

Editorial

Nov. 22, 2007, 7:37PM

Prison track

Texas has to make schools safe for learning without turning misbehaving students into criminals

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Something went horribly wrong after Texas decided to crack down on mayhem in public schools by mandating zero tolerance for weapons, drugs and violence on campus. Given broad discretion to remove unruly pupils from class, teachers and administrators restored order. But they also created a terribly efficient fast track to prison for a shocking number of Texas schoolchildren.

According to an analysis of statewide data for 2001-2006 and thorough studies of more than a dozen Texas school districts, the number of students suspended and the number removed to alternative discipline campuses skyrocketed after the Legislature's 1995 overhaul of school discipline laws. This, the public interest law group Texas Appleseed states, has caused a "school-to-prison pipeline" that puts inordinate numbers of youngsters on a path to dropping out of school and into the juvenile justice system. The far end of the pipe pours into Texas' massive adult prison system.

Appleseed's report, "Texas' School-to-Prison Pipeline, The Impact of School Discipline and Zero Tolerance," argues that schools that suspend and expel students to Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs for minor misbehavior not covered by the zero-tolerance mandates unwittingly funnel kids into this life-stunting pipeline. Infractions that have gotten children suspended or expelled include profanity, rough play, bringing prescription medicine to school and disrupting class.

For many at-risk youths, suspensions lead to lost academic ground and more behavior problems. Once in a DAEP, students are five times more likely than mainstream counterparts to drop out. The link to crime is clear: In Texas, one in three juveniles in a Texas Youth Commission lockup is a dropout. Dropouts comprise 80 percent of the adult prison population.

The school-to-prison pipeline is filled with black, Hispanic and special education students, who are far more likely to be given discretionary referrals for discipline than their numbers in the school population would predict. Also, contends the American Civil Liberties Union, pressure to do well on high-stakes standardized tests pressures schools to suspend poor academic performers in order to raise overall scores.

Much of this damage is avoidable: Fully two-thirds of Texas students sent from their school to a DAEP campus are transferred at campus officials' discretion. (The remaining third are mandatory removals under state law.) What's more, the harm is haphazard. Some school districts employ discretionary referrals at much higher rates than others, so where a child goes to school, rather than the offense, is a better predictor of whether a student ends up at an alternative campus.

Groups such as Texas Zero Tolerance, a statewide organization to reform public school disciplinary codes, complain that schools have taken zero tolerance to extremes, often involving police in minor student misconduct — even in elementary school. Students are being arrested at school for breaking campus rules and prosecuted in court. Schools fail to immediately notify parents when their children are interrogated by police.

School districts can improve this grim picture by employing research-based strategies and offering teachers more classroom management training. Parents must be more involved in their children's education, and schools should provide them the tools to do so, informing parents right away about behavior issues.

Appleseed says it will urge lawmakers to improve oversight over alternative education programs to ensure that minimum education standards are enforced, and to intervene at schools that make inordinate numbers of disciplinary referrals. Furthermore, lawmakers should revive a bill that passed in the House last session but died in the Senate that would have made it mandatory for districts to consider a student's intent when determining punishment. Such a law might have kept a young Katy Independent School District student out of the criminal justice system for writing "I love Alex" in small letters on a school wall.

Texas can do better. Schools can be safe for learning without turning students into criminals for minor infractions, exacerbating an out-of-control dropout problem and setting kids who are merely unruly on a path toward prison.

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