

Interrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Written by Judith Browne Dianis
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Salecia Johnson, age 6, grew frustrated in her Milledgeville, Ga., kindergarten class last year and erupted into a temper tantrum. Unfortunately, it's something that mothers sometimes must confront with raising young children. But what happened next was not routine, nor should it be happening to Salecia or any other children.

Creekside Elementary school called the police, who said they found Salecia on the floor of the principal's office screaming and crying. Police said she had knocked over furniture that injured the principal. The African-American child was handcuffed, arrested and hauled to the local police station. She was held for more than an hour before her parents were notified and she was charged with simple assault and damage to property, but didn't have to go to court because she is a juvenile.

But the ordeal has severely impacted the child. Her mother, Constance Ruff, says Salecia is traumatized, having difficulty adjusting back to school and may never recover. Salecia, she says, has awoken at night screaming, "They're coming to get me!" Sadly, her case is not an anomaly.

Across the country, young people are being arrested for behavior that used to be solved through a trip to the principal's office or the intervention of a counselor. In Florida, a 14-year-old was arrested and charged for throwing a pencil at another student and spent 21 days in jail. In New York, a 12-year-old was arrested for doodling, 'I love Abby and Faith on her desk.' In Chicago, 25 children, some as young as 11, were arrested for engaging in a food fight.

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Supporters of zero tolerance policies say being tough on any infraction creates strong incentives to behave. But the reality belies that myth and cries out for the implementation of common sense discipline policies that ensure that students are put on a pathway to career or college rather than the destructive criminal justice system.

The Advancement Project, a multi-racial civil rights organization based in Washington, DC, tracks the increasing encroachment of law enforcement and the juvenile justice system into American classrooms, particularly impacting students of color. The research has documented racial disparities nationally and in specific school districts. According to a 2005 report by Advancement Project, *Education on Lockdown: The Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track*, Black and Latino students in Denver were 70 percent more likely to be disciplined (suspended, expelled, or given police tickets) than their white peers. There were no states where Black students were not suspended more often than their white peers.

The easy answer is that Black and Latino students misbehave more than other students. However, research consistently shows that this is false. Black and Latino students are punished, even arrested, most often for subjective infractions (i.e. “disorderly conduct,” “disobedience,” “disrespect,” etc.), while White students are more likely to be punished for concrete dangerous activities (e.g., carrying a weapon, using drugs).

During a convening for “America Healing,” a racial equity initiative of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, a panel discussion this spring focused on examples where different sectors of the community have achieved some success interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline.

Jody Owens, director of the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Mississippi office, which filed a lawsuit against the district, asserted that “we are losing a generation” in Meridian, Miss., because of the way children are needlessly introduced to the criminal justice system. Kids are pushed into police detention directly from the classroom. Students referred to the Police Department for misbehavior are automatically arrested and sent to the juvenile justice system. There, these students are given probation requiring them to serve any school suspensions incarcerated in the juvenile detention center. One student spent 48 days in jail for wearing the wrong color socks. Youth who run afoul of school rules, not criminal law, are routinely handcuffed to a pole outside the school for the entire eight-hour school day.

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Data shows that zero tolerance policies result in higher dropout rates, lower academic achievement and young people being pushed into the criminal justice system – hence the name school-to-prison pipeline.

How have practices like these become common?

After the Columbine tragedy, we saw the emergence of zero tolerance policies extended into the nation's schools. Proponents argue that safety in schools is the key issue though there is little to no evidence these practices create safer learning environments or change disruptive behavior.

America Healing panelists cited the importance of empowering community groups to achieve victory over these destructive policies.

Developing leaders among both adults and children willing to advocate for common sense school discipline, building the capacity of organizations through training and providing community resources, and broadly connecting the movement across the nation can build a movement that works.