

**Hearing before the
Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights**

On

“Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline”

Written Testimony of Edward Ward

December 12, 2012

Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Graham, and members of the Subcommittee – thank you for the opportunity to speak at today’s hearing.

My name is Edward Ward, I am 20 years old, from Chicago, Illinois, and I am an Honor Roll student in my sophomore year at DePaul University.

In addition to my academic responsibilities, I volunteer with Blocks Together, which is located in the West Humboldt Park community on Chicago’s Westside. Blocks Together is a member of the Dignity in Schools Campaign, a national coalition of parents, students, educators and advocates working to promote positive approaches to discipline and to protect students’ human rights to an education and to be treated with dignity. I work with Blocks Together to help prevent students who are currently enrolled in Chicago Public Schools from being unnecessarily suspended and put out on the streets by promoting positive alternatives to suspensions and expulsions like restorative justice practices, peer mediation and positive behavior intervention and supports (PBIS). I am also a youth pastor of the Word of Life Christian Ministries.

I grew up on the West Side of Chicago, where I attended and graduated from Orr Academy High School. My high school seemed like its own personal prison. From the moment we stepped through the doors in the morning, we were faced with metal detectors, x-ray machines and uniformed security. Upon entering the school, it was like we stepped into a prison. Violence is prevalent in my community. When I was eighteen, I witnessed a complete stranger’s killing, mere feet from me, in a neighborhood restaurant. That same year, I found my cousin – who had moved out of our neighborhood to get married and start a better life – slain by gun violence outside my home. A few years back, I was stopped by police on the street and saw them train their guns on me until I could quickly show that the item in my pocket was simply a cell phone. I have seen, and stopped, kids from jumping older residents in the community. And I know of the abuse – be it physical, emotional, or sexual – and abandonment that some of my peers have faced in their families.

Poverty was and still remains prevalent in my community as well; some experience it at home and others experience it in their own communities. Many of us come from families where it’s a constant struggle to pay bills; there are some instances where we have had to choose between

paying the gas bill and having food in the house. After that decision, we suffered one extremely cold winter. I saw how my fellow students, who faced similar struggles did all they could to focus on getting an education despite the economic hardships they experienced at home, many of them while also taking care of their siblings and themselves.

In elementary and middle school I was often picked on and talked about by students. It was very hard for me to be accepted by my peers; I wasn't "cool enough," according to them. I was a quiet student and I mostly kept to myself, but when I got to high school, I began to see that my fellow classmates were being constantly suspended from school. My high school was taken over by a management agency through school turnaround four years ago, but continues to have one of the worst graduation rates in the state. In 2008, the graduation rate from Orr was 27.7%. Orr is 90% low income and 100% Black and Latino. About a third of the youth within the attendance boundaries of Orr are wards of the state and more than a fourth of the students at Orr are in special education.

When my classmates were suspended from Orr, they would disappear for days and when they were kicked out they would disappear sometimes for weeks. What was most shocking to me was discovering that they were being suspended for minor infractions, the kind of infractions that shouldn't merit more than a stern warning or reminder. I clearly remember a classmate who was climbing up the stairs from the weight room in the basement of our school, and on his way up he tripped and landed on his knee. His reflex was to yell "Damn!" from the pain. He was served with a two-day out-of-school suspension. This was disheartening, and it made me question what kind of reasoning was behind these policies that led my school to dish out suspensions and expulsions that led to young people missing valuable class time and being abandoned by our schools. CPS records that Orr's suspension rate in 2011 was well above the district average: the percentage of student misconduct handled by the school which resulted in suspensions was 66.7%, and the district average was 39.3%.

Unreasonable punishments like these were not rare at my school. My classmates and I saw many other students served with two-day suspensions because, for example, they weren't carrying proper identification around their necks. Some of my friends would sometimes come to school late, sometimes by no fault of their own. I remember one of my peers coming to me saying that she was held in detention and could not be permitted to go to class because she came late, but it was because she couldn't leave her little brother at home alone because her parents did not arrive home on time. Many were forced to miss class and stay in the detention room for the rest of the period. Because our school works on a "block schedule" with longer class periods, students would miss 90 minutes of class time just for arriving late to first period. These detentions negatively impacted their attendance and their performance in the class, since they were not allowed to turn in their homework and missed entire lessons. Being in detention was like being in solitary confinement; you were to sit there quietly with no work to do and if you made noise while in detention you would get suspended. If you put in headphones you would get suspended. If your phone rang and it was heard, it was to be confiscated for seven days and you would get

suspended. And when you were suspended you were immediately sent home, without your parents being contacted. You were escorted from the school and anything could have happened, but that didn't seem like it was much of a concern.

The way my school handled discipline, students were never given the chance to explain their side of the story, and if they attempted to speak and try to explain, they were threatened with further punishment.

My school's environment was very tense; the halls were full with school security officers whose only purpose seemed to be to serve students with detentions or suspensions. Many of the school security officers were very disrespectful to students; some of them spoke to us as if we were animals. They were constantly yelling and antagonizing us from the moment we stepped into the halls until we reached our destination. This was nerve-wracking for me, because although I was an honor student, I felt constantly in a state of alert, afraid to make even the smallest mistake or create a noise that could enable the security officers to serve me with a detention. Instead of feeling like I could trust them, I felt I couldn't go to them for general security issues because I would first be interrogated before anything would get done.

A survey done by one of my school's advisory classes revealed that many students were experiencing physical and verbal abuse and sexual harassment from security guards at the school. It was so normalized that students said they didn't think to make formal complaints and didn't trust that they would be listened to anyway. I can remember a specific moment where the senior class arrived back at the school after a college tour, and I was told to go to the main office to send a message; while on my way there I was stopped by one of the security guards who proceeded to yell at me before I was even allowed to explain myself.

While the security guards constantly threatened to discipline students, the police officers stationed at my school were even more aggressive. Most Chicago public high schools have 2 on-duty police officers present. Our school even had a police processing center so police could book students then and there. The officers don't get any special training to be in the school so they don't treat us like we are misbehaving; they treat us like we are committing crimes. I remember when a fight broke out between two young women and the police were called. While trying to break up the fight, the police grabbed one of the young women and slammed her to the ground numerous times although there were no weapons involved in the altercation. Every time there was a fight the police would step in and handcuff students even in cases where there was no weapon. Some would be sent to the police station in the school, a few or some never came back to school after that.

These policies and actions disheartened me. I could slowly see the determination to get an education fade from the faces of my peers because they were convinced that they no longer mattered, that their voices would continue to be completely ignored. Students were not given a chance to explain themselves or defend their actions. They were in need of someone who

understands them, someone they could confide in; the last thing that would work is to place them in institutions of confinement and control. They needed to feel like there was hope for a better future quite different from their current situations, so it would be antithetical to convince them that they were criminals deserving of severe punishment.

The discipline policies seemed to overlook ways to help students succeed. They needed proper mentors, people who could understand them. They needed a place to grow, to learn, to escape everything in our worlds that was making us grow up too quickly otherwise. Instead the school seemed to focus more on how to make its numbers look good. Periodically, dozens of students were dropped from the school's enrollment. According to the school, they missed too many days. But after you get two tardies in a day, it counts as an absence. So a lot of these "chronically truant" students were coming to school every day. Others were homeless and had trouble getting bus cards to come from far off places where they stayed. If students actually came back to the school with a parent to try to get back in, they had to sign a contract saying that if they had two infractions they would be kicked out of the school permanently. Where was the support? Students felt as if it was too much. Some decided to drop out. The dropout rate at Orr is now three times the district average. CPS records that the one-year dropout rate in 2011 was 20.1%, in 2012, 21.4%, while the District average is 7.6%.

I had a friend who was diagnosed with Leukemia that the school tried to dis-enroll because she was missing so many days of school. Thankfully, her mother fought and succeeded in keeping her enrolled at my school – a fight she should have never had to have.

Until recently, I had a cousin who was attending Orr. However, he never finished because he was suspended with so much frequency that he eventually dropped out of the school.

He had problems at home that most people at school never really understood. You see, my cousin's mother is a drug addict, and as a young person he didn't quite know how to deal with that, so he started acting out in class. He was what you would consider to be the class clown. The school believed that by suspending him, it would allow him time to think about his misbehavior. Instead, it just gave him more time alone out on the streets and made it easier for him to simply turn to selling drugs and make easy money. After all, his mother was on drugs and he had no other way to make ends meet. Eventually, my cousin was arrested and then one day I got the call saying he had been shot twice. I thank God that he is alive today.

I grew up with my cousin. He was not a bad kid. But in the one place that he should have counted as his second home, he was abandoned. In the one place where he could have learned life lessons and learned from his mistakes, his mistakes were used against him. These are the type of situations that feed our nation's school-to-prison pipeline. Where many young people, like my cousin, feel unwelcome and under siege in their own schools, they end up on the street, in the criminal justice system, or worse.

Because I believed I needed to take part in improving my school, I got involved with Blocks Together and joined their effort to introduce and implement restorative justice practices in Chicago Public Schools as an alternative to suspensions and expulsions. Restorative justice is grounded in the idea that we become safer when we hold each other accountable in ways that build more tight-knit community, get to the root of problems, restore relationships between people, and give people the skills and support they need to prevent future problems. Through our organized pressure we were able to get some disciplinary incidents in our school referred from the dean for discipline to the restorative justice-based peer jury. I served as a restorative justice facilitator at my school and helped train other students to be restorative justice facilitators as well.

Restorative justice enabled us to create an environment in which we listened to the voices of students who were facing disciplinary action, and instead of automatically suspending them, the school and student facilitators convened hearings during which the student's actions were explored and the student had an opportunity to explain why she/he took the action in question.

I was moved by what I saw in these hearings. Students were actually understanding each other; they were working together to restore the relationships that were almost destroyed between them. This effort has provided a safer school environment in which students and staff can work together as a unified body. A suspension could never do that. Students didn't need to be silenced or put out, they needed to be heard and welcomed with open arms.

When Orr's administrators bought into our restorative justice peer juries, we were able to interrupt the trend of automatic suspensions so that the voices of students who were facing disciplinary action could be heard, the underlying needs explored, the harms repaired and the student put back on the right track. However, we went through 15 different administrators in 4 years and we found ourselves starting over with each new dean or principal. We tried going to the higher ups at the management agency that runs my school but it is hard to hold accountable because it does not have the usual community governance structure that a regular public school in Chicago has.

I think that schools need to throw out the assumption that young people are all dangerous or a threat. They must work to understand the issues that students face every day whether it's problems at home, learning difficulties, language barriers, experiencing bullying and discrimination. To accomplish this shift, both my high school and Chicago Public Schools need to prioritize training for teachers, students, staff, administration and parents ahead of this overemphasis on "zero tolerance" and school policing. Suspension and expulsion for non-violent offenses really do dismantle a student's future.

I hope you understand that my experience at Orr was not an anomaly, but is what is happening in schools across the country, particularly in communities of color. I would hope in the near future, we will have undone this mistake – that my children will never have to feel anything but

welcome in their schools. But a problem my generation did not cause cannot be solved by my generation alone.