

Schools to Prisons

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that hundreds of millions of dollars could be saved by state and local governments with one simple policy: use suspensions and expulsions as — genuinely — a final resort.

Can reducing the use of kiddie racial profiling to discipline youth by kicking them out of class be the key to reducing the achievement gap — and the incarceration rate?

New Obama Policy

Last July, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder and Education Secretary Arne Duncan together rolled out the Supportive School Discipline initiative, dedicated to addressing “the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ and the disciplinary policies and practices that can push students out of school and into the justice system,” the Justice Department said.

“The initiative aims to support good discipline practices to foster safe and productive learning environments in every classroom,” Holder said at the time.

The policy came in response to a massive University of Texas study tracking nearly one million seventh graders for three years; the data showed the vast majority had at least one suspension — 84 percent for boys, 70 for girls. Black students were 31 percent more likely to receive a “school discretionary action” than white or Hispanic students.

“Ensuring that our educational system is a doorway to opportunity — and not a point of entry to our criminal justice system — is a critical, and achievable, goal,” Holder said in a statement last summer. “By bringing together government, law enforcement, academic, and community leaders, I’m confident that we can make certain that school disci-

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--Oregon Rep. Lew Frederick

pline policies are enforced fairly and do not become obstacles to future growth, progress, and achievement.”

‘Literally Decades’

Oregon Rep. Lew Frederick, D-Portland, spent many years as the public information officer for the Portland Public Schools; before that he was a television news reporter.

He says he’s not surprised by the idea that kicking students out of the classroom holds them back in the long run.

“We have seen this kind of indication for literally decades,” he says. “We know what works, we just have, for various reasons, political, philosophical and otherwise, decided that we’re not going to do what works.”

Frederick says that back in 1979-1980, part of the Portland schools desegregation plan was “the concern about the kind of impact that suspensions and expulsions have on minority kids, black kids in particular, and that in fact was feeding the pipeline for kids going into the prison system.”

The Data

In Washington state, education officials have yet to agree on any statistical data on the “push out” issue; in Oregon, the numbers add up in an almost spooky way.

“More than a third of Oregon young people who have been incarcerated are convicted of felonies within three years of their release,” reported the Annie E. Casey Foundation last year in their study, “No Place for Kids: The Case for Reducing Juvenile Incarceration.”

Meanwhile, a new study by Multnomah County’s Department of Community Justice shows nearly 40 percent of African American school kids throughout Multnomah County experience suspension or expulsion, almost 3.5 times the rate of white students.

These two statistics measure different things — yet the “nearly 40 percent” and the “more than one third” proportion are haunting clues to the consistent population of young people being flushed out of the schools and into the prisons.

Harsher Punishments

The new Multnomah County report, “Exclusionary Discipline in Multnomah County Schools: How Suspensions and Expulsions Impact Students of Color,” links early-childhood school exclusions to the drop-out rate, youth violence and incarceration.

“Nationally, Caucasian students are referred to the office significantly more frequently for offenses that can be objectively documented (e.g. smoking, vandalism, leaving without permission and obscene language),” it says.

“African-American students, in contrast, are referred more often for disrespect, excessive noise, threat and loitering — behaviors that would seem to require more subjective judgment on the part of the referring agent. And, on a national level, students of color facing discipline for the first time are typically given harsher, out-of-school suspension, rather than in-school suspensions, more often than white students,” according to the report.

‘Open Defiance’

Tarver says this definitely describes her experience at her son’s school. The boy was well-behaved during his mom’s interview with *The Skanner News* despite the fact that the game he brought to play with didn’t work.

“I feel that as an educator, if you’re dealing with my child, you should have some type of understanding of what he is doing with himself and how you can accommodate that,” Tarver says. “Not just that you see a kid who doesn’t want to do the assignment, well he throws it on the floor. To them that is being defiant; to him it means I can’t do this writing assignment, my hand hurts because I’ve been writing this long sentence with a lot of letters and my skills aren’t up to par. That’s what that means to him.

“But to the teacher, he just doesn’t want to do the work, he’s not listening. ‘I told him to sit down and do his work and he threw the paper on the floor; he got up and walked away.’ But they’re two different things, but unless you take the time and know that — they’re in charge, and that’s a go home offense. That’s open defiance, that’s insubordination, that’s all kind of things. They’re all about do what I say and do it now.” **Next: Part 2: Solutions — and Failures**

Read the rest of this story online at www.theskanner.com



Youth

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kinds help outreach workers engage youth.

“If it’s raining, how long is a kid going to stand there talking with us,” said Robert Blake of Brothers and Sisters Keepers. “But if I can take them for a burger, then I have their attention for half an hour or more.”

Royal Harris asked community justice workers to allow youth to play basketball in the park, rather than pick them up for associating with other ‘gang members.’ If youth on probation or parole are to stay out of trouble, he said, they have to have something positive to do.

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