How Harsh School Discipline Fuels the School to Prison Pipeline

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“I believe that education is the civil rights issue of our generation. And if you care about promoting opportunity and reducing inequality, the classroom is the place to start. Great teaching is about so much more than education; it is a daily fight for social justice.”

~ Secretary Arne Duncan, October 9, 2009
The School to Prison Pipeline in Ohio
School to Prison Pipeline

• Overemphasis on policies and practices in schools that lead to involvement in the juvenile and criminal justice systems and the incarceration of youth
  ▫ Zero tolerance
  ▫ Harsh exclusionary discipline like suspension and expulsion
  ▫ Prison-like security procedures
  ▫ Overreliance, in some schools, on police officers to discipline students in school
  ▫ Increasing numbers of school-based arrests and referrals to juvenile court
How School Discipline Contributes to the Pipeline

• Ohio schools issued more than 210,000 out of school suspensions in 2012-13.
• 54% of out of school suspensions and 21% of expulsions were for “disobedient or disruptive” behavior.

• A November 2012 CDF-Ohio issue brief found that only 1.2% of out of school suspensions and 9.3% of expulsions are for possession of a gun or other weapon.

• Kids are being removed from school mostly for non-violent, non-criminal behavior.
Exclusionary school discipline disproportionately impacts certain groups of children.

- African American students in Ohio are five times more likely than white students to be suspended (for the same behavior).
- Students with disabilities are anywhere from two to eight times more likely to be suspended (for the same behavior), depending on the disability category.
- Economically disadvantaged students are 2.5 times more likely to be suspended than students without economic disadvantage (for the same behavior).
• Zero tolerance policies exacerbate this problem
• **Zero tolerance** is a policy or practice that results in an automatic disciplinary consequence such as in-school or out of school suspension, expulsion, or involuntary school transfer for any student who commits one or more listed offenses. A school discipline policy may be a zero tolerance policy even if administrators have some discretion to modify consequences on a case-by-case basis.
How School Discipline Contributes to the Pipeline

- Students lose ground academically when they miss school
- Schools with higher suspension rates have lower academic achievement rates and standardized test scores overall
- No evidence that removing “problem” students from school makes those schools safer for other students
A history of prior suspensions from school is the number one predictor of whether children will drop out of school – more so than any other factor, including low socio-economic status, not living with both biological parents, high number of school changes, and having sex before age 15.

• Approximately 80 percent of the adult prison population in Ohio did not graduate from high school.
Arrests and Referrals to Juvenile Court

• School-based arrests have increased dramatically. The majority of arrests are for minor incidents such as “disturbance of the peace” or “disruptive conduct.”
• National research shows that African American students and students with disabilities are arrested at higher rates than White and non-disabled students.
CDF-Ohio’s August 2013 issue brief on school resource officers details best practices and model programs for minimizing the risk to students when SROs are present in school buildings. These recommendations are available in detail in the brief, available at http://www.cdfohio.org/research-library/documents/school-resource-officers.html
DESPAIR

Why God, why?!
March 2013: The sealing of the school-to-prison pipeline in Meridian, Miss. has officially started after a U.S. District Court judge approved what the Department of Justice is calling “a landmark consent decree” that features a “far-reaching plan to reform discipline practices ... that unlawfully channel black students out of their classrooms and, too often, into the criminal justice system.”
June 2013: The Portland Parent Union successfully pushed for the passage of a bill to reform school discipline and roll back 'zero-tolerance' policies in Oregon. On May 21, 2013, the Oregon legislature passed HB 2192-B, removing mandatory expulsion requirements from the state's school discipline statute.
September 2013: Parents and educators speak out against overly harsh discipline policies in Susquehanna Township, Pennsylvania
January 2014: Youth leaders of NC Heat and Youth Organizing Institute speak at a press conference in Wake County, NC about a federal complaint filed against law enforcement agencies and Wake County Schools.
April 2014: Students from YOUTH VOICE in Detroit walk 80 miles from Detroit to Lansing, Michigan over 2 days to raise awareness around educational justice and to end the school to prison pipeline.
May 2014: Monroe County, Georgia schools and other Middle George districts implement Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports focused on keeping students in the classroom and providing extra interventions and supports where needed to make that happen.
June 2014: Jefferson County, Kentucky school board approves a new code of conduct focused on reducing suspensions while members of Citizens of Louisville Organized and United Together, who pushed for the changes, cheer!
August 19, 2014: As a result of years of advocacy work by local advocates and parent and student-led groups, Los Angeles Unified School District implemented a new policy prohibiting arrests of students for low-level offenses. This followed earlier changes to the district’s discipline policy to end out of school suspensions for “defiance.”
October 2014: Students in Ferguson, Missouri marching from “the schoolhouse to the jailhouse” to protest school pushout policies.
April 2015 – Akron’s Schumacher Elementary uses classical music, single gender classrooms, and logical consequences to reduce out of school suspensions – down more than half since last school year.

Ohio Legislation to Watch

• SB 34 – would remove the state mandate that all school districts have “zero tolerance for violent, disruptive, and inappropriate behavior, including excessive truancy” and require replacing such policies with policies that take into account individual circumstances and adopt alternative approaches.
• Would be a strong first step toward reforming school discipline policies in Ohio schools.

Restorative Practices

- A framework for a broad range of restorative justice approaches that proactively build a school community based on cooperation, mutual understanding, trust and respect, and respond to conflict by including all people impacted by a conflict in finding solutions that restore relationships and repair the harm done to the school community.
Repair harm and relationships using conferencing and problem solving circles.

Maintain relationships when minor conflicts occur, using conflict resolution and informal mediation.

Make and develop relationships by encouraging a community of care and a sense of shared responsibility for each others’ wellbeing using circle meetings etc.
Restorative Practices

- SB 34 explicitly requires school boards to replace zero tolerance policies with “alternative strategies, including prevention, intervention, **restorative justice**, peer mediation, and counseling . . .”
- Restorative practices can significantly reduce the need to use out of school discipline like suspensions and expulsions. Can be used in concert with other approaches, like Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS).
Resources

Children’s Defense Fund Ohio issue briefs
• http://www.cdfohio.org/research-library/

Dignity in Schools Campaign
• http://dignityinschools.org/

US Dept of Justice School Climate and Discipline Guidance
• http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html

UCLA Civil Rights Project: School to Prison Pipeline
• http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/resources/projects/center-for-civil-rights-remedies/school-to-prison-folder

Florida Students Caught in the School to Prison Pipeline – YouTube video:
• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbkfdg84g8U&feature=youtu.be
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