

Suspensions

continued from page 1

As it happens, federal officials on Tuesday released more statistics from the data they have been gathering for years explicitly linking a student's race to suspensions, expulsions, and the criminal justice system.

But the question remains, given added urgency for families like the Tarvers: How to dismantle the school to prison pipeline — for good?

'Debunking,' Denial

Over the generations, finding a way to turn around zero-tolerance school discipline policies and other factors that push Black kids out of schools and into the law enforcement system has proven a tough nut to crack.

Experts say that's because each student's case is personal and schools won't always release information about their disciplinary patterns.

Another stumbling block is denial, including the American Psychological Association's 2006 report "debunking" the link between school discipline and the eventual incarceration of students.

Meanwhile, the Obama Administration's 2011 Positive School Discipline initiative was announced last July after one of the largest studies of its kind in U.S. history showed 60 percent of nearly a million Texas school kids were suspended or expelled over a period of six years — including 83 percent of Black male students (compared to 59 percent of white male students) and 70 percent of Black female students (compared to 37 percent of white female students).

"Only 3 percent of the disciplinary actions were for conduct for which state law mandates suspensions and expulsions; the remainder of disciplinary actions was made at the discretion of school officials, primarily in response to violations of local schools' conduct codes," the study said.

Overall, virtually every study reviewed by The Skanner News for this series indicated 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."

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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 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 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 showing 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."

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.

"It's a big step because, again, we're

anticipating that the data is not pretty."

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 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, policy-makers have been a little slow to respond to some of this, because there's really this lack of data around the issue."

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 March 8 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."

"The forum is at SEI which is great because it's a safe place and people will feel comfortable going there," she said. "But 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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