

## Student Stories

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### Student Mini Grant: A School Code Project: Tackling the school-to-prison pipeline through Code of Conduct research

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The Student Rights Project (SRP) is an interdisciplinary consortium of Law, Social Work, and Education graduate students specially trained to advocate for the educational rights of K-12 students across Southeast Michigan. Through our unique community-university partnership with the Student Advocacy Center of Michigan, SRP trains volunteers to advocate for students facing suspension and expulsion to ensure that every student's right to an education is protected.

Dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline is at the core of our mission. We recognize that zero tolerance policies, often codified in school disciplinary codes of conduct, subject students to severe and punitive discipline, criminalizing typical behavior and resulting in academic disengagement, failure, push-out, and delinquency. Moreover, schools and administrators must adapt their disciplinary processes, including

their codes of conduct, to reflect changing local, state, and federal educational laws.

Thus, as a part of our advocacy work, SRP launched the School Code Project to work with public schools across Michigan to review and revise school codes of conduct. The purpose of this project is to challenge institutional threats to students' educational rights and encourage schools to align their codes of conduct with evidence-based, nationally recognized best practices for responding to student misbehavior.

### **Prior Results:**

Since the project's inception, SRP has evaluated codes of conduct for school districts in four Southeast Michigan counties: Wayne, Washtenaw, Macomb, and Oakland. In 2016, we developed a partnership with the Wayne County School Justice Partnership and Dr. Paul Salah at the Wayne Regional Educational Service Agency. In early 2017, we developed reports for 31 Wayne County school districts based on our analyses. We presented our findings as part of a four day workshop series to over 100 superintendents, administrators, teachers, and staff, taking our project from proof of concept to having tangible community impact.

In August of 2017, we partnered with the Student Advocacy Center, Volunteer Advocates of Mid-Michigan, ACLU of Michigan, 482 Forward, Michigan State Conference NAACP, Street Democracy, Michigan Protection and Advocacy Service to send a letter to schools around the state to offer "significant expertise in code of conduct revisions, tools to implement the law, professional development, youth leadership, and individual case problem-solving and advocacy." (ACLU Press Release)

The demand for our work has only increased since the 2017 passage of new Michigan state laws related to school disciplinary practices. This includes the formation of a partnership with 482Forward, a city-wide education organizing network in Detroit, to support the development of the Detroit Public School District's Code of Conduct. The support of the library has been critical to in meeting the growing needs of the school code project.



### **Next Steps/Anticipated Results:**

Over the next few months, we expect to complete the code review process for districts in both Washtenaw and Wayne counties. After a final review is done for both counties, we will begin writing reports for each district in order to provide context in terms of data as well as customized recommendations for how districts can improve their codes. Once these counties are completed, we will move on to Jackson and Oakland counties and hope to have reports completed by the end of next year. As always, we will continue to train new and current advocates in the school code review process in order to build a larger team that will hopefully make the review process even more efficient.

Additionally, we will continue to work to develop relationships with districts and community organizations that are focused on improving schools codes of conduct for students and families. We hope to continue to be a resource for Wayne RESA and present at future meetings in order to identify specific districts who may be interested in our services. Furthermore, we hope to build on our recent communication with 482 Forward in hopes of becoming a stakeholder in the development of the new code of conduct for Detroit Public Schools. We think this relationship can be a model for not only how we work with districts, but how we can engage parents, students, and communities in the code revision process.

Finally, we plan on developing a 1-pager and infographic to distribute directly to districts in the fall. We hope that these materials will help us be more proactive in our work with districts and avoid potential

adversarial dynamics when we critique codes at suspension and expulsion hearings. We plan to use national, state and local data to highlight the disparities in suspensions and expulsions and develop an infographic that can effectively depict the issue in an easily digestible manner. The 1-pager will highlight the work we've done and the services we can provide districts who are hoping to improve their codes. While we plan on doing a direct mailing of these materials, we hope to reach out to statewide organizations that may be willing to distribute them as well.

### **Mini Grant Funds**

The School Code Project utilized our grant funds through three avenues: training, mileage reimbursement, and board transitions.

**Training:** The mini grant funds enabled us to more than triple our number of trained advocates to support the project: we went from 7 trained advocates to 25 in one academic year. Not only does this increase the speed at which we are able to evaluate school codes, but it increases the number of districts we are able to evaluate and leaves additional time for us to create relationships with key community partners in order to ensure our work has the maximum positive impact possible. Our funding supports training materials and food for these training events.

**Mileage:** The funding we received also allows us to reimburse our advocates for any traveling they do between campus and school districts or community partner organizations. Without the funding, this is a cost that may need to come out of advocates pockets. The relief of these funds allows us to have a more sustainable and reliable system of reimbursement, so that our volunteer advocates don't incur expenses in order to do this important work.

**Board Transitions:** Finally, we utilized a portion of our funding to supplement our onboarding process for six new board members this winter semester. This allowed us to financially support a retreat that provided a space for new board members to get together, learn more about each other and our interdisciplinary backgrounds, and learn more about our common goals for SRP. This time was also used to strategically plan for the School Code Project as an entire board, which

has not been done in the past. Without this retreat, we would not be able to tap in to our individual strengths and knowledge bases as efficiently, which is the core benefit of our interdisciplinary work.

### **Support from Library Mentor:**

The support we have received from our library mentor has been essential in our efforts to think more strategically about how we approach our work with districts. Our mentor connected us with the staff at the Center for Educational Outreach who were instrumental in helping us develop a plan for a proactive 1-pager/infographic. We hope to continue working with CEO to brainstorm additional ways to educate districts on the resources we can provide. We also hope to utilize the library support as we gather data for our infographic. Much of our research is qualitative as we review codes under our 31 question rubric; however, in order to take advantage of aggregated data on suspensions nationwide, we could certainly use the expertise of library staff to better understand and navigate educational statistic databases.

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