

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. 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. 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.”

II. 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

III. 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

IV. Data Review from Letters

Key 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
- While females constituted 60.5% of all principals in LAUSD in 2015-2016, they represented 68% of principals issuing DPLs.
- 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.
- 70% of DPLs come from elementary schools.
- Local districts with higher DPL issuance had more schools or principals that issued 5 or more DPLs.
- About 70% of recipients were female.
- 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 .5% parents were issued 4 or 5 letters .

IV. Data Review from Letters

Behaviors that Triggered DPLs:

- Verbal behaviors: 389 (82%)
 - 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.
- Violating school or district policy or procedures: 168 (35%)
 - Frequent violations included: Visitor's policy, failing to leave campus when requested, classroom observation, student pick up or drop off procedures, taking photos, recording meetings, Facebook posting, violating court orders
- Parents approaching students: 85 (18%)
 - Reprimanded or confronted verbally, touched on arm or shoulder, physically attacked, inappropriate relationship.
 - *About 34%, of these cases were related to bullying, where a parent approached a student in an attempt to stop the bullying of his or her child.*

IV. Data Review from Letters

Behaviors that Triggered DPLs:

- Physical altercations: 32 (6-7%)
 - Parent vs other parent: 21 incidents; parent vs staff: 10 incidents; unclear: 1 incident.
- Threats: 121 (25%)
 - 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.
- Bullying-related incidents: 45 (9%)
 - Of the 38 situations that started by talking with staff, 22 escalated rapidly from a single offense to multiple offenses during a single visit.
- Police calls: 45 (9%)
 - 25 of these calls were made due to verbal behaviors, 9 were made due to court orders or criminal activity
 - 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

Key Findings:

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

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.

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

- 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 restriction.
- 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

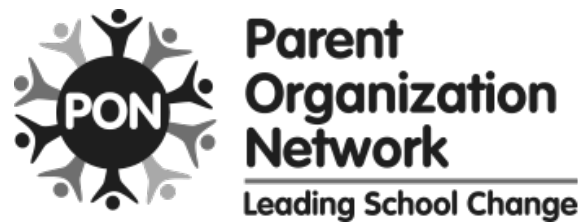
Strengthen Relations with Parents

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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