School to Prison Pipeline

The “school to prison pipeline” refers to the alarming trend of so many youth being routed from school directly into the juvenile justice system.

In the past few decades, public schools increasingly began to adopt “zero tolerance” discipline models in response to fears about school safety. Zero tolerance discipline has caused a dramatic increase in the use of out-of-school suspension and expulsion to punish even low level infractions. In one state a study found that only 5% of students who were suspended were for a “serious infraction.”

These cultural trends have been reinforced by “tough on crime” education policy such as the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 requiring an entire year’s out-of-school suspension for any student who brings a weapon into a school. Many schools applied this punishment to pocket knives or even toy weapons, resulting in an education denied and a child outside of the system. These policies disproportionately affect children of color.

Another piece of legislation that has been linked to the school-to-prison pipeline is No Child Left Behind. The serious ramifications for schools that do not meet the law’s standards have prompted administrators to remove problematic students, thus presenting a more successful profile to the government. And when students return from the juvenile justice system, administrators are reluctant to accept them, since they carry a risk of hurting the school as a whole.

The significant increase of Student Resource Officers (SROs), police officers based in schools, has contributed to criminalizing even minor discipline infractions. Though the intent may be student safety, evidence shows that the officers mostly respond to low-level discipline issues unrelated to safety. A report by the Justice Policy Institute found that schools with SROs were 500% more likely than schools without officers to arrest students for the vague category of “disorderly conduct,” even controlling across school districts’ poverty level. Such school-related arrests are extremely racially skewed, with African American and Latino students accounting for 70% of the arrests and thus beginning the process of racially disproportionate incarceration.

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204 http://www.thenation.com/article/205129/states-are-required-educate-students-behind-bars-heres-what-really-happens
205 http://www.vox.com/2015/2/24/8101289/school-discipline-race
206 http://www.3cdn.net/advancement/0d4633c0e97b1f061f_q4m6igky2.pdf
Instead of criminalizing students, school districts would do well to invest in guidance counselors, social workers, and training staff in alternative models of discipline and conflict resolution. Schools should be teaching children to effectively deal with problems in a healthy and effective manner rather than sending them to jail.

**Sample Partner Organizations**

- **Dignity in Schools**: Their work includes the National Week of Action Against School Pushout, Solutions Not Suspension Initiative, and a Model Code on Education and School Discipline. [www.dignityinschools.org](http://www.dignityinschools.org)

- **Advancement Project**: [http://www.advancementproject.org/issues/stopping-the-school-to-prison-pipeline](http://www.advancementproject.org/issues/stopping-the-school-to-prison-pipeline)

- **ACLU**: [www.aclu.org/school-prison-pipeline](http://www.aclu.org/school-prison-pipeline)


- **Suspension Stories** is a youth-led participatory action research project to understand the school to prison pipeline: [http://www.suspensionstories.com](http://www.suspensionstories.com). This initiative is the result of a collaboration between the Rogers Park Young Women’s Action Team (www.rogersparkywat.org) and Project NIA (www.project-nia.org).

- **Numerous local student-led organizations have released reports and led campaigns**, such as Youth United for Change (YUC) in Philadelphia or Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE).

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**Talmud, Sanhedrin 71a**

Rabbi Shimon taught: Just because a boy ate a triens [about three ounces] of meat and drank half a log [about 1/4 liter] of Italian wine, should his father and mother take him out and stone him? Such a thing [a rebellious son] has never existed and will never exist.

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