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Texas Schools Tough on Disciplining Youth

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HOUSTON—Thousands of troubled Texas youth are getting a dose of strong medicine as a result of an effort to rid them of their misbehaving ways. Every year, over 100,000 students statewide are given discipline-alternative education placements (DAEP). A large portion of students given DAEPs have committed only minor or discretionary offenses.

Placing troubled youth in alternative schools is common across the country, but Texas has been notably tough on the issue.

Texas Appleseed, an Austin-based advocacy group, claims there is also a significant overrepresentation of students with mental illness in DAEP. It claims that the "zero tolerance" policy of mandatory removal of violent students seeks to protect the general student population from aggressive behavior. However, over two-thirds of those referred to DAEP are charged for non-violent offenses.

"The children are sent there for breaking school rules," says Lynda Frost, associate director at the Hogg Mental Health Foundation. "Some of [the rules] are required by Texas law, but most are sent at the school's discretion."

Wide Range of Students

Students sent to DAEP are not limited to those with problematic behavior, but extend to special education students. "We know that special education kids are sent to disciplinary placements in disproportionate numbers," says Frost. "But we don't know why."

Research gathered by legal and advocacy groups reveals that in the 2003-2004 school year special education students accounted for a little over 11 percent of Texas's student population. Of that amount, over a quarter of special need students were sent to DAEPs.

"The Texas education code mandates the offenses where school districts are required to send students for DAEP, but the vast majority is for discretionary reasons," says Janis Monger, communications director at Texas Appleseed. "The school districts can send students to DAEP for a simple violation of school's code of conduct."

Some districts send fewer students to DAEP while others send considerably more. From the 2001 to 2006 school year, Pasadena Independent School District (ISD) outside of Houston was consecutively listed in the top 10 schools with the highest DAEP referral rate.



(Photos.com)

Monger believes that the amount of students referred is not based on the individual behavior of the student but the district the student is in.

"It's very hard to measure what motivated [school referrals]," says Monger. "What we're trying to do is document that a problem exists."

Starting Young

Research conducted by Texas Appleseed in association with the Hogg Mental Health Foundation found that children as young as 6 are sent to DAEP.

A statutory ban in Texas prevents children under 6 years old from being sent to disciplinary education unless caught bringing firearms to school, but some schools are sending a disproportionate number of younger students to alternative education, says Frost.

Pasadena ISD in the last five years sent 100 kindergarten and pre-kindergarten students and over 400 first-grade students to DAEP. Data from research conducted by Texas Appleseed does not reveal reasons behind the districts referrals, but advocacy groups find district's decision questionable.

"I think that it's highly unlikely that we have that many young children in Texas taking firearms to school," says Monger. "It raises questions. Are there really that many young children bringing firearms to school or are they being sent for other reasons?"

Pasadena ISD officials could not be reached for comment. However, in an April report by the Houston Chronicle, Pasadena officials allege the district's high rate of alternative education referrals is a result of mislabeling. The students are not sent to DAEP, said officials, but are referred to in-school suspension.

However, Pasadena is not alone. Statewide, over 110 schools have sent students in kindergarten or below to DAEPs.

Looking at Demographics

"If you look at troubled kids, a lot of them are going to have different disabilities," says Jim Hurley, spokesman for the Texas Youth Commission (TYC). "It's part of the reasons for their acting up. There's also different social reasons [that causes their behavior]."

According to information from the TYC, 40 percent of the youths sent are eligible for special education services another 41 percent suffer serious mental problems.

In 2001, the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission conducted a mental health screening and found that in half of those referrals received for 2001, one-third of the students scored at a caution cutoff on multiple mental health screenings. Serious juvenile offenders were found to have multiple mental health needs.

However, mental health is not the sole contributing factor. In the 2006 fiscal year, of the over 2700 students sent to the TYC, over 60 percent of them come from low income families and over half have a violent family history. Of those, 44 percent are Hispanic and 30 percent are African American.

Some counties contribute more youths to juvenile correction programs than others. Reports from both Texas Appleseed and TYC shows Harris County in southeast Texas at the top of the list counties contributing juvenile offenders in 2006, taking up 23 percent of the admitted 2738 students. Dallas County follows in second with Bexar in third.

"Harris County has Houston which has an enormous population," says Hurley. "Obviously there's going to be a lot more [troubled youth]. The most populous county sends the most kids."

Measuring DAEP Impact

Measuring the affect alternative discipline programs have on students presents a difficult challenge.

"For some children [an alternative discipline program] is an easier environment [for the child] to be in," says Frost.

"Overall, it can be a challenging environment for any child. In general what you're doing is changing the child's peer group to a group of children that have broken school rules, that have gotten into some kind of trouble."

Monger also warns of challenges faced in an alternative education program student, particularly in future involvement with the criminal justice system.

According to Monger, a study carried out by Texas A&M University concluded that the "greatest predictor of future involvement in the criminal justice system is a history of having been disciplined in school," a fact highlighted by over 80 percent of Texas prison inmates being high school dropouts.

Students placed in DAEPs face a five times more likely chance of dropping out of school. Alternative education programs can also be an academic setback for some.

According to Frost, the resources available at alternative education programs may be limited and prove to be unable to correct undesirable behavior in special needs students.

"The programs vary a lot in how much they're focused on punishment, on how much they are focused on identifying the individual child's struggles," says Frost. "If the [child's] behavior is consequence of a disability, punishment is not that appropriate of an approach."

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