

# New School Discipline Code Gets Tentative Approval of Unions

By DAN ROSENBLUM | Posted: Monday, February 23, 2015 4:45 pm

Unions were lukewarm about a new school-discipline code announced earlier this month by the de Blasio administration that would take a more deliberate approach to disruptive students.

Pending a March 2 Panel for Education Policy vote, the Department of Education would shift away from suspensions and calling police to deal with unruly students to instead follow a “restorative” philosophy that emphasizes accountability and dialogue over punitive punishments that remove students from classrooms and potentially hinder their academic progress.

## Too Many Black Students?

Out-of-school-suspensions—numbering more than 53,000 in the 2013-2014 school year, according to WNYC—have been criticized by student-advocacy groups and the New York Civil Liberties Union, particularly for the higher rates among black and special-education students.

“Today’s changes will protect students from bullying and violence, and provide relief and a better school experience for students who need to be focused on their learning and not constantly worry about getting suspended for any minor incident,” said Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña.

A major imperative of the \$5-million “school-climate reforms” would direct Principals to seek authorization from the DOE’s Office of Safety and Youth Development before suspending students for insubordination or defying unlawful authority, and it would enforce an existing rule that requires school leaders to check with OSYD before suspending children in kindergarten through third grade. The office would also consider how students’ behavior has disrupted classrooms and their prior behavior before making decisions.



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CARMEN FARIÑA: Changes better for all concerned.

Education unions tepidly backed the reforms. Council of School Supervisors and Administrators Executive Vice President Mark Cannizzaro said his union was very supportive of restorative efforts that emphasize Guidance Counselors and other staffers in lieu of suspensions by default, but said that because of their experience in schools, Principals were “best-positioned” to interpret the discipline codes.

### **‘Principal’s Call’**

“We feel that the Principal should always have the discretion to make the decisions that he or she feels is in the best interest of the child—including consequences or no consequences—depending on the situation,” he said last week.

In his view, it was too soon to tell whether getting approvals for suspensions was practicable.

The DOE, working with the NYPD and the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice, also developed new codes for police and School Safety Agents that would limit their justification for placing metal handcuffs on students younger than 12 years old, launch a pilot program to replace summonses with warnings, track the use of restraints and prioritize verbal commands over physical intervention.

The city proposed spending \$2.4 million to give students entering the court system a dedicated Guidance Counselor to help advise them as well as give them access to Internet-based coursework and graduation-planning systems; \$1.2 million to train staff on the restorative approach; and \$432,000 to mentor at-risk students. The DOE would also spend \$1.45 million to reduce 911 calls by creating a plan to de-escalate a child’s “emotional or behavioral event,” offer 1,500 high-school educators crisis-management training, and better track emergency-management calls.

### **Team to Set Tone**

The DOE has created a School Climate Leadership Team, partially composed of Principals, parents, NYPD and union representatives, to recommend improvements promoting “student safety and dignity.”

“We support policies that improve the learning environment in our schools, and welcome being part of the new leadership team that will keep tabs on these changes and suggest further improvements if needed,” United Federation of Teachers President Michael Mulgrew said in a statement.

The DOE will also expand training for SSAs and police officers assigned to the School Safety Division. The agents have gotten three-day crisis-intervention courses and the training academy was lengthened by two weeks to include new conflict-resolution techniques.

“It is my hope these reforms will go a long way in easing tensions with young adults,” said Gregory Floyd, president of Teamsters Local 237, which represents SSAs.

DOE officials said that crime in schools has decreased by 24 percent over the last two years, while suspensions and arrests dipped 23 percent and 55 percent, respectively. In its announcement, the department cited national statistics showing that high-school suspensions lower a student’s odds of graduating on time by 46 percent and that those who are arrested are twice as likely to drop out as their peers.