver applications, SFUSD pledged to develop a School Quality Improvement System (SQIS), which includes a Social/Emotional Domain Index (20 percent) that will address suspension and expulsion rates for the purposes of reducing disproportionality.

Disproportionate suspension remain, widens achievement gap

However, the Board of Education and superintendent remain concerned that a disproportionate number of African-American students and students with disabilities in SFUSD are given office referrals, suspended and referred for expulsion relative to their counterparts, leading to extensive lost instructional time and deepening the racial achievement gap.

In 2012-2013, though African-American students made up approximately 10 percent of the district population, they accounted for close to 50 percent of suspensions and expulsions, and African-American high school students missed an average of 19 more instructional days annually than their peers.

Studies indicate that suspension does not often result in positive behavior conditioning and furthermore can instead intensify misbehavior by increasing shame, alienation, and rejection amongst students. The American Academy of Pediatrics released a report describing the adverse effects of out of school suspension as "profound," and the organization maintains that "out of school suspension and expulsion are counterproductive to the intended goals, rarely if ever are necessary, and should not be considered an appropriate intervention in any but the most extreme and dangerous circumstances."

All schools to have shared approach to interventions and supports by 2017

The Safe and Supportive Schools Policy commits the district to full Implementation of Restorative Practices (RP) and School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) at all schools. It calls for an implementation plan for the roll-out of RP and SWPBIS at all schools over the next three years, which will mean investing more time and money into these approaches in order to equip all staff with the necessary training and support.

"While the work outlined in this policy has begun and is making a big impact, we simply haven't had the resources over the past five years to fully implement these strategies. This policy puts front and center that this is a funding priority," said Carranza.

Furthermore, suspension, including supervised suspension at school, may only be utilized as the appropriate intervention in the most extreme circumstances when the appropriate identified interventions in the behavioral discipline matrix have been exhausted and documented. Beginning in the fall of 2014, the district policy will be updated to provide that no student shall receive a suspension or recommendation for expulsion/be expelled solely on the basis of "disruption/willful defiance." Schools must provide alternatives to suspension for "willful defiance" and ensure that proactive and evidence-based alternative interventions are in place.

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