

Draining the School-to-Prison Pipeline



Nice to meet you, Child Advocates

The Support Center for Child Advocates (*Child Advocates*) is the oldest *pro bono* legal services agency in the country dedicated solely to representing court-involved children and youth who have experienced abuse or neglect. Utilizing a whole child model of representation, *Child Advocates* teams a master's level social worker with a volunteer attorney to address not only the child's legal issues, but also the child's well-being issues, such as safety, permanency, education, and physical and behavioral health.

This newly-created newsletter, "Draining the School-to-Prison Pipeline" grows out of *Child Advocates'* Project YES! (Youth Educational Success), which strives to improve educational outcomes for children and youth. In 2017, Project YES! began a partnership with Temple's Institute on Disabilities (Temple IOD), funded through a grant through the Pennsylvania Developmental Disabilities Council (PADDC). Our joint work explores and lays fundamental groundwork for youth and families, schools, system professionals, community partners, and advocates on how to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline, and mitigate recidivism for youth returning to their school community from a congregate care placement in the child welfare, juvenile justice, and/or behavioral health systems.

Recently, we concluded a series of interviews with youth, their families, and professional partners from schools, residential facilities, and the child welfare, juvenile justice, and behavioral health systems. Dozens of participants from across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania identified challenges to school reintegration and shared their best practices to support students returning from congregate placement. Their wisdom has been compiled in our forthcoming publication: "School Reintegration for Youth Returning from Residential Placements: Voices from the Field and Recommendations for Pennsylvania."

As part of this partnership, we are also pleased to launch this monthly digest – a place to learn about the issue of community school reintegration, discover practical recommendations for supporting returning students, track relevant public policy and legislation, and meet some of the individuals and organizations doing this important work. In this inaugural issue, we introduce you to foundational concepts in the school-to-prison pipeline.



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Glossary of Terms

Congregate Care - Also referred to as residential or institutional facilities, congregate care settings provide residential care and supervision 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to youth involved with the child welfare, juvenile justice, and/or behavioral health systems who require multiple coordinated services and supports to meet their behavioral, health, and educational needs. Youth who are in a congregate care setting have been removed from their home and often their community for placement in this setting.

School Reintegration – School reintegration refers to the process of a youth returning to a community school following a period in congregate care. Specifically, our work has identified six key components that contribute to a youth's success or failure in reintegrating to school: timely and complete transfer of student records, appropriate and timely school placement, special education services, credit transfer and recovery, youth participation and family involvement, and a welcoming school community.

Grow

Your

Knowledge

Training opportunities:

As part of our joint work, *Child Advocates* and Temple IOD offer free training on the school-to-prison pipeline and school reintegration. These trainings can be personalized to your needs and organization. For more information on these trainings, contact Ciera Ellison at cellison@sccalaw.org.

SPOTLIGHT SERIES

Our spotlight Series highlights individuals and organizations both internally and externally that are doing innovative and important work on the issues of community school reintegration, dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline, and addressing bias in education. In this inaugural issue, we introduce you to a key member of our own staff.



Meet Ciera Ellison, the new Child Policy Associate at *Child Advocates*. Ciera joins *Child Advocates* from the School District of Philadelphia where she worked as a transition case manager for youth returning to the school district following placement at a congregate care facility. Ciera has her Bachelor's Degree in Social Work from Temple University, and her Master of Legal Studies from the Drexel Kline School of Law. Ciera has dedicated her career to supporting youth and families involved in the juvenile justice and child welfare systems. Ciera is a strong advocate for racial equity and inclusion with a specific focus in education and school stability for youth returning to a community school setting. Ciera will focus on *Child Advocates'* school reintegration work, including offering trainings for professionals around supporting youth who are returning back into their communities, and advocating for policy change to dismantle oppressive systemic barriers. When Ciera is not working, she enjoys spending time with her 14-month old Dalmatian at the dog park, grabbing ice cream with friends, and exploring all that the City of Philadelphia has to offer.

FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE

With the start of school this fall, some students are returning to in-person learning for the first time in 18 months. It's a good time to remember that not all students come from traditional home environments, and many have experienced hardship and tragedy in recent months. Here are two practical suggestions for making all students feel welcome as the school year kicks off.

Whether a student is starting at a new school this year or returning after a year of virtual instruction, supporting social connections will be key to building a sense of school community. Advising students about - and inviting them to join - school-based clubs and sports teams is a great way to promote peer involvement. Another proven way to acclimate youth of any age is to create partner/group activities where the partners/groups have already been pre-selected. Pre-selecting the partners or groups will assist students who are too shy to make the first connection and will ensure that students will not be left out if they do not know anyone. Doing partner activities first thing in the morning also creates opportunities for youth to continue to grow that connection at lunch later in the day.

Lessons, projects, or share-outs in the form of: "What did you do this summer?" have the potential to cause unintentional trauma or triggers for students who may have been removed from their home this past year, or experienced a form of separation from their family. With intention and careful application of educational sensitivity, the question could be asked in a different way: "What was one of your favorite activities this summer?" or "What is your favorite summer time activity?" With a simple alteration, the question can support a positive and inclusive response for a student that may not want to share unpleasant parts of their summer.

THE ROAD FROM OUR REALITY TO OUR RESPONSIBILITY

Racial and economic disparities have been built into the foundation of our nation from slavery, to Jim Crow laws, through segregation, and beyond. While our nation was building, so too was a legal system of oppression and disenfranchisement. Although the existence of these disparities were known and experienced long before the murder of George Floyd in May of 2020, that event seems to have spurred conversations concerning inequities to advance from simple dialogue to action and reform.

As advocates and supporters of youth across Pennsylvania, *Child Advocates* seeks to close the gap of racial disparity and other inequities that we see in our day-to-day practice - particularly in the systems of child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and behavioral health. Education on the existence of these injustices is a vital first step to opening the gates of collaboration and change among advocates for children, with the goal of empowering the youth with whom we work and creating a more equitable world for us all.

Every issue of this digest will include a discussion of vital issues related to the lived experiences of our clients related to: out-of-home placement, youth justice, school pushout, and school reintegration. We will explore our present systemic barriers, introduce evidenced-based research for dismantling current practice, and create a blueprint for structural change and empowerment.



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SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

In 1994, the Federal Government mandated that schools take a zero-tolerance approach to students who commit an in-school infraction, or risk losing federal funding. This came at a time when the country believed adolescents were committing more violent crimes and felt the need to protect the community from what they believed was an emergence of a new generation of youth "super predators."

The "School-to-Prison Pipeline" refers to the observed national crisis of students being pushed out of the classroom and into the juvenile justice or criminal justice system creating a cycle of system involvement and incarceration.

Resources and References
Person. (2020, December 10). The story of the SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE. ArcGIS StoryMaps. Retrieved September 13, 2021, from <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/6185240ac3b346268cabe50770ec62f3>.
School-to-prison pipeline. American Civil Liberties Union. (n.d.). Retrieved September 13, 2021, from <https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline>.

To combat the harmful effects of the zero-tolerance policies, some large urban school districts across America have recently eliminated the presence of police in schools, and instead have reallocated those resources to provide students with additional support staff such as social workers, school psychologist, nurses, and guidance counselors. Research demonstrates that adding support staff who provide academic, behavioral, and emotional intervention can greatly reduce rates of out-of-school suspensions.

School Districts across the nation scrambled to implement policies that would align with the federal government's new mandate by hiring or contracting with local police departments to monitor and walk the halls of school buildings. While the integration of police officers in schools was a direct response to the implementation of zero-tolerance policies, what resulted was the disproportionate attack on the most marginalized population of students. Research has found that the students most affected by zero-tolerance school policies are students living in poverty, students with disabilities, and students of color.