June 30, 2010

The Honorable Harry Reid
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Republican Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable John Boehner
Republican Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Majority Leader Reid, Republican Leader McConnell, Speaker Pelosi and Republican Leader Boehner:

As professors who teach, research, advocate and write about youth and issues which affect them, we are writing to express our strong support for reauthorizing the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDPA) in the 111th Congress.

We understand that this legislation has been passed out of the Senate Judiciary Committee twice, and is now awaiting a full Senate vote. We urge the Senate to take up and pass these urgently needed reforms this summer. We also understand that Chairman George Miller has not yet moved a bill through his House Education and Labor Committee, so we would urge progress in that Committee on this important legislation in the near term as well.

The JJDPA has been protecting youth across the nation for over 35 years. Established in 1974 and most recently authorized in 2002 with bipartisan support, the JJDPA is based on a broad consensus that children, youth and families involved with the juvenile and criminal justice system should be protected by federal standards. This important legislation also supports effective prevention programs and other ways to ensure that communities are kept safe, including reducing the recidivism rate of youthful offenders.

In addition, the JJDPA provides support for the Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) at the Department of Justice, which provides training and technical assistance, develops model programs, and supports research and evaluation. This legislation also supports a nationwide juvenile justice planning and advisory system and improvements in state and local juvenile justice programs and practices.

Since the last in-depth revision of the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act in 1992, researchers and policymakers have learned a tremendous amount about what works to prevent and reduce juvenile delinquency. From the growing body of research on child and youth development, the development of the adolescent brain, and effective programs and practices, we now know much more about what works in turning these young lives around. Additionally, policymakers have increasingly recognized the importance of evaluating programs in order to enhance their effectiveness and foster replication.

However, our nation continues to face significant challenges in the juvenile justice arena. These include ongoing racial disparities in the treatment of youth in the justice system; the over-reliance on detention and incarceration as a response to juvenile crime; the continued detention of status offenders, such as truants and runaways, despite federal prohibitions; and the increased placement of children at risk of abuse, sexual assault and suicide in adult jails despite the JJDPA's original intention to keep them out of adult facilities.

After 18 years, it is clearly time to implement a comprehensive reauthorization of the JJDPA. We strongly support this legislation and the reinvigoration of the Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention at the Justice Department. We are confident that implementing these best practices and latest research results will benefit both the children and youth who are at risk of entering the juvenile court system, and those who have already entered the system. We also believe it will help make our communities safer and healthier. We urge Congress to make this legislation a priority in the next few months. Our youth deserve nothing less.

Sincerely,

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Cc: The Honorable Patrick Leahy, Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee
The Honorable Jeff Sessions, Ranking Republican, Senate Judiciary Committee
The Honorable George Miller, Chairman, House Education & Labor Committee
The Honorable John Kline, Ranking Republican, House Education & Labor Committee