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Settlement of SPLC Suit to End Brutal Treatment of Students

A federal judge has approved a settlement agreement between the Southern Poverty Law Center and the public school system in Jackson, Miss., to reform discipline policies across the district and to end the brutal practice of handcuffing students to railings and poles for hours at a time as punishment for minor rule violations.

"This settlement agreement is a victory for the students of Jackson Public Schools who have been subjected to years of brutal disciplinary policies," said Jody Owens, who leads the SPLC's Mississippi office.

"Jackson Public Schools officials at the highest levels failed to protect students from a prison-like environment, where children were subjected to regular shackling and chained to poles and railings for minor, non-criminal violations of school rules," Owens said. "This handcuffing policy demonstrated a punitive school culture and a broken model of school discipline that focused on criminalizing students at the expense of educating them."

The agreement, approved Thursday by U.S. District Court Judge Tom Lee, resolves a federal civil rights class-action lawsuit the SPLC brought against Jackson Public Schools in June 2011 on behalf of students at Capital City Alternative School (CCAS) who were shackled and handcuffed to railings and poles by JPS officials. These children were frequently left unsupervised for up to six hours at a time, forced to eat their lunches while restrained, and had to beg school staff to release them in order to use the restroom. These abusive and excessive tactics were used as discipline for perceived violations of minor school rules, including dress code infractions.

Under the agreement, the school system must overhaul discipline policies throughout the school district. The specific reforms approved and ordered by the court include:

- A written directive from the district barring all Jackson Public Schools employees from using fixed restraints on any JPS students.
- A ban on the use of handcuffs on all students under the age of 13, and a ban on the use of handcuffs as punishment for non-criminal behavior.
- A school climate assessment of Capital City Alternative School within 60 days, including student, parent and teacher satisfaction surveys.
- The adoption of a Social Emotional Learning curriculum at CCAS designed to help students develop appropriate social skills and emotional regulation.
- Training for all individuals employed at CCAS on behavior management, verbal de-escalation and effective communication.
- The implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports at CCAS, including the regular review of discipline data and interviews with staff and students.
- The formation of an oversight council comprised of students, parents, child advocates and a mental health professional to oversee disciplinary reforms.

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The settlement agreement also requires JPS to hire an independent expert to monitor the district's compliance with the terms of the agreement.

The SPLC's education reform efforts in Mississippi include advocacy to reform school discipline practices that cause children to leave school and that have a disproportionate impact on students of color or with special needs.

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