

## Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute

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### Closing the School to Prison Pipeline in Texas

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#### What is the “School to Prison Pipeline?”

This phrase describes the pattern of increased risk for future involvement with the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems as a result of educational practices implemented by school districts across the state and across the country. These practices feature so-called zero tolerance policies and the use of police in schools, but school climate and everyday school responses to normal classroom misbehavior can also contribute to increased risk.

The school to prison pipeline starts in the classroom. When combined with zero-tolerance policies, a teacher’s decision to refer students for discipline can be the start of a sequence through which they are pushed out of the classroom and are quickly at risk for entry into the criminal justice system.

*Suspension from 9th grade triples the chances of incarceration and doubles chances of dropping out.*

Students are also far more likely to be arrested at school now than they were 10 years ago. This is in part related to the increased police presence in schools over that time period. According to the US Department of Justice, the number of school resource officers increased about 40% in the past 10 years. School resource officers are sworn law enforcement officers responsible for security and crime prevention in schools. While the increase was driven by safety concerns, the vast majority of these arrests are for nonviolent offenses, such as being disruptive in the classroom. While classroom disruptions must be addressed, zero-tolerance policies, which set one-size-fits-all punishments for a wide range of behaviors, underlie these trends.

#### Who is in the School to Prison Pipeline?

A 2011 study published by the Justice Center of the Council of State Governments tracked nearly 1 million students in Texas for six years. The study found that children with emotional disabilities (Severe Emotional Disturbances) were disproportionately suspended and expelled, and African Americans were disproportionately punished compared with otherwise similar white and Latino students.

Nationally, students from two groups are over-represented in the school to prison pipeline:

- **Racial minorities:** African American students are 3.5 times more likely than their white classmates to be suspended or expelled for the same offense; black children constitute 18% of the school population but account for 46% of those suspended more than once.

- **Children with disabilities:** Students with disabilities are similarly at risk. Nearly three out of four students in special education are suspended or expelled, and “emotional disturbance” is among the most common underlying issues. While about 9% of public school children have been identified as having disabilities that affect their ability to learn, these students make up about 32% of youth in juvenile detention centers.

Despite laws that prohibit discrimination against racial minorities and people with disabilities, these patterns have existed for many years.

### How Can We Close the Pipeline?

Reducing use of suspension and expulsion is not simple, especially with schools under pressure to meet accountability standards. Given the strong system of local control of education in Texas, individual school districts and administrators have tremendous power to make changes in school discipline. With leadership from the top, school discipline can change from a system of punishment to a system of student development. Evidence-informed alternatives to exclusionary discipline can simultaneously diminish the negative outcomes of harmful discipline policies, boost achievement, reduce misconduct, and maintain safe and healthy schools.

Reviewing efforts from around the country, there seem to be four broad categories of action:

1. **School-wide social and emotional support models that seek to improve the culture within an entire school.** They rely on professional development to allow all staff to work together to implement positive behavioral interventions and instructional strategies to replace more punitive measures. The best-known of these programs are *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support* (PBIS) and *Safe and Responsive Schools* (SRS).
2. **Programs that teach educators better skills in behavior management and student discipline.** Examples include “*My Teaching Partner*” and “*Objective Threat Assessment*.”
3. **Approaches that change the way that schools respond to misbehavior.** These approaches either replace suspension with another type of response or offer alternative activities to students during times of suspension. The *Restorative Justice* model is the most widely recognized of these strategies.
4. **Schools can partner with health care systems to ensure access to health and mental health care for students who need it** through school-based and school-linked health care delivery.

In addition to strategies implemented directly by schools, it is also useful to support actions such as *compiling data on disciplinary actions* organized by gender, race and disability. Ensuring *clear policies and limits to the role of law enforcement at school* – including arrests and the use of restraints – is also important. Finally, schools should make sure that clear and simple explanations of infractions and prescribed responses are known to all.