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< Are Traumatized Students Disabled? A Debate Straight Outta Compton

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DAVID GREENE, HOST:

And now let's turn to California, where today a judge will preside over a hearing in an unprecedented court case. It's a class action suit that's been brought against the Compton, Calif. Unified School District. Compton is one of the most violent cities in the country. And a handful of students say they have been traumatized by life there and that the city's schools have failed to give them the help they deserve. Cory Turner from NPR's Ed team reports.

CORY TURNER, BYLINE: The complaint is a terrifying read of kids coping with physical and sexual abuse, addicted parents, homelessness and a constant fear of violence. One of the plaintiffs, listed as 15-year-old Philip W., says he witnessed his first murder when he was 8. A quick warning, this is graphic.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

PHILIP W.: Somebody got shot in the back of the head with a shotgun.

TURNER: This is a recorded interview with Philip, provided by his attorneys.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

PHILIP: And they threw him over the rail. And he was just sitting there, bleeding, blood all down the little sewer line. It was a horrifying sight.

TURNER: The complaint says Philip has witnessed more than 20 shootings and in 2014 was hit in the knee by a bullet. What's this have to do with Compton's schools? Well, Susan Ko, of the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, says exposure to violence can have a profound effect on the brain's ability to learn.

SUSAN KO: That impacts concentration, the ability to just listen to what the teacher's saying, to understand what you're reading, to remember something that you learned or what the teacher just said.

TURNER: Not only that; many traumatized students live in a state of constant alarm. Innocent things like a bump in the hallway or a request from a teacher can stir anger and bad behavior. The lawsuit alleges that in Compton, the school's reaction to traumatized students was too often punishment, not help.

MARLEEN WONG: They were repeatedly either sent to another school, expelled or suspended. And this went back to kindergarten.

TURNER: Marleen Wong teaches at the USC School of Social Work and has spent decades studying kids and trauma.

WONG: I think we're really doing a terrible disservice to these children.

TURNER: The suit argues that trauma is a disability and that schools are required by federal law to make accommodations for traumatized students, not expel them. The plaintiffs want Compton to provide teacher training, mental health support for students and to use conflict mediation before resorting to suspension.

DAVID HUFF: That's a very strong mandate, and it needs to be funded.

TURNER: Compton Unified's attorney, David Huff, says cost isn't the only problem with the suit. He believes it's too broad a definition of disability and sends the wrong message to kids living in other struggling neighborhoods.

HUFF: A sweeping declaration would effectively tell these children that they have now been labeled as having a physical or mental handicap under federal law.

TURNER: Compton Unified has asked the judge to dismiss the case. This idea of treating trauma in children as a disability is relatively new. Though, the problem is not, says Ko.

KO: Twenty-five percent of kids will have experienced a traumatic event before the age of 16.

TURNER: Twenty-five percent - that doesn't mean they'll all struggle in school. But many will and not just in Compton, where students return to class this week, bringing with them the stories of summer - good and bad. Cory Turner, NPR News, Washington.

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