

Chapter 3

Targeted Solutions to Improve the School-to-Prison Pipeline

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ABSTRACT

Students who are subjected to exclusionary discipline have worse academic performance and are more likely to be incarcerated later in life. This phenomenon is nuanced and requires a calculated, multifaceted approach. As an educator and juvenile law attorney, the authors have seen the school-to-prison pipeline from both the school perspective and the legal perspective. They will use their combined narratives to raise awareness of the school-to-prison pipeline and provide a three-pronged approach to help curb its growth. This chapter unfolds by first discussing the phenomenon and how it can be recognized. Next, the authors address who is being impacted by the phenomenon and where it is taking place. Then, they discuss when to do something about the phenomenon, and what to do, before discussing the ways this autoethnographic self-narrative forced us to revisit our thinking. Finally, they provide a three-pronged approach modeled on a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) framework, restorative circles, and a teen court system.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-9236-9.ch003

AUTHOR ONE'S PERSPECTIVE: CONTINUATION HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER

As a continuation school teacher, I had the privilege of working with a diverse group of students, each with their own unique stories and challenges. Among them, there is one student who stands out in my memory, named Isabella (pseudonym). Isabella's journey was marked by frequent absences, but her reasons were far from ordinary. When Isabella first stepped into my classroom, I could sense the weight of her experiences. She carried herself with a guarded demeanor, as if constantly on edge. It wasn't long before I learned about her sporadic attendance, which was a result of being in and out of a juvenile detention facility.

Through our conversations, Isabella shared glimpses of her life, unveiling a haunting truth about the interconnectedness of our education system and the criminal justice system. She recounted how her troubles began long before she entered the juvenile detention facility. Isabella's single mother was disabled from a car accident and unable to work. Isabella shared the immense responsibility of taking care of her sister, working odd jobs, and buying and selling various items to try to help keep her family's electricity on. She mentioned her teachers at the comprehensive high school ignored her because her class sizes were so large and that she often didn't know where she could go for help when she was struggling with school or her home life. She acknowledged that she acted out or didn't pay attention in class because she felt behind, like she couldn't get caught up, and that she was too far behind to make an attempt to improve her standing. She felt her teachers often blamed her for her circumstances, and when they did pay attention to her, it was a negative interaction; she was often sent to the school administration, missing class and placing her further behind her peers.

Isabella's story shed light on the systemic issues that contribute to the School-to-Prison Pipeline, a phenomenon that hadn't made itself apparent to me until I worked in a continuation high school. I grew up in a middle-class family with a privileged background, so this phenomenon was unknown until I began witnessing students like Isabella in and out of juvenile detention facilities. It became clear that her frequent encounters with law enforcement were not an isolated incident but rather a symptom of a larger problem plaguing our education system. It saddened me to realize that instead of nurturing her potential, Isabella had fallen victim to a cycle that perpetuated inequity and denied her the opportunity to improve her circumstances.

Witnessing Isabella's struggles firsthand, I resolved to be more than just a teacher to her. I became her advocate, working tirelessly to ensure she received the support she needed to thrive academically and emotionally. Together, we explored paths to success, focusing on building resilience, self-confidence, and a sense of belonging. I supported her in finding resources, connected her to a counselor, and worked with

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