

OPINION

MY TURN | 'School-to-prison' can't be our aim

Posted: April 19, 2016

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By Tarra Simmons

My son's first year in middle school has proved to be a trying time. Middle school is trying for most kids, given how challenging it is for adolescents to develop their identities. But, in part due to a history of family problems, poverty and disability, my son has had it harder than most and has had difficulty controlling his comments.

Because of this, he has been repeatedly punished at school and even suspended. I understand his comments are inappropriate and offensive to others, and agree that there should be consequences for his actions. But is suspension really the answer? Or is suspending my child simply putting him into the school to prison pipeline, on track to be pushed out of school and into the criminal system?

The term "school-to-prison pipeline" has become a popular way to describe what is happening to many youth today. I've known what it means personally for much longer. Starting at a young age I was constantly told that I was a bad kid. My attitude, my need to control my surroundings, and my inappropriate comments were not welcome at school. My mother was on her third marriage and suffering with addiction. I was a struggling kid, desperate to find acceptance somewhere. At 13, I looked to gang membership for a place to fit in. Within two months of starting junior high, I was expelled. The expulsion led to more unstructured time at home. By age 14, I was pregnant and homeless.

Is there an alternative path for kids struggling in middle school and high school, or are we going to keep setting this trajectory for our youth?

When kids act out, that doesn't mean they are inherently bad or beyond our help. Some students act out because they are coping with the stress of family problems like unemployment, poverty, addiction and mental health issues. Some students act out because "misbehavior" is part of ordinary child development. During adolescence, a child's brain is unable to access the executive functioning portion that helps in self-regulation, making them more likely to act impulsively. Testing boundaries, finding out what gets attention and how to assert an identity are normal activities for adolescents.

Unfortunately, our schools have few resources for struggling kids. Kids under stress and seeking to find themselves need safe space to discuss their problems. They can benefit from positive behavioral support systems and restorative justices policies that focus on learning and changing rather than punishment and exclusion from school.

Unfortunately, districts have adopted quick, easy, punitive approaches to remove a child from school if the child is deemed "disruptive." This is damaging to kids. The No. 1 way to prevent a prison sentence is to help kids earn a high school diploma. The No. 1 way to prevent a child from entering the juvenile justice system is to keep them engaged in education. Each day a child is suspended puts them at a higher risk of being pushed out of school, or dropping out of school

We all want kids to succeed. Unfortunately, we are failing. In the Central Kitsap School District, where my children attend, 89 percent of children are graduating high school. But only 68 percent of African American children are graduating. Research shows that African American students are targeted for punishment in schools, receiving more punishment than white students for the same behaviors. In addition, children with disabilities are twice as likely to be disciplined than children without disabilities. Why are we backing school district policies that reinforce this school-to-prison pipeline and disproportionately impact marginalized

My heart breaks as I watch my son struggle with school policies that don't help him shift his behavior and thrive, but only stigmatize him and banish him from school. I call on our school districts to drop a failing, punishment-centered approach that is hurting so many children and especially endangers kids of color and kids with disabilities.

Because pushing kids out of school to later incarcerate them by the masses is not a value we share in our country, our state, and surely, our community.

Tarra Simmons of Bremerton is a second-year law student at Seattle University. She is also a community activist working to reform the criminal legal system through the nonprofit group Civil Survival, and was profiled recently in the Kitsap Sun. She can be reached at simmons9@seattleu.edu.



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