

Emptying the School to Prison Pipeline

Background

The School to Prison Pipeline (S2PP) refers to the myriad of factors that affect a student's ability to succeed in school and increase any likelihood of becoming involved with the juvenile justice system. One factor is the "Zero Tolerance" approach to school discipline. This practice dictates that every crime is punishable, consistently and aggressively, to deter further misconduct. Zero-tolerance policies in schools have led to students being criminalized for behavior that could be handled differently. "Decisions to call a shouting match or locker graffiti a crime, to arrest rather than to see a teachable moment, to prosecute rather than resolve disputes – these practices are turning schools into policed territories".¹ Hardline punishment erodes academic success and can lead ultimately to high dropout rates which increase the additional risk of misconduct in the community and possible contact with the juvenile justice system. "...it is short sighted at best to fail to understand that removing many students from school simply leaves them unsupervised on the street".²

Identifying the causes and serious consequences of exclusionary discipline, removing students from the classroom, and academic failure are critical for an understanding of the S2PP.

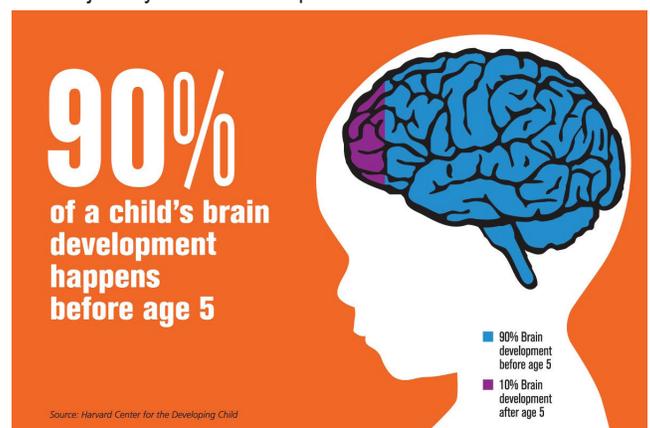
Entry points in the pipeline

Surprisingly, the first entry point is Pre-Kindergarten. Too often when a preschooler is exhibiting challenging behavior, "soft expulsions" are implemented.³ During these expulsions, parents are called to pick up their child early in the day. For working parents who depend on Pre-K as not only the beginning of their child's academic path, but also daycare, this is especially problematic. When this is no longer an option, often times the child is withdrawn from school completely.

Many times the behavior exhibited by pre-school children is caused by exposure to traumatic events which profoundly affect the fragile, developing brain at that age. Young children depend on the safety of a caregiver. When that bond is weakened or broken, trauma is likely to occur. Prolonged exposure to stress can derail a child's early years that could set a trajectory for relationships and successes for the rest of their lives. Because a young child cannot express in words how they feel, they may display uncharacteristic behaviors to which adults may not know how to appropriately respond.⁴

During the 2014 – 2015 school year, the Connecticut Department of Education reported approximately 2,600 suspensions for children under the age of 7. The good news is that in 2015, Connecticut passed legislation to place a moratorium on out-of-school suspensions and expulsion for Pre-K to second grade students.

In a 2013 report by Connecticut Voices for Children, it was noted that school arrests, in- and out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions peak in ninth grade. In 2011, it was found that one out of every 200 students was arrested for behavioral issues, and at least 11% of those arrested were considered "easily avoidable." They suggest a deeper look at how youth transition from middle to high school.⁵



In the Psychology Today article, “Adolescence and the Transition to Middle School”, they explore how the various differences between elementary and middle school can affect adolescent behavior. ⁶ Challenges youth face during this time in their life, such as anxiety over a larger, unknown school, multiple teachers with different teaching styles and higher expectations around academics and independence, may lead to misconduct. These same challenges exist when students transition to high school but if a strong foundation of educational success has not happened in middle school, transition to high school will be significantly more difficult.

Those who are either expelled or drop out of high school are disengaged from their education and many times become disconnected (neither in school nor working). In Connecticut, disconnected youth aged 18 – 24 are five times more likely to be incarcerated than youth that age who completed high school. ⁷

To understand the entry points into the S2PP, we must look at all the factors that lead to a breakdown in educational success, especially at every vulnerable transition point in a child’s development.

School climate matters

Yet another contributor to the S2PP is school climate. This term is not referring to the hot or cold temperature but the conditions for learning - the extent to which students feel safe, connected, engaged, and supported in their classrooms. Schools that create a welcoming and secure learning environment are more likely to engage students and improve educators’ ability to manage student behavior. In schools with poor school climate,

students become confused, frustrated, and angry when they find themselves removed from the school for an extended period of time because of misconduct that they feel did not warrant such a harsh punishment. ⁸ They become further frustrated when they are unable to learn the academic material and meet grade-level expectations and oftentimes misbehave out of frustration or embarrassment.

Utilizing overly punitive measures for misconduct ruins personal relationships between the student and teachers, as well as relationships with other students, the family, and community. Relationships are one of the most significant factors in student learning and where those relationships are lacking or based on low expectations, learning will be damaged. ⁹ When suspensions and expulsions become the default response to misbehavior, the achievement gap persists, other educational goals are undermined and more kids become caught up in the juvenile justice system. ¹⁰ So, in effect, these policies undermine both educational and public safety goals.

“The Schools of Opportunity” is an organization established to promote and recognize schools that are using research-based practices to close the opportunity gap for all students. They are working to provide better ways of approaching the issue of discipline and the spiraling effects from negative approaches. One example is Hillsdale High School in California that has worked in partnership with Stanford University to re-envision their public high school. They used teacher-led Smaller Learning Community (SLC) model to reshape their school culture. They believe that learning is a social phenomenon, and schools must intentionally create structures that facilitate powerful relationships with the students they serve. Hillsdale’s SLC model connects “house” cohorts of students with teams of teachers and advisors who work with students over two years. “In a 2013 self-study Student Survey, 90% of students agreed that at least one teacher on campus knew them well, and 92% said they feel part of a community at Hillsdale. 93% percent of Hillsdale parents agreed that “Hillsdale is a safe, comfortable place for my student.” and 94% agreed they would recommend Hillsdale to others. It is no wonder that in 2014, Hillsdale was in the 99th percentile for school climate among California schools.” ¹¹ Other models can be found on their website, <http://www.schoolsofopportunity.org>.

What happens in the classroom matters

It’s important for us to explore the underlying causes that lead to juvenile misconduct and ultimately the school to prison pipeline. A large range of factors contribute to a young person’s behavior. Toxic stress environments include living in poverty, exposure to violence, and drug abuse. Many youth have had traumatic experiences such as losing a parent or loved one, being victims or witnesses of crime and abuse. All of these factors contribute to a youth’s inability to focus and learn, leading them to act out.

Low expectations and low engagement, poor or lacking school relationships, low academic achievement, inappropriate referral or categorization in special education, and overly harsh discipline (including suspension, expulsion, referral to law enforcement, and arrest) are catalysts for entry in the S2PP. In addition, a disproportionately large percentage of disciplined students are youth of color, students with disabilities and youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. As a community, we have yet to address our role in contributing



to underlying biases and how we, as family, community, educators, and police respond differently to various kinds of triggering behavior. For example, African American students are often responded to in a punitive way for more subjective behaviors such as disrespect, excessive noise, threatening, and loitering, while white students are called out for more objective behaviors such as smoking, leaving without permission, vandalism, and obscene language.¹²

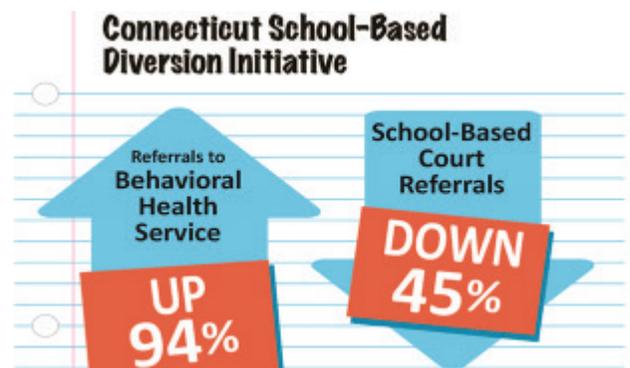
Another factor to consider is that many under-resourced schools place a higher reliance on the police to maintain discipline.¹³ A growing number of districts employ school resource officers to respond to conflicts. As a result, children are far more likely to be subject to school-based arrests – the majority of which are for non-violent offenses, such as disruptive behavior.

“If we ignore the discipline gap, we will be unable to close the achievement gap.”¹⁴

Changing failing practices and attitudes

Now, knowing more about brain science and development, the conversation needs to change from a punitive, disciplinary approach to one of supporting a student’s unique background and experiences and restoring their sense of pride in what they can accomplish. High quality pre-kindergarten improves school readiness, providing children with the cognitive, academic, social, and emotional skills they require to be successful in elementary school. When they experience academic success in elementary school, it sets a foundation for further learning. Understanding what children are being disciplined for begins to shed light on which children are more at risk and how best to address their needs.

A shift to restorative-focused practices that help students change behavior and stay in school has taken hold in many states and communities. Restorative-focused practices are equitable, respectful, student-oriented discipline procedures so that students – regardless of race/ethnicity, gender, class, disability, language, etc. – feel treated as equals in their education. In some schools, response-to-harm circles are being utilized when some conflicts such as two students fighting or a student yelling at a teacher. According to the Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut, implementation of a school-based diversion program that utilized restorative justice approaches led to a 45% decrease from 2010 - 2015 in school-based arrests.



What’s next in our Connecticut school classrooms

Due to the overwhelming research and data that disciplinary approaches create a pathway into the juvenile justice system, and a high likelihood of escalating misconduct, Connecticut is taking several steps to reverse these practices.

- Public Act 16-147 “An Act Concerning the Recommendations of the Juvenile Justice Policy Oversight Committee” (JJPOC) calls for policy change to be implemented by August 15th 2017. Truancy and Defiance of School Rules, which are classified as status offenses, will no longer be handled through the courts but diverted to the community for services. As stated earlier, hard line punishments for minor offenses that remove students from the classroom do not improve school safety and lower expectations of academic success, leading in many cases to additional delinquent behavior and disengagement.
- The second piece of work leading to system reform is coming from the Diversion Work Group of the JJPOC. They have completed an extensive study of research-based truancy intervention models from across the country that school districts in Connecticut may chose from as they implement the new Truancy and Defiance of School Rules law locally.
- In partnership with the Connecticut Department of Education (SDE) and other agencies, the third significant step is unfolding. They are creating a school-based diversion plan that will focus on the implementation of best practices for improving school climate. Also with the SDE, the JJPOC Recidivism Workgroup is looking at the educational barriers that youth will face coming out of confinement so that the chances of them not recidivating can be improved and they can be fully reconnected with school.
- Another bright spot in Connecticut’s progress in changing programming and practice in juvenile justice is the restorative justice work of CHDI mentioned earlier. The School-Based Diversion Initiative (SBDI) is being adopted by 37 schools across 13 school districts and continues to expand to additional schools each year. It has especially focused on the Alliance school districts in the State, those districts with the lowest performance. They provide training to help school personnel identify children with behavioral health needs, build connections between schools and effective community-based mental health services, as an alternative to arrest, suspension and/or expulsion, and revise schools’ policies and practices to increase capacity for responding to the mental health needs of all students.

