



FEATURE

The School-to-Prison Pipeline

Policies and practices that favor incarceration over education do us all a grave injustice.

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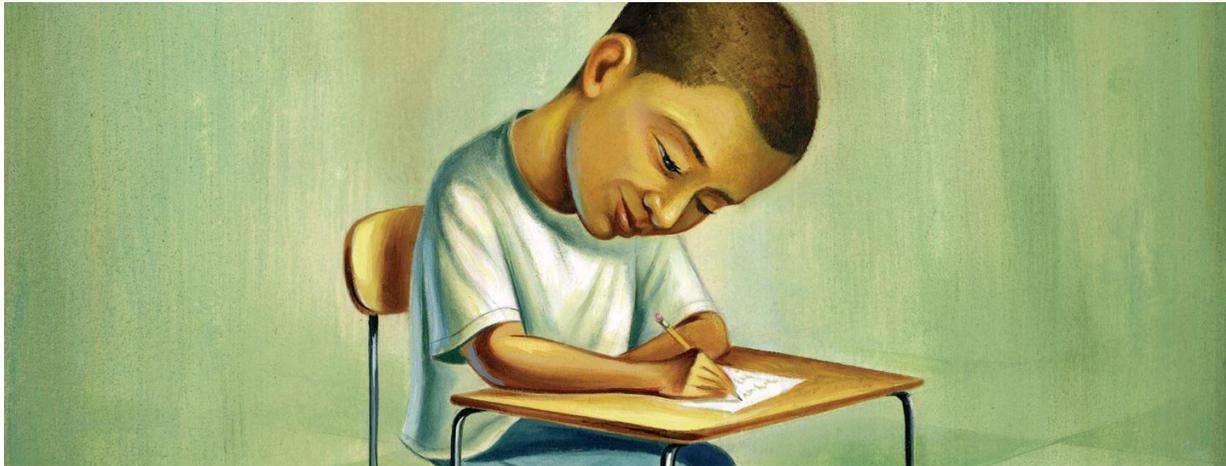


Illustration by Chris Buzelli

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In Meridian, Miss., police routinely arrest and transport youths to a juvenile detention center for minor classroom misbehaviors. In Jefferson Parish, La., according to a U.S. Department of Justice complaint, school officials have given armed police “unfettered authority to stop, frisk, detain, question, search and arrest schoolchildren on and off school grounds.” In Birmingham, Ala., police officers are permanently stationed in nearly every high school.

In fact, hundreds of school districts across the country employ discipline policies that push students out of the classroom and into the criminal justice system at alarming rates—a phenomenon known as the school-to-prison pipeline.

Last month, Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., held the first federal hearing on the school-to-prison pipeline—an important step toward ending policies that favor incarceration over education and disproportionately push minority students and students with disabilities out of schools and into jails.

In opening the hearing, Durbin told the subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee, “For many young people, our schools are increasingly a gateway to the criminal justice system. This phenomenon is a consequence of a culture of zero tolerance that is widespread in our schools and is depriving many children of their fundamental right to an education.”

A wide array of organizations—including the Southern Poverty Law Center, the NAACP and Dignity in Schools—offered testimony during the hearing. They joined representatives from the Departments of Education and Justice to shine a national spotlight on a situation viewed far too often as a local responsibility.

“We have a national problem that deserves federal action,” Matthew Cregor, an attorney with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, explained. “With suspension a top predictor of dropout, we must confront this practice if we are ever to end the ‘dropout crisis’ or the so-called achievement gap.” In the words of Vermont’s Sen. Patrick Leahy, “As a nation, we can do better.”

What is the School-to-Prison Pipeline?

Policies that encourage police presence at schools, harsh tactics including physical restraint, and automatic punishments that result in suspensions and out-of-class time are huge contributors to the pipeline, but the problem is more complex than that.

The school-to-prison pipeline starts (or is best avoided) in the classroom. When combined with zero-tolerance policies, a teacher’s decision to refer students for punishment can mean they are pushed out of the classroom—and much more likely to be introduced into the criminal justice system.

Who’s in the Pipeline?

Students from two groups—racial minorities and children with disabilities—are disproportionately represented in the school-to-prison pipeline. African-American students, for instance, are 3.5 times more likely than their white classmates to be suspended or expelled, according to a nationwide study by the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights.

"Black children constitute 18 percent of students, but they account for 46 percent of those suspended more than once."

For students with disabilities, the numbers are equally troubling. One report found that while 8.6 percent of public school children have been identified as having disabilities that affect their ability to learn, these students make up 32 percent of youth in juvenile detention centers.

The racial disparities are even starker for students with disabilities. About 1 in 4 black children with disabilities were suspended at least once, versus 1 in 11 white students, according to an analysis of the government report by Daniel J. Losen, director of the Center for Civil Rights Remedies of the Civil Rights Project at UCLA.

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A landmark study published last year tracked nearly 1 million Texas students for at least six years. The study controlled for more than 80 variables, such as socioeconomic class, to see how they affected the likelihood of school discipline. The study found that African Americans were disproportionately punished compared with otherwise similar white and Latino students. Children with emotional disabilities also were disproportionately suspended and expelled.

In other studies, Losen found racial differences in suspension rates have widened since the early 1970s and that suspension is being used more frequently as a disciplinary tool. But he said his recent study and other research show that removing children from school does not improve their behavior. Instead, it greatly increases the likelihood that they'll drop out and wind up behind bars.

Punishing Policies

The SPLC advocates for changes to end the school-to-prison pipeline and has filed lawsuits or civil rights complaints against districts with punitive discipline practices that are discriminatory in impact.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the number of school resource officers rose 38 percent between 1997 and 2007. Jerri Katzerman, SPLC deputy legal director, said this surge in police on campus has helped to criminalize many students and fill the pipeline.

One 2005 study found that children are far more likely to be arrested at school than they were a generation ago. The vast majority of these arrests are for nonviolent offenses. In most cases, the students are simply being disruptive. And a

recent U.S. Department of Education study found that more than 70 percent of students arrested in school-related incidents or referred to law enforcement are black or Hispanic. Zero-tolerance policies, which set one-size-fits-all punishments for a variety of behaviors, have fed these trends.

Best Practices

Instead of pushing children out, Katzerman said, “Teachers need a lot more support and training for effective discipline, and schools need to use best practices for behavior modification to keep these kids in school where they belong.”

Keeping at-risk kids in class can be a tough order for educators under pressure to meet accountability measures, but classroom teachers are in a unique position to divert students from the school-to-prison pipeline.

Teachers know their students better than any resource officer or administrator—which puts them in a singularly empowered position to keep students in the classroom. It’s not easy, but when teachers take a more responsive and less punitive approach in the classroom, students are more likely to complete their education.

The information in "A Teacher's Guide to Rerouting the Pipeline" highlights common scenarios that push young people into the school-to-prison pipeline and offers practical advice for how teachers can dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline.

Avoiding the Pipeline

How can school districts divert the school-to-prison pipeline?

1. Increase the use of positive behavior interventions and supports.
2. Compile annual reports on the total number of disciplinary actions that push students out of the classroom based on gender, race and ability.
3. Create agreements with police departments and court systems to limit arrests at school and the use of restraints, such as mace and handcuffs.
4. Provide simple explanations of infractions and prescribed responses in the student code of conduct to ensure fairness.

5. Create appropriate limits on the use of law enforcement in public schools.
6. Train teachers on the use of positive behavior supports for at-risk students.

Deepen your understanding of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Dig in to "A Teacher's Guide to Rerouting the Pipeline."

Five shifts a teacher can make to keep students in school.