

# FIX SCHOOL DISCIPLINE CAMPAIGN

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES that FAST TRACK POLICY CHANGE



## HIGHLIGHTS

**Issue** Harsh school disciplinary practices such as the overuse of expulsions and suspensions were derailing the futures of hundreds of thousands of California’s youth, with disproportionately high impact in communities of color.

**Strategy** Coordinated communications and policy advocacy strategy that reframed the issue from a local concern to a statewide education reform opportunity.

**Who** The California Endowment.

**How Much** *Statewide public opinion polling:* approximately \$45,000.

*Framing research and messaging:* approximately \$100,000.

*Targeted paid media:* approximately \$100,000 in select communities, Sacramento and Fresno.

*Promotion of research media relations and design:* approximately \$15,000.

**Biggest Result** Four school discipline reform bills were signed into law, including provisions that required school administrators to use alternative disciplinary practices before suspending students, changed truancy rules to reduce fines, and gave administrators more options for keeping students in school. School suspensions have dropped 27% in California in three years.



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Photo: Fresno Building Healthy Communities

# INTRODUCTION

The California Endowment, the state's largest health foundation, has a strategy aimed at reducing health disparities by combining deep sustained investment in 14 disadvantaged communities with a focus on state policy change. A key idea behind the strategy is that grassroots concerns help develop a stronger policy agenda for the removal of roadblocks to health and opportunity for Californians.

That's exactly what happened through the Fix School Discipline campaign, which originated with youth leaders in the 14 communities who said their opportunities for a healthy and successful life were being cut short by school suspensions that happened often and for reasons that didn't make sense to them. After youth in more than half the 14 communities raised the same concern, The Endowment's statewide policy team began to examine the scope and scale of the issue across California and found the youths were exactly right.

In 2011, California schools issued nearly 800,000 suspensions, the majority unrelated to violence or drugs. Further research revealed that just one rationale – a catch-all category for minor misbehavior called “willful defiance” – represented 44% of all suspensions in the state. And data also showed stark racial disparities: African-American and Latino students were suspended at far higher rates.

Most importantly, research showed that schools were not suspending their way to success. Higher rates of suspension did not lead to safer schools or higher test scores. But they have been proven to play a significant role in educational failure. A Florida study found that just one suspension in the 9th grade doubled the risk of dropping out of high school.

With this knowledge, Endowment leaders brought together policy and community advocates to discuss what might be done. And from there, advocates developed a legislative and policy change agenda that formed the basis of the Fix School Discipline campaign. The campaign brought together youth leaders, community advocates, educators and others to make the case for positive school discipline approaches that help kids learn from their mistakes while keeping them in school.

The Endowment, a non-partisan foundation that doesn't engage in lobbying, contributed to the campaign through a number of communications tactics and strategies to raise awareness of the issue. These included polling to understand whether Californians were ready to support school discipline reform; messaging research to identify the most compelling ways to talk about the issue; promoting research that documented the overuse of harsh discipline and its impact on students; organizing events aimed at attracting media coverage and assisting with the development of op-eds; and promoting California schools that had embraced positive discipline that both lowered suspension rates and lifted test scores.

In less than two years, school discipline reform went from unknown to a high-profile education policy issue. And the policy-change process became an important platform for raising awareness of this issue statewide, leading to a 27% drop in suspensions in just three years.

# REFORMS INSTITUTIONALIZED IN STATE EDUCATION CODE

## IMPACTS

Within a year after the Fix School Discipline campaign began, four key bills that revised the state education code in California related to school discipline reform were signed into law. They included the required use of alternative disciplinary practices prior to suspension and revised truancy rules and fines.

A narrative shift was visible in public comments on the issue. “Kids who have been suspended or expelled are five times more likely to drop out and 11 times more likely to turn to crime,” said Roger Dickinson, chair of the California State Assembly Select Committee on Delinquency Prevention and Youth Development. “We must address behavioral issues with alternative means of correction so we can keep young people in school and on track to graduate, and out of the criminal justice system.”

All the while, local school discipline advocacy continued and some of the state’s largest school districts passed local reform measures prioritizing positive school discipline approaches, including Los Angeles Unified, Fresno Unified, Long Beach Unified, San Diego Unified and San Francisco Unified. “It’s not just about discipline. It’s really about changing school climate and changing the relationships between everyone who’s on a school campus,” said Jumoke Hodge, Oakland Unified School Board Member, after their vote.

The momentum in California contributed to a growing national movement for school discipline reform, which most recently included the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Justice introducing new 2014 federal guidelines aimed at stopping the explosion in student suspensions, expulsions and referrals to the criminal-justice system. The guidelines describe how schools can meet their obligations under federal law to administer student discipline without discriminating against race, color, or national origin.

After vetoing a bill aimed at preventing the overuse of willful defiance in 2013, Governor Brown worked with advocates in 2014 to agree on a bill that would limit schools’ ability to suspend or expel students for “willful defiance,” including banning defiance suspensions entirely for

grades K-3. The bill is expected to move forward for Senate approval. The momentum of reform also worked its way into California’s new Fair School Funding law (also known as Local Control Funding Formula). The law requires districts to address eight specific priority areas with the funding, “school climate” being one of them. Every school in the state must conduct school climate surveys, provide goals for each priority and report their progress. Lastly, community advocacy efforts are underway to encourage their school districts to set goals for the reduction of expulsion and suspension rates and to monitor progress.

## HOW IT HAPPENED

### Making data meaningful

Throughout the campaign, data played a significant role in educating the public and policymakers on the scope of the problem. In December 2011, an Endowment-funded journalist at The Center for Public Integrity analyzed state data and published an investigation documenting disparities in the use of school discipline across California. In early 2012, The Endowment helped promote new research from The Civil Rights Project at UCLA that documented the scope and scale of the problem in California through promoting media coverage and op-eds connecting the facts and analysis with the stories of those most affected by the harsh discipline policies. Because the data was available by county and school district, local reporters and policymakers were able to clearly see the impact in their communities.

### Power tools boost campaign coalition

To inform the shape of the message, Foundation staff commissioned a firm to do a statewide attitude poll. The results showed that 4 in 5 voters in California supported changes in the discipline system. The poll also found that messages focused on giving students a second chance to succeed and get on track were most persuasive, with credible messengers including students who had gotten in trouble but learned from their mistakes. These insights helped reframe the narrative used by the campaign coalition from one of punishing individual troublemakers to a need for systemic change that held kids accountable

while helping them learn and get the support they needed to succeed. The professional intelligence gleaned from these communications investments honed understanding of campaign audiences and unified messaging.

## Young voices carry

It was young people who first sounded the alarm about the issue. Youth also were the most compelling, persuasive and persistent messengers in media interviews, at legislative hearings, and as part of Capitol Hill visits. At crucial points in the campaign, it was the voice of youth that personified the devastating human cost of current discipline policies. Some of the earliest coverage of the issue resulted from a virtual rally held in four cities as part of Dignity in School's National Week of Action. There, young men and women shared their experiences and found inspiration in that this was not just a problem in their communities, but an issue happening across the state. Over the course of the campaign, youth organizers gathered over 15,000 signatures to petition the Governor. They came out in large numbers to testify at regional hearings and were a key part of policymaker education. One of the youth advocates from Oakland, Malik, reflected, "We really made a difference! Once people heard our stories and why we wanted them to vote yes, they paid attention and I believe we changed the way some of them voted. I do not want other kids to be pushed out of school the way I have been and I think these bills will change the way things work."

## Media drumbeat unavoidable

The Endowment funded the creation of FixSchoolDiscipline.org as an information hub for media and school practitioners. The site housed the latest research and data, news and toolkits for school administrators and community members that wanted to take action. The campaign also maintained a concerted media relations effort that amplified the voices of the youth and educators. A story database was developed to consistently collect and share new voices ranging from police officers from the law enforcement association Fight Crime, Invest in Kids, to local stories from teachers and students dealing with school discipline inconsistencies. The campaign timed the release of the polling data

and promotion of the research to coincide with Education Committee Hearings. The message was everywhere. While young people spoke to lawmakers on Capitol Hill, researchers held a press conference detailing high rates of suspension levels state-wide and the activities were covered in all major media outlets in the state – including *The Sacramento Bee*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Oakland Tribune*.

The campaign also included targeted use of paid advertising as a complement to earned media and community organizing. The Foundation-branded ads ensured the campaign's message was seen at key moments. Examples included a heavy TV spot rotation in Sacramento during crucial policy debate, a local newspaper ad at the site of the California School Board Association Conference, and a targeted *Fresno Bee* ad placement prior to a key school district board vote.

The Endowment's visionary role was key to the success according to advocates and policymakers. Key campaign member Brian Lee, State Director at Fight Crime, Invest in Kids, an anti-crime organization representing law enforcement officers and violence survivors, said, "TCE's leadership on this issue and involvement in the campaign has been invaluable."

When the bills were awaiting signature on Governor Brown's desk, the decision was made to hold a public hearing in Los Angeles to keep the issue in the public eye. Co-sponsored by the US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, the California Department of Education and the State Attorney General's Office, the event featured testimony by 22 speakers. Among those who testified were a number of students who spoke passionately about the importance of moving toward positive discipline approaches. Two weeks later, Governor Brown signed five of the seven bills related to school discipline reforms.

"Public campaigns like those that have been initiated by the Endowment ... they are critical to us as policymakers," says Gil Cedillo, Los Angeles City Councilmember and former California State Assembly member and State Senator.

More progress is needed, but as Laura Faer, Education Rights Director at Public Counsel said, "Gov. Brown has helped our state take an important step toward common sense discipline that works."

# LESSONS LEARNED

- ▶ Understanding and communicating the scale and scope of an issue is key to identifying opportunities for systemic change.
- ▶ Youth can be powerful messengers who emphasize the human effect of an issue and provide energy and urgency to a campaign.
- ▶ Providing professional-grade communications intelligence and tools such as polling data, messaging research, and communications materials to grantee collaboratives boosts coordination and effectiveness.
- ▶ Dedicated resources for media relations (coordinated with, but above and beyond, the efforts of grantee collaboratives) helps to amplify campaign messages.
- ▶ Foundation-branded advertising and out-front leadership calling out the need for change helped provide credibility to the issue for policymakers and educators.



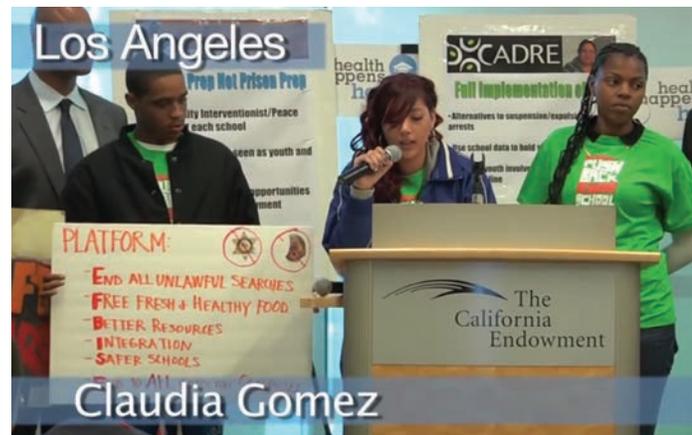
Garfield High School  
East Los Angeles  
2008-09  
Total Suspensions

510



Garfield High School  
East Los Angeles  
2010-11  
Total Suspensions

1



Claudia Gomez



## 10 Elements of Success

Among the Fast Track case studies, we've identified the following 10 insights. The most critical elements of success for each case appear as symbols throughout the series.



### 1 SOLUTIONS

The majority of these initiatives contained messages not just about the problem, but about a range of potential solutions. The net effect is to give the public hope and give policymakers a call to action. This approach also speaks directly to the nexus of the nature of the Internet and journalism: to both ask questions and answer them.



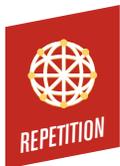
### 2 POLICYMAKERS

Identifying policymakers explicitly as a target audience and devoting appropriate resources to outreach is key. Whenever possible, explicitly making it a bi-partisan effort can be very effective.



### 3 AGILITY

While a communications strategy is important, so is building in flexibility. The ability to respond quickly with resources to a changing landscape is critical to overcoming unforeseen challenges and leveraging unexpected opportunities. Often these initiatives can be a bit messy mid-stream; flexibility and agility makes navigation easier.



### 4 REPETITION

Continuity of coverage has a multiplier effect on awareness-building. Journalistic series and paid-advertising campaigns keep issues top-of-mind during delays in the legislative process.



### 5 HUMANITY

Engaging community voices can be a powerful way to give an issue a human face. Emphasizing personal impact stories can also support journalistic efforts, assist with multi-media content, engage the constituents of lawmakers and provide testimonials for solutions.



### 6 PAID ADVERTISING

Having the ability to control the content and timing of messages through paid advertising can create awareness during key milestones. The ability to customize messages geographically or by target audience can also accelerate the speed of social change.



### 7 FOUNDATION BRANDING

Putting a foundation's name and "brand" on media or communications efforts lends credibility and gravitas to an issue, especially in smaller markets or rural areas. Stakeholders are more likely to take another look at an issue if it has become the priority of a philanthropic institution.



### 8 MEDIA START-UPS

Establishing digital outlets for in-depth coverage about an issue can be a cost-effective and efficient way of designating a "space" for the issue to live in. At their best, these sites also become media tools for expanded and sustained coverage over time.



### 9 PARTNER. PARTNER. PARTNER.

Whether it is funder partnerships or media partnerships, collaborative and in-kind efforts result in impact that is greater than the sum of its individual parts.



### 10 INTEGRATION FROM THE OUTSET

The combination of media, community and policymaker engagement from the beginning of a strategic communications effort is key to success. The catalytic effect of coordinating and integrating these strategies far outweighs any one as a siloed or solo effort.