

“WHOSE KIDS ARE THESE?” JUVENILE JUSTICE AND EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS USING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE TO END THE “SCHOOL-TO- PRISON PIPELINE”

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School suspensions and expulsions resulting from zero tolerance disciplinary policies have directly expanded the “school-to-prison pipeline” while disproportionately and negatively affecting minority students. This paper presents restorative justice as a proven effective alternative to punitive disciplinary policies, and suggests it can be used to emphasize and reward efforts to keep students in school while also serving as a strategy to redefine the collaborative role of justice professionals and educators in the school setting.

In the past decade, the problems associated with excessive use of school suspensions and expulsions as disciplinary practices have been recognized as a national concern for both education and juvenile justice systems (American Psychological Association, 2008; Stinchcomb et al., 2006). Despite efforts of citizens and educators to restrict suspension rates, zero tolerance policies have expanded in many school districts and been cited as a primary factor limiting the disciplinary options of educational and administrative staff (Green, 2004; Bazemore and Schiff, 2010). Aside from the impact on school climate and student progress, these exclusionary policies also have had drastic effects on the justice system. Indeed, many suspended youth are now being referred directly from schools into juvenile justice agencies, where some end up on diversion caseloads, probation, or even in secure detention facilities for relatively minor, generally nonviolent infractions (Advancement Project, 2005; Florida Blueprint Commission, 2008).

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As a result of zero tolerance, the justice system has become increasingly engaged in the business of education, and education likewise engaged in the business of juvenile justice. A particular challenge that has generally remained unaddressed by both education and justice policymakers concerns the respective role each system should play in a collaborative effort to stem what has recently been termed the “school-to-prison” pipeline, and what tools have been proven successful in reducing harsh and exclusionary disciplinary practices (Advancement Project, 2005; Wald and Losen, 2003; Lospennato, 2009). Schools have increasingly come to rely on school resource officers to help keep challenging students out of the classroom, and the role of such justice professionals in the educational context has focused primarily on accelerated enforcement of suspension and arrest. While the short-term impact of this reliance may help teachers and education administrators with classroom management and arguably, school safety, the longer-term outcome of such policies is to create multi-layer impediments to keeping youth in school and off the street and especially out of court.

Juvenile justice professionals often willingly take on these responsibilities consistent with historical roles that emphasize surveillance, arrest and punishment for school rule violations. However, recent attention to the deepening pathway being worn from schoolhouse to jailhouse makes it apparent that roles and relationships between educators and justice professionals in the schools must evolve. Hence, it is now timely to expand the juvenile justice function in the school environment beyond traditional enforcement, surveillance and arrest, to include an emphasis whereby justice specialists in delinquent behavior contribute to and enhance educational efforts to keep youth in schools. Additionally, the scope of available tools to support such transformation must broaden to include evidence-based best practices that have been proven successful in both the juvenile justice and education contexts such as restorative justice.

This paper first reviews the impacts of zero tolerance, and then considers successful restorative justice strategies that have been demonstrated as successful in minimizing the unnecessary use of zero tolerance disciplinary responses in schools. Specifically, we examine the growing successful use of restorative disciplinary systems based on emphasizing and rewarding efforts for keeping students in school rather than pushing them out. Finally, we consider new working collaborations between school and juvenile justice professionals committed to limiting school suspension caused by zero tolerance and other harsh disciplinary policies.

IMPACTS OF ZERO TOLERANCE

Zero tolerance policies are essentially an exclusionary justice intervention imposed in an educational setting. Like their corresponding retributive justice predecessors, such as sentencing guidelines and mandatory minimum sentencing, zero tolerance disciplinary codes attempt to structure ostensibly rational, equitable consequences in direct proportion to the harm caused (Green, 2004). The focus of the first zero tolerance codes to exclude firearms and drugs from school grounds were understood by most criminal justice and educational professionals as practical responses to public safety threats in schools that interfered with the learning environment (Stinchcomb, et. al., 2006; Skiba and Rausch, 2006). In recent years, however, such policies have expanded to include far more minor disciplinary violations (Sughrue, 2003; Florida Blueprint Commission, 2008). Unfortunately, the unintended consequences of zero tolerance practices have resulted in the systematic exclusion of poorly performing and “behaviorally challenged” students from schools whose administrators have also been mandated to improve academic achievement scores through policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in order to receive sufficient state resources (Advancement Project, 2010).

Intended to promote school safety and enable teachers and administrators to remove threatening students from their classrooms, zero tolerance policies have in fact had considerably more far-reaching negative consequences and been viewed as largely responsible for the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Despite the lack of scientific evidence that zero-tolerance policies actually increase school safety and correspondingly foster academic achievement (American Psychological Association, 2008; Advancement Project, 2010), punishments typically associated with zero tolerance tend to put students at greater risk for decreased connectivity to school, increased participation in risky or illegal behavior, poor academic achievement and dropout and, for many, subsequent entry into the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Boccanfuso and Kuhlfield, 2011; Cassalla, 2003).

Moreover, school suspension and expulsion significantly increase the likelihood that students will be held back a grade, not graduate, and become involved in the justice system (Fabelo et al., 2011). Being suspended from school significantly decreases chances of graduating on time, and increases the likelihood of subsequent suspension or expulsion and dropping out (Osher, 2010; Balfanz and Boccanfuso, 2007; Skiba and Rausch, 2006). Despite faith in zero tolerance as a means of increasing school safety and thus student performance by excluding disruptive students from the classroom, higher school-wide suspension rates in fact appear to have the opposite effect, leading

instead to lower academic achievement and standardized test scores, even when controlling for factors such as race and socioeconomic status (Davis et al., 1994; Mendez, et al., 2003; Skiba 2006).

Overall, zero tolerance policies have had their most insidious impact on Black youth, whose rate of suspension or expulsion from schools is accompanied by an unprecedented number of school-related referrals into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Tragically, there is consistent and increasing evidence that students being suspended and expelled for minor infractions are considerably more likely to be Black and those with disabilities (Advancement Project, 2005; Losen and Skiba, 2010). Nationally, data suggest that Black students represented only 17 percent of public school enrollment in 2000 but accounted for 34 percent of suspensions (Advancement Project, 2005), while special education students represented 8.6 percent of public school students, but 32 percent of youth in juvenile detention nationwide (NAACP, 2005). Black students with learning disabilities are three times more likely to be suspended than similarly situated white students and four times more likely to end up in correctional facilities (Poe-Yamagata and Jones, 2000).

Individual states report alarming impacts of zero tolerance policies. In 2007/08, the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (FDJJ) recorded significant increases in the proportion of school-based referrals, with a misdemeanor as the most serious charge in 69 percent of these cases (Florida Blueprint Commission, 2008). Moreover, students of color (mostly Black students) in Florida represent just 22 percent of the Florida school population, but 46 percent of both school suspensions and referrals to juvenile justice (Advancement Project, 2005). In addition, the Advancement Project (2010) reports that:

- In Philadelphia, Black and Latino students are far more likely to be suspended, transferred to alternative schools and arrested than White students.
- In Colorado, Black students were over twice as likely as White students to be referred to law enforcement and Latino students were 50 percent more likely than White students to be referred to law enforcement.
- In Ohio, Black students were nearly five-and-a-half times more likely to be suspended out-of-school than White students in 2007.

There are similar stories from almost every state in the country and, in each case, the impact has dramatically increased with the onset of zero tolerance policies and is disproportionately high among students of color and those with disabilities.

EFFECTIVE RESTORATIVE JUSTICE RESPONSES TO ZERO TOLERANCE IN SCHOOLS

A proven strategy to reduce suspensions, expulsions and disciplinary referrals is modeled after restorative justice approaches used in the juvenile justice context and now increasingly being applied in schools to deal with youth misbehavior, rule violations and to improve school climate (Karp and Breslin, 2001; Lewis, 2009; Kane et al., 2007; Morrison et al., 2005). Restorative justice is an evidence-based practice where responses to misbehavior can take a variety of forms that are centered on several core principles:

- 1) focus on relationships first and rules second;
- 2) give voice to the person harmed and the person who caused the harm;
- 3) engage in collaborative problem-solving;
- 4) enhance personal responsibility;
- 5) empower change and growth; and
- 6) include strategic plans for restoration/reparation (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005).

Restorative justice views crime or harm primarily as a violation of individuals, relationships and communities that “creates obligations to make things right” (Zehr, 1990, p.181). The assumption underlying a restorative response is that “justice” is more than simply punishing, or treating, rule-breakers, but rather is about repairing the harm caused to victims, offenders and community. To the greatest extent possible, restorative processes seek to rebuild relationships damaged by crime and other conflicts. Achieving justice and meaningful school discipline in a restorative way suggests that holding offenders or rule-breakers accountable is not about asking them to “take the punishment,” but rather about ensuring that they take *responsibility* by making amends to their victims and the community. Indeed, it is this distinction between passively accepting punishment and actively assuming responsibility for behavior that distinguishes restorative accountability from punishment. A restorative justice response includes two primary components:

- 1) a non-adversarial and dialogue-based decisionmaking process that allows affected parties (known as “stakeholders”) to discuss the harm done to victims, while considering needs of all participants; and
- 2) an agreement for going forward based on the input of all stakeholders about what is necessary to repair the harm directly to the persons and community (Bazemore and Schiff, 2010).

The quality of a restorative intervention is determined by the degree of adherence to three core principles addressing:

- 1) the extent to which the response repairs the harm to victim, community, offenders and their families;
- 2) the extent to which each stakeholder is involved in the discussion of the incident and is given input into the plan for repair; and
- 3) the extent to which community and government roles (e.g., the criminal justice system, education system) are transformed to allow communities a greater voice and increased responsibility for responding to conflict, while other enforcement systems (e.g., schools) assume a more facilitative role (Pranis, 2001; Van Ness and Strong, 1997).

As Reistenberg (2007:10) asserts:

A restorative philosophy emphasizes problem-solving approaches to discipline, attends to the social/emotional as well as the physical/intellectual needs of students, recognizes the importance of the group to establish and practice agreed-upon norms and rules, and emphasizes prevention and early restorative intervention to create safe learning environments.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE OUTCOMES IN UNITED STATES AND INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL SETTINGS

Restorative responses to zero tolerance have shown strong results in keeping students in school and off the streets in various jurisdictions around the United States and the world. At this time, restorative practices in schools are known to exist in California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, Texas, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut. Some states, such as Georgia, are expanding the use of restorative justice by experimenting with changing the relationship between juvenile justice and education with the goal of increasing educational support for troublesome and delinquent youth within the school environment by placing probation officers in schools. In these jurisdictions, school-based probation officers are developing new partnerships with educators through restorative practices to help create alternatives to suspension, and to offer additional support to school staff with the goal of providing second chances for youth otherwise likely to be suspended or expelled.

Nationally, as well as internationally, there is now considerable evidence that restorative approaches can produce a promising number of positive outcomes in the academic environment, including reduced suspension and expulsion, decreased disciplinary referrals, improved academic achievement, and other beneficial results (Karp and Breslin, 2001; Lewis, 2009). Jurisdictions have implemented varying strategies to achieve their results, including restorative mediation, conferences or circles, school accountability boards, daily informal restorative meetings, classroom circles, restorative dialogue, restorative youth courts, peer mediation and other practices. In addition, School Accountability Boards (SABs) are becoming an increasingly common restorative response to school disciplinary issues. In a SAB setting, peer groups of students, along with faculty and staff, deal with one another's challenges in an inclusive and relationship-driven community (Schiff, Bazemore and Brown, 2011). Although there has been relatively little rigorous impact evaluation on restorative measures in schools, preliminary research suggests very promising results.

Some examples of positive results from incorporating restorative justice from schools and school districts across the country are detailed below.

- Using restorative circles, conferences, peer mediation and other approaches, the Minnesota Department of Education significantly reduced behavioral referrals and suspensions in two schools by 45 to 63 percent, increased academic achievement and significantly reduced behavior referrals and suspensions. In a recent survey, 277 schools principals reported that their schools used restorative practices (Minnesota Department of Education, 2003, 2011).
- In Denver, Colorado, a combination of informal classroom meetings, victim impact panels and restorative conferencing resulted in a 68 percent overall reduction in police tickets and a 40 percent overall reduction in out-of-school suspensions in seventeen schools (Advancement Project, 2010).
- Upon implementing restorative circles, West Philadelphia High School saw a 50 percent decrease in suspensions, along with a 52 percent reduction in violent and serious acts during the 2007/08 school year, followed by a further reduction of 40 percent during the 2008-2009 school year (Lewis, 2009).
- Various schools in Pennsylvania saw marked reductions in fighting, cafeteria violations, misbehavior, detention, fighting, theft, classroom disruptions and suspensions after implementing restorative conferencing, circles and other practices (Mirsky, 2003).

- At Cole Middle School in Oakland, CA, suspensions declined by 87 percent and expulsions declined to zero during the implementation of whole-school restorative justice (Sumner et. al, 2010). The Oakland Unified School District then passed a resolution making restorative justice its official district policy (Oakland Unified School District, 2010).
- Based on successful implementation of restorative peer juries in Chicago, IL that saved over 1,000 suspension days, restorative practices were integrated into the 2007 Student Code of Conduct and a school implementation guide was developed (Dignity in Schools Fact Sheet, n.d.; Ashley and Burke, 2009).
- Following training and technical assistance in restorative circles and conferences from a local university, Palm Beach County, FL is now moving to include restorative justice in its menu of disciplinary options available to all county public schools (Lewis, 2012).

In addition to the results seen across the United States, schools, numerous jurisdictions in other countries are also implementing restorative practices in response to overly harsh disciplinary policies and reporting notable outcomes. For example:

- In Scotland, school “exclusions” were significantly reduced in 14 out of 18 public schools after implementing various restorative practices (Kane et al., 2007).
- In Hong Kong, a whole-school restorative approach resulted in a significantly greater reduction of bullying, higher empathetic attitudes, and higher self-esteem in comparison to a partial intervention and a control group (Wong et al., 2011).
- In several Canadian schools, suspensions went down anywhere from 12 percent to 73 percent after implementing restorative conferencing (Lewis, 2009).
- In several United Kingdom schools, decreases were seen in suspension days and negative incidents following implementation of restorative conferencing, circles and other practices (Lewis, 2009).
- Restorative conferencing was implemented within schools in Queensland, Australia in 1994, and studies since then have illustrated its effectiveness as a response to student misbehavior (Youth Justice Board, 2002).

- In England and Wales, implementation of conferences, mediation and whole school approaches resulted in 94 percent satisfactory conference outcomes, 96 percent conference agreements upheld, 89 percent student satisfaction with outcome. In addition, teachers reported less teaching time lost due to managing behavioral problems, and a trend was identified whereby schools implementing restorative justice reduced permanent student exclusions (Shaw, 2007).
- In Flanders, following high levels of satisfaction and compliance with restorative conferences, the Flemish Education Department decided to take steps towards implementing restorative group conferencing in Flemish schools (BursSENS et al., 2006).

To date, much research demonstrating the positive effects of restorative justice has been qualitative – improved school climate and culture, better relationships, increased responsibility among students, better teacher-student interaction and increased satisfaction with disciplinary outcomes (McKlusky et al., 2008; IIRP, 2009; Morrison et al., 2005). Rigorous empirical research on the quantitative impact of restorative justice in schools has yet to reach the same scale as seen for its application in juvenile justice settings, but there is nevertheless a growing body of evidence that restorative practices in educational settings can mediate the impacts of poorly applied zero tolerance policies (e.g., Schiff, Bazemore and Brown, 2011).

DISCUSSION: REDEFINING “JUSTICE” IN THE EDUCATION CONTEXT

It is evident that restorative justice can have an impact on decreasing suspensions and expulsions, as well as engaging youth in the school setting and improving school climate. Moreover, there is now national and international evidence that the status quo relationship between education and juvenile justice must change (Morrison et al., 2005). As educational and juvenile justice professionals agree and research documents, adolescents are more likely to expand, rather than limit, their delinquent involvement when removed from the structure of the school environment. Yet to date, the role of the justice professional in the education context has been limited to serving as a passive “intake officer” required simply to mete out punishment and provide surveillance over troublesome youth within the educational community setting. It is critical to recognize that juvenile justice and education *serve the same kids*, and encouraging schools to push their more difficult charges

into the justice system, where their risk of academic failure and subsequent criminality is heightened, is not just bad social policy, it is also bad economic policy as the costs of court and detention continue to increase.

An alternative approach would envision reshaping the role of juvenile justice practitioners in the academic environment as agents of positive youth development (Butts et al., 2010). It may be time to question the efficacy of educators defining and determining the best role for justice professionals within their walls, rather allowing trained justice professionals to clarify and determine their own best role within the education system. Using restorative justice in the educational setting can be a strong vehicle for creating true partnerships between justice and education practitioners, as school police (and probation) officers can become resourceful, strategic partners in prevention and intervention efforts designed to strategically or potentially help keep youth *in* school and *out* of the justice system. Such transformation would apply to the roles of School Resource Officers (SRO) as primary intervention intermediaries, and potentially to probation officers once youth have already been involved in the justice system. For example, in Georgia and some schools in Illinois, a new role for probation officers involves spending a significant amount of their time in schools where youth on their caseload are enrolled (Bardertscher and Tagami, 2011). These jurisdictions may be acknowledging the obvious fact that both systems serve the same kids, and communication and collaboration is an essential component of keeping such youth away from further justice system involvement.

In this context, restorative justice is an especially effective strategy for helping to keep youth in school by redefining school disciplinary options and codes (as seen, for example, in Oakland, California; Chicago, Illinois; Denver Colorado; and West Palm Beach, Florida) to minimize the use of exclusionary school discipline and increase the use of restorative justice strategies to help keep kids out of the school-to-prison pipeline. While we have suggested elsewhere that slowing the “school-to-prison pipeline” will require more than a single disciplinary or educational strategy (Bazemore and Schiff, 2010), we suggest here that educational policy alone, no matter how well grounded, is inadequate. Rather, it is essential to decrease the number and rate at which youth are being “graduated” into justice facilities by effectively comingling evidence-based education and youth justice interventions. Moreover, there must be a complementary relationship between well-trained education and justice professionals working collaboratively in schools to hold youth accountable for their behavior while also keeping them engaged, productive and academically successful. We propose that the justice role

in the education environment must not be defined by educators looking for “enforcement” of exclusionary policies, but rather by a comprehensive engagement and agreement of *both* justice professionals and school personnel to engage students in the principles and practices of restorative justice.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have suggested that the cumulative effect of zero tolerance and other exclusionary discipline policies in schools has been generally disastrous and has resulted in unprecedented numbers of mostly minority youth entering what is now being called “the school-to-prison pipeline.” In response to failed attempts at improving school safety through increasing surveillance and expanding suspension and expulsion rates, we offer restorative justice as an effective, evidence-based nonpunitive response to school rules violations. Moreover, it can redefine the collaborative roles and relationships of educators and juvenile justice professionals by offering an inclusive and responsive structure for helping reengage youth in the academic setting rather than further disenfranchising them from the school community.

Charting a new relationship between juvenile justice staff and educators may be difficult when responding to troublesome youth in schools. However, it is possible for police and potentially probation staff to develop supportive respectful relationships with teachers and other education professionals aimed at maximizing opportunities to keep troubled youth in school. While the specter of putting probation officers in schools might be viewed as a dangerous signal of what some critics rightly view as reinforcing a “lock-down” mentality, the objective in the jurisdictions highlighted here seems more about ensuring that court-involved and at-risk youth are supported in the classroom and are making progress in meeting educational goals. Though not yet evaluated, these promising efforts seem to suggest a direction for new education/justice partnerships that benefit teachers, staff and students. In the end, the goal of restorative justice in the schools is to reengage youth at risk of academic failure and juvenile justice system entry by creating restorative responses to misbehavior that help keep youth in school, off the streets and out of detention. By designing new education-justice partnerships grounded in principles of restorative justice, we assert that it is possible to stem the tide of youth currently at risk of entering in the school-to-prison pipeline.

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