Sharon S. Issurdatt,

LCSW, ACSW

Senior Practice Associate

Sissurdatt@naswdc.org

Call the Principal, Not the Police:
Preventing the School to Prison Pipeline

The "school to prison pipeline" is a phenomenon that has occurred over the last few decades as school systems have increasingly relied upon zero tolerance policies and law enforcement to manage discipline in schools, resulting in rising incidents of suspensions, expulsions and school-based arrests. This trend represents a shift from discipline being handled fully by the school administration in a more individualized manner, attending to the nuances of the student and the misconduct, to a shift towards criminalizing even minor offenses with rigid consequences that are often extreme for the offense.

Factors such as decreased funding for education, including minimal allocations for specialized instructional support personnel; stricter teaching standards, including student performance based evaluations; and the growing fear of school-based violence have driven troubled youth away from the school environment and into the juvenile justice realm. Pressed by increased reliance on testing and inadequate resources, many schools are choosing to forego mentorship and intervention for students in favor of exclusion and arrest (NAACP, 2013).

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU (c), 2013) reports "zero-tolerance policies criminalize minor infractions of school rules, while high-stakes testing programs encourage educators to push out low-performing students to improve their schools' overall test scores. Many of these children have learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse or neglect." The safety net that once supported these vulnerable students no longer exists.

The Myth of Zero-Tolerance

Zero tolerance policies are a mandated; "one-size fits all" approach to discipline. "Zero tolerance" resulted from a 1994 federal law that required all states receiving federal money to require school districts to expel any student found to have brought a weapon to school for at least one year (Science Daily, 2010). Often zero tolerance policies result in students being suspended, expelled and even arrested. The zero tolerance approach has become a standard method in schools for managing discipline issues. In some school systems, students who have been suspended or expelled as a result of zero tolerance policy enforcement are not entitled to receive any education during the allotted time frame. In other systems, these students are sent to disciplinary alternative schools that are frequently operated by private, for-profit companies, and immune from educational accountability standards (such as minimum classroom hours and curriculum requirements) (ACLU (a), 2013). Both situations leave vulnerable students without the educational supports they need.

In August 2006, a Zero Tolerance Task Force convened to explore the effectiveness of these policies. The report concluded that the zero tolerance policies in schools, although intended to reduce school violence and behavior problems, can actually have the

In 2005, 48% of public schools responding to a United States Department of Justice survey reported having on-site police officers. Today, there are an estimated 17,000 school-based officers (ACLU (d), 2012).

Research has shown that the presence of on-site police officers frequently results in both more student arrests and more arrests for misbehavior previously handled informally by educators and parents (ACLU (d), 2012).

opposite effect. In addition, such policies not only fail to make schools safe or more effective in handling student behavior, but they can actually *increase* the instances of problem behavior and dropout rates (American Psychological Association, 2006).

School Resource Officers

The pervasive lack of financial resources for education has resulted in many schools relying on law enforcement rather than school administrators and teachers to manage discipline issues. In addition, rigid teaching guidelines and higher student-to-teacher ratios have left many teachers unequipped to manage even simple discipline issues in addition to their other required duties. Many specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) positions such as school social workers, nurses, and guidance counselors are often unfunded and vacant positions in today's schools. In rare instances when there is a school social worker on staff, these personnel often have high referrals and caseloads complicated by multiple school locations; limited funding and complex schedules (Issurdatt, 2010).

It has become common practice for school districts to employ school resource officers to manage discipline issues. Many of these officers are unprepared to work with children and are trained from a criminal justice standpoint. As a result, children are far more likely to be subjected to school-based arrests than they were a generation ago (ACLU (b), 2013). The vast majority of these arrests are for non-violent offenses such as "disruptive conduct" or "disturbance of the peace" (ACLU (b), 2013).

Disparities in Discipline

These extreme discipline rates are resulting in astounding disparity gaps. Students of color, particularly African-American boys, account for the overwhelming number of school-enforced punishments, as well as the majority of arrests for school-related incidences around the country (NAACP, 2013). African-American students, overall, are now nearly three times as likely to be suspended, and Latino students are nearly one-and-a-half times as likely to be suspended, as their white peers (NAACP, 2013). Studies show that students of color receive harsher punishments for engaging in the same conduct as white students (NAACP, 2013).

As these extreme discipline measures become more pervasive, it is common for schools to increasingly ignore or bypass due process protections for students, leaving students unable to defend themselves (ACLU, a, 2013). Many students are denied procedural protections once in the court system and many court-involved children do not

have lawyers (ACLU (a), 2013). In addition, provisions for supplemental academic supports, counseling, mentoring and parental involvement have been replaced by policies that promote exclusion from both schools and academic success. The lack of due process is particularly acute for students with special needs—who are disproportionately represented in the pipeline—despite the heightened protections afforded to them under the law (ACLU (a), 2013).

How Social Workers Can Help Prevent the Pipeline

- **Promote Awareness.** Many parents, families and professionals, including social workers, teachers, and school administrators are unaware of the vastness of this issue within the country. Many adults assume that school discipline policies are similar to when they were in school decades ago and are unaware of how the lack of funding, test-based accountability and other major changes have affected how students are disciplined for even minor misconduct in schools.

  Social workers have the ability to reach parents, families, school administrators, teachers, etc. through their unique relationships to help raise awareness of the inequalities these discipline measures create and sustain. Promoting awareness through creating documents for distribution, discussion, trainings and advocating for student and family rights are some ways to help foster awareness of this issue.

- **Advocate for effective discipline measures.** Much research has been conducted regarding the unintended consequences of zero tolerance policies. However, many school systems still employ them as the backbone to their discipline policies. And many still receive funding for using these measures. Social workers can offer valuable information regarding the negative impact of zero tolerance policies and propose positive solutions for alternative measures.

  Research has shown that when students are more engaged in school and feel connected, rates of violence go down and school safety increases. Increasing the strength and quality of classroom engagement by creating caring, supportive, culturally responsive learning environments is often effective in reducing acts of violence (Osher, Bear, Sprague & Doyle, 2010). Social workers can support administrators and teachers in gaining skills to better manage the wide range of discipline issues, especially minimally disruptive misconduct.

- **Support funding and policies for Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISP)**
  SISP includes professions such as school social workers, as well as school counselors, school nurses, psychologists, school psychologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, art therapists, dance/movement therapists, and music therapists; speech-language pathologists and audiologists.

  SISP professionals work in various ways to help foster student achievement and academic success. Due to lack of funding and limited budget allocations, these positions are becoming fewer and fewer as school systems reduce services that are not directly academic. Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISP) provide direct services such as education, therapy, counseling, assessment, diagnosis, and referrals for all children and youth who are experiencing problems that interfere with learning. These services help engage students in school and act as a prevention measure. They are also often the main focus of intervention when a student has a discipline issue. These services, by design, can support students on a more individual basis and help them feel more connected to school.

Resources

NASW Standards for School Social Work Services outlines standards for professional practice, professional preparation and development, and administrative structure and support. socialworkers.org/practice/standards/NASWSchool SocialWorkStandards.pdf.

NASW School Social Work Specialty Practice Section is a customized option with NASW membership that provides resources and training directly relevant to school social work practice through opportunities for professional development via live practice specific teleconferences, free CE's, chats, E-Alerts, and more. socialworkers.org/sections/default.asp

The Certified School Social Work Specialist Credential (C-SSWS) is exclusively offered by NASW and attests to expertise, skill and knowledge in the field of school social work; certifies two academic years of post-MSW supervised school social work experience and attests agreement to abide by the *NASW Code of Ethics,* and the *NASW Standards for School Social Work Services* and the *NASW Standards for Continuing Education*. socialworkers.org/credentials/specialty/c-ssws.asp.

The National Alliance of Pupil Services Organizations (NAPSO) is a coalition of national professional organizations whose members provide and support a variety of school-based prevention and intervention services to assist students in becoming effective learners and productive citizens. NAPSO organizations represent over a million members, including school counselors, school nurses, psychologists, school psychologists, social workers and school social workers; occupational therapists, physical therapists, art therapists, dance/movement therapists, and music therapists; speech-language pathologists and audiologists; teachers, students, parents, and administrators. NASW is a member organization. **napso.org**.

Teaching Tolerance is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. Founded in 1991, this project is dedicated to reducing prejudice, improving intergroup relations and supporting equitable school experiences for our nation's children. This project provides free educational materials to teachers and other school practitioners in the U.S. and Canada. **tolerance.org**.

American Educational Research Association (AERA), founded in 1916, is concerned with improving the educational process by encouraging scholarly inquiry related to education and evaluation and by promoting the dissemination and practical application of research results. **aera.net**.

References

American Civil Liberties Union (a) (2013). What is the School-to-Prison Pipeline? Retrieved May 8, 2013 from aclu.org/racial-justice/what-school-prison-pipeline

American Civil Liberties Union (b) (2013). School to Prison Pipeline: Talking Points. Retrieved May 8, 2013 aclu.org/racial-justice/school-prison-pipeline-talking-points

American Civil Liberties Union (c) (2013). School-to-Prison Pipeline. Retrieved May 8, 2013 from aclu.org/racial-justice/school-prison-pipeline

American Civil Liberties Union (d) (2012). Arrested futures: The criminalization of school discipline in Massachusetts' three largest school districts. Retrieved on May 16, 2013 from aclum.org/sites/all/files/education/arrested_futures.pdf

American Psychological Association (2006). Zero Tolerance Policies Can Have Unintended Effects, APA report finds. Retrieved on May 13, 2013 from apa.org/monitor/oct06/tolerance.aspx

Issurdatt, S (2010). *A shift in approach: Addressing bullying in schools*. School Social Work Practice Update. NASW Press: Washington, DC.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc. (2013). School to Prison Pipeline. Retrieved May 8, 2013 from naacpldf.org/case/school-prison-pipeline.

Osher, D., Bear, G.G., Sprague, J.R., & Doyle, W. (2010). How Can We Improve School Discipline? *Educational Researcher*, 39, 48-58.

Science Daily (2010). Zero Tolerance Ineffective in Schools, Study Finds. Retrieved May 14, 2013 from sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/05/100510132157.htm

St. George, D. (2012). Federal data show racial gaps in school arrests. Retrieved on May 16, 2013 from articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-03-06/national/35446604_1_school-arrests-national-education-policy-center-enrollment.htm

The department's Office for Civil Rights collected data from 72,000 schools across the country for the 2009-10 school year showing that 96,000 students were arrested and 242,000 were "referred" to law enforcement by school leaders, meaning the students were not necessarily arrested or cited (St. George, 2012).

Center for Workforce Studies & Social Work Practice Recent Publications

Children & Families
- *Social Work Services with Parents: How Attitudes and Approaches Shape the Relationship*

Clinical Social Work
- *2012 Medicare Updates for Clinical Social Workers*
- *Clinical Social Workers and 5010: Frequently Asked Questions*
- *Clinical Social Workers Be Aware: Version 5010 is Coming*
- *Documenting For Medicare: Tips For Clinical Social Workers*
- *Retiring? Tips For Closing Your Private Practice*
- *Risk Management In Clinical Practice*

Education
- *Addressing the Educational Needs of Older Youth*
- *Gangs: A Growing Problem in Schools*

Leadership and Organizations
- *Beyond Survival: Ensuring Organizational Sustainability*
- *NASW Leadership in Palliative & Hospice Social Work*
- *Organizational Integration of Cultural Competency: Building Organizational Capacity to Improve Service Delivery to Culturally Diverse Populations*
- *Organizing For Office Safety*

Poverty
- *The Affordable Care Act: Implications for Low and Moderate-Income Women's Health and Well-Being*
- *Overcoming Economic Hardships*

Workforce & Career Development
- *Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs): Opportunities for the Social Work Profession*
- *Career Coaching: A Valuable Resource For Social Workers*
- *Furthering Your Social Work Education: Obtaining A Doctorate*
- *Negotiating A Higher Salary*
- *Networking: Finding Opportunities for Career Development*
- *Securing The Social Work Job You Seek: Advice For The Interview Process*
- *Setting and Maintaining Professional Boundaries*
- *State Health Insurance Exchanges: What Social Workers Need to Know*
- *The Value Of Social Work Mentoring*
- *Transitioning Across State Lines: Licensing Tips Beyond*
- *9 To 5: Working As A Consultant*

Practice Perspectives   Spring   May 2013