



Criminalizing our Youth:

How LAUSD's Random Metal Detector Search Policy Contributes to the School to Prison Pipeline

LAUSD Policy
#BUL-5424.2 requires staff at all schools serving grades 6-12 to conduct daily metal detector searches of students and their belongings for weapons, even if they have done nothing wrong or if there are no documented safety concerns at the school.



In January of 2018, students at the Bayard Rustin Educational Complex in New York City successfully abolished metal detectors from their school.

What do the searches look like in action?

School staff must interrupt classroom instruction and select students based on a “pre-established random plan.” The selected students are ordered to leave the classroom with their belongings, losing valuable instruction time. In a separate location staff members search students and their belongings with a metal detector. If any item violating school rules is found (even if it is not a weapon) the student is disciplined.

“When children attend schools that place a greater value on discipline and security than on knowledge and intellectual development, they are attending prep schools for prison.” - ANGELA DAVIS



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The policy must be eliminated immediately and LAUSD should invest in real measures that improve student safety, including restorative justice, positive behavior intervention, community schools, counselors, psychiatric social workers, arts and electives, smaller class sizes, peace builders, peer mediation and full implementation of the School Climate Bill of Rights.

Eliminating this un-just policy would in no way interfere with the district's ability to conduct student searches based on “reasonable suspicion.”

Why does it matter?

The policy is ineffective. There is no evidence the policy actually reduces crime or improves safety. In fact, research shows the opposite: studies have shown that using metal detectors in schools heightens tensions in schools. ¹

Students lose learning time. When students are pulled out of class it disrupts learning for all students in the class.

The policy is excessive. All secondary schools are required to interrupt classes and search students every day. In smaller schools this means that the same students frequently lose instruction.

There is no flexibility. The policy applies to every LAUSD school serving students in grades 6-12, without consideration of relevant factors such as the size of the school, whether the site has a history of violent crimes, whether the site is employing other means to promote a safe school environment, whether students, parents and staff are supportive of the policy, or whether the policy will have an adverse impact on school climate.

Trusting relationships between students and educators are undermined. Instead of focusing on student achievement, school staff are forced to search their students, creating a climate of distrust. When students see educators as enforcers and disciplinarians rather than trusted mentors, their affective filter is raised, making it difficult to create and sustain a safe learning environment that encourages critical thought and exploration.

Searches cannot truly be random. The policy doesn't have any concrete requirements about how students are chosen to be searched, which leads to certain groups of students being targeted and disproportionately selected for searches. Educators and students report that students are frequently chosen non-randomly, with certain students being selected because of their race or prior history.

The policy is intrusive. Search logs show that searches are too invasive, with most searches revealing nothing more than harmless school supplies.

There are no training requirements. The policy does not mandate consistent, adequate training for staff, resulting in inconsistent implementation.

1. National Association of School Psychologists, Research on School Security: The Impact of Security Measures on Students (2013), <http://nasponline.org/advocacy/schoolsecurity.pdf>

RESOURCES & FURTHER READING

- * Petition to end random metal detector searches in LA schools: <https://action.aclu.org/secure/students-not-suspects>
- * Do you have a random metal detector story? Share on social media using the hashtag #StudentsNotSuspects
- * "When Schools Feel Like Prison" - The Atlantic <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/09/when-school-feels-like-prison/499556/>
- * "Calls Mount to End Random Searches at LA Schools" by Mike Szymanski <http://laschoolreport.com/calls-mount-to-end-mandatory-random-searches-at-la-schools/>
- * AFT Winter 2015-2016 Issue around Positive School Discipline Practices, <http://www.aft.org/periodical/american-educator/winter-2015-2016>



<http://visual.ly/minor-infractions>



Random Metal Detector Searches
LAUSD BUL 5424.2
Push Back Questions & Answers

**** Walk through detectors are not enough. Kids bring keys, wear belt buckles, jewelry etc that would set off a walk through detector. However, they bring drugs to school and I don't want my kid exposed to that. They need to be wanded and searched so we can find the stuff they don't need to have at school.*

The stated purpose of this policy is to search for weapons for safety reasons, not for drugs. Courts have not approved random searches for drugs at school, only for weapons under limited and extreme circumstances. Furthermore, wandering with a metal detector would not yield non-metallic objects such as drugs. One might argue that searches should be more intrusive, but young people who are acting out would simply find better ways of hiding contraband. Treating them like criminal suspects simply alienates them further. The only thing that works, as skillful parents know, is fostering a loving, trusting, respectful relationship with our children. That way, if they are exposed to a negative influence, they will feel safe reaching out to a trusted adult for support.

Also, the searches are not effective. A review of thousands of log entries revealed that the searches almost never uncover any weapons. The policy yields almost no results and yet costs students and teachers thousands of hours of valuable class time per year.

**** What if a kid brings a gun to school and it accidentally goes off and hurts someone? These kids have to be scared straight, so our schools will be safe.*

Young people are already scared; that is why some of them carry weapons. It is not schools, however, that pose dangers to young people. In reality, young people often fear the neighborhoods they have to pass through to get to and from school. We need more safe passage programs and gang prevention/intervention workers, as well as mental health experts to help young people feel safer so that they do not feel like they have to protect themselves by carrying weapons. More broadly, we need better housing, jobs, transportation, health care, and other social services so that people's basic needs are met. When this happens, our communities will no longer experience violence and everyone will feel safer.

Also, the district has not provided any evidence that any guns have ever been found through the random metal detector search policy. Even if this policy is removed, the district can still search students based on reasonable suspicion. If district staff reasonably believe that a student broke a law or school rule, including possessing a weapon, they can still search the student.

Finally, every LAUSD school is responsible for developing and implementing a School Safety Plan. These plans must work to create a truly safe spaces in which students feel nurtured and supported rather than targeted and harassed.

**** It's better for a class to be interrupted for random searches for a few minutes, than to have someone hurt or killed in a classroom.*

When young people overcome seemingly insurmountable odds simply to get to school because they want to learn, but then are racially profiled and repeatedly treated like criminal suspects upon arrival, some may begin to act out these perceived expectations of them. In practice, this policy is completely ineffective in either reducing violence on campus or deterring students from carrying weapons. It actually has the opposite effect, by destroying healthy

relationships between young people and adults and by making young people feel alienated and more likely to act out. (See research from NASP, Journal of School Health, and US Secret Service).

**** Kids these days are exposed to too much and have quick access to the whole world at their fingertips. Random searches may prevent a mass shooting.*

This policy may actually be putting us at greater risk for another school shooting. A U.S. Secret Service study of over 30 high-profile school shootings concluded that zero-tolerance policies and metal detectors “are unlikely to be helpful,” because shooters often make no effort to conceal their weapons. What actually triggers the shooting is often feeling consistently harassed, profiled, and punished for minor infractions. (See <https://tragadiescolumbine.wordpress.com/impact-on-school-policies/>)

This particular policy will never prevent a mass shooter. Even though the district is applying the random searches far too broadly, students know that the odds of being selected for a search on any given day are miniscule. A student could bring a weapon to school without fear of being randomly searched. Again, the only way to stop a mass shooter is to focus on prevention and identify, and provide services to, students who feel alienated.