



Breaking the Cycle: Disrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline Through Restorative Justice

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The school-to-prison pipeline refers to the systemic funneling of students from schools into the criminal justice system. Harsh disciplinary policies and exclusionary practices often criminalize student behavior rather than support it. This brief examines how restorative justice and trauma-informed approaches can offer alternative models for school discipline, breaking the cycle of the pipeline and fostering healthier, more accountable school communities.

II. OVERVIEW

The school-to-prison pipeline is one of the most urgent and overlooked civil rights issues in American education. Rooted in zero-tolerance policies, over-policing, and racial bias, the pipeline pushes vulnerable students out of classrooms and into the juvenile justice system. Traditional disciplinary methods—such as suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement—disproportionately impact Black, Indigenous, special needs, and low-income students, often in attempts to combat non-violent or developmentally typical behaviors. By addressing the root causes and centering student accountability and healing, these models shift the focus from punishment to restoration.

A. Relevance

According to the American Civil Liberties Union, zero-tolerance policies often result in students being criminalized for behavior that should be addressed within a school. These policies were largely introduced in response to fears about school violence; however, they disproportionately target students of color and give them harsh punishments—like imprisonment or placement in disciplinary schools—when support, mediation, or counseling could have been more effective.

Restorative justice and trauma-informed education represent a growing movement that rethinks school discipline through the lens of equity and care. In California, suspension rates have declined since 2020, but racial disparities remain deeply entrenched, having been most dramatic for children of color. Stats show that the students who experience classroom exclusionary punishments are also more likely to repeat a grade, drop out of school, and become involved in the juvenile justice system. As mental health crises, youth incarceration, and educational disparities continue to widen, policy leaders and educators should urgently reconsider how justice is defined, practiced, and prioritized in schools. Ending the pipeline is both reform and a moral imperative to ensure that schools remain places of learning, not punishment.

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

The school-to-prison pipeline has its roots in a broader shift toward punitive discipline in the late 20th century. In the 1980s, fears about youth crime and the rise of the "tough on crime" era led to the widespread adoption of zero-tolerance policies in schools. These policies mandated automatic punishments—such as suspension, expulsion, or referral to law enforcement—for a wide range of behaviors, including those as minor as defiance or dress code violations. As a result, school discipline began to mirror criminal justice procedures, with police officers (often called school resource officers) increasingly stationed on campuses. This shift marked a separation from traditional disciplinary approaches, coinciding with an increase in suspensions and expulsions, disproportionately affecting students of color, disabled students, and other marginalized groups.

As fear around school violence grew, especially in the 1990s, the federal government pushed for stricter discipline. The 1994 *Gun-Free Schools Act* made it mandatory for schools to expel any student who brought a weapon on campus or risk losing federal funding. But in practice, these policies didn't stay limited to serious threats—they started expanding to include vague or subjective behaviors like "disruption" or "defiance." More and more students were pushed out of class for minor issues, and schools began treating discipline like law enforcement. Instead of addressing why a student might be acting out, the goal became removing them entirely.

That mindset is what gave rise to restorative justice in schools. Starting in the early 2000s,

educators and advocates began pushing back by offering a different approach—one focused on relationships, accountability, and repairing harm. Drawing on Indigenous and community-based practices, restorative justice emphasizes relationship-building, dialogue, and accountability rather than punishment. Pilot programs began appearing in school districts across the country, offering an alternative framework that prioritized healing and conflict resolution. Although restorative justice practices are not yet universally adopted, they continue to be a growing movement among educators, advocates, and policymakers in creating school environments rooted in care and equity.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

Students, particularly ones from marginalized or underfunded communities, are most directly impacted by the school-to-prison pipeline and are the primary stakeholders. Students are the ones who face lost instructional time, falling behind academically, and long-term involvement in the criminal legal system. Students are not simply removed from class, but pushed from opportunity. However, teachers, as the ones often enforcing the disciplinary policies, are directly impacted by student behavior and may feel that restorative justice asks too much of them without enough training.

Principals and district leaders are stakeholders with responsibility over setting discipline policies, adopting restorative programs, and ensuring their implementation; these leaders are accountable for safety and federal compliance, but may worry about liability, funding, or public image. Finally, policymakers and elected officials shape the laws

and funding behind school discipline, and while they may gain political support by appearing certain on safety, they also risk criticism if harsh policies fail to improve outcomes.

B. Risks of Indifference

If stakeholders remain indifferent to harsh disciplinary policies and their impacts, the risk is that disproportionate punishment of marginalized students will continue or even worsen. Suspension and expulsion rates would likely rise, following trends seen in 2000, from 1.7 million in 1974 to 3.1 million students. The trend of students falling behind in classes without the needed support from staff would consequently lead to the loss of trust between students, families, and schools. Over time, these patterns contribute to lasting social and economic costs for communities, including reduced workforce opportunities and increased involvement in the criminal justice system, ultimately perpetuating the cycles of inequality.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Because school discipline policies affect not just individual students but the overall well-being of educational systems, communities, and long-term societal outcomes, nonpartisan efforts must address the harmful effects of exclusionary discipline and support alternatives such as restorative justice. The benefits of doing so include, but are not limited to, the following:

- 1) Improved educational outcomes and workforce readiness: As aforementioned, when students are repeatedly suspended or expelled, they miss valuable class time, fall behind academically, and are more likely

to drop out. This affects not only their futures but the talent pool of the broader workforce. Reducing suspensions, particularly for non-violent, subjective offenses, helps keep students engaged in learning and better prepared to contribute productively to the economy. Investing in approaches that keep students in school benefits future labor force participation and economic competitiveness.

- 2) Cost savings for school districts and communities: Out-of-school suspensions and juvenile justice referrals often lead to long-term public costs, from increased policing to incarceration. Meanwhile, schools that implement restorative justice programs report fewer behavioral issues, fewer suspensions, and higher graduation rates. While some training and staffing are needed up front, the long-term reduction in legal system involvement and student disengagement translates into significant savings for school districts and taxpayers.
- 3) Stronger school climate and community trust: Exclusionary discipline damages relationships between students, teachers, and school staff. In contrast, restorative practices promote communication and community-building. Schools that adopt these practices report better student-teacher relationships and fewer disruptions, strengthening the school as a trusted institution in the eyes of both families and the broader community, which is essential for public confidence in education systems, regardless of political affiliation.

V. TRIED POLICY

While the school-to-prison pipeline is a nationwide issue, California has served as a testing ground for restorative justice legislation, offering insight into what implementation can look like at the state level. In 2016, California passed Assembly Bill 1010, which aimed to reduce suspensions and expulsions by promoting restorative practices in schools. It encouraged districts to move away from zero-tolerance discipline and adopt alternatives that address student behavior through dialogue, accountability, and community repair. Some districts, like Oakland Unified and Los Angeles Unified, began implementing pilot programs even earlier, reporting decreases in suspension rates and improved school climate.

However, these programs can only go so far without the resources to back them. In many cases, schools lack the funding, staff training, or long-term support needed to expand restorative practices across an entire district. Even when early results are promising, momentum often fades without clear infrastructure in place. California's experience makes one thing clear: restorative justice cannot just be a one-time initiative—it needs lasting investment to create real change.

V1. POLICY OPTIONS

Dedicated Statewide Funding for Restorative Justice Infrastructure

A major barrier to effective restorative justice in California is the lack of sustained, reliable funding. Many districts have piloted programs like peer mediation, restorative circles, and harm repair sessions, but struggle to maintain them due to unstable budgets. Establishing a dedicated state budget line for restorative justice and

trauma-informed training would provide consistent support for hiring trained facilitators, ongoing staff development, and building community partnerships, especially in districts with the greatest disciplinary disparities. Without this financial foundation, even well-designed programs risk fading before reaching their full potential.

Restorative Practice Integration into Teacher Credentialing and Administrator Training

Currently, restorative justice is often treated as an add-on or afterthought—something only a handful of staff receive training for. Making restorative principles a required component of teacher preparation programs and administrator certifications would normalize these approaches across California schools. This would ensure that educators enter classrooms equipped not just to manage behavior, but to build community, prevent conflict, and respond to harm in developmentally appropriate ways. Embedding these practices into professional pathways strengthens implementation and reduces reliance on external consultants or sporadic training.

Data Transparency and Accountability for Disciplinary Outcomes

To meaningfully address the school-to-prison pipeline, California must track not just overall suspension rates but who is being disciplined and how. A state-level mandate requiring schools to publicly report disaggregated disciplinary data—by race, disability status, and income—would promote transparency and help identify patterns of disproportionate impact. This data should be tied to intervention: if disparities persist, districts must submit corrective action plans outlining how they will reduce exclusionary practices. Transparency alone isn't enough, but

when paired with accountability, it becomes a tool for structural reform and improvement.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

In exploring the school-to-prison pipeline, I've come to see how deeply discipline systems reflect our values, and how urgently they need to be reimagined. Restorative justice and trauma-informed approaches aren't just alternatives to punishment; they're tools for building trust, addressing harm, and supporting the very students who are often failed by our traditional systems. California's efforts have shown what's possible when we prioritize relationships over removal, but also how complex and ongoing this work truly is. It's not enough to have the right ideas—we need the infrastructure to carry them out.

Addressing the school-to-prison pipeline is not just a policy challenge—it is a moral obligation. Still, California is uniquely positioned to lead in this space. By prioritizing healing over punishment and centering the needs of students most affected by exclusionary discipline, California and our nation have the opportunity to redefine what justice in education truly means. Through continued investment, thoughtful training, and transparent accountability, the state can deepen its commitment, not just by reducing harm but by actively cultivating school environments where every student has the chance to belong and succeed. Progress is happening, and with the right policies in place, that progress can become a foundation for lasting, systemic change.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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