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The Beginning of the End of Random Searches: Students Know What They Need Next

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The Beginning of the End of Random Searches: Students Know What They Need Next

BY

Ashley Ruano

The #StudentNotSuspects coalition has long worked in Los Angeles to end the random searches policy that discriminate against students and create a hostile campus environment for students to learn. For many years, Los Angeles Unified School District implemented mandatory random metal detector searches in middle and high schools. The searches did not make campus environments more secure. Instead, the policy targeted, and criminalized students of color. With the random search policy ending in 2020, what are students who experienced the impact this criminalizing practice saying? What are the educators who supported ending random searches saying about the policy change? How do community members define and create campus safety? We are asking these questions as LAUSD discusses how to replace random searches with real restorative practices and campus safety solutions. Fix School Discipline, along with community partners, asked students, educators, and parents to share their stories in this series of blogs.

Student leader, Ashley Ruano shares with us her firsthand experience of random school searches not making campus environments more secure, how they targeted and criminalized students of color, and what the end of random school searches in LAUSD means for her.

My name is Ashley Ruano and I am a junior at Apex Academy. My charter high school shares a campus with LAUSD schools. I have been through a handful of random searches from middle school to high school and each experience has been different. There are so many harms to these random searches but now we have gotten the chance to change the policy to one where students can be treated as they deserve to be treated.

Students all over LAUSD have felt judged and criminalized during these random searches. I've also felt what these students have felt. During my freshman year, there was a day where the random searches were all day. Honors Classes weren't being searched, so I got searched in the one class I had that wasn't honors. I noticed how unequal that was. Why was it students in honors classes weren't being searched but other students were? I came to a conclusion that the students being chosen were ones seen as suspicious, when the teacher said Honors Students are more "reliable".

I did not think being picked for a random search would be a big deal for me because I had nothing to hide. Everyone knows I'm harmless and would not have anything that would be considered a weapon or do something harmful to anyone or myself. However, when security guards and a lady who was a counselor told me to show them my pockets from my pants to my hoodie, it made me feel like I was seen as a criminal—like I did something wrong. It made me think: maybe I do have something to hide.

They searched through my backpack and took everything out, making my backpack more of a mess than it already was. During the search, they took out everyday items a teenage girl has: pads, perfume and other hygiene items. When the security guards checked the last pocket they found a blue sharpie, the guards asked me what I was using it for. "Are you using this to get high?" My answer was no. It was for my art class, in which I had to write my name on a piece of paper with a sharpie and make it into a graffiti styled artwork. I wasn't doing anything illegal with this sharpie, I was completing a class assignment. They confiscated the marker and I never got it back. I was able to finish the assignment with a washable marker but since a lot of my assignments required sharpies I had to buy another one.



Now, if I were to go back and ask them, "What was so harmful about me having a marker?" I would not get an answer. Because like every other teenager who questions school authority, we are treated as if our voice doesn't matter. Not anymore. On June 18th, there was an LAUSD board meeting and the topic of random searches for many years. With the policy finally ending, this gives #StudentsNotSuspects a better representing the USD of our mainly young students. The random searches had to end because it was a waste of money for the district, and instead of worrying about students' mental health, they were worrying about the contents of their backpacks. Random searches also cost students resourceful class time. These random searches were just another way to keep students fearful and the feeling unsafe, in an area where it is supposed to be safe for anyone, regardless of skin color or background. The money that was used to profit the staff searching students and spent on the metal detectors should go toward more counselors, therapists, and social workers. When the new policy comes to order, LAUSD officials need be careful in making sure that, whatever the policy is, it doesn't create a loophole that can resort to the same problems such as criminalizing students and creating a hostile school environment. With the policy ending students won't feel criminalized anymore. The random search policy left students scared of going to school, and made them fear a place where they can't trust the people there. But with the policy ending, students all over LA, including myself, are happy and relieved that we will no longer be judged by what people assume we carry in our backpacks and we will feel safer with the new environment.

With the school board now removing random searches by July 2020, students feel like they can finally concentrate on school and not on what they might have in their backpacks, especially students who have been persecuted and who fought against the policy. This vote showed students that we will no longer be picked on by school authorities. Students can feel safer and more secure. I think it is a step forward in the way schools are managed. The ending of random searches will help students feel like they have a voice. Students' education will come first and the district can provide more resources and put students' education first, such as more college access opportunities. Random everyday objects won't be taken away. This win means that for many students all over LAUSD their voice is being heard. Now, they can focus on their studies instead of thinking about being harassed and feeling criminalized.

About the Author



Ashley Ruano is currently entering junior in year of high school. She is very passionate about writing, and, with her passion, she also advocates for equality and brings awareness to social injustices that people face. She is currently an intern at the ACLU of Southern California Youth Liberty Squad, where she focuses on the educational inequalities students like her face. Her dream is to attend the University of California, Berkeley and pursue a career as a criminal law attorney.

About the #StudentsNotSuspects Coalition

The #StudentsNotSuspects Coalition is comprised of Students Deserve, Youth Justice Coalition, American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, Public Counsel, Black Lives Matter-LA, and United Teachers Los Angeles. The Coalition has worked since 2014 to end the random search policy and push LAUSD to further decriminalize our schools and increase positive supports for students and families in schools.





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[Experiences, Realities, and the Future: What the End of Random Searches Means to Students](http://www.fixschooldiscipline.org/2019/10/23/elvia/)
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