

Changing the code of discipline

BY JASMINE SARMIENTO
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If you don't like it, you can leave.

That's the line of defense that Noble Network of Charter Schools' supporters have fallen back on in the wake of research showing that the rapidly expanding charter school network has made almost \$400,000 in disciplinary fines imposed on low-income students and their parents.

Many Noble students leave the school before their senior year, some forced to choose between bus fare and their education by a discipline code that fines them for bringing chips to school or chewing gum. Students and their parents are coming to us with stories of financial hardship, of repeating an entire school year for discipline reasons, and of fines incurred for behavior like "running a pencil alongside the edge of a desk."

As one parent shared with us, it was not just the harmful financial costs — as high as \$280 for "behavior classes" — but the cost in self-esteem to her son who, because he had difficulty keeping his eyes on the teacher at all times, fell asleep in a three-hour silent detention or slouched in his chair, began to see himself as a "bad kid."

Sadly, instead of teaching appropriate consequences — and investing in the success of the young people who most need support — Noble founder and CEO Michael Milkie simply delivers the same message Mayor Rahm Emanuel gave reporters last week: If you don't like it, you can leave.

It's a refrain that's heard far too frequently by students across Chicago. And, in a warped twisting of the mission of public education, the students who hear it most are the ones public officials should be zeroing in on to put on a pathway to college: the poorest students, the students who are learning English, the students with learning disabilities.

Noble isn't alone in pushing these young people out of school. Under increasing pressure to raise test results, schools are turning to other types of extreme disciplinary practices, such as multiweek suspensions, school-based arrests and forced transfers.

As parents and students across Chicago know, and as academic research confirms, the results of these extreme discipline policies have been disastrous: low academic achievement, high dropout rates and alienation between students and their teachers.

It doesn't have to be this way. Advancement Project, a national civil rights organization with expertise on education, has successfully worked with urban school districts across the

country to develop smarter and safer school discipline codes.

In Baltimore, a city whose student population looks much like Chicago's, Advancement Project helped school officials overhaul their approach to discipline and invest in a system that emphasizes early interventions, positive behavior support, keeping students in the classroom and the teaching of consequences instead of ineffective and extreme punishments. The result? Record high graduation rates and a 60 percent drop in suspensions. It's no surprise that youth crime also dropped to record lows. The same approach in Denver led to similar results.

These examples suggest that Noble's defenders, who say that Noble's harsh discipline is the only way to make schools calm and safe, are presenting us with a false choice. The implication is that the alternative to extreme punishment is chaos and fear.



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No one wants safe schools more than we do. The best way to get there is to replace the current discipline policies — at Noble and throughout all of Chicago Public Schools — with one that actually works. What all the research demonstrates, and what our personal experience confirms, is that what makes a school safe is the quality of relationships between students, teachers and staff. Extreme discipline — whether it's fining a student for forgetting his belt or arresting an 11-year-old for throwing a tantrum — actively damages the trusting, respectful and supportive relationships that make our schools safe.

It's time to stop playing shell games with young peoples' lives. We need better reporting from all our schools on how disciplinary practices are being used. We must invest in common-sense discipline and support systems that have proved to be effective. It's what our students deserve.

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