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Criminalizing Kids

Zero-Tolerance Policies In Schools Only Push 'Problem Children' Down A Fast Track To Failure

By ABBY ANDERSON

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Schools must keep our children safe. But zero-tolerance policies have overwhelmed common sense and turned playground scuffles into felonies.

Any child involved in violence — aggressor or victim, senior or kindergartner — may be arrested. This starts a cycle of missed days and disrupted relationships that can lead to failure in school and worse.

Take the 10-year-old Connecticut boy from eastern Connecticut targeted by school bullies. Running away from yet another beating, he tripped over a pipe on the school grounds and pulled it loose. His principal had him arrested for vandalism.



The incident is absurd but sadly not unusual. Children enter the school-to-prison pipeline as early as elementary school. Students are far more likely to be arrested at school than they were a generation ago. This might seem like a get-tough remedy to violence. There is, however, less youth violence in the United States than at any time since the 1970s. It is simply covered in more exhaustive and exploitative detail.

Schools have strong incentives to jettison "problem children" and few incentives to help them. Their low test scores decrease federal funding. Their behavior means that teachers have to spend more time helping children develop socially and less time drilling for standardized tests.

Children can be removed from classrooms through arrest, suspension or expulsion. More than 3 million children are suspended or expelled from U.S. public schools every year. During the 2006-2007 school year, Connecticut children missed 152,850 school days — 418 years — because of suspensions and expulsions. Kids who aren't in school can't keep up academically. Suspension and expulsion are, therefore, predictors of school failure and of eventual incarceration. Most suspensions and expulsions are not for violent behavior, but for school policy violations such as truancy. (Yes, the punishment for truancy is being made to stay home.)

Children of color, boys and students in urban districts are at greater risk of suspension, expulsion, arrest or dropping out. In the nation's largest urban school districts, fewer than half of students graduate. A report by Johns Hopkins University labeled 9 percent of the schools in Connecticut "dropout factories"

because they had a yearly promotion rate of 60 percent or worse between 2004 and 2006. That spells devastation for those communities.

High school graduates make far more money than peers who don't complete 12th grade. Higher educational attainment is associated with better health by a number of measures. And graduation means a sharply decreased likelihood of ever ending up in prison, where more than two-thirds of inmates lack a high school diploma.

The baby boomers, more than any group of retirees before them, need the next generation to contribute to the economy rather than be a drain on it. In Connecticut, the annual tuition for eight children attending Yale equals the cost of housing one child in the state's secure juvenile facility, which is estimated at \$280,000.

Here in Bridgeport, 580 arrests took place at school in 2005, nearly half of the city's total juvenile arrests. By 2007, only 185 arrests took place on school grounds. As of the end of April this year, the number stood at 136.

Many factors brought about this turnaround. A new head of security offered training in child development to help officers de-escalate situations. Improving attendance and reducing suspensions became a priority at all grade levels, as did an emphasis on social skills. There was no single program but a broad shift in philosophy.

Changing philosophy, by the way, costs taxpayers nothing. "It's a belief in children and youth ... and a belief that adults can make a difference in their lives," Assistant Superintendent for Youth Development John DiDonato said.

Suspension or arrest sends a clear message to a child: "We've given up on you." A number of communities around the country have decided to send a different message and have made shutting down the school-to-prison pipeline a priority. We need, every one of us, to have zero tolerance for policies that give up on kids.

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