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Report: Student Arrests Decline in CT But Many Arrests Avoidable and Practices Vary Widely

First report on student arrests includes school district data

A new study of records from Connecticut schools shows an encouraging reduction in the number of student arrests in our schools. The report from Connecticut Voices for Children, the first comprehensive study of its kind, attributed the change in arrest rates to reforms of school discipline policies which followed passage of a 2007 law limiting the use of out-of-school suspensions. Connecticut Voices for Children found that, despite this positive news, room for improvement remains. Records show that many of the students were arrested for behaviors that were probably not criminal and could likely have been handled within the school without police involvement. In addition, racial and ethnic disparities in arrest rates, together with wide variations in arrest rates among similar school districts, suggest a need for uniform criteria in decisions about arresting students in school.

“Connecticut’s progress in reducing school arrests is good news for children, families and businesses across the state. Arresting children for behavior that could be handled in the school takes students out of the learning environment, sets back educational progress, and results in additional costs.” said Ellen Shemitz, Executive Director of Connecticut Voices for Children. “The data suggest policy changes may be necessary to prevent unnecessary involvement with the juvenile justice system to keep children where they belong – in school.”

Among the findings of the report:

- **The number of students arrested has declined in recent years.** During the 2011 school year, 2,936 students (about one in 200) were arrested. This was a 13.5% decline in the number of children arrested from the peak of 3,396 students arrested in the 2008 school year. The highest arrest rates among mid- to large-sized school districts were in Meriden (27.8 arrests per thousand students), Area Cooperative Educational Services (a regional school district serving greater New Haven - 27.1), New London (23.1), Ansonia (18.3), and Waterbury (17.1). In comparison, the statewide rate was 5.7 arrests per thousand students.
- **Many arrests were likely avoidable.** A significant share of arrests were for reasons that the report classified as likely avoidable (11%) – behaviors that were probably not criminal and could

have been handled within the classroom or school. These reasons included skipping class, insubordination, and using profanities. The report classified another one-quarter of arrests (23%) as questionably necessary – incidents that may have risen to the level of a crime in some circumstances but in many cases could have been handled by the school. These included categories like physical altercations without injuries, bullying, obscene behavior, and false fire alarms.

- **Arrest rates were higher for students of color, students in poor districts, and special education students.** Black students were 3.7 times and Hispanic students 3.2 times more likely to be arrested than white students. This is correlated with a much higher arrest rates for students who live in low-income, urban communities when compared to the arrest rates of students in wealthier, suburban towns. Students attending a school in District Reference Group (DRG) I, which includes the cities of Bridgeport, Hartford, New Britain, New Haven, New London, Waterbury, and Windham, were arrested nine times more often than students in the schools of DRG A, which includes nine suburban districts in Fairfield County. However, racial disparities in student arrest rates are not confined to urban or suburban schools; 59% of school districts had higher arrest rates for black students than white students. In addition, students with special education needs were arrested at rates 2.8 times higher than their peers.
- **Arrest rates varied widely between similar school districts and among schools in the same district, suggesting that much of this variation is driven by differences in school practices, not simply differences in the student population or socioeconomic factors.** While lower-income and urban districts tended to have higher arrest rates overall, many of these districts had rates below or near the statewide average, including Derby, Norwalk, Stamford, Bridgeport, Hartford, and New Haven. While higher-income and middle-income school districts tend to have lower than average student arrest rates, some of these districts have rates that are above the statewide average, including Region 5 (Bethany, Woodbridge, and Orange), Ellington, Enfield, Windsor Locks, and Newington. The report also cited several examples of schools within the same district that arrested students at widely different rates.

To reduce unnecessary student arrests, Connecticut Voices’ report made several recommendations, including proposals that state policymakers and the State Department of Education should:

- Clearly define “student arrests,” which are not currently defined by the state. Collect and publish data on all student arrests (currently not required for all incidents resulting in arrests).
- Require districts with police stationed in schools to create a memorandum of agreement between the schools and police that sets ground rules concerning arrests.
- Provide technical assistance to districts seeking to reduce arrests and promote sharing of successful strategies from other districts.

“In light of discussions of school safety following the Newtown tragedy, these findings raise cautions about potential unintended consequences of increased police presence in schools,” said Sarah Esty,

author of the report, former Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices, and a consultant to the organization. “Many schools are effective at managing problem student behaviors without resorting to arrests and costly involvement with the juvenile justice system, and we should share lessons about what works.”

Connecticut Voices for Children is a research-based think tank that works to advance policies that benefit the state’s children, youth and families. The report, “Arresting Development: Student Arrests in Connecticut,” is available on the Connecticut Voices website at www.ctvoices.org.

[Note to reporters: For district-level data on student arrests, see Appendix B of the full report and other selected tables. Also see our online database at www.ctvoices.org/arrest, which – when available under student confidentiality regulations -- contains district-level arrest data by gender, race/ethnicity, special education status, and grade level.]

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