FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: May 14, 2015  
CONTACT: Marie Condron, Public Counsel, [mcondron@publiccounsel.org](mailto:mcondron@publiccounsel.org) or 213-925-9605

**Oakland Unified Takes Historic Vote to End Suspensions and Transfers for ‘Willful Defiance’**

*Makes An Unprecedented Commitment of $2.3 Million in Violence Prevention and Intervention Approaches that*

*Create Real Safety for Students*

OAKLAND –  After months of advocacy by a broad coalition of community groups and civil rights advocates, students, parents and teachers, the Oakland Unified School Board voted unanimously on Wednesday night to end suspensions and involuntary transfers for ‘willful defiance and disruption’ as of July 1, 2016. Superintendent Antwan Wilson and members of the Oakland Unified School Board also made a formal and unprecedented commitment to invest $2.3 million of hard district dollars this fiscal year to expand violence intervention and prevention strategies that help students achieve educational success.

“The end of suspensions and involuntary transfers for ‘willful defiance’ is a historic victory for Oakland,” said Jasmine Jones, Lead Organizer for BOP, one of the organizations leading the effort for school climate policy reforms. “The community has been fighting for an end to discriminatory school removals that hurt our students. This victory for the students, parents and teachers of Oakland will result in real safety in our schools and interrupt the school to prison pipeline.”

“The vote means so much to me. I feel like I have a target on my back and like the district doesn’t always care about me and wants to push me out of school,” said Dane’nicole Williams, 15, who is African American and Italian American, attends McClymonds High School and is a youth member of BOP. “This vote tells me that the school district is changing and it is taking the problem of pushout seriously. It says they want to support me, help me, and not kick me out for small things.”

Although Oakland has significantly reduced the number of students suspended over the past several years, students of color continue to be removed from school for minor behavior, often categorized as disruption and willful defiance, at much higher rates than other students. Data from last school year shows that African-American students account for more than half of the students suspended for “disruption and willful defiance,” even though they only make up about one-quarter (28%) of the students enrolled in OUSD. School Board Director Rosie Torres worked closely with community and strongly championed the unprecedented and significant $2.3 million dollar investment that will result in expansion of restorative practices to all schools and of the African American Manhood Development program to include more African American males but also to support Latino and African American female students, and for professional learning for teachers and staff on restorative justice and social emotional learning.

“Restorative Justice was working at my school. When there were conflicts or beefs or I was struggling just to concentrate but couldn’t, the RJ coordinator helped us stay focused and get back on track,” said Aixa Fuller, 16, who is African American, attends McClymonds High school and is a youth member of BOP. “When we had someone who could just ask us what was wrong, when we were acting out, it made a difference. Sometimes it is because we are hungry, or there is a big problem at home. We need this support and caring in every school in the district.”

The other significant school climate policy reforms passed by the Board last night that take place immediately include:

* Creation of a Safe and Strong Schools Task Force: to guide expansion of implementation of the African American Manhood Development program and restorative practices that take a culturally based, healing informed approach to promoting community building to all schools.
* Data Accountability and Transparency: to provide regular data on key discipline data – suspensions, transfers, days lost to suspension – disaggregated by all subgroups to the public
* A Community Complaint and Feedback Process: to alert the district if restorative approaches are not effective

“Oakland Unified made history last night,” said Laura Faer, Statewide Education Rights Director with Public Counsel, another organization leading the effort. “The end to suspensions and transfers for “willful defiance” is a strong step toward dismantling the school to prison pipeline and closing the achievement gap. The research is clear that even one school removal can double the chance of drop out and make it three times more likely for a student to end up in the juvenile justice system. The District’s commitment to invest hard dollars in real safety and a restorative and youth development approach that is working will transform Oakland schools, reduce racially disparate discipline, and exponentially improve the education outcomes and opportunities for Oakland’s most vulnerable students.”

At the 24 schools already implementing Restorative Justice in Oakland over the last three years:

* + The discipline gap between white and African-American students decreased significantly, but stayed the same for students at schools without RJ programs.
  + Reading levels of 9th graders increased by 128%, compared to only an 11% increase in schools without such programs, and graduation rates increased by 60%, compared to 7% for other schools.

In addition, district data shows that graduates of the African American Manhood Development Program have 25 percent higher grade point averages and are on track to attend 4 year state Universities at a higher rate than other students.

The coalition will continue to advocate for OUSD to cap the number of positions for school police for at least the next three years, and instead reinvest such funding in real safety – caring and trained adults on campus without guns and arrest powers to help students stay on track. Currently, the Oakland Unified School District spends more than $7.2 million per year on its own, internal school police department, including police officers and security guards. In a recent poll of Oakland voters, they overwhelmingly (71%) stated that OUSD should spend more on prevention and intervention strategies that keep students in school, on track and help address their mistakes and less on school police.

“From my own experience, it was a restorative justice coordinator that helped me get on track and stay out of trouble, not an armed police officer,” said Dazahne Labbot, a student at McClymonds High School and a member of BOP. “If the district cares about my future they would listen to the recommendation that myself and my peers worked hard to come up with.”

**The coalition and supporters consist of the Dignity in Schools Campaign – Bay Area, the Black Organizing Project, Public Counsel, ACLU of Northern California, Legal Services for Children, PolicyLink, Californians for Justice, Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY), Forward Together, Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ), the Brotherhood of Elders Network, the Gay-Straight Alliance Network, Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, Equal Justice Society, Oakland Community Organizations, and Oakland Education Association.**

“The Alliance for Boys and Men of Color applauds the Oakland Unified School Board for its historic and wise action and the Dignity in Schools coalition for its dedicated efforts to improve Oakland schools,” said Marc Philpart, a director at PolicyLink, which coordinates the statewide Alliance for Boys and Men of Color. “To ensure California’s future success, districts across the state need to follow OUSD’s example and invest in its students of color.”

###