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ZERO TOLERANCE DISCIPLINE, DISCRIMINATION, AND THE SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE

The School to Prison Pipeline (STPP) is a nationwide system of local, state, and federal education and public safety policies that pushes students out of school and into the criminal justice system. The system disproportionately targets youth of color and youth with disabilities. Inequities in areas such as school discipline, policing practices, high-stakes testing, wealth and healthcare distribution, school “grading” systems, and the prison-industrial complex all contribute to the Pipeline.

The STPP operates directly and indirectly. Directly, schools send their students into the Pipeline through zero tolerance policies, and involving the police in minor discipline incidents. All too often school rules are enforced through metal detectors, pat-downs and frisks, arrests, and referrals to the juvenile justice system. And schools pressured to raise graduation and testing numbers can sometimes artificially achieve this by pushing out low-performing students into GED programs and the juvenile justice system.

Indirectly, schools push students towards the criminal justice system by excluding them from the learning environment and isolating them from their peer groups through suspension, expulsion, ineffective retention policies, transfers, and high-stakes testing requirements.

THE RISE OF THE SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE DID NOT CORRESPOND WITH AN INCREASE IN SCHOOL VIOLENCE.

Crimes against and by youth were actually declining before zero tolerance policies took hold.¹

Zero Tolerance policies directly and indirectly feed the Pipeline

- Schools rely on suspension, expulsion, citations, summonses, and arrests to handle disciplinary problems like bringing cell phones and ipods to school, smoking cigarettes, and skipping class. Students who might easily be disciplined through a visit to the principal’s office end up in jail cells—this is the essence of the Pipeline²
- **Criminal charges are brought against youth in schools for violations that never would be considered criminal if committed by an adult**

¹ The Advancement Project (March 2005). Education on Lockdown: The Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track, p. 11.

² NYCLU (March 2007), Criminalizing the Classroom: The Over-policing of New York City Schools

Suspensions indirectly feed the Pipeline

- **A child who has been suspended is more likely to fall behind in school, be retained a grade, drop out of high school, commit a crime, and become incarcerated as an adult³**
- The best demographic indicators of children who will be suspended are not the type or severity of the crime, but the color of their skin, their special education status, the school they go to, and whether they have been suspended before⁴

The Pipeline limits opportunities for our most vulnerable youth

- **Zero tolerance and suspensions disproportionately affect students of color and those with learning disabilities**
 - Black students represented only 17% of national public school enrollment in 2000 but accounted for 34% of suspensions⁵
 - Special education students represent 8.6% of public school students, but 32% of youth in juvenile detention nationwide⁶
 - Black students with learning disabilities are three times more likely to be suspended than white students with learning disabilities and four times more likely to end up in correctional facilities⁷
- **School disciplinary, juvenile, and criminal records work against disadvantaged students when they apply for colleges, scholarships, jobs, and selective high schools.**
- In many places, having a criminal record can prevent students and their families from living in public housing⁸

Solutions

- **Invest in education rather than the far more costly corrections system**
 - In 2004, the federal government spent \$60 million to hire police forces for schools and \$19.5 million on school safety equipment such as metal detectors⁹
- **Begin exploring successful, non-punitive discipline models such as peer mediation, conflict resolution, truth and reconciliation committees, guidance counseling, mentoring, teacher training and support, and parental and community involvement initiatives to reduce conflict in schools**
- **Allow students to have a role in designing school discipline codes. When students understand the reasons for rules and take ownership of them they are more likely to conform their behavior¹⁰**

³ The Advancement Project (2000). Opportunities Suspended: The Devastating Consequences of Zero Tolerance and School Discipline, p. 13.

⁴ Russel Skiba and M. Karega Rausch (2003), Zero Tolerance, Suspension, and Expulsion: Questions of Equity and Effectiveness

⁵ The Advancement Project (March 2005). Education on Lockdown: The Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track, p. 18.

⁶ NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline, p. 5.

⁷ Building Blocks for Youth (2000), And Justice for Some.

⁸ The Advancement Project (March 2005). Education on Lockdown: The Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track, p. 12.

⁹ The Advancement Project (March 2005). Education on Lockdown: The Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track, p. 17.

¹⁰ NYCLU, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, and Make the Road New York (July 2009), Safety with Dignity: Alternatives to the Over-Policing of Schools.