



**FFLIC's**

# **Focus** on the **Family**

**News from Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children**

Volume 6, Issue 1

Summer 2011



## **FFLIC Celebrates Ten Years of Making Family Voices Equal Voices**

### **Moving Forward with the Status Quo**

by Damekia Morgan

*Response to Louisiana Governor Bibby Jindal's veto of Senate bill 67*

When Governor Bobby Jindal vetoed State Senate Bill 67 (SB 67), he failed to protect the right to education for thousands of Louisiana school children. Each year more than 25% of Louisiana students are put out of school for "willful disobedience," which includes suspensions of students in elementary grades for very minor "infractions" like being out of uniform. In the 2009-2010 school year alone, there were more than 14,600 Louisiana students suspended for being habitually tardy or absent.

It was this alarming data that led FFLIC and students, parents, teachers and education advocates in Louisiana to come together to advocate for SB67 and demand that suspensions and expulsions be reduced and that positive approaches to school discipline be used that address student behavior while keeping kids in school. If we are to create an equitable and high quality public education system for Louisiana's children, we must ensure that students are not hastily pushed out of school for minor infractions. Keeping our young people in school should be our number one priority.

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### **Updates from the Director**

by Gina Womack

I can't believe how quickly 2011 is rolling by, and to top it off, this is the year that FFLIC turns 10 years old. On September 8, 2001 Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children held its inaugural event: the Mock Jazz Funeral to mourn the dead and dying dreams of Louisiana's children.

This idea was developed by the members of our parent support group, so that light would be shed upon the notorious Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth and so families could advocate for the closing of Tallulah alongside our parent organization the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana.

Our parents decided to no longer remain silent; instead, they endeavored to tell the world of Louisiana's state-sanctioned abuse that was being inflicted upon their children. They yearned to shout out loud and clear that we are NOT bad parents, and these are NOT throw away children!

What a proud and defining moment; I don't think anyone realized that FFLIC would become the catalyst for passing Act 1225, the Juvenile Reform Act of 2003. Currently, we have four chapters across the state, where hundreds of members are able to come together and sit around tables to lift their voices and educate law makers so legislation benefitting families and children is passed.

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**Gina Womack with young men from the Miller McCoy Academy**

## Lake Charles Chapter of FFLIC

### Doing What We Do Best

Connie Walton Lewis, Director of Lake Charles Office



**Members of the FFLIC Lake Charles Chapter visit with their Legislators during the 2011 Day at the Capitol in Baton Rouge.**

The Lake Charles Chapter of FFLIC is still doing what we do best, and that is reaching our community which has been affected by the education, criminal justice and juvenile justice systems. We have had a productive year despite the many challenges, and we have continued to work towards further juvenile justice reform.

This has been a year of collaborations with the city of Lake Charles and five other agencies. We provide services to children that attend after-school and summer programs at the city of Lake Charles recreation centers. FFLIC educates youth about disparities in the juvenile and education systems, more specifically the role of FFLIC in the community.

We have a new part time staff member, Mark Thibodeaux Sr., who has become a valuable addition to FFLIC's Lake Charles Chapter. Most of our members have taken on leadership roles. Telisha Curtis was our 2011 recipient of Mother's Day Award, because of her unselfish service

to the Lake Charles Chapter helping members to understand their potential and taking the lead on many projects, as well as picking up folks for meetings and making calls to members for events.

We have taken the FFLIC youth members on trips throughout the South. Recently we attended Umoja's Celebration of the African Child and the Mississippi Hip Hop Summit. This will be the second year attending both celebrations. The younger kids really enjoyed traveling to Baton Rouge in support of Senate Bill 67 and touring the capitol grounds. This year FFLIC had a bike donated anonymously to give to the child with the best report card for the end of the last six weeks. Michael Thomas was awarded the bike at the end of the 2010 school year. The third annual FFLIC Back to School Block Party and school supply drive will take place in August 2011.

Members have been very supportive in advocating for reducing overly punitive punishments for students that are detailed in SB67. Many members, like Charlene Green, have said that advocating for SB67 taught them about the many underlying problems in the education system of which they never really knew. By traveling to the capitol, our members have gained the knowledge they need to advocate for their children in the school system.

Lake Charles FFLIC is doing what we do best! We are looking forward to 2012 and building up communities and support for families affected by the school, juvenile, and criminal justice systems by continuing our continuing reform work.

***Are you in the Lake Charles Area?***

***Join our Chapter!***

We meet on the first Tuesday of every month  
188 Williamsburg Avenue, Lake Charles, LA 70605

Need a ride? We'll pick you up!

- Become more connected with your community.
- Learn about the education and juvenile justice systems.
  - Hold your leaders accountable!



**FFLIC Members at the Family Focus Workshop in Lake Charles discussing school discipline.**

# New Orleans Chapter of FFLIC

## Family Matters

Ernest Johnson, Community Organizer



**Mr. Johnson, FFLIC  
New Orleans Community  
Organizer**

We have come a long way. A little more than ten years ago there were more than 2,000 kids in secure care facilities in Louisiana; today, there are less than 500. This is due to the Juvenile Justice Reform Act (Act 1225) being passed with the support of ordinary folks like you. Thank you for your support.

There is still a high percentage of youth in detention centers and on probation today, so we still have our work cut out for us before Louisiana is a model for reform. FFLIC believes in the community we serve and that is why we must demand more community-based alternatives to detention and improved education systems that provide opportunities for youth to reach their full potential. Parents, teachers and neighbors must have a role in shaping youth. We all are at risk when we fail to invest in our youth.

FFLIC members and supporters have a significant role in shaping our youth, changing the functions and the philosophy of the system stakeholders, general public, and families. Advocating and educating, from the street level to the national level. Nobody is coming to save us, we must continue to stand up and be empowered to make changes that should happen sooner rather than later.

Today FFLIC continues to support families and the community with events such as Book Screenings. We recently reviewed Michelle Alexander's *"The New Jim Crow" Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* where she explains racial disparities in the justice system and how the label "felon" keeps folks confined to poverty and low-paying jobs. While many people pray and wish well for those who have felony convictions, we find ourselves asking the question why, when and how? FFLIC believes that families are the answer; they are the experts on what their kids need. When given the opportunity to speak about their social issue, you begin to find the answers. It can be a range of issues when you treat people from a humane perspective. Nobody wants to fail, whether you believe it or not.

FFLIC gains from having national support from Community Justice Network for Youth (CJNY), a program of the W. Haywood Burns Institute. They promote culturally appropriate programming for youth of color and poor communities. CJNY helps to develop real solutions.

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Mr. James Bell and Tshaka Barrows have been hands-on mentors to me with the rest of the staff are always a phone call away. The National Parent Caucus also is a great national supporter. It gives FFLIC parents an opportunity to share their experiences and to develop leadership. It is facilitated by former FFLIC organizer Grace Bauer, who has taken our mission to Washington, D.C and all across the country.



**Mr. Johnson, of FFLIC and Tshaka Barrows of  
Community Justice Network for Youth**

The beginning of the school year is approaching. Take time out to take someone out of the grind, and help someone with their homework, take them on a weekend excursion, or just listen to them--they have a lot to say. We are here for you so give us a call or stop by our office as we continue to demand a better world for everyone. Like the railroad crossing STOP, LOOK and LISTEN.

### ***Make change in Louisiana's Juvenile Justice and Education Systems:***

1. *Get in touch with Mr. Johnson at (504) 522-5437*
2. *Join the FFLIC New Orleans Chapter*
3. *Attend Chapter meetings the first Thursday of the Month*
4. *Educate yourself through our workshops and seminars*
5. *Advocate for change!*



# The Parents in Schools Leadership Project

By Ellie Canter

FFLIC has begun training lead parents for the Parents in Schools Leadership Project (PLP) this summer. PLP is designed to empower parents to advocate effectively for their children, particularly through cultivating an awareness and knowledge of Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) and its implementation in their children's schools. We have identified at least one lead parent within each of the four partner schools in the Recovery School District that are willing to implement PLP. The lead parent is responsible for initiating and supporting the development of a parent council or organization at their school and providing resources regarding PBIS, advocacy, and other school concerns. However, we are not limited to working with parents at our partner schools, as any interested parents are welcome to receive the same training materials and support from FFLIC in the hopes that PLP can and will expand to more schools in need.

FFLIC's training process incorporates lesson plans and surveys that assess parents' knowledge of PBIS prior to participating in the training program and upon completion of each session. The training process also asks parents to evaluate their children's schools and the current discipline process. We hope this parent-driven

evaluation will shed light on the state of school discipline and uncover necessary areas for improvement. We have recently teamed up with the Urban League of New Orleans to share the resources they have prepared for their Parent Leadership Academy, and we will run our first collaborative training session with the parents at Harmony Oaks this month.

FFLIC plans to publish a report documenting the quantitative and qualitative impact of the Parents in Schools Leadership Program following its first year of implementation. We are preparing surveys and school evaluations with quantifiable measures to ensure that the opinions and expertise of parents are captured and recorded in the data. We have also begun interviewing parents who have been directly impacted by the School to Prison Pipeline for inclusion in the report. We feel that the Parent

Leadership Project and the report will affirm the valuable expertise of parents in the local community and provide further incentive to fund the implementation of PBIS and other successful and innovative approaches to discipline in the RSD.



**Ashana Bigard, Ellie Canter and Ruth Idakaula pose for a quick picture at a parent meeting for the Parents in Schools Leadership Project.**



## *Continued from front, Updates from the Director*

People in power often call us "the red shirts"; a disgruntled expression because they know that we will hold them accountable for their inaction, and they dread our hard questions. In the past decade, we have made decisive changes and have had innumerable victories, which we have published in our newsletters and on our website ([www.ffmpeg.org](http://www.ffmpeg.org)) and continue to talk about with pride.

Despite our successes, we are still grappling so that our overarching goals are met; to reduce the number of children in prison, reduce suspension and expulsions and to be involved whenever juvenile justice is being discussed. Our families are the experts on what they need, and FFLIC is the vehicle, so that those in power know that families believe their children can grow, thrive and should have every opportunity to do so. We will continue our work until this system ceases to be a force of oppression upon our families and communities and there IS JUSTICE FOR ALL.

Over the next year, FFLIC plans to celebrate our ten year anniversary in a variety of ways, so that we may grow our allies and raise much needed funds to continue fighting, hire our families, and eventually find a home that is appropriate for our needs.

The other day was a very cramped, but awesome, day in our office. There were several youth working with our interns receiving ACT/SAT prep and study skills, waiting to go on a college tour at some of the local colleges, which we arranged. We had an intern working with two of our parent liaisons who are being teaching other parents Positive Behavior Supports (PBS) mechanisms and helping them organize parent groups in their schools. One of the parents has a beautiful baby boy for whom we are working to secure a future. There was chatter all around on this day and many days as staff was busy on the phones advocating on behalf of new families or writing letters in protest to the Governor who thought it best to veto a bill that would keep children in school instead of facing needless suspensions for minor infractions like uniform violations. This picture left me overjoyed thinking about all the possibilities another 10 years will bring.

We will kick off our yearlong celebration on September 9, 2011 with a fundraiser themed: FFLIC Ten Years and Beyond: Making Family Voices Equal Voices. Hope to see you all there!

Despite having bi-partisan support, majority floor votes, and being passed by both the Louisiana House of Representatives and Senate, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal vetoed SB 67 on July 1, 2011.

If enacted, SB 67 would have reduced suspensions and expulsions for minor infractions by encouraging schools and districts to use positive intervention tools and strategies such as restorative justice and peer mediation. Nationwide research has shown that these positive approaches are more effective than suspensions and reduce disciplinary incidents, even decreasing violent incidents in schools by up to 50%.

In Governor Bobby Jindal's statement following his veto of the bill, he stated, **"I have always supported a teacher's right to use a variety of tools and strategies in his or her own classroom. Senate Bill No. 67 reduces those tools and strategies by placing restrictions on when and how they can be used."**

At the close of each legislative session, Governor Bobby Jindal annually signs many bills from the Louisiana Legislature that limit the variety of tools and strategies that teachers can use, including the many budget cuts imposed on the education profession that the governor actively supports and that will have a significant impact on the accessibility and application of tools and strategies teachers can use in their classroom. So, in his statement justifying his veto, Kindal contradicts his own actions. Furthermore, Senate Bill 67 would not have taken away rights or restricted teachers from using any tools and strategies in their classroom. Rather, it would have required that classroom teachers allow students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade to stay in class when out of uniform or for being habitually absent or tardy.

In his statement Governor Jindal added, **"nothing in current law prevents a school board from deciding to reduce the use of suspension or expulsion, speed up the expulsion hearing, or hold parent-teacher conferences in a timelier manner."**

However, nothing in current law encourages them to do so, which is exactly why SB 67 is so necessary since the school boards are in fact doing the opposite. The bill was intended to hold school boards accountable.

Each and every year, approximately 300,000 Louisiana students spend several days out of school due to "disciplinary" reasons. The state of Louisiana will never close the achievement gap or decrease racial disparities among students who are pushed out of school in Louisiana for subjective minor "disciplinary" reasons. Currently, the Louisiana Revised Statute 17:416 (R.S. 17:416) allows local school boards to keep a student out of school indefinitely until an expulsion hearing takes place; it has been noted that on average, students are kept out of school for more than 14 days awaiting an expulsion hearing.

At present, there is nothing in state law that protects the rights of children or prevents school boards from putting young students out of school for minor and subjective disciplinary reasons. SB 67 would have amended state law R.S. 17:416 to decrease the number of days a student could be suspended out of school for minor disciplinary infractions and require districts to create guidelines for reducing suspensions for "willful disobedience." Furthermore, the bill would have made certain that students were not out of school for more than 10 days awaiting an expulsion hearing. Finally, SB 67 would have supported the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) in attaining the "9 Critical Goals" as adopted by the LDOE and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) in 2010.

If we do not begin to make logical data-driven decisions to protect the educational rights of our children and now by amending the state's disciplinary laws (specifically R.S. 17:416) to ensure that students are not being denied their right to an education, the state of Louisiana runs a high risk of a class action law suit for violating students' constitutional rights to receive an education.

Power, authority and autonomy heavily sought after within the education system in Louisiana; the teachers want power and control in their classroom by any means; the principals want power over their school by any means; the school boards wants power over the schools in their districts by any means. In the meantime, students and families are left powerless.

Given the existing data and bipartisan support we can only conclude that Governor Jindal's reason for vetoing Senate Bill No. 67 was not based on data, qualitative information, or in regard to the constitution but rather on his subjective reasoning due to uninformed advice. We recommend that Governor Jindal support the provisions proposed in Senate Bill 67 during the 2012 legislative session. **If we are to shift the current paradigm and change the status quo, it is imperative that we continue to organize ourselves.**



**FFLIC Members gather in front of the capital to advocate for school discipline reform**



**FFLIC Lake Charles  
Community Organizer,  
Mark Thibodeaux**

## Lake Charles' Newest Addition

### Mark Thibodeaux

Hi, my name is Mark Thibodeaux Sr. I was born in Lake Charles, LA to Wilmon and Elsie Thibodeaux, where I've spent most of my life. I've been happily married to my wife, Ethel M. Thibodeaux, for the past 28 years having raised three sons and two daughters. My oldest son is a Physician in training, the middle a Sergeant in the Army/Civil Engineer major, and the youngest son an Audio/Sound Engineer. My oldest daughter is a 2011 High School graduate going off to major in Criminal Justice and the youngest daughter a junior in High School. Education is a stronghold preached diligently in my home. After faith in God, education bares the keys to success and stability in life.

My childhood was a sheltered one. As the oldest boy of 8 children, I rose to the occasion of "man of the house," after losing my Dad at the age of 11. I grew up in an African American neighborhood and until the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and attended a Catholic Elementary/Middle School. I graduated from W.O. Boston High School in 1977. I attended McNeese State University from 1979-1982 as a Health & Physical Education Major. I have worked over 20 years in the local school district. From coaching on the field, running the basketball court, to working in the classroom, and as an Elder in the Church it has been an eye opener to a much bigger picture.

I believe because of lack of leadership and meaningful support from some heads of our school systems, our low-performing schools are continuously failing. There is a need to place truly caring yet effective teachers in these classrooms. This has caused great hurt, left students behind, and promoted closing of schools. The No Child left Behind Law may have put a spotlight on failing schools, in which majority are in minority communities, but never had a clear cut way on how to make the change. Some principals' lack of firmness of teachers to efficiently teach has con-

tinued to cripple minority schools to this day, either because of incompetence or willful neglect. Even more so, lack of guidance by some superintendents and school board officials to act accordingly in these schools are discriminatory. Statistics show, at an alarming rate, that children who drop out of school are more likely to become pregnant and/or incarcerated by the age of 18. It is a fact that Louisiana has the highest incarceration rate in the nation. It's easy to see where those uneducated will make uneducated decisions. A major distress is the arbitrary abuse of the discipline policy by the school system. The minuscule things some teachers will write students up for, or even commit fraud on the disciplinary forms is an outrage. I have attained and seen the proof.

I have always been an advocate for organizations that seek equality, justice, and the betterment of today's youth. I have also served two terms on the Mayor's Council for Race Relations. The fact my own daughter was dealt the unjust hand of our schools' disciplinary system led me straight to FFLIC. Here at Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children, I plan to collectively cultivate the spirit and attitude that seeks the integrity, passion, and awareness of today's youth.

## Interning with FFLIC and the Orleans Public Defenders Office

### Michael Grey

For the past year I interned with FFLIC as part of my legal education at Thomas M. Cooley Law School. My duties revolve around researching legal issues, writing memos, and helping out with any of the organization's needs. The past 3 months have been exciting and insightful. I have witnessed FFLIC strive to make a difference in the local community and throughout the state of Louisiana.

My first day at FFLIC was a visit to the Swanson Correctional Facility in Monroe, La. The visit to Swanson was eye-opening. I saw for the first time how children are treated in Louisiana's secure-care facilities. Immediately I understood why FFLIC fights for the children in Louisiana's juvenile justice system. Swanson was the first of three trips to Louisiana's secure care facilities. Other notable events I experienced included FFLIC's 5K run, helping to draft a re-write of Louisiana's school disciplinary code, and doing outreach at one of New Orleans's housing developments.

While interning at FFLIC, I had the opportunity to spend a week at the Orleans Public Defenders Office. The best word to describe the public defenders office is "intense." Public defenders deal with large caseloads, run back and forth to court, and fight for clients who had little hope in their trial. Many of the attorneys I met at the public defenders office were adamant about defending indigent clients. I witnessed one attorney file multiple appeals for a client, knowing he was going to be convicted; another attorney worked late and came in early just to meet a deadline the court gave her that day; and I saw one attorney held in contempt for yelling at the judge for not caring about his client's case. The worst part of the public defenders office was seeing parents cry and break down when their child was sentenced. Public defenders witness this happen daily and it requires a strong will to not succumb to the sadness that accompanies criminal trials.

Overall, interning with FFLIC and the short time I spent with the Orleans Public Defenders Office has given me a better understanding of true advocacy. FFLIC has shown me what dedicated individuals who genuinely care can accomplish when they have an unwavering focus. The experience I have gained at FFLIC has caused me to seriously consider focusing on juvenile work when I finish law school.



**FFLIC Legal Intern,  
Michael Grey**



## If It Were Your Child, Would It Be Ok?

By Gina Womack, FFLIC Executive Director

I believe that all parents, when they first hold their baby in their arms, have high hopes for their children and pray that, their children's lives will be much better than their own. But for some, these hopes quickly fade to black.

Thirteen years ago I began this work ignorant of the fate that was being inflicted upon the people that I have now come to know and love. Furthermore, I could not fathom having a family member being personally affected by the very same system. To be honest, I have been completely baffled for the past 13 years. How can so many children be pushed into the juvenile justice system? What is even more troubling is the blindness possessed by those directly unaffected by the system. They stand on the sideline passing judgment.

I always thought that nothing like this could ever happen to anyone in my family as well; after all, I did everything that I was supposed to. When I sadly became a single mother of three, I held onto the dreams I had crafted for my children. I mean, what could go wrong? I would continue to work the plans that I laid out for them.

After having to move home with my parents and put my oldest daughter in public school for a short period of time, I was finally blessed with the opportunity to put her in one of the best private schools in the area because I obtained financial aid for her. I later had my middle child tested when he became school age with the hopes he could go to the same school. However, a psychologist told me he was not a "good fit" for the school. Obviously, I was devastated. How could a child not be a good fit for a school? "Schools are supposed to provide education for *all* children," was my first thought. Fortunately, the school accepted him. I, unfortunately, later learned exactly what the phrase "not a good fit" meant.

The nightmare began when my son was diagnosed with ADHD. I started noticing how my life was following a path similar to that of the families I had been working with. He was talking out of turn at school, couldn't sit still to complete his work, and had the habit of being impulsive. The school was very helpful, and I was floored at our first meeting—his two teachers, the school counselor, the learning specialist and the principal were all there. I remember crying at the meeting, as I was overwhelmed with the outpour of support. I thought of other family's stories at not receiving any support at all and not knowing where to turn to find help. I attended various counseling sessions with my son; I even met with the local Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorder (CHADD) chapter to learn all of the tools I would need to help redirect my child's behavior.

***"It's better to build strong children than to repair broken men"***

***- Fredrick Douglass***



Ironically at the same time, I was diagnosed with ADD. Needless to say, all of the behavior modifications, tutoring, school functions, work, and taking care of three children was a big chore, but I worked hard to help my son and myself. By 5<sup>th</sup> grade, however my son wasn't fitting in academically nor meeting the private schools rigorous academic standards—he was not a "good fit." I loved my school; here my son's teachers utilized all the behavior modifications, like conflict resolution, peer to peer support and many techniques to redirect behavior. He was allowed to move around when necessary with direction and rules, not confined to a desk to sit still like a zombie when he actually couldn't. He wasn't seen as disruptive or a discipline problem; rather, he was seen as a child that struggled and needed some assistance. Unfortunately, the advanced curriculum proved to be too much, and I couldn't afford tuition, doctor visits, medication as well as the tutors to help him keep up. I had to begin my arduous search for a public school that could meet my child's needs.

My first selection in the public school system was one of the KIPP schools because I had heard great things about this schools' program, even on Oprah. "KIPP Central City Academy endeavors to empower each student with the character traits, academic abilities, and self-confidence needed to excel in competitive high schools, colleges, and beyond. We prepare our students to become leaders who positively navigate life's myriad challenges and work to make their community and world a better place." Surely this was a place I could turn to that would work with my son and me. He would surely be a "good fit" here.

The year I sent my son to KIPP was its inaugural year, so I knew the school would have some room for improvements. However, I wasn't really prepared for the questions, phone calls, or the school's complete incapability to care for my child; it was a grueling school year. The school tried to work with parents, providing buses to pick parents up for functions, as well as buses that would bring children home who had to serve detention. I really appreciated that. However, the school expected an amount of accountability from parents and children that they didn't require of themselves.

Even though the school was very aware that my son had ADHD and certain accommodations should be made for his learning style

and disability, I was hard pressed to have that happen even after multiple phone calls and visits to the school.

First, I began receiving many phone calls. “Your son will not sit looking straight ahead, your son will not sit still, and your son is talking in class.” Then, there were the times that he didn’t come home from school. I would only learn later that he was held in detention, and no one bothered to call me. No one put an IEP together for him that would help him succeed, even though I made many requests. There were no meetings of school personnel assuring me that they were concerned about my son and he mattered, no redirecting of behavior consistent with his diagnosis; only discipline and more discipline. I was constantly bombarded with phone calls and held accountable, but I was unable to hold the school accountable.



Already exhausted and feeling helpless, I thought I would exercise my right to choose and seek another environment for my son the following school year, somewhere that he would be a better fit. I was excited to learn that a new school was opening. Miller McCoy Academy, a private-like charter school that was designed for African-American boys, would surely be a good choice. The principals came to our home to get to know us, and they talked about their mission. I discussed his learning disability and the problems I had at other schools with the principals. They assured me they understood, and they reinforced their mission; they were committed to work specifically with African American boys. This was the place! This school has a Three-fold Academic Approach: Promote high levels of academic achievement, nurture the social, emotional, physical and intellectual development of male learners, and provide students the skills needed to be analytical thinkers, self sufficient and successful entrepreneurs, inventors, and positive contributors to society.

I became a very active parent, working with three other parents and the school to develop a parent group. Things were looking much better, or so I thought. Soon my son began having to serve detention for talking out of turn, not sitting still, not turning in his homework. I don’t have a problem with a child serving detention; he would need to learn to follow rules. Sadly, the school never worked with me to put together an IEP so there was no plan to work through his issues. No one called me to find a way to help my son succeed in school, but phone calls began when school administrators would call at 5 p.m. to tell me that my son was in detention, when they were supposed to call to inform me prior to him needing to be picked up. On several occasions, I was called and told he was detention, only to go and pick him up and he wouldn’t be there. On one occasion, I went to pick him up after being called, only to have a teacher rudely tell me that she did not know where my son was as he was clearly not in detention. I asked several school personnel and no one could help me. I walked around the school looking for administration and answers. I finally went home to find that my son home, telling me that he did not have detention. I live in uptown New Orleans; the school is in New Orleans east, a 20 minute ride each way if there is no traffic. I called the school the next day to speak with the principal only for her to tell me that the teachers described me as irate. She rattled off some school policy that if the child wasn’t in detention he certainly got on the bus, which I had explained to her that I had not been told. She stated that now I was aware of the policy and as I tried to say something else, she hung up on me. I immediately wrote a letter to her and her board requesting a meeting. They next day my son got a mysterious suspension stating he attended a game that he wasn’t supposed to when in fact I had documented approval from the coach for him to do so. Again, it was a lack of communication on the school’s part for which my son was paying the price. I quickly saw where this was going to end up, I heard the stories from our families way too many times.



**Gina Womack with students at Harney Elementary**

I felt as though I was fighting a losing battle. **Students with disabilities are suspended and expelled at a rate twice that of their non-disabled peers.** With all the research on adolescent brain development and ADHD, it should not be so difficult to find a school that

**“Do not put the fate of your children into anyone else’s hands and trust them to fight like you will fight”**

**- Assata, FFLIC Member**

works with children with disabilities and those who exhibit challenging behaviors. I was never challenged or made to feel badly at my private school. My child was never made to feel badly about himself and his challenges; he was helped with modalities that corrected and redirected behavior.

If I could have afforded tutors at that time to help my son academically, I’m sure he would still be in a place that cares for children and wants to see them succeed. I heard the stories too many times, so I pulled my son from the school mid-year and sent him to live with his dad in Arkansas hoping the



Research consistently shows: *The majority of suspensions are for minor misbehavior, such as “disruptive behavior,” “insubordination,” or school fights, which can be interpreted in subjective and biased ways, even unintentionally.*



## Join the FFLIC in supporting the Dignity in Schools Louisiana Chapter

Contact [dmogran@fflic.org](mailto:dmogran@fflic.org) for more details!

The Dignity in Schools campaign sites that: “Suspensions lead to a systematic pushout of children with disabilities and behavioral problems.

Pushouts has severe and lasting consequences for students, parents, schools and communities.

1. Exclusionary discipline practices and zero-tolerance policies have yet to demonstrate improvements in student behavior or increases in school safety.

2. Instead, pushout results in the denial of access to education for vulnerable youth.

- Suspensions result in missed instructional time and increase the likelihood of poor academic performance. In fact, students who have been suspended in the past score three grades levels behind their peers in reading skills after one year, and almost five years behind after two years.

- Suspension, expulsion and school based arrests are linked with an increased likelihood of school dropout or failure to graduate on time. Students suspended three or more times by the end of their sophomore year of high school are five times more likely to drop out than students who have not been suspended.

3. Exclusionary discipline increases a child’s likelihood of involvement with the juvenile or criminal justice system.

- Young people who drop out of high school, many of whom have experienced suspension or expulsion, are more than eight times as likely to be incarcerated as those who graduate.

- One study found that 80 percent of youth incarcerated in a state facility had been suspended and 50 percent had been expelled from school prior to incarceration.”

**The Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC) challenges the systemic problem of pushout in our nation's schools and advocates for the human right of every child to a quality education and to be treated with dignity. The DSC unites parents, youth, educators and advocates in a campaign to promote local and national alternatives to a culture of zero-tolerance, punishment and removal.**

school system was better there. I had to tear my family apart to find a school that would keep my child in school to be educated. Much to my chagrin, public schools across the country seem to all employ the same strategies: push children with challenging behaviors who commit minor infractions out of school. Also, a large percentage of such students drop out of school, funneled into the school to prison pipeline.

Two years later and much of the same in Arkansas as it had been in Louisiana, this last school year my son had to appear in court for a battery charge for a school fight. He had fallen over a friend’s foot and reacted impulsively, hitting his friend – a fight ensued. Impulsivity is a symptom of ADHD. Although the boys made up immediately, there was no conflict resolution; no restorative justice that happened here, only punishment that I don’t feel fit the behavior. The boys were suspended and sent to court. Because of the work that I do, I was able to make several phone calls to get the help and direction for my son even though I was in New Orleans. Thank God, due to our presentation to the court, we were able to get the situation dropped . . . this time! I don’t condone fighting in school or anywhere, but should a child face charges or jail time for a schoolyard fight where no one is hurt, largely due to behavior that is beyond their control? Psychologists tell of techniques to redirect behavior to correct challenging behavior; not once did I ever read a battery charge being one of those modifications. My son received such redirections while in private school, and his teachers did not resort to suspensions or expulsions as a disciplinary tactic.

***Even the most severe disciplinary sanctions such as suspension for the remainder of the school year and transfer to a disciplinary alternative school are applied to minor incidents. During the 2007-2008 school year, the most common reason for serious disciplinary actions in U.S. schools was “insubordination” (43% of all actions).***

When did we stop caring about other people’s children? It seems that basically it all comes down to money and opportunity. It is very obvious that clearly defined economic barriers exist in the United States. What is less transparent, however, is exactly how entrenched said barriers are. Wealthy Americans are seen to be living the ‘American Dream,’ yet the lives of those in poverty are less than ideal. The opportunities people in the United States are privy to reflect the socioeconomic status in which they are placed, and dishearteningly, education, health, and other similar services are distributed accordingly.

In Louisiana, the social injustice is evident. Many families of color live in poverty, and are forced to send their children to unacceptable and inadequate public schools that are more interested in disciplining than educating. Because of the lack of proper education, many youth of color, especially black youth, are funneled into detention facilities and jails where their basic civil rights are constantly violated, as they are beaten, abused, and mistreated. Further, lack of rehabilitation and community service

force youth back onto the streets and subsequently into the adult system.

If suspension and expulsions are decreased, there will be a substantial decrease in the number of youth in state facilities. It is FFLIC's vision that the aforementioned goals are met, so that youth of all backgrounds can be exposed to equally opportunity-filled futures, and so that no parents have to struggle and worry like the scores of FFLIC parents have.

My son is just about to start 9<sup>th</sup> grade and as the school year approaches, this should be a time of excitement as my son embarks upon his high school endeavors and new challenges. I remember high school as such a fun time where I learned to exist independently, choose friends wisely and feel like there was nothing that I couldn't do. But for my son, I don't see the same spark of excitement because he has already been made to feel that his life is doomed and because of his diagnosis, as public school has consistently labeled it as a problem. I'm dreading the phone calls from the school because my child can't fit into this little box defined by our public school system. Please pray for my son and all the children and families who are dreading the start of school and who are made to feel like they are bad parents when we are all doing the best we can. Truth be told, we could all who use a little support.

For these are all of our children, we will profit by or pay for whatever they become.

- James Baldwin

## Photos from the 2011 Day at the Capitol



**FFLIC Staff members with Senator Sharon Weston Broome Sarah Dunna-gan, Ernest Johnson, Executive Director Gina Womack, Senator Broome, Damekia Morgan, Connie Walton**



**Patrick Dobard, RSD Deputy Superintendent of Community and Policy shows his support for FFLIC's work at the 2011 day at the capitol.**



**Connie Walton Presents Senator Sharon Weston Broome with FFLIC's Champion for Positive Change Award**



**Senator Sharon Weston Broome receives FFLIC's Champion for Positive Change Award.**



**Charlene Green says, "advocating for SB 67 taught me about the many underlying problems in the education system that I never really knew about"**

## We would like to thank our supporters for making our work possible!

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### FFLIC's Board of Directors

**Candace Chambliss**, Esq. Chairperson

Born in Chicago, IL, Candace Chambliss graduated from New York University and went on to earn a juris doctorate from Northwestern University School of Law in 2003. She has dedicated her professional life to providing quality legal defense to juveniles and adults charged with crimes and who cannot afford an attorney. She resides in New Orleans, LA

**James Bell**, Esq, Treasurer

Founder and Executive Director of the W. Haywood Burns Institute. Mr. Bell and his colleagues at the Burns Institute are working with systems and community stakeholders to reduce disproportionality of youth of color in the juvenile justice system in over 40 jurisdictions throughout the country. Mr. Bell also works closely with the Casey Foundation's JDAI jurisdictions and the MacArthur Foundation's Models for Change Initiative.

**Norris Henderson**, Secretary

Founder and Executive Director of VOTE and former SOROS Fellow, native of New Orleans, Norris has been involved in Criminal Justice reform for more than 30 years, 27 of which were served inside Louisiana's State Penitentiary in Angola.

**Flora Watson**

Co-Founder of FFLIC and Parent of a formerly incarcerated youth, Flora is also a Special Education Teacher in St. Bernard Parish.



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## Join FFLIC's 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual 5K Run/Walk For Juvenile Justice

Saturday, October 22, 2011  
 Audubon Park, Shelter 10  
 Registration begins at 8:00 am  
 Race begins at 9:30 am

**\*\*Awards for top finishers\*\***

### Registration

Children (17 & Under): \$15  
 Adults: \$20  
 Groups of 5: \$15 each

Registration forms available at  
**FFLIC Office**  
 1600 Oretha C. Haley Blvd.  
 New Orleans, LA 70113

### Contact

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Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful,  
committed citizens can change the world.  
Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead

