



Best Practices for Dismantling the School To Prison Pipeline

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Identifying the problem:

The *School To Prison Pipeline* is a disturbing trend in public schools across the United States that has been documented in scholarly research, reports, and studies. In the name of “zero-tolerance” and “school safety” increasing numbers of children have been suspended, expelled and even arrested for relatively minor disciplinary infractions. Once they have been funneled out of the public school system, these children are more likely to end up in dead-end alternative schools, the juvenile justice system, and in prison. This trend disproportionately affects children of color, the poor and those with disabilities.¹ Scholarly research shows that students are suspended or expelled are far more likely than other students to drop out of school. Moreover minority children are retained, suspended and expelled at a higher rate than white students. Students that have dropped out of high school are 3 times more likely to be incarcerated than their in-school peers. Although children represent just 34 percent of the U.S. adolescent population, minority youths represent 62 percent of youths in detention.²

Furthermore, as public schools struggle to increase the performance of their students on high-stakes tests, they use suspension, expulsion, and arrests to get rid of low-performing students. The enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act has only increased the use of high-stakes testing and therefore the incentives to push low-performing, disabled and at-risk youth out of school. These policies put great pressure on teachers and administrators to ignore and “forget” the needs of at-risk and very low performing students.³ This combination of over-

¹ Johanna Wald and Daniel Losen. “Defining and Redirecting a School-To-Prison Pipeline.” *The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University*.

<http://www.woodsfund.org/community/Folder_1036081004377/File_1084877618748>.

² “Overview of Factors Contributing to the Cradle to Prison Pipeline.” *The Children’s Defense Fund*. August 8, 2007 <http://www.childrensdefense.org/site/PageServer?pagename=c2pp_factsheets>.

³ Elizabeth Jaeger. “What Every Parent, Teacher and Community Member Needs to Know About No Child Left Behind.”

zealous disciplinary practices and increased focus on high-stakes testing push poor, at-risk, minority and disabled children out of public schools and into the juvenile justice system and prisons.

Correcting the Problem:

There is an equally large body of work identifying ways to counteract this trend. There are many and varied approaches, policies and programs that have had success reaching out-of-school youth, encouraging education, and success. Additionally respected experts on the school-to-prison pipeline, at-risk youth, and education have proposed strategies to counteract this national trend. These varied approaches share certain similarities and overarching principals. Important also are their diversity in approach, offerings, and structure.

1) General Principals - There are many different ways to counteract the school-to-prison pipeline from grass-roots independent programs to changes in federal laws and programs. However, the successful approaches share several basic principals.

A) **Diversity in Programming** - There is no one fix-all program. There are many different types of at-risk students and each student faces a distinct matrix of social, familial, and personal barriers. To engage each student schools and programs must offer many different levels, tracks or methods within each program as well as variety in programming. Also, within each program students should have support in creating a personalized set of goals and plans for achievement.⁴

B) **Collaboration** - Because youth can face barriers to success from all directions, intervention will be most effective if every entity that has contact with the child works together. Collaboration between schools, parents, local leaders, agencies, and

⁴ Lili Allen, Cheryl Almeida and Adria Steinberg. "From the Prison Track to the College Track: Pathways to Postsecondary Success for Out-of-School Youth." *Jobs for the Future*. <www.jff.org>. April 2004.

community organizations is vital to keeping students in school and finding meaningful alternatives for out-of-school youth.

2) Programs: Alternatives to Traditional Education

There are many programs that reach at-risk and out-of-school youth by offering alternatives or supplements to traditional public education. These programs have the advantage of greater flexibility than is possible in the public school system. The most successful programs offer diversity of programming, collaboration, and connections with other institutions and/or forces in children's lives.

- A) **Theoretical Framework** - Successful programs consciously set out to create an environment where students can feel safe, supported and can succeed. This involves the following general principals and understandings.
- a. Programs and advocates must understand the **multiple, structural barriers** that at-risk children face. This should include a strong understanding of racism and class issues and how they work together to disadvantage youth.⁵
 - b. Programs must work to change the perception of parents, students and communities that alternative programs and schools are for "bad children."⁶
 - c. Programs should provide youth with an **environment that leads to success**. Youth need a safe space to deal with past discouragements, create new goals, and be continually self-reflective.⁷
 - d. The most successful programs provide **small close-knit communities** where all members are interested in the success and development of other members.

⁵ Marsha Weissman et al. "School Yard or Prison Yard: Improving Outcomes for Marginalized Youth." *Justice Strategies*. <www.communityalternatives.org/articles/school_yard.html>. (April 2005): 3.

⁶ Ibid: 4.

⁷ Allen, Lilly and Cheryl Almeida and Adria Steinberg. "From the Prison Track to the College Track: Pathways to Post-Secondary Success for Out-of-School Youth." *Jobs for the Future*. April 2004.

- B) **Common Elements of Successful Programs** - While diversity in programming is essential, some variation on the following elements exist in most programs that successfully engage at-risk youth.
- a. **Community Investment/Involvement** - Some of the most successful programs offer students a way to get involved in their communities working to understand and change the situations that led to their own difficulties. Again diversity of options is important and programs use different methods to get children out into the community. These programs include community service, internships, work experience and even collaborative community research projects.
 - b. **Mentoring** - Individual, one-on-one mentors, advocates or counselors ensure that youth are heard, and that their individual needs are addressed by the program. Mentors can also help with individual goal setting and planning, as well as provide a contact, continued support, and encouragement after the child has left or graduated from the program. Because the School-to-Prison Pipeline disproportionately affects African American males, it is crucial to provide these youth with “caring, committed black male role models.”⁸
- C) **Model Programs** - As at-risk youth face different barriers and have many different interests and assets, the following types of programs provide support at different levels and in varying ways.
- a. **Reinvented High Schools** - These small schools approach education differently and focus on the “development as well as intellectual growth of youth.”⁹ They engage students in the community through various service-learning projects and offer smaller, focused learning options. This education model is gaining popularity and high-level funding.

⁸ Dorothy Stoneman. “Flip the Script: Self-Sufficiency and Fulfillment for All.” *Shaping the Future of American Youth: Youth Policy in the 21st Century*. Ed. Anne Lewis. (Washington DC: American Youth Policy Forum, 2003): 42.

⁹ Lili Allen et. al. “From the Prison Track to the College Track: Pathways to Postsecondary Success for Out-of-School Youth.” *Jobs for the Future*. <www.jff.org>. April 2004: 8.

*e.g. Maya Angelou Public Charter School*¹¹ - This charter school in Washington DC is supported by a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It serves the districts' most disadvantaged children; those in the juvenile justice system, with learning disabilities or living in extreme poverty. The school operates 10.5 hours a day in the school year and 6-8 hours per day in the summer. It blends "academics, leadership opportunities, job training, counseling and life skills training."¹⁰ Class size is limited to ten. Students spend their first year studying social issues before moving on to core subjects, and the school offers students extensive support including communal meals and housing.

*e.g. Horizonte High School*¹¹ - This public high school in Salt Lake City caters to a diverse student body, from young parents to ESL students. It operates twelve months a year during the day and evenings. Students can freely enter and exit the school as they need. Many of the courses offered, such as driver education and occupational business, are geared towards the development of real-life job skills.

- b. **Summer, Break, and After-School Programs** - These programs fill the hours after traditional schools adjourn and provide lower income youth with the supplementary enrichment activities that are usually available only to more privileged children.

*e.g. Youth VOICES*¹² - This Philadelphia-based after-school program is the result of a partnership between the University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia and Temple University. Local youth do extensive community research projects with close-age mentors from the University. The projects give youth an opportunity to explore the problems and issues in their communities.

¹⁰ Allen: 8.

¹¹ Hillary Pennington, "Building One System for Youth Development and Opportunity." *Shaping the Future of American Youth: Youth Policy in the 21st Century*. Ed. Anne Lewis. (Washington DC: American Youth Policy Forum, 2003): 63.

¹² <<http://www.temple.edu/uccp/>>

*e.g. Strategies for Success*¹³ - As a part of a larger initiative to reduce suspensions and expulsions in the Syracuse City School District, the Strategies for Success program offers after-school, break and summer programming. The program includes a student-run hip-hop sound studio, writing workshops, work experience opportunities as well as leadership training.

- c. **High School/College Blends** - These types of programs allow students to work towards a high school diploma or GED while simultaneously taking college classes and earning college credit. These programs provide extensive support to the student while still allowing them the greater independence of a college schedule. The college environment allows students to finish their high school credentials faster and in a more flexible and self-directed manner.

*e.g. Portland Community College's "PCC Prep"*¹⁴ - Portland Community College has created several programs to provide multiple "entry points" to college. The "Gateways to College" program allows students who have dropped out of the local public schools to attend preparation for college courses, high school completion courses as well as courses for college credit. The program costs very little and the program provides students with ongoing advising and "close-knit learning communities of 20 students."¹⁵ The flexible hours allow students to maintain jobs. Portland Community College also offers the Youth Empowered to Succeed (YES) GED program for struggling students that need to get their GED even faster. For non-native English speaking students the Community College runs a Multicultural Academic Program

*e.g. Middle Colleges*¹⁶ - Over 20 high schools and community colleges across the country have partnered to provide low-performing or at-risk youth with "a

¹³ <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSDFS/altst_2000.html>

¹⁴ <<http://www.pcc.edu/prepare/head-start/prep/>>

¹⁵ Allen: 9.

¹⁶ < www.lagcc.cuny.edu/mcnc/>

combination of rigorous course work, extensive supports, personalization, and internships in the community.”¹⁷

- d. **Job/School Blends**¹⁸ - As post-secondary education may not be the answer for all students, these programs combine high school completion classes, technical job skills training, and work experience programs. Students graduate with marketable job skills and connections in their field of study. Disconnected youth may be more inclined to stay in this type of program because it feels more applicable to the “real world,” and because they may have opportunities to do paid internships or work experience through the program.

*e.g. ISUS Trade and Technology Prep Community School*¹⁹ - This charter school in Dayton Ohio caters to youth ages 16-21 that have dropped out of the public school system. The school provides students with college-level technical education towards their career of choice (currently construction or computer technology) as well as remedial academic classes taught using real world examples from the student’s field. In addition, the school emphasizes hands-on learning and helps students secure mentors, job shadowing, and paid internships in the community.

*e.g. Youth Build*²⁰ - This national organization has 226 local programs across the country and targets out-of-school youth ages 16-24 from difficult backgrounds. Youth attend classes on alternate weeks working in small learning environment towards their GEDs. When not in class, youth build low income housing in their neighborhoods, while receiving job training from qualified instructors and increasing their work experience. Youth also have an active roll in leadership through a student government program and have access to counseling, peer support groups and life planning assistance.

¹⁷ Pennington: 64.

¹⁸ Allen: 12.

¹⁹ <www.cew.wisc.edu/charterschools/profileISUS.asp>

²⁰ <www.youthbuild.org>

3) In-School Changes: Making Public Education Work

Independent programs and charter schools may be able to catch some of the at-risk and out-of-school students moving through the school-to-prison pipeline as well as provide alternative learning environments to students frustrated by traditional education. However, it is equally important to work within the public schools to prevent unnecessary and discriminatory disciplinary practices and high-stakes tests that push children out of school. Diverse programming and collaboration among the main factors that make in-school changes most effective.

- A) **Changes** - What schools are doing and can do to keep students in school, ensure school safety, and promote success for at-risk children.
 - a. **Teacher training** - Teachers should be trained in classroom management, conflict resolution and how to recognize and provide support for children with learning disabilities. Additional “sensitivity training” for teachers should highlight the cultural contexts of their students. This should include briefing on the community of color’s historically troubled relationship with law enforcement, and the influences that street-life and cultural pressures can have on students.²¹
 - b. **Revised Disciplinary Policies** - Schools should write and implement a disciplinary policy that uses out-of-school suspensions, expulsions and law enforcement involvement only in the most severe cases such as gun possession. The policy should be published and posted so that teachers, students and parents know how the school will deal with disciplinary infractions. The policy should be specific and explicit as to how disciplinary actions will take place, but should also allow for individualization when necessary. Written into the policy should be a

²¹ Richard Verdugo and Beverly Glenn. “Race-Ethnicity, Class and Zero-Tolerance Policies: A Policy Discussion” Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 105, 2002): 25.

mandated forum for discussion between involved teachers, administrators, students, and parents before any student is suspended, expelled or when criminal charges may be filed.

- c. **Alternatives to Out-of-School Suspensions** - At-risk youth are the most vulnerable when they are out of school. Principals should do whatever possible to use in-school alternatives to out-of-school suspensions and expulsion.

- d. **Smaller, In-School Programs**- At-risk students perform better when they are involved in small, close knit learning environments where they feel supported and connected to their peers, adult teachers and mentors. Several schools use small, in-school alternative programs to create this environment for at-risk students within the larger school. Generally students take core classes together and electives with the general student body.²² In this way students benefit from closer connections and increased adult attention without leaving the regular public school.

- e. **Monitoring and Accountability** - Schools should monitor and maintain data on disciplinary actions taken by teachers, especially use or recommendations of suspension and expulsion. The data should include the race and sex of the child, and teachers and schools should be held accountable if their disciplinary actions are over-zealous or discriminatory.

- f. **Focus on Prevention** - Instead of waiting for disciplinary problems to occur, schools should actively implement programs and supports for students and teachers to avoid disciplinary issues. Again, diversity in programming is necessary to reach students with different challenges and needs. This can include readily available counseling, training for students, parents and teachers, conflict resolution programs, early intervention, mediation, peer courts, character

²² “Opportunities Suspended: The Devastating Consequences of Zero Tolerance and School Discipline Policies.” National Summit on Zero Tolerance (Washington, DC, June 15-16, 2000): 31.

education programs, designated “safe-spaces” or cooling off areas within the school with non-staff adult advocates and mentors.

- g. **Encourage Parent Involvement** - Schools should collaborate with parents regarding discipline of their children. Parents must be aware of the schools disciplinary code and must be given the chance to advocate for their child before he/she is suspended, expelled or before any criminal charges are filed. Students and schools do better when parents are actively involved beyond disciplinary measures. Schools should support and encourage parent volunteering, substitute teaching, open houses, house visits and calls, active PTAs and bilingual staff who can engage with non-English speaking parents where applicable.
- h. **Explicit Relationship with Law Enforcement** - Schools and law enforcement agencies should create a mutual “memorandum of understanding” regarding their roles in school discipline.²³
- i. **Bond Students to School** - “Students who are labeled and low tracked develop low self images and fail to attach themselves to schools, its norms, and its rituals.”²⁴ Schools should make efforts to bond even the most vulnerable students to the school through activities such as student government, sports, mentoring, and after school programs. These programs should get all students involved and foster feelings of connectedness.
- j. **Well-Stocked, Academically Challenging Schools** - All students benefit from schools that are well-stocked with books and supplies and that have physical environments that are clean, well maintained and geared towards learning. Because at-risk students and students of color are often tracked into low level classes where “low expectations lead to negative experiences for students,”²⁵

²³ Judith A. Browne. “Derailed! The Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track.” (The Advancement Project, 2003): 30.

²⁴ Verdugo: 23.

²⁵ Ibid.

schools should maintain high academic expectations for all students and quality teaching at every level.

- k. **Partnership** - Again, students are best served when schools collaborate with local government and community organizations to provide programming.
- B) **Model School and Policies** - These schools have successfully implemented programs and disciplinary methods that have reduced out-of-school suspensions, dropouts, and kept at-risk children in school.
- a. **Rachel Carson Elementary School**²⁶ - This public k-8 school in Chicago, Illinois serves a low-income, mostly Hispanic population. The school posts their disciplinary rules and policies, employs a full time interventionist and uses mandatory study time and in-school suspension as alternative punishments. In addition, Rachel Carson serves as a model for cultural awareness and bilingual education. The school employs mostly bilingual staff, supports multicultural programming, and has small multi-aged education groups designed to increase expression and reflection. This combination of innovative programming has led to improvements in academic achievement. A recent study by Brown University showed: “ITBS results from 1998 show an improvement in reading scores school wide. Scores rose to 41.2% (from 30.0% in 1997). Math scores show an even bigger improvement in 1998: 55.1% (from 41.3% in 1997). In addition, average Illinois Goal Assessment Program (IGAP) scores in reading, mathematics, science, and social sciences are well above district averages, and comparable to state averages.”²⁷ In addition Rachel Carson has an extremely high attendance rate, 97.8% in 1996-97, and low suspensions and expulsion rates.²⁸

²⁶ < <http://www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/pos/rachelcarson.html>>

²⁷ “Rachel Carson Elementary, Transitional Bilingual Education.” *The Education Alliance at Brown University*. August 8, 2007 <<http://www.alliance.brown.edu/pubs/pos/rachelcarson.html>>.

²⁸ “Opportunities Suspended” 33.

- b. **DeWitt Clinton High School**²⁹ - DeWitt Clinton High is a public high school in the Bronx, New York. The school is organized into ten “houses,” each with counselors, advisors, and leadership, which provide a small supportive environment and follow the students through their four years. Several of these small learning communities have specific career focuses such as “Health Careers” and “Public Service” to help students connect academics with their career interests. The school has a standard disciplinary code but allows room for individualization. Every disciplinary issue can be addressed in conferences with students, administrators and parents. In 2004, only 52 students were suspended, compared to the average for similar sized schools, 164. Numbers of students involved in police department incidents were also significantly lower than in similar-sized schools.³⁰
- c. **Classic City High School: A Performance Learning Center**³¹ - This high school in Clark County Georgia uses the Performance Learning Center (PLC) model to “reengage disengaged youth.” The school serves students 16 and older who have typically dropped out of traditional public schools. Students elect to attend and are provided with flexible scheduling and a non-traditional school setting. All students participate in a “Learning Through Service” course that requires 100 volunteer hours at local organizations. Additionally students can participate in a dual-enrollment program with nearby Athens Technical College where they can earn college credit as well as credit towards graduation.

4) Policy Recommendations

Many of the factors that funnel youth through the School To Prison Pipeline are faulty public policies and legislation that exacerbate problems in troubled schools and tie the hands of school

²⁹ <<http://clinton.ny.schoolwebpages.com/education/school/school.php?sectionid=2>>

³⁰ “2004-2005 Annual School Report, Region 1, H.S. 440, DeWitt Clinton High School.” *New York City Public Schools*. August 8, 2007. <<http://schools.nyc.gov/OurSchools/Region1/X440/AboutUs/Statistics/default.htm>>.

³¹ <<http://www.clarke.k12.ga.us/do/schoolView?id=3522>>

officials who want to reach out to troubled youth. Changes in these public policies would make it possible for schools to maintain high academic standards and keep schools safe and not funneling out children of color, low performers, and the poor, disabled, troubled or at-risk students.

- A) **Funds Follow the Learner** - Current policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act create incentives to push slower learners and children with disabilities into alternative schools in order to increase the regular schools test scores and therefore access to federal funding. Alternatively, funding should follow the student, which would change the school's incentive to keeping all students in school. In the event that a student is sent to an alternative school, that school would receive increased funding. Schools could even receive additional funding for each "recovered" dropout.³²

- B) **Increase Visibility of Youth: Data Tracking and Responsibility** - Each city or county government must be held accountable for keeping longitudinal data and tracking youth ages 14-24. This data would not be difficult to collect or maintain, and a few states already have this kind of program. The state should then be held accountable for all youth who drop out of school or end up in prison. By desegregating this data, it would be possible to study how, where and why youth of color are disproportionately funneled out of the public school system.³³

- C) **Decreased Reliance on High-Stakes Testing** - Not all bright students are good test takers. Policies that rely on standardized tests, which are often ethnically biased, are used to determine school funding, and student advancement; these policies disadvantage both schools and students. Policy makers should devise a more local, multifaceted, individual and flexible way to hold students and schools to higher standards.

³² Allen: 14.

³³ Christine Sturgis. "Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline." *Shaping the Future of American Youth: Youth Policy in the 21st Century*. Ed. Anne Lewis. (Washington DC: American Youth Policy Forum, 2003): 71.

- D) **Put Disconnected Youth on the Public Agenda** - National, State and local elected officials should increase public awareness of the school-to-prison pipeline and add disconnected youth to the public agenda. These leaders must “charge governors, mayors, employers and nonprofit leaders with the mission of educating, training, and embracing the out-of-school unemployed young people as a necessary part of strengthening our economy and protecting our security.”³⁴
- E) **Department of Corrections Funds Diverted to Re-Entry and Education** - Most states spend significantly more on incarceration than education. This trend must be reversed through increased spending on education and diversion of corrections funding to innovative re-entry programs.³⁵ States must prioritize public education and weaken contributions to the prison industrial complex.
- F) **Structurally Support Collaborative and Alternative Education** - Communities should move from School Boards to Community Education Boards. This shift would make the Board responsible for pulling together all the community’s resources; non-profits, community colleges, libraries and faith based organizations, to educate all youth. This shift would also encourage Boards to support, develop and fund a diverse system of schools and educational programs, beyond the traditional public school system. Programs with small learning communities, and that offer multiple and individualized pathways to adult success need the endorsement and structural and financial support of local and national governments.³⁶

Conclusion: A Systematic Approach

³⁴ Stoneman: 47.

³⁵ Ibid: 47.

³⁶ Pennington: 65.

The school-to-prison pipeline is just one part of a system of laws, policies, attitudes, prejudices and social problems that work together to oppress poor people and people of color in America. From this systematic perspective, any effort that works broadly to lessen or eradicate poverty, violence and racism will work to deconstruct the school-to-prison pipeline. The Children's Defense Fund, a leader in the fight against the pipeline, outlines several broad issue areas that they believe are causally linked to the removal of children from public schools and into the prison system. These issue areas include: poverty, child abuse and neglect, community violence, educational success, prenatal and health care, mental health services and disability support and parent and family involvement and empowerment.³⁷ While the school-to-prison pipeline must be specifically addressed, it is also important to remember and recognize the root causes of this phenomenon. Improvement in any of these areas should mitigate the affects of the school-to-prison pipeline and increase disadvantaged children's chances of success.

³⁷ "Cradle to Prison Pipeline Initiative." The Children's Defense Fund. August 8, 2007. <<http://www.childrensdefense.org/site/PageServer?pagename=c2pp>>.