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The School-to-Prison Pipeline

By **THE EDITORIAL BOARD**

School officials across the country responded to a surge in juvenile crime during the 1980s and the Columbine High School shootings a decade later by tightening disciplinary policies and increasing the number of police patrolling public schools. One unfortunate result has been the creation of a repressive environment in which young people are suspended, expelled or even arrested over minor misbehaviors — like talking back or disrupting class — that would once have been handled by the principal.

The policies have not made schools safer. However, by criminalizing routine disciplinary problems, they have damaged the lives of many children by making them more likely to drop out and entangling them, sometimes permanently, in the criminal justice system. The policies are also discriminatory: black and Hispanic children are shipped off to court more frequently than white students who commit similar infractions.

The need to chart a new course in school discipline is underscored in a report scheduled to be released on Thursday by the [New York City School-Justice Partnership Task Force](#), a working group led by Judith Kaye, the former chief judge of the State of New York, and composed of people from the fields of law enforcement, education, philanthropy, civil rights and child advocacy.

The task force examined disciplinary practices in the city's 1.1 million-student system during the 2011-2012 school year. It found that “the overwhelming majority of school-related suspensions, summonses and arrests are for minor misbehavior, behavior that occurs on a daily basis in most schools.”

The numbers are startling. The city schools imposed nearly 70,000 suspensions in the 2011-2012 school year, 40 percent more than the period six years earlier. Of the 882 arrests during the school year studied, one in every six was for “resisting arrest” or “obstructing governmental administration,” charges for which there is often no underlying criminal behavior. The authorities also issued more than 1,600 summonses — tickets that require the student to appear in criminal court and that can lead to arrest for those who fail to appear.

The discriminatory application of disciplinary policy is particularly troubling. For example, the study found that black students in New York City are 14 times more likely to be arrested

because of school-based incidents than their white peers; Hispanic students are five times more likely to be arrested than whites. Special-needs children are also disproportionately affected, and are four times more likely to be suspended than their peers.

The good news is most of the city's schools manage to handle misbehavior without resorting to draconian measures. Only a small percentage of schools account for a disproportionate number of the suspensions, summonses and arrests. As the report notes, New York City can fix this problem by embracing comprehensive, systemwide guidelines that have proved successful in places like Baltimore, Cincinnati and Clayton County, Ga.

The report makes many detailed recommendations. For starters, it calls on the next mayor to convene an interagency leadership team — including educators, social service officials, court officials and others — to keep more students safely in school while cutting down on the use of the harshest measures. It also suggests a “graduated response protocol” that would show schools how to resolve nonserious misbehavior themselves, reserving the court system for the most egregious cases. And it asks schools with low rates of suspensions, arrests and summonses to share solutions with schools that struggle with this problem. All of these ideas make good sense for Mayor Michael Bloomberg's successor.

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