



**“Challenging People to Shape a Better Future Now”**

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## Schools

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too many students are being kicked out of school as a form of discipline, but that Black students and those in special education are singled out the most – with Black special education students being by far the most likely to be excluded from school.

### Shame is a Barrier

Daniel Losen is one of the top researchers on the issue nationwide, which is saying something; literally an ocean of data documents the ways black students are being pushed out of public schools by excessive suspensions and expulsions.

Further, the research details how young people are moving in a direct pathway out of the classroom and into the jails and prisons, which is why even the Obama Administration calls it the “school to prison pipeline.”

“The public has a right to know this information but oftentimes we don’t see this information,” Losen told *The Skanner News*. “The people are shocked to see that 30 to 50 percent of students from one subgroup to another are being suspended in middle school in a given year – but they shouldn’t be but they’re shocked because first of all I think that if the public knew more about this that these kids wouldn’t be suspended so frequently.”

(A recent report by The Multnomah County Commission on Children, Families & Community said almost 40 percent of all Black students have been suspended or expelled — a rate 3.5 times the rate of white students — and that the students are punished more harshly for offenses, and that the offenses triggering the discipline are more a matter of “subjective judgement” of the adult rather than required suspensions such as fighting, drugs, etc. Washington State does not have any comparable data from a government agency.)

Losen says the issue is a tough one to grapple with in part because for parents – the main advocates for kids – the disciplinary process is embarrassing for the whole family, and often involves labeling them “troublemakers” rather than understanding the big picture of what the students need in the classroom.

“A lot of times, if it happens to your kid, you’re sort of ashamed, you think ‘what did my kid do wrong?’ Parents don’t realize that there’s often a problem with the school policy or practice, lack of training for the teachers in the school, lack of classroom management, lack of behavioral management,” Losen said. “There are things schools can do to really improve things.”

Losen’s research shows a leading reason kids get suspended is truancy.

“Now truancy is not an act of violence,” he says. “The kids are not coming to school so we’re going to say, ‘you can’t come to school.’”

“That’s really the schools abdicating responsibility — to make sure the kid comes to school and doing what they can in terms of outreach — by suspending them.”

### Following the Money

Mark McKechnie of Youth Rights and Justice in Oregon says that even as the schools have quietly been pushing kids out of the classroom as a form of discipline, communities have increasingly criminalized youth behavior – all of which combines to wallop municipal budgets with a fiscal sledgehammer.

“The juvenile court system was created originally to recognize the differences between children and adults, and recognizing that when they got in trouble there were different approaches beyond the traditional incarceration,” McKechnie says.

“But in the last 20 years there has been an increasing trend to incarcerate youth, particularly

### Data, Data, Data

In Washington State, League of Education Voters state field coordinator Maggie Wilkens says “data is the magic word” in advocating for school disciplinary reforms on push-out.

And when state officials start publicizing the data they are collecting on disproportionate suspensions and expulsions in 2012, it’s not going to look good, she warns.

“We’re really hoping that we can work with the data governance work group down in Olympia to ensure that this information that they’ll be releasing in 2013 is disaggregated by race and is also broken down by income levels,” Wilkens says. “It’s a big step because, again, we’re anticipating that the data is not pretty.”

‘There’s not a school district that isn’t facing some issues around disproportionality’

--Maggie Wilkens, League of Education Voters

under mandatory sentencing laws and automatic waivers of youth to adult court, and in Oregon, Measure 11, which waives youth to adult court automatically and also imposes mandatory minimum sentences on both juveniles and adults who fall under that law.”

The nonprofit YRJ contracts with the Multnomah Public Defender to represent children, youth and parents in the juvenile court system; about 75 percent of their clients – are children in foster care.

“The expense is a big issue that both states and local governments are running right now, and I’d say there’s more data than ever show-

The LEV has worked for several years on the issue, also convenes public hearings and forums, and has tried without success to pass legislation to change how discipline is meted out in the schools. Their website features an informational audio podcast series and fact-filled blogs on the issues around youth incarceration – particularly the cost.

Wilkens is enthusiastic about Washington State Superintendent of Public Instruction Randy Dorn’s steps so far.

“School push-out is a pretty tough issue to tackle in a lot of ways because it’s something that communities that are most directly

‘Parents don’t realize that there’s often a problem with the school policy or practice, lack of training for the teachers in the school, lack of classroom management...’

impacted by disproportionate discipline in the school/prison pipeline issues have felt for more than two decades,” Wilkens says. “We can trace it back and it’s well established in the juvenile justice system as well, that there’s disproportionate rates of incarceration and just plain ole contact with police people.”

“However in the school system, policymakers have been a little slow to respond to some of this, because there’s really this lack of data around the issue.”

“It’s tough because, what I’ve been seeing in national trends in every state in every school district is that it doesn’t look good,” Wilkens says. “Overall there have been a rise suspensions and expulsions as a whole and there’s not a school district that isn’t facing some issues around disproportionality.”

Wilkens says that the most important thing for parents to know is that “it’s their human right

ing that the sort of traditional approaches to juvenile crime, which tend towards incarceration, actually are not very effective in achieving the goals of reducing crime,” McKechnie says. “The recent Annie E Casey Foundation report basically shows that the recidivism rates for youth who’ve been incarcerated are extremely high in most states, and the few states that have really bucked that trend and opted for more community based responses probation and different kinds of evidence-based mental health treatments and other kinds of interventions, have actually seen reductions in juvenile crime while at the same time they’re reducing the rates of incarceration.”

“That really bucks the conventional wisdom that you prevent crime by locking up the people who are committing the crimes and therefore incapacitate them for the period of incarceration.”

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Wilkens says that the most important thing for parents to know is that “it’s their human right

as parents and community members, as guardians to students, to ask their principals and ask their superintendents to be more accountable on these issues.

“Whether that means addressing it at school board meetings, or whether it means sitting down one to one with parents or a group of parents that are having issues over and over again, and really talking about the discipline policies and really talking about the school dynamics and the classroom culture,” Wilkens says. “There’s so many different components about how you talk about school push-out and school discipline in the context of zero tolerance policies – that’s only one of the issues.”

“What’s really tough in school reform in general is whether it’s an issue that needs to be solved through legislative strategies statewide? Or is this something that we can address here in our own school communities? In a lot of ways I think it’s both,” Wilkens says. “Every different perspective that we can get moving on this I think is very helpful.”

### Empowering Families

Sheila Warren, founder and director of the Portland Parents’ Union, is a local standard-bearer for the movement against push-out. Partnering with the national group Dignity in Our Schools, the PPU holds parent meetings every second Wednesday of the month at their offices in the Left Bank Building.

“It was blatant when folks looked at the data from all around the country, that the zero tolerance has been the very thing that has created the epidemic that kids are being pushed out,” she says.

Warren, who has worked on the issue since 2007, is both hopeful and frustrated at Oregon’s progress; while she has testified before state officials and facilitated meetings at schools, she says she – and the overlooked families she often represents — are still often left out when power-brokers get together to talk about solutions.

She sees the OEIB meeting at SEI as a victory – but says neither she nor her group were actually invited to the forum.

“Members of the board came up to us after our testimony and talked about setting up a forum – but when it came down to it actually happening, I heard about it third-hand,” Warren said. “Even though Tamberlee and my testimony is what convinced them to hold the forum they didn’t even call us back to tell us it was scheduled.”

“SEI already gets it – their families are not the ones struggling with expulsions. The people who are suffering the most are in the apartment complexes, they’re on the edge, they’re not plugged into a successful system like SEI,” Warren said.

“What is the state really doing to reach out to the people who are already left out?”

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