



**PUBLIC INTEREST LAW  
CENTER OF PHILADELPHIA**

AFFILIATED WITH THE LAWYERS COMMITTEE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS UNDER LAW

## Press Conference Advisory

### **NAACP and Public Interest Law Center To Announce Federal Lawsuit Against Lebanon School District**

**Date:** Thursday, January 20<sup>th</sup>

**Time:** 3:00 p.m.

**Location:** New Birth Church  
1025 Lehman St.  
Lebanon, PA 17042

LEBANON, PA – On Thursday, January 20<sup>th</sup>, the **Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia** and the **Pennsylvania NAACP** will announce the filing of a lawsuit in the **U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania** against the **Lebanon School District** that requests that the District be compelled to stop collecting and repay 500 truancy fines assessed illegally in an abusive and counterproductive truancy policy.

Along with the lawsuit the NAACP is calling upon Lebanon to reform its truancy policy to stop using court fines as its only means to end truancy. The Law Center has discovered that over the course of six years the District took parents and students to court more than 8,000 times and was awarded more than \$1.3 million in fines. During the 2008-2009 school year alone, the District levied almost \$500,000 in truancy fines and costs, more than ten times more per student than nearby Lancaster School District. In addition to violating a state law, these fines have led to the incarceration of parents and high dropout rates, and they have failed to reduce truancy.

The Law Center will also issue a report revealing that the Lebanon School District and local courts this last year have secretly reduced more than 300 fines by nearly \$250,000 in response to the complaints of the Law Center and NAACP about its illegal practices. But hundreds of other families who suffered from the truancy policies are still paying their fines. Meanwhile, the families that fully paid their fines have been left out in the cold.

At the press conference, which will be held at the **New Birth Church** in Lebanon, Pa., spokespeople from the Law Center and the NAACP will provide background on the issue and explain in further detail the aims and allegations of the lawsuit. Individual plaintiffs who have been subjected to the illegal fines will also be present. Copies of the lawsuit and the Law Center's report on the District's illegal truancy policy will be available at the conference.

The plaintiffs are calling upon the District to adopt a constructive truancy policy, such as is outlined in guidelines from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, which directs districts to reach out to parents first and use courts and fines as a last resort, thus making a positive effort to reduce truancy and make all students feel welcome at school. The lack of welcome in Lebanon schools seems to be a problem especially for minority students. The excessive fines seem to have been disproportionately targeted toward the District's growing minority populations, and at the request of the Lebanon chapter of the NAACP, the **Civil Rights Division of the U.S.**

**Department of Education** is currently conducting an investigation into the alleged racial discrimination.



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“We are glad that the School District has admitted that its high fines were illegal by reducing so many fines,” says **Michael Churchill** of the Law Center. “But they can’t just pick and chose who they will do this for, and it is unfair not to return the thousands of dollars they collected that they were never entitled to. Moreover, the high fines are just a symptom of a problem of over-relying on the courts to deal with truancy. It is time the District to start working with parents and the community to solve this problem rather than turning to the courts as the very first step.”

**Letitia Fuentes Keith**, President of the Lebanon Chapter of the NAACP stated: “We welcome the investigation by the US Department of Education, because we are concerned that the District has been using truancy fines more harshly against minority parents. None of the families we have had had contact with has been invited to the school for a Truancy Elimination conference. It appears the school is more interested in pushing the students out rather than finding a way to keep them in school.”

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**About the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia:**

The Law Center, founded in 1969 as a local affiliate of the Lawyer’s Committee for Civil Rights Under the Law, uses impact litigation and community engagement to ensure access to fundamental necessities – including a quality public education – for at-risk populations who have historically been denied them. The Law Center’s public education advocacy is devoted to making *Brown v. Board of Education* a living reality for students in public schools.

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