

ISSUANCE OF 'DISRUPTIVE PERSON LETTERS' TO LAUSD PARENTS

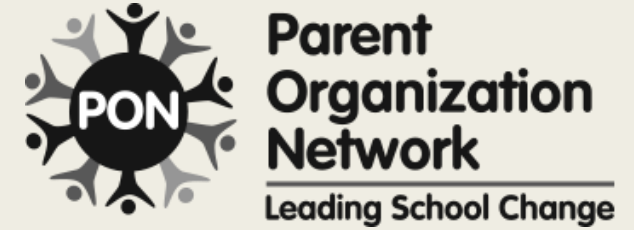
Modifying the System to Maintain School Safety &
Improve Parent Relations



**Parent
Organization
Network**

Leading School Change

I. Introduction to PON



- Mission: The Parent Organization Network (PON) strengthens the abilities of culturally diverse and underserved parents to be trainers and leaders, supports their local initiatives and advocacy efforts, and connects them to a broader network of committed individuals and organizations, so together they can effect long-term systemic changes, resulting in high-quality education for all students.
- Founded in 2005 by the Asian Americans Advancing Justice | Los Angeles, Los Angeles Urban League, and MALDEF.
- Fourteen member organizations in five school districts: LAUSD, Long Beach, Lynwood, Pasadena, and Whittier City.

I. Report Introduction

- Schools are meant to be calm, safe places where students can learn. However, schools are also unique institutions in our society where children and adults of many different backgrounds gather. Cultures, values, goals, personalities and “people skills” of parents at times clash with those of school staff.
- District policy and state law grants school principals the authority to restrict campus access to visitors in order to keep students safe.
- State and federal laws guarantee the right of parents to be involved in school as advocates for their children and as partners in decision-making.
- However, in the course of carrying out parental duties and exercising parental rights now and then a parent’s words, tone of voice, or behavior may be interpreted or labeled by school staff as “disruptive.”
- This determination then triggers school-safety provisions that result in principals issuing so-called “Disruptive Person Letters” (DPLs) to parents.

II. Methodology

- Review of 476 DPLs obtained through a Public Record Act Request.
 - These DPLs come from 192 schools and span school years 2002-03 through 2015-16, with the data set being most robust for the past four school years.
 - Each letter was carefully read and information contained in it was entered into a database so that the letter could be analyzed by school year, local district, school grade-level configuration, school type, principal, recipient(s), type and frequency of offense, and number of bans and warnings given to recipients.
- Data analysis from six interviews with parents.
 - All are active in their school, or in central-level advisory committees, and/or in the community.
 - Each parent was asked 21 questions regarding their experience with the DPL process in the LAUSD.

III. Context

What is a DPL?

A “disruptive person letter” is a document received by a parent, guardian, other adult, or even a minor, from a school principal, for behavior which has been deemed “disruptive.”

- It restricts access to the school campus for an unspecified time period
- It requires that in order to enter the premises at any time for any reason, the recipient must first obtain the principal’s permission.

By What Authority May Principals Issue DPLs?

- California Penal Code § 626.6, 626.8
- California Education Code §44810, 44811 classify “willfully interfer[ing] with the discipline, good order, lawful conduct, or administration of any class or activity of the school with the intent to disrupt, obstruct, or to inflict damage to property or bodily injury upon any person” as misdemeanors that are punishable by monetary fines and incarceration.
- LAUSD Board Rules 1265 and 2002, and BUL-6492.0 uphold these principles

****Note:** The issuance of DPLs is a practice that has been adopted by some school administrators to implement the laws mentioned above. At this time, to the best of our knowledge there is no state law, LAUSD Board Rule or District policy which defines, mandates or suggests a process for drafting or issuing “disruptive person letters.”

III. Context

Parent Concerns Raised at ECEPE Committee Meeting on April 19, 2016

Currently there is no process to challenge the allegations, appeal the decision, and restore access to school campus when a parent receives a letter. Consequently, parents recommended to:

“Create a fair policy around the issuance of Disruptive Person Letters across LAUSD schools that provides parents with due process and a chance to be heard regarding the content of such letters.”

District Response at ECEPE Committee Meeting on June 2, 2016

A senior OGC attorney stated that the District:

- Does not have a legal obligation to provide an appeals process to recipients.
- These letters are intended as a last resort to stop disruptive behavior.
- Ideally DPLs would be issued only after school administrators have warned parents about repeated or ongoing inappropriate behavior

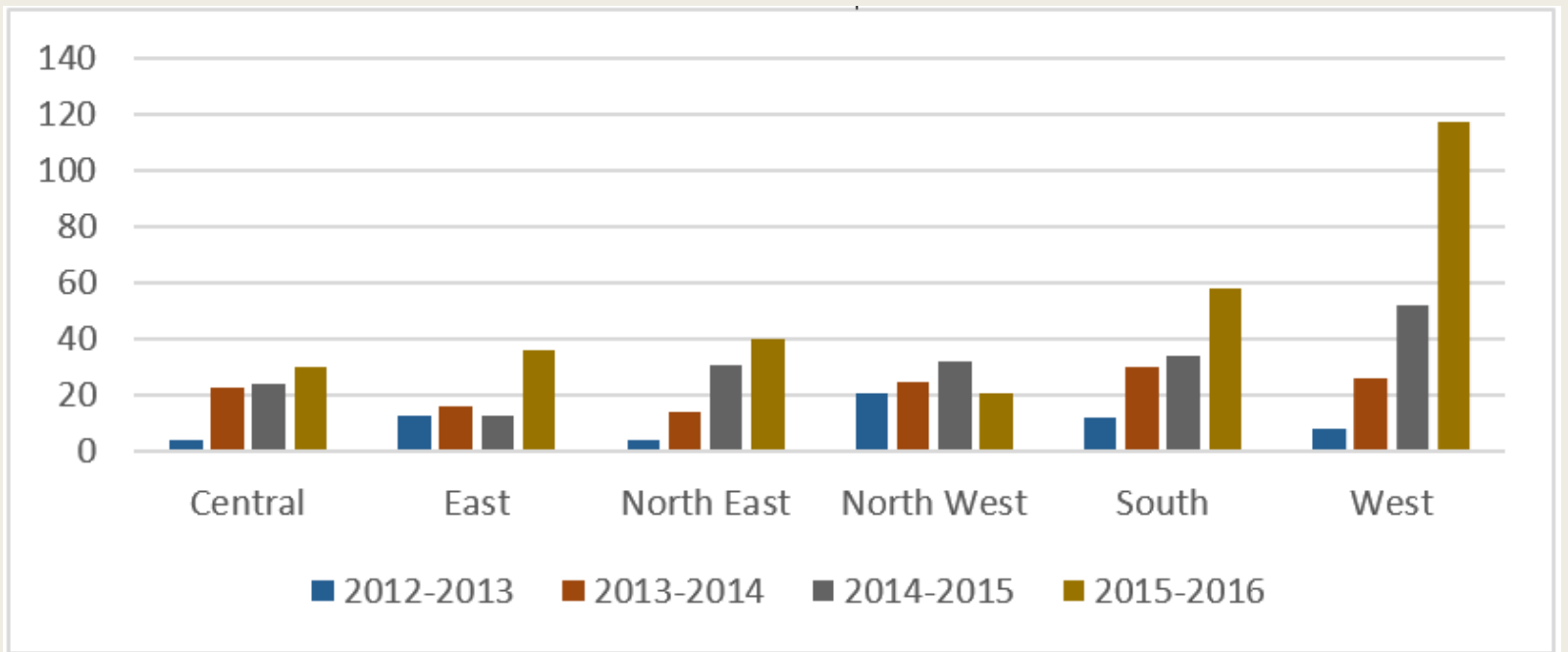
IV. Data Review from Letters

A. Magnitude and Frequency of DPL Issuance in LAUSD and Local Districts

Findings:

- There is a trend of DPL issuance increasing in recent years.
- There is wide discrepancy between DPL issuance by local district with about 38% of all DPLs coming from the West Local District

Graph 1: DPLs per Local District over Four Years



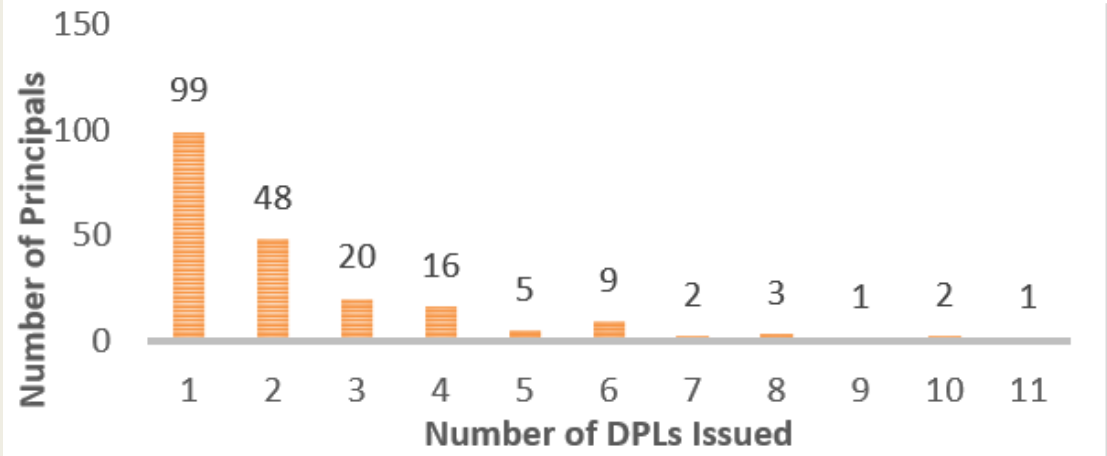
IV. Data Review from Letters

B. Who issues DPLs?

Findings:

- While females constituted 60.5% of all principals in LAUSD in 2015-2016, they represented 68% of principals issuing DPLs.
- Although about 68% of the principals seem to be using DPLs as a last resort, about 32% of principals in the sample may be overusing or misusing the tool.

Graph 2: Distribution of the Number of DPLs Issued by Principals

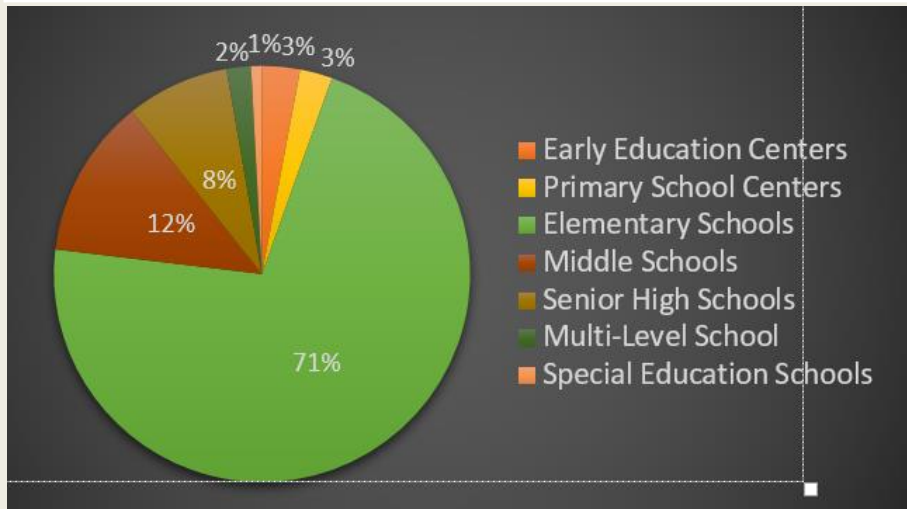


32% of all DPLs (157 letters) come from just 11% of all principals who generated DPLs. These 23 principals each issued at least 5 DPLs each in this period—and few issued 10 or more.

IV. Data Review from Letters

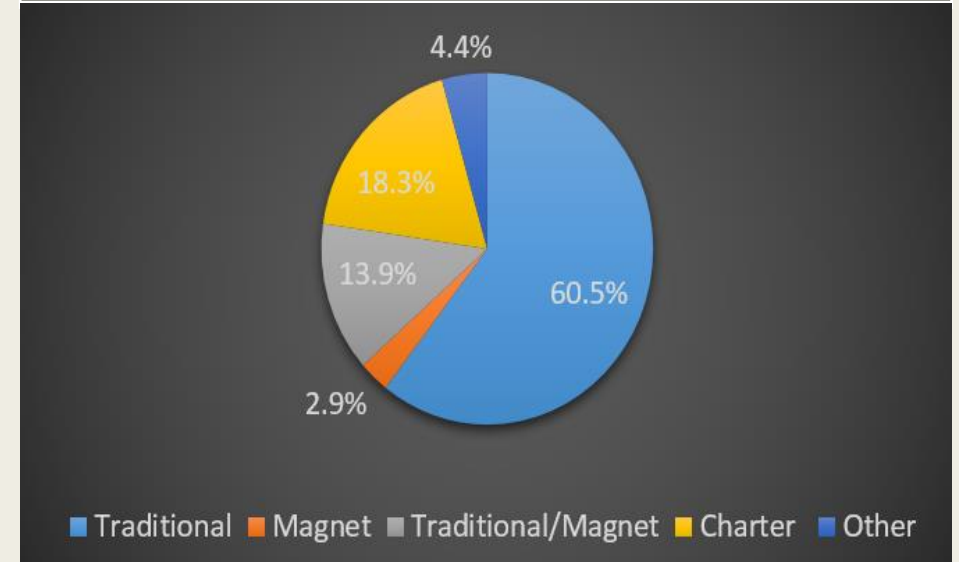
C. DPL Issuance by School Type & Governance Models

Graph 3: Percentage of DPLs According to Grade Level Configuration



- **70% of DPLs come from elementary schools.** Middle schools and senior high schools issue 12% and 8% of DPLs respectively. Student enrollment in elementary schools for 2015-2016 was 46.5% (2015-2016 LAUSD Fingertip Facts).

Graph 4: Percentage of DPLs Issued by School Type



- Although traditional elementary schools make up 35.5% of all schools in LAUSD, they account for 49.5% of the schools that issued DPLs. There also was a slight over-representation of elementary magnet schools within a regular campus and possibly elementary charter schools.

IV. Data Review from Letters

C. DPL Issuance by School Type & Governance Models (Continued)

Table 10: Distribution of Schools by Number of DPLs Issued and by Local District

	C		E		NE		NW		S		W	
1 DPL	14		15		11		20		17		14	
2 DPLs	4	18 (69%)	7	22 (76%)	6	17 (68%)	7	27 (70%)	10	27 (75%)	9	23 (62%)
3 DPLs	3		5		1		3		1		4	
4 DPLs	2	5	4	9	4	8	3	6	0	4	3	7
5 DPLs	0	(19%)	0	(24%)	3	(32%)	0	(15%)	3	(11%)	0	(19%)
6 DPLs	0		0		0		3		3		3	
7 DPLs	1		0		0		0		1		1	
8 DPLs	1		0		0		0		0		1	
9 DPLs	1		0		0		0		0		1	
10 DPLs	0		0		0		2		1		0	
11 DPLs	0		0		0		0		0		1	
12 DPLs	0	3 (12%)	0	0	0	0	1	6 (15%)	0	5 (14%)	0	7 (19%)

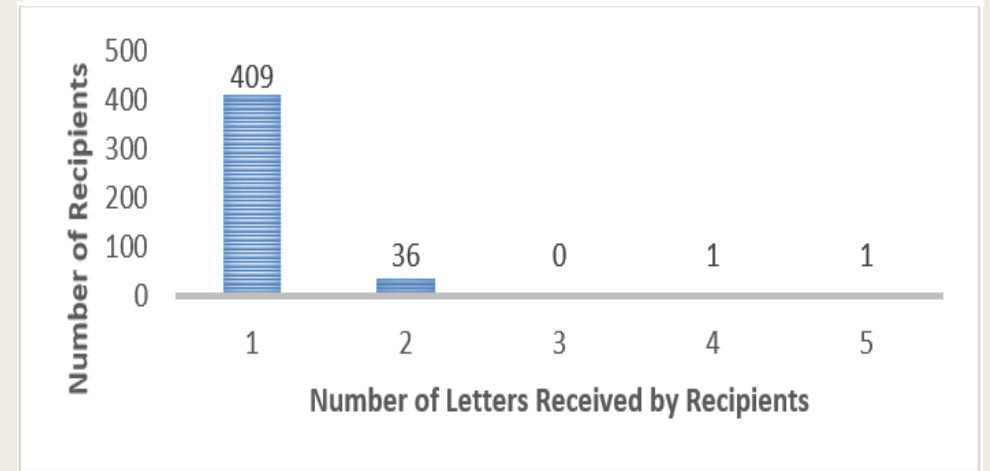
Finding: Local districts with higher DPL issuance had more schools or principals that issued 5 or more DPLs.

IV. Data Review from Letters

D. Who Receives DPLs?

- The 476 letters were issued to 447 recipients.
- **About 70% of recipients were female.**
- All recipients were given a copy of the DPL in English and only 23 (4.8%) received the letter in Spanish, as well.
- One hundred and four (23%) of recipients had Spanish surnames. Race or ethnicity was not identified.
- Ninety-four percent (94%) of recipients were parents but letters were also issued to others.
- **91.5% of parents in this sample were issued one letter only, 8% were issued two letters, and only 2 (.5%) parents were issued 4 or 5 letters (see Graph 5).**

Graph 5: Distribution on the Number of Letters Received by Recipients



IV. Data Review from Letters

E. Why, When, Where are DPLs Issued?

- Behaviors Considered Disruptive that Triggered DPLs :
 - Verbal behaviors: 389 (82%)
 - Violating school or district policy or procedures: 168 (35%)
 - Parents approaching students: 85 (18%)
 - Physical altercations: 32 (6-7%)
 - Threats: 121 (25%)
 - Bullying-related incidents: 45 (9%)
 - Police calls: 45 (9%)

IV. Data Review from Letters

E. Verbal Behaviors

- Verbal behaviors included: being irate, raising the voice, yelling, using the wrong tone of voice, using profanity, being argumentative, being disrespectful, saying negative things about the school, staff, or parents to others, or making general threats.

Table 12: Context from DPLs on How the Alleged Disruptive Verbal Behavior Happened

Reasons Behind Parents' Verbal Behavior	Number	Percentage
Parents addressing issues related to child (e.g. learning, program, attendance, behavior)	65	16.6%
Parents addressing bullying/child safety issues	38	9.7%
Parents providing input or expressing opinions (e.g. in meetings, asking questions or justifications, "talking negatively" about school)	35	9%
Parents disputing legal issues (e.g. restraining orders, court orders regarding child custody)	28	7%
Parents disrupting school events (e.g. sports game, holiday program or student performances)	10	2.5%
Total	176	44.8%

IV. Data Review from Letters

E. Verbal Behaviors

Sample Letter Excerpt 1:

“Your conduct in our campus caused great disagreement that affected our school:

- 1. You approached parents in the main office to express negative comments about the school.*
- 2. You threaten staff by saying you would file a complaint at the district level.*
- 3. The school has received reports from parents that you have asked them to go to district to file complaints against the school and staff. You have mentioned in several occasions that you will make sure specific staff is fired because you don't like them.*

Sample Letter Excerpt 2:

“On Monday, April 27, 2015, you harassed [redacted staff name] in an antagonistic way over the phone because you received automated messages regarding attendance of your [redacted student's name]...your conduct caused Mrs. [redacted staff name] great discomfort and anguish....If you have business on campus, please call my office in advance.”

IV. Data Review from Letters

E. Violating School Policies

Table 13: Alleged Frequent Policy/Procedure Violations

Alleged Frequent Policy/Procedure Violations	Number	Percentage
Visitor's Policy (e.g. parents not signing in or out correctly or at all on the school's visitor log)	72	38.5%
Failure to Leave Campus or Comply with Instructions	30	16%
Student Drop-Off and Pick-Up Procedures (i.e. parking violations, dropping off at wrong gate)	18	9%
Classroom Observation (e.g. parents stopped observing and talked to others)	14	7.5%
Checking Out Students Early (e.g. not being able to provide identification, taking child without proper check out)	14	7.5%
Policies Related to Photographs, Audiotaping, Video Recording and Posting on Facebook:	10	5.5%
Violating Court Orders, Previous DPLs (e	9	5%
Other Reasons (e.g. administering medicine, dogs on campus, questioning enrollment criteria, retrieving ball from classroom roof)	20	11%
Total	187	100%

Sample Letter Excerpt:

“According to the written statement of [redacted staff name], Special Education Assistant and of Ms. [redacted staff name], Substitute Teacher, you interrupted the class to ask questions regarding curriculum and took pictures with your iPhone. In addition you continued to take notes for almost an hour or more; all items mentioned constitute a class disruption.”

IV. Data Review from Letters

E. Parent Approaching Students and Physical Altercations

Eighty-five DPLs (85) were issued for situations where parents approached children other than their own

Situations Involving Children	
Witnessed adult(s) behaving inappropriately	84
Reprimanded or confronted verbally	59
Touched (grabbed arm, touched shoulder)	10
Physically assaulted (wrestled, struck)	13
Inappropriate relationship or touching	2
Took someone else's child home without parent's consent	1
	169

Pattern: Twenty-nine (29), about 34%, of these cases were related to bullying, where a parent approached a student(s) in an attempt to stop the bullying of his or her child.

Physical Altercations:	
Parent vs parent	21
Parent vs staff	10
Parent vs unclear	1
Total	32

IV. Data Review from Letters

E. Threats

Types of Threats	
General verbal threats (e.g. when person is angry, generally hostile toward others, or is intoxicated)	65
Verbal threats specific to individuals	40
Verbal threats specific to hurting the school, people in it	4
Credible threats to hurt individuals or the school	10
Negligent actions potentially endangering others	2
	121

- Overall the words “threat”, “threatening manner”, “felt threatened” were used in 121 or 25% of the letters.
- **It was difficult to assess from the letters if or when a verbal threat was credible.**
- What tends to be documented most are verbal threats that are made when relationships become strained.
- However, in more dangerous situations where a person resorted to violence, there wasn’t much time for verbal threats.

IV. Data Review from Letters

E. Bullying-Related Incidents and Police Calls

Bullying-Related Incidents:

- Forty-five letters were issued for bullying-related incidents where parents entered the school, intending to stop their child from being bullied.
- Thirty-eight (84%) of these situations began with verbal exchanges with school staff, and another 7 (or 15.5%) approached students directly.
- **Of the 38 situations that started by talking with staff, 22 escalated rapidly from a single offense to multiple offenses during a single visit.**
- Some parents expressed dissatisfaction with the way their child's being bullied wasn't being investigated

Reasons for Calling Police	
Verbal behavior	25
Court or criminal activity	9
Physical altercations	8
Bullying-related incidents	3
Total	45

Pattern: Of the 13 incidents where children were physically hurt (i.e. wrestled, struck) by adults, police were called in only two instances to intervene.

IV. Data Review from Letters

E. Type of Offenses in Letters from Principals Issuing 5 or More DPLs

- Verbal behaviors: 127 | 389 (33%)
- Violating school or district policy or procedures: 55 | 168 (29%)
- Parents approaching students: 31 | 85 (36%)
- Physical altercations: 10 | 32 (31%)
- Threats: 44 | 121 (36%)
- Bullying-related incidents: 19 | 45 (42%)
- Police Calls: 19 | 45 (42%)

Principals that issued high number of DPLs consistently accounted for at least 29% percent of all incidents in each offense category.

Physical altercations show higher percentages of aggression between staff and parents:

Physical Altercations:	
Parent vs parent	5 21
Parent vs staff	4 10
Parent vs unclear	1 1
Total	10 32

Possible explanation:

High levels of conflict in a school may be due to the school leader's and staff's conflict resolution skills and communication style. When conflict is not resolved in the early stages, it escalates.

IV. Data Review from Letters

iii. Frequency of Offenses Over Time

■ Frequency of Offenses Over Time

Findings:

- 49% parents received letters for single offenses happening one time.
- 76% of DPLs were given over incidents happening in one visit.

Frequency of Offenses Over Time		
	#	%
One Offense / Single Visit	231	49%
Same Offense / Multiple Visits	65	13%
Multiple Offenses / Single Visit	127	27%
Multiple Offenses / Multiple Visits	53	11%
	476	

- **Warnings:** Only 14% of letters mentioned giving prior warnings.
- **Warnings & Bans:**
 - 19% of DPLs were written warnings
 - 81% were actual bans
- **Type of Bans:** 99% restricted access to campus.
- **Length of Ban:** 97% of letters did not specify the length of the ban.
- **Additional Instructions:**
 - Schedule appointment prior to coming
 - Need administrator approval
- **Not a single letter provided instructions on how to appeal the letter or regain normal access to campus.**

V. Data Analysis Review from Interviews

- All six persons interviewed were:
 - *Parents of at least one child that currently attends an LAUSD school.*
 - *All received DPLs from an elementary school, one received a letter from a middle school as well.*
 - *The DPLs from these parents were issued by principals in the West Local District (2), Central Local District (2), and South Local District (2).*
 - *All are active in their child's or children's school(s) and have observed classrooms and volunteered; five of the six had been elected to serve on school or district advisory committees.*
 - *Two were male and four female. A male and female were a couple.*

V. Data Analysis Review from Interviews

Key Findings:

- The majority of these include violations of school rules or procedures.
- All six interviewees reported that allegations in their letters were either:
 - Exaggerated (incidents did not occur as claimed) or
 - Completely fabricated (incidents never occurred)
- They were not given:
 - any prior warning before receiving a letter
 - An opportunity to defend themselves against the allegations
- Five of the six interviewees mentioned a suspicion that the real reason for receiving a letter was because they had been vocal or persistent in challenging policies, pointing out improprieties.

V. Data Analysis Review from Interviews

Key Findings:

- All parents interviewed took action after receiving the letter by attempting to:
 - Meet with the principal,
 - Asking for the letter to be rescinded,
 - Requesting that the letter be reviewed by the principal's supervisor or an administrator from their local district.
 - **None of their actions yielded positive results, except for the parent that sued the district.**
- All complied with the letter's restrictions and instructions.
- Five of the six parents kept their children enrolled in the same schools where the DPLs were issued as they prioritized their children's needs over their own.
- Overall parents report experiencing emotions ranging from feeling sad, angry, frustrated, powerless, desperate, and ultimately devastated. **They felt there was "no way out" to get the principal's decision reviewed or overturned.**
- Two of the six parents shared stories of children being retaliated.

VI. FINDINGS

System flaws that prevent it from being more effective

1. The definition of “disruptive” behavior has expanded beyond “willfully interfering with activities” or “intentionally disrupting, obstructing, or inflicting damage” to include a wide range of routine and minor policy or procedural violations and verbal behaviors are now labeled and sanctioned as disruptive. This generates a higher number of DPLs, some of which are legitimate and many that are not.

2. DPLs expose an inherent, unresolved conflict of goals that is likely to continue recurring in schools and growing in coming years.

- a. Administrators prioritize maintaining order over building relationships, addressing individual parent requests or concerns, and resolving conflict.*
- b. Parents prioritize their child’s wellbeing and securing opportunities or resources that will help their child or children in their community develop fully and thrive in life.*

VI. FINDINGS

System flaws that prevent it from being more effective

- 3. The system is not designed to recognize and differentiate the reasons why a parent is angry or having difficulty managing his or her emotions.** It is therefore unable to: determine if anger is a natural and appropriate response to a situation; identify the root cause problem the parents seek to address; differentiate cases that pose more of a threat than others; and adopt different responses to resolve cases more appropriately.
- 4. The practice of DPL issuance and letter templates used by principals are often not used as described by district officials at the June 2, 2016 ECEPE meeting.** Too many parents are receiving these restrictions for one offense during one visit.
- 5. The current system gives too much discretion to site administrators, without a process to investigate the legitimacy of, or to appeal, DPLs.** This allows a small number of principals (11 percent) to generate a great number (32 percent) of DPLs. The absence of a verification and accountability mechanism provides the opportunity for abuse of a principal's discretion or power, and calls into question the legitimacy of the system itself.

VI. FINDINGS

System flaws that prevent it from being more effective

6. The system only monitors and documents the ways in which inappropriate adult behavior from visitors harms children, but children are also affected when parents receive DPLs.
7. The system works best at maintaining an orderly environment and keeping students safe during the school day if there is only one entrance and all visitors comply in entering the campus through the main office.
8. The system assumes aggressors will verbalize their intentions and threaten others before engaging in harmful or unsafe actions.
9. It is unclear to what extent, if any, race, culture, and socio economic status play a role in conflict situations between parents and administrators as the information was not available.
10. It is unclear whether DPLs are an effective means of ensuring the safety of students and staff, and whether administrators are receiving adequate training in safety protocols.

VII. Recommendations

Recalibrate the system so that it is centered on protecting children and staff and strengthening relationships with parents

District Level Policy & Procedure Modifications

1. Clarify the Process of DPL Issuance

- a. Differentiate responses to parent behavior.
- b. Talk calmly to parents who enter the office and appear distressed or angered.
- c. When a parent does not calm down, issue an emergency DPL to restrict access for a brief and specific period of time (e.g. 48 hrs).
- d. Clarify that actions that are not willful or that intently disrupt do not qualify for a DPL.
- e. When parents come onto campus to intentionally disrupt instruction call the police and issue a DPL.

2. Update the letter template used by principals

3. Offer assistance in mediating conflict between staff and parents

4. Review the district policy and procedure to investigate and resolve bullying cases.

VII. Recommendations

Recalibrate the system so that it is centered on protecting children and staff and strengthening relationships with parents

Training for School Staff

1. Provide training to any staff member that interacts with parents on customer service, conflict resolution, and de-escalation techniques, and identifying credible threats, and know how to document the details needed to issue a written warning.
2. Prioritize training for principals that issued five or more DPLs and their main office staff.
3. Evaluate principals and staff on how they work with parents in the school and in the community as well on whether they increased parent participation.

VII. Recommendations

Recalibrate the system so that it is centered on protecting children and staff and strengthening relationships with parents

Training for Parents

1. Providing parents with a booklet of rights to review on their own is not enough. Principals need to review the rules most frequently violated with parents at “Back to School Night” events.
2. Offer formal orientations to new parents with opportunities for parents and staff to dialogue about policies and procedures, rights and responsibilities, and how to navigate system.
3. Before a parent is granted permission to volunteer or observe a classroom, schools need to provide training on what and what not to do.

VII. Recommendations

Recalibrate the system so that it is centered on protecting children and staff and strengthening relationships with parents

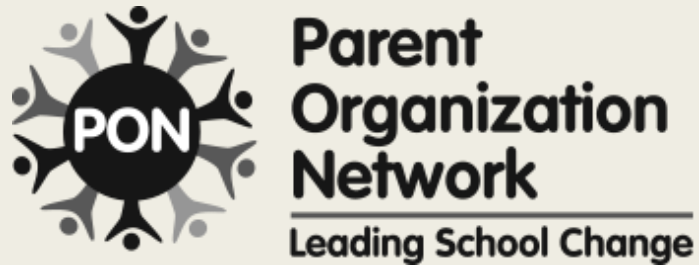
Strengthen Relations with Parents

1. Establish an Office of the Parent Advocate by creating a specific unit to help resolve conflict between administrators and parents.
2. Engage Parents in Identifying the Problems and Finding Solutions
 - a. Review Current Procedures & Update School Safety Plans at the School Site: These bodies should review incidents that have caused disruptions or threatened safety at their schools to determine if they need to rethink some of the procedures frequently violated.
 - b. Assess School Climate: Require district administrators to review with local administrator the reasons why the DPLs were issued and the school's results of the annual LAUSD School Experience Survey (SES) to identify improvement areas that may be causing the conflict.

VIII. Conclusion

- As an overarching philosophy, “Listen to parents; don’t restrict their access to campus when they are informed and empowered, because they are your most crucial partners in educating children.”
- Laws and District policies give school principals a “shield,” a system of procedures to protect children’s safety and their learning environment. Let’s modify the policies and procedures so that the system actually does what it’s intended to do, while strengthening relationships with parents.
- **Maintaining the safety of students while building stronger relationships with their parents are not mutually exclusive concepts. Both are achievable if schools truly reframe the role of parents as true partners.** After all, no school administrator can do it alone, for the education and the safety of children in schools is a shared responsibility with parents, staff, and other stakeholders inside and outside a school.

Thank You | Questions?



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