

Inside Education

Part 6—Continued—The SPP: Those Who Care!

Dr. Armand A. Fusco

Last week's Part 6 looked at the various issues involved with the *School to Prison Pipeline* (SPP-- a term coined early in the early twenty-first century to refer to the policies and practices that directly and indirectly push students out of school and on a pathway to prison resulting from an academic condition of can't read, can't learn); and you likely viewed your situation as hopeless especially with six strikes against you, one of which was that you were born into an impoverished neighborhood. **As a result, by law you were forced to attend a failing school where you were held in bondage because you had no real option to leave until you could drop out; it's a sordid condition that you did not create; it was forced on you. It should be against the law, and it may be, but it has not been challenged in the courts.**

By any standard of justice, any court action should decide that it's unconstitutional. School miseducation and educational malpractice should not be forced upon you by lawful means that propelled you unknowingly to get in line for the *School to Prison Pipeline*; again, something over which you had no control. Therefore, it would not be surprising that you must have felt like no one cared about your plight, but that's not true because there are advocates who care and they are sincere in wanting to end this tragedy of schooling. Sadly, caring and sincerity does not lead to successful results unless the core problem has been identified; this, as you will see, is something that not a single one done.

The fact is that the *School-to-Prison Pipeline* **“has been a crucial concern of parents, educators, ministers, civil rights activists, lawyers and youth advocates for a number of years.”** It started to become a major concern of the research literature and the general public starting around the start of the 21st century. It was due in large part (as will be seen shortly) to the spiraling statistics and the negative impact on children of color like yourself. Some advocates have defined the problem as *“a systematic way of syphoning children out of public schools and funneling them into the juvenile and criminal justice system.”* In addition, ***a number of civil rights lawyers regard the SPP as a critical civil rights issue.***

MY COMMENTARY: However, although it is claimed to be a civil rights issue first and foremost, any such successful actions will not solve the core problem of reading deficits. It's far more than a civil rights issue because it's **a constitutional issue. Being forced by law to attend a failing school where failure and the pipeline is predictable is not only unjust but unconstitutional by any standard.** Yet, as will be seen, the following advocates who are representative of so many others, have not been very successful in their efforts; if they were, you and others like you, would not be behind prison walls, and I would not have to write this open letter.

With so many advocates for you, it really is hard to know where to begin when it has been happening over many years. Although the research indicates that the SPP issue started getting attention at the beginning of the 21st century, the fact is that your incarcerations started to increase very sharply, quickly and dramatically starting around mid-1980 going from 200 per 100,000 population to 950 per 100,000 about 2005 through 2014 and it's just starting to show a slight decline.

What's baffling to me is that despite all of the smart people involved and the resources at their disposal, they have all missed targeting the right issues.

What follows is a sampling of those who have advocated for you over the past few years; and, as you will see, after each example, I will do a commentary of my reaction.

Dignity in Schools Campaign (2006)

The DSC challenges the systemic problem of pushouts in our nation's schools and works to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. As a national coalition, the *Dignity in Schools Campaign* builds power amongst parents, youth, organizers, advocates and educators to transform their own communities, support alternatives to a culture of zero-tolerance, punishment, criminalization and the **dismantling of public schools**, and fight racism and all forms of oppression. We bring together our members through direct action organizing, public policy advocacy and leadership *development to fight for the human right of every young person to a quality education and to be treated with dignity.*

In addition, DSC provides fact sheets on pushouts at the national and state level as well as current federal legislation to combat school pushout.

MY COMMENTARY: Despite such rhetoric, the SPP has not been dismantled and neither has the public schools! This source and the others to follow are all addressing the peripheral issues, the outer skin of the onion, rather than unpeeling it to get at the stench the skin hides. The stench is that the law forces detention in failing schools and that is what needs to be stopped in order to start solving the real problem. Legislation would be nice, but in **any school district failing schools can be closed without legislation or even state approval.** So why isn't it being done is the question?

The problem is that all of the advocates see the problem as policies and practices such as **zero tolerance policies that need to end; but, ending the them will not provide a solution to your reading problem. Furthermore, to even suggest dismantling public schools is absolutely mission impossible, as well as, unnecessary.** What needs to be dismantled are the **failing schools; but that alone will not solve the problem either. Once they cease to exist, they must be replaced with schools or programs that are effective in teaching reading.**

Also, for those of you who are incarcerated, there are usually rehab programs (schooling) to get you a high school diploma (GED). That can be done right now unless they too are a failing school type; the fact that 78% of you return to the prison cells within 5 or fewer years is an indication that they may fall into that category.

In the next few citations, please notice the same script they all follow because they seek the same solutions without ever getting to the cause. It's rather remarkable how so many smart and educated people can be so blinded by biased beliefs rather than searching for the truth. I don't know who the Pied Piper is that they are following, but obviously there must be one.

National Opportunity to Learn Campaign

“Ending the School to Prison Pipeline, National Opportunity to Learn,” Schott Foundation, (undated but had to be after 2011):

Across the country, [here comes the common script they all follow] ***“the combination of overly harsh school policies and an increased role of law enforcement in schools has created a “schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track,” in which punitive measures such as suspensions, expulsions, and school-based arrests are increasingly used to deal with student misbehavior, and huge numbers of youth are pushed out of school and into prisons and jails.*** In many communities, this transforms schools from places of learning to dangerous gateways into juvenile court. **Again, the problem is not disciplinary, it is a failure to teach you reading skills required to be an educated student.**

The Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice's ***“Redirecting the School to Prison Pipeline”*** project also tackles this issue, saying ***“the School to Prison pipeline is derailing individual lives, devastating families and communities, and threatening our nation's economic future. Yet, preliminary research indicates that jail is not the inevitable destiny for children trapped within this pipeline.”***

CHHIRJ produces action kits, manuals, and other tools useful to advocates and conducts training for juvenile judges, defense attorneys, school officials, and others. It would be interesting to find out how many of these officials have used them.

“Their journey through the pipeline is accelerated by the convergence of ill-conceived policies and practices permeating both educational and juvenile justice systems, and by the failure of these two systems to work together to improve the life chances of at-risk youths. Fortunately, these ineffective and costly policies can be dismantled and replaced with interventions and programs aimed, first, at keeping more at-risk youths in school through, at a minimum, completion of high school, and, second, at helping those who have dropped out or been sent to juvenile halls to successfully re-enter communities and schools.”

MY COMMENTARY: The problem is that what can be done, and should be done is not being done! Further, just keeping you in school will not solve the problem unless effective reading programs and strategies are not only implemented, but successful. What’s worse is that simply graduating you to get a diploma without having the basic literacy skills to obtain and keep a meaningful job is not very productive even though it makes the school graduation statistics to look good. Again, it’s not dealing with the inner core of the onion.

Annie E. Casey Foundation, October 2011

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF®) is devoted to developing a brighter future for millions of children at risk of poor educational, economic, social and health outcomes.

Its mission focuses on strengthening families, building stronger communities and ensuring access to opportunity, because children need all three to succeed. *“We advance research and solutions to overcome the barriers to success, help communities demonstrate what works and influence decision makers.”*

“Putting young people in jail – particularly for nonviolent offenses – is a failed strategy, according to a recent report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation that relied on decades of research and data. The report’s most scathing findings include that youth incarceration does not reduce future offending; provides no overall benefit to public safety; wastes taxpayer dollars; and exposes youth to high levels of violence and abuse.

The Advancement Project’s Action kit: *Ending the schoolhouse-to-jailhouse pipeline* aids in collecting and analyzing data about school discipline policies and practices.

“...School districts around the country have taken the Zero Tolerance principle, initially intended for weapon and drug offenses, and expanded it so that harsh disciplinary practices such as suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement are increasingly common for minor misconduct...in which the punishment rarely fits the They are also unforgiving leaving students without any “lessons learned” and a discipline record that follows them from grade to grade.”

MY COMMENTARY: All of this information has been collected and known; and restating what is known does not produce any effective remedies. What is a playbook script to follow is continued by others: *The conduct of certain students is for minor offenses and, therefore, the punishment does not fit the minor infractions.* What is not spelled out is just what are these *minor or insignificant infractions* of conduct? Granted there are some teachers who do not know how to handle disciplinary problems very well, but they are not the norm. **Most teachers do not react to every minor infraction and for a very good reason; if they did, it would be impossible to teach any lesson.**

Keeping them (you) out of jail can also be very unproductive because it’s likely they will have to resort to more crime due to “self-employment” activities, selling drugs and other stuff to survive that will still end in incarceration.

Moms Rising

“Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline,” is a disturbing national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

MomsRising is working to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline from the point of suspension to the point of youth incarceration. *We're challenging the practices and policies that push students out of schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. When we work to dismantle the school to prison pipeline, we open up opportunities to advance the cradle to college pathway.*

“Many of the children most impacted by this “push out” have learning disabilities, histories of poverty, abuse, or neglect, and would benefit from additional counseling services. Instead, they are isolated, punished, and pushed out.

MY COMMENTARY: What the “moms” don’t understand is that dismantling the pipeline will not solve the underlying cause of your problem because your reading deficits will still exist. What is completely ignored is that keeping you in school will not stop “*minor but disturbing to the teacher infractions,*” and research has shown that it does have a negative impact on the rest of the students (the vast majority) to learn. Where are their rights and advocates?

NAACP Legal Defense Fund

“Dismantling the School to Prison Pipeline:” The punitive and overzealous tools and approaches of the modern criminal justice system have seeped into our schools, serving to remove children from mainstream educational environments and funnel them onto a one-way path toward prison. These various policies, collectively referred to as the *School-to-Prison Pipeline*, push children out of school and hasten their entry into the juvenile, and eventually the criminal, justice system, where prison is the end of the road.

“Historical inequities, such as segregated education, concentrated poverty, and racial disparities in law enforcement, all feed the pipeline. The School-to-Prison Pipeline is one of the most urgent challenges in education today.”

MY COMMENTARY: The first sentence of the quote confirms their bias looking at factors that are not causes, but simply related issues. What really feeds the pipeline is the inability to learn because of reading deficits. **Bad education policies and practices instigate the problem and that has nothing to do with discrimination or racial bias.** As long as the drumbeat is played to enhance the script, the problem will not be solved. Considering that this effort is from the *Legal Defense Fund*, they should be propelling the movement to charge that it is an unconstitutional issue of forcing attendance at failing schools with no right of redress.

National Education Association: edjustice

“Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline. Most of us believe that every child, whatever their color, background or zip code, has the right to learn in a supportive environment that respects their humanity, upholds their dignity, and responds fairly to mistakes and mis-steps. Instead, zero tolerance and other exclusionary school discipline policies are pushing kids out of the classroom at unprecedented rates.

“Funding choices by certain politicians prioritize putting police into schools harming students who are Black, brown, LGBT or disabled for making mistakes that for wealthy white kids are deemed part of growing up and learning.”

MY COMMENTARY: This rhetoric on the part of the NEA is so distorted and biased as educators, they should know what the root cause of the problem is; but, of course, they cannot blame their membership of educators. Police have been put into schools because the educators

could not and can no longer deal with the chaos of “*mistakes and mis-steps*” that translated means that it’s making effective teaching a class of students difficult if not impossible. In fact, this is exactly what is reported from their own teacher membership.

The Atlantic (an online newspaper)

“*Why the U.S. Must Dismantle the School-to-Prison Pipeline,*” Johnson and Womack & National Journal, 01/22/201: 3The Justice Department recently filed a lawsuit against the city, Lauderdale County, judges of the Lauderdale County Youth Court, and the state of Mississippi for operating what it called a "school-to-prison pipeline in which the rights of children in Meridian are repeatedly and routinely violated."

“Unfortunately, the injustices in Meridian are not isolated events. A new report shows similar events have happened across Mississippi...where public-school staff admitted to handcuffing students to metal railings for hours. In Louisiana, more than 300,000 students are suspended and expelled each year, many of them for minor behavior issues or what could be explained as simple childhood mistakes.

Harsh punishments undermine the positive work of educators. In our state education systems, it can also increase resentment and distrust of law-enforcement officials, which makes their efforts less effective and in turn can also decrease overall public health and safety...

*Nationally, 3.3 million of our nation's students are suspended from school every year — enough students to fill every seat in all of the NFL stadiums combined. **How this punishment is handed down is highly discriminatory.***

Studies have shown that like their male classmates, young women of color are often pushed out of the classroom for minor violations and now make up the fastest-growing segment of our juvenile-justice system...

The momentum for change is building. The U.S. Senate Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights recently held the first-ever congressional hearing on ending the school-to-prison pipeline. Connecticut and Maryland have both passed statewide measures to keep kids in school and make out-of-school suspensions a punishment of last resort. And schools from New York to California are implementing alternative disciplinary strategies to address student behavior problems.

Cision, a PR Newswire commented (12/12/2012): "This hearing is a testament to all of the hard work of parents, students, grassroots organizations, and advocates across the country that have been fighting for decades on a local, state and national level to end this school pushout crisis in our nation's schools,"

MY COMMENTARY: Let me explain what is really happening in the school

trenches. **Suspensions and expulsions are down, but unruly behavior is not.** Also, “*childhood mistakes*” certainly sounds trivial; if so, why are the teachers reacting with concern? Let me explain from being in the trenches. It would take literally a totally incompetent teacher to react or deal with every childhood mistake that, incidentally are not explained. If teachers react to every minor mistake as they often occur in any classroom, the lesson plan would fly out of the door with no learning that day.

The reality is that if the schools do not report declines, the federal government will intercede, **even if there is no discrimination.** What is not being reported enough is that discipline chaos is becoming all too common in the failing schools particularly, but it’s simply not being recorded or reported. **It’s strange that this committee is involved with the Constitution, yet nothing was said about the issue of lawfully forced “incarceration or bondage” of students in failing Zombie schools known for ineffective schooling.**

Voices of Youth in Chicago Education

This is an organizing collaborative for education justice led by students of color from seven communities throughout the city of Chicago, and recently it conducted a cost analysis that found that not only are zero-tolerance policies ineffective, they are costly.

“Colorado students, parents, community members and organizational allies have made a significant stride in the effort to end the school-to-prison pipeline with the passage of legislation that calls on leaders to formulate alternatives to zero tolerance policies.”

Washington Post (05/26/2011): *Rethinking has come in North Carolina and Denver, in Baltimore and Los Angeles — part of a phenomenon driven by high suspension rates, community pressure, legal action and research findings. In the Washington region, Fairfax County is considering policy changes after a wave of community concern; school leaders in the District and Prince George’s, Arlington and Montgomery counties have pursued new ideas, too. Now, ‘it’s become evident that simply suspending students and putting them on the street comes back and bites you.’*

MY COMMENTARY: The problem is if they (you) remain in the classroom, it bites the teacher and the rest of the students. If they are to be kept in school (and they should be if at all possible), they must be isolated and provided with effective teaching; but this is not likely to happen in a failing school. I know I am sounding like a broken record, but ending zero-tolerance policies does not get at the problem that causes the need for zero-tolerance—misbehavior (by you) that is caused by frustration and anger in the learning process because of reading deficits. Ending every such policy will not solve one-iota of the problem other than the statistics that appear on a report.

League of Education Voters: School 2 Prisons Podcast Series

LEV works to create an educational system in which every student has an equal and adequate opportunity to succeed in college, work, and in life. LEV released a podcast series addressing the school to prison pipeline.

For more information about the school-to-prison pipeline and to see other toolkits, visit the OTL Campaign website: www.otlcampaign.org www.otlcampaign.org

MY COMMENTARY: The mission is sound, but it cannot be achieved unless students graduate with reading skills that will support them in meaningful employment. That’s what’s not happening; and when it doesn’t happen, there is only one bad choice to make in order to survive on the streets. If it was happening, there would not be any school-to-prison pipeline or issue.

There is one major organization that is in a position to advocate very strongly for your plight because it is concerned with legal “justice.”

ABA (American Bar Association)

A task force assembled to study this problem resulted in a 138-page report, ***ABA, School to Prison pipeline, Recommendations and Preliminary Report, 2018:***

“While many have known about the problems associated with the school-to-prison pipeline for years now elucidate the magnitude of various disciplinary actions including referral to alternative schools suspensions, expulsions, referral to law enforcement, and arrest...Local data provide additional sobering evidence of this problem, especially in light of the substantial evidence that many of these referrals to law enforcement were for minor offenses. _

The number of student suspensions and expulsions have also dramatically increased in recent years. *Approximately 3.45 million students were suspended at least*

one time during the 2011–2012 school year, and approximately 130,000 were expelled during that same time period... data also indicate that the majority of these suspensions and expulsions resulted from only trivial infractions of school rules or offenses, not from offenses that endangered the physical well-being of other students.

MY COMMENTARY: Here we go again with “*trivial infractions*” that are words without any real meaning unless explained. **The disciplinary offenses may seem trivial from outside observers, but they are not to teachers who are trying to teach a class of students whose instruction has to be stopped to deal with the “trivial infractions.”** In fact, there is some evidence to prove that the rest of the students do lose out on instruction when the teacher has to take time to deal with such disruptions. If a teacher deals with every trivial infraction, there would be little time to teach.

It is important to note that the ABA is an organization of lawyers who are trained to get at facts, but the only facts in this report are the same rehashed script that is repeated over and over again that race, money, poverty, discrimination, harsh disciplinary policies and police presence etc., are causing the problem; **they are all issues, not causes**; and the harsh discipline is the result of students who are frustrated learners because they cannot read to learn. Again, the root cause is *can't read, can't learn*. What can't be simpler to understand?

Notice the date of the report (2018) 7 years after the extensive effort of the ***National Opportunity to Learn*** effort and instead of helping to decrease the numbers in the school to prison pipeline, this report indicated that there was a dramatic increase of suspensions and expulsions followed by an increased occupancy of prison cells.

These are all fine, noble, and needed reports and studies, but why none, absolutely none, has gotten at the root cause is beyond my ability to understand or accept. These are all smart, well educated, skillful people who are involved with the law and their missions is to search for the truth; yet, they did not search for the truth; instead, they followed the same worn out script.

Every Student Succeeds Act (2015)

This federal reform act claims to provide an important tool to dismantle this school-to-prison pipeline, but ***this act doesn't provide federal authorities with the tools they need to hold school districts accountable... communities must hold their school officials accountable*** [how can “communities” hold schools accountable when they have no idea of what is really going on with the SPP?] Nevertheless, it requires...

“School districts to show how they are taking steps to curb discipline practices that remove students from the classroom. This can include identifying schools with high rates of discipline. School districts are also being asked to adopt discipline practices backed by evidence and keep kids in school – welcome news after districts have spent many years touting harsh, zero-tolerance policies.

What's more, a district's discipline policy should be part of a “long-term goal of prison reduction through opportunities, mentoring, intervention, support and other education services,” according to the act. This approach is long overdue”.

MY COMMENTARY: It should be remembered that there is no education role in the Constitution for the federal government; it is a state responsibility. However, the feds are knee deep in schools because of the grant money they provide through legislative actions which is about 10% of all school expenditures. Each president of late has been responsible for education reform legislation, and to date none have succeeded; that is why there is reform after reform after reform. This too will also join the heap of failed reforms.

Shriver Center on Poverty Law

The Shriver Center works with community partners to seek lasting policy solutions for economic and racial justice.

“Multifaceted Strategies to Stop the School to Prison Pipeline Clearinghouse Review, 2009: Despite Supreme Court decisions, legislative mandates, and widespread recognition of the pivotal role that education plays in our society, **the denial of appropriate education because of their race or disability persists.**

WOW, they got it right. In other words, state education agencies and school districts ignore all of these efforts and for one good reason—there are no consequences to act and play dumb. Yet, the SPP can be stopped if communities and advocacy organizations, as well as individuals working in concert with one another, institute well-planned, coordinated, and multifaceted strategies...*It’s time for a new strategy and vision to emphasize education over punishment...it’s time for districts to implement promising evidence-based practices that promote learning, fairness, inclusion and a positive environment for all children.*

Among the new strategies are litigation, community lawyering, state/federal legislation, juvenile system reform, public education, and organizing and coalition building.

MY COMMENTARY: WOW! This 15-page report is rather awesome in what it seeks to accomplish; but, it’s mission impossible! It does not get at the causation of the problem that begins the disciplinary cycle—the cancer of reading deficits. Furthermore, this and numerous other efforts over the years have not produced a single piece of meaningful legislation to even slow down the SPP. However, far more important, **not a single word in this report mentions the cause that produces the need for discipline—can’t read, can’t learn, and when you can’t learn, you want out and dropout, and the way out is to misbehave—that’s psychology 101.** It’s like trying to stop someone who robs a loaf of bread time and time again; the cause is not criminal behavior, it is hunger, solve the hunger problem and the crimes end. **In other words, boys of color are being robbed of their right to learn according to their needs, they are hungry to learn, but they need the bread of learning—reading skills—to do so.**

Instead it rehashes what has been said over and over again that the problem is basically caused by zero-tolerance or harsh policies of schools intended to address chaotic discipline problems so most of the other children can learn; further, it impacts minorities the most and yet, never identifies that the minorities are primarily black boys. It’s not a serious problem in suburban schools, and far less a problem with girls in any school compared to boys. This should come as a lightning strike that it’s hitting one gender only; in other words, follow where the lightning strikes.

What none have mentioned is that this is also an urgent law enforcement issue because it results in up to 80% of crimes being committed by school dropouts; again, not one article, report or study thus far has emphasized this fact. Why aren’t law enforcement officials demanding that something be done, not to reduce on paper what is termed discriminatory disciplinary practices, but do what schools are supposed to do and that is to teach all students the skill they need to learn—reading. **Why is this so difficult to understand?**

With the various advocacy centers, studies, reports, and articles that are enough to cover the educational landscape, there has not been one significant action to stop the SPP. And, I am sorry to say this, but it means there are too many benefits to keep the system alive and well; shameful, but factual to say, it keeps an awful lot of people employed and that is just one of the benefits. What other explanation can there be? It’s certainly not a lack of information, but it is a lack of identifying, understanding, and addressing the cause.

Teaching Tolerance

“The SPP, policies and practices that favor incarceration over education do us all a grave injustice,” (Marilyn Elias), Spring 2013:

“In Meridian, Miss., police routinely arrest and transport youths to a juvenile detention center for minor classroom misbehaviors. In Jefferson Parish, La., school officials have given armed police “unfettered authority to stop, frisk, detain, question,

search and arrest schoolchildren on and off school grounds.” In Birmingham, Ala., police officers are permanently stationed in nearly every high school.

In fact, hundreds of school districts across the country employ discipline policies that push students out of the classroom and into the criminal justice system at alarming rates—a phenomenon known as the school to-prison pipeline

A landmark study published last year tracked nearly 1 million Texas students for at least six years. The study controlled for more than 80 variables, such as socioeconomic class, to see how they affected the likelihood of school discipline. The study found that African Americans were disproportionately punished compared with otherwise similar white and Latino students. Children with emotional disabilities also were disproportionately suspended and expelled.

Finally, Sen. Richard Durbin, held the first federal hearing on the SPP...

“For many young people, our schools are increasingly a gateway to the criminal justice system. This phenomenon is a consequence of a culture of zero tolerance that is widespread in our schools and is depriving many children of their fundamental right to an education.”

Teachers need a lot more support and training for effective discipline, and schools need to use best practices for behavior modification to keep these kids in school where they belong.”

The information on the following pages highlights common scenarios that push young people into the school-to-prison pipeline and offers practical advice for how teachers can dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline.”

MY COMMENTARY: Well now we know what the problem is, police in the schools. Of course, no one has asked, why there is a need to bring police into the schools? That would be an interesting question to ponder. The answer is easy, school discipline has been taken away from the hands of the educators, causing discipline chaos, so without the authority needed to discipline unruly children, police were brought into the schools. Believe me, it's the last thing administrators and parents want to see in the schools unless it was absolutely necessary.

But there is another thought about this described vividly in, **“Don't Like Police Officers in Public Schools? Blame Lousy Parents,”** (David French), *National Review*, 10/28/2015

“The cycle of cultural hand-wringing moves fast indeed. Within 48 hours of rushing to judgment against a student resource officer in Columbia, S.C., Senior Deputy Ben Fields, for forcibly removing a young black girl from her seat after she refused demands from a teacher and administrator to leave class and then apparently hit Fields in the face when he first attempted to move her, the Left is using this incident to make a larger point about the problematic presence of police officers in public schools.

Let's begin with a point of agreement: Ideally, no one wants cops in schools.

But in all too many public schools, parental involvement simply isn't an option. As one inner-city public-school teacher told me, in her first four years of teaching elementary school, she could count the number of intact, mother-father households on the fingers of one hand — and those parents weren't even married. Very few parents bother to show up for parent/teacher conferences, and the interactions are often dominated by angry threats to sue for various perceived slights. Lousy parenting leads to horrific, often violent child behavior — and even seasoned teachers can be shocked and frightened when classroom incidents spiral out of control.

Against the backdrop of a litigious culture, teachers feel hamstrung.

TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS ARE LIMITED IN THEIR ABILITY TO PLACE ANY PHYSICAL RESTRAINT ON UNRULY STUDENTS, AND WHEN CALLING MOM (DAD TYPICALLY ISN'T AROUND) ISN'T A PRODUCTIVE OPTION, THEY CAN QUICKLY FIND THEMSELVES HELPLESS IN THEIR OWN CLASSROOMS. IN SUCH CIRCUMSTANCES, ZERO-TOLERANCE — AS MADDENING AS IT IS — STARTS TO MAKE SENSE. IF TEACHERS CAN'T HANDLE SIGNIFICANT DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS, THEN THEY SHOULD PUNISH BEFORE ESCALATION — SUSPEND BEFORE VIOLENCE.

Yet all of this represents the government schools' inadequate attempt to respond to a problem that it simply can't fix: the breakdown of the family and its horrific and lasting effect on young kids.

Just as I can vividly remember what it's like to have parents fix school-discipline problems, I can also remember the moment in my high school when the police took control. A fight broke out during my senior year, a brawl so violent that teachers — even football coaches — were knocked to the ground and thrown against lockers. Students scrambling to get out of the way slipped on the bloody floors, and chaos reigned until first the sheriff and then the state police arrived in force. For the next week, we walked the halls with police officers in every corridor, and we were grateful for their presence.

When I see a police officer in a public school, I don't see oppression, I see a symptom of a cultural disease, a crisis of morality and responsibility.

When the family dies, public schools in troubled neighborhoods are often forced to pick their poison: Do you accept the risk of student disruption and violence by shunning zero-tolerance and rejecting a police presence? Or do you accept the near-certainty of more arrests and the “school-to-prison pipeline” of in-school law enforcement?

Yet until the family is repaired, the police will likely stay. Parents have damaged their children, and someone needs to protect the innocent from harm”.

MY COMMENTARY: This presents quite a different view of the problem. The police are not the blame, now it's the “lousy” parents; and it's not zero-tolerance policies either; and guess what, it's not a discrimination or racial issue

Unfortunately, the family situation has not been repaired; on the contrary, it's worse because most families are no longer traditional, mother and father, families, but rather single, unmarried, parent homes usually in difficult financial situations. There is no way to repair what no longer is the norm and, therefore, not repairable. In other words, in the impoverished zones around the inner-city schools, there are no *parents*, only a possible *parent*, sometimes just a *grandparent*. and the new phenomenon of homeless children. Children coming from these conditions are mostly the troubled and troublesome students and their only family are their friends in schools and on the streets.

With no traditional families to teach accepted cultural behavior norms, and with “*in loco parentis*” formerly considered a role of teachers when parents were not available gone, the only authority left in the school setting to discipline are police, and now the police are being taken out of more and more schools. It's not hard to predict what will happen again as it has in the past, discipline chaos will reign supreme in the same way defunding police departments has seen an increase in community crime. In fact, schools have become the victims of cultural change.

Faith In Action

“What Faith Leaders Can Do to Help End the SPP?” Dianis & Robinson-Mock, *Advancement Project*, 09/12/2014:

“The Faith community can be one of our strongest allies against zero tolerance policies...to end the criminalization of young people is more urgent than ever. Faith

leaders can mobilize congregations, serve as mediators, of simply open their doors to those interested in becoming engaged in justice work.

This is one of the very rare articles that mention the role of faith leaders to mobilize congregations to join in helping to solve this sinful problem that resides in the schools. They have the undivided attention of their congregations every week to educate them about the problem and the needs. They preach from the Bible and scriptures that all contain words to help those in need, but they may not be so welcomed in schools because of separation of church and state.

Truthdig (04/03/2014)

(a former independent news source that has stopped publishing).

“Negative disciplinary actions affect African-American children starting as early as age 3.”

“Although African-Americans constitute only 13 percent of all Americans, nearly half of all prison inmates in the U.S. are black. This startling statistic has led the United Nations Human Rights Committee to publicly criticize the U.S. for its treatment of African-Americans. A number of recent studies and reports paint a damning picture of how American society dehumanizes blacks starting from early childhood.

*Racial justice activists and prison abolition groups have long argued that the “school-to-prison” pipeline funnels young black kids into the criminal justice system, with higher rates of school suspension and arrest compared with nonblack kids for the same infractions. More than 20 years ago, Smith College professor Ann Arnett Ferguson wrote a groundbreaking book ***Bad Boys***: based on her three-year study of how black boys in particular are perceived differently. “*

MY COMMENTARY: All of the above statements are basically truthful, but the claim that *American Society has dehumanized blacks* is blaming all of society and that is not a truthful statement to make; in fact, what it does is to take the discussion away from solving the problem to simply promoting more hatred. To put it another way, even if society can be purified and stops “dehumanizing blacks” the problem of reading will still exist. What would have been a little more appropriate to state is that failing schools, populated by up to 80% minorities, not society in general. These Zombie schools dehumanize blacks by lawfully keeping them in literal bondage with no real way out. *If you can't read, you cannot learn*, and if you are not learning, it leads to frustration and anger. **Solve the reading problem and the rest of the claimed discriminatory and racial issues go away** along with dehumanizing issues.

ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union)

The ACLU is committed to challenging the “*school to prison pipeline*,” a disturbing national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Many of these children have learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse or neglect, and would benefit from additional educational and counseling services. Instead, they are isolated, punished and pushed out.

“Zero-tolerance” policies criminalize minor infractions of school rules, while cops in school lead to students being criminalized for behavior that should be handled inside the school [Keep in mind that the police are in the schools because the educators are either unable or not allowed to discipline without being charged with discrimination and racial bias]. Students of color are especially vulnerable to push-out trends and the discriminatory application of discipline. True, but it's because they are difficult to discipline. What is not being said is this is happening primarily in failing schools in which the minority population averages 80% or more.

The ACLU believes that children should be educated, not incarcerated [no one should disagree with such a noble statement]. We are working to challenge numerous policies and practices within public school systems and the juvenile justice system that contribute to the school to prison pipeline.

The ACLU filed a federal lawsuit challenging South Carolina's "*disturbing schools*" law. The law allows students in school to be criminally charged for normal adolescent behaviors including loitering, cursing, or undefined "obnoxious" actions on school grounds. The ACLU is also challenging a similarly vague "*disorderly conduct*" law, which prohibits students from conducting themselves in a "disorderly or boisterous manner." The statutes violate due process protections of the Constitution. **Yet, it has done nothing to challenge the fact that it is unconstitutional by law to force students to attend failing schools where they are destined to fail. Remember too, these failing schools tend to get the least competent teachers and, in fact, even those who are not certified because competent teachers do not want to or need to work in failing schools.**

The Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals (03/16/2018) handed down a victory for students' rights, ruling that *South Carolina's "disturbing schools" law endangers plaintiffs' freedom of expression and due process, entitling them to their day in court.*

The law allows children to be arrested and prosecuted for any behavior a school deems "*obnoxious*," such as failing to follow a teacher's instruction or cursing at lunchtime. Under South Carolina's "disturbing schools" law, Black students are nearly four times as likely to face criminal charges as their white classmates. As a result, Black students have been **disproportionately** saddled with criminal records and a litany of other burdens that come with charges and arrests, deepening the harms of the school-to-prison pipeline.

MY COMMENTARY: Interestingly, absent from the rhetoric is any reference to have their (your) day in court to an adequate education in a non-failing school. In addition, the date (2018) compared to the previous cited reports and actions that apparently have had no effect 7 years later on South Carolina laws; yet, it's, neighbor, North Carolina was on board to rethinking their disciplinary policies (Washington Post previously cited). However, *rethinking* will not result in efforts to improve reading skills but rather show on paper reports that disciplinary actions have been reduced.

Again, what is happening is efforts to reduce disciplinary actions without identifying or discussing the cause. The consequence is that it results in no actions to solve the problem that will still exist even if, instead of the SPP, they graduate. If they are allowed to graduate with poor reading skills, it will make the graduation rates look better, but the students will not be better able to get meaningful jobs; when that happens, it's back to the street culture, crime and incarceration. So there may be a reduction in the number of school dropouts reported, but the number of incarcerated graduates will increase when statistics show how many are in prison because of poor reading skills. In other words, the end results will be the same if they do not have societal reading skills.

However, there is another issue that has been provoked by this citation: when discipline is disproportionate to a given population, it is discrimination. Believe me, I have searched the heavens and beyond to find any minutia of evidence that discipline, crime, etc. must be proportionate to the population, gender, race, etc. In other words, when disciplinary actions reach the proportion of a given population, they must stop misbehaving or committing more crimes; of course, they are never told this. Of course, even if they are told this, it will not stop their behavior problems. Rather ridiculous to say the least. This proportional math does not exist in the research domain except in the rhetoric of advocates.

Huffington Post

"In Both Rich And Poor Schools, Black Students Face Harsher Punishments,"
Rebecca Klein, 04/04/2018:

“A new government watchdog report shows how black students and students with disabilities are punished more severely...”

*The Government Accountability Office report...comes as civil rights leaders are fighting tooth and nail to save this guidance. The 2014 guidance calls on schools to reduce their reliance on harsh disciplinary practices like suspensions and expulsions. **It also warns schools they could run afoul of federal law if certain groups of students are disproportionately punished even if there is no discrimination.***

The Education Department [not a particularly enlightened group or even an unbiased group and this comes from first-hand knowledge] data analyzed in this report is from the 2013-2014 school year, and reveals deep discipline disparities across student groups — the very problem the guidance is intended to address. Independent of school poverty level, type of public school or type of disciplinary action, boys, students with disabilities, and black students are being punished at far higher rates than other students. For black students, these inequities start as early as preschool.

*This is the first such analysis to explicitly compare schools at different poverty levels. **In high-poverty schools, black students are overrepresented among students who receive suspensions by 25 percentage points, and in more affluent schools, they are overrepresented by 12 points, the data shows.** Students with disabilities face similar problems. In affluent schools, students with disabilities are overrepresented among students who receive suspensions by 20 points, while in low-income schools, they are overrepresented by nearly 11 points.*

*Even though black students only make up about 16 percent of public school students, they account for nearly 40 percent of students who are suspended from school. A similar pattern exists for students with disabilities, **and for male students in general.** Students with disabilities make up about 12 percent of public school students, but account for a quarter of those who are suspended, referred to outside law enforcement or arrested at school.*

The analysis shows that students of color suffer harsher discipline for lesser offenses than their white peers and that racial bias is a driver of discipline disparities.” This report underscores the need to combat these gross disparities by strengthening, not rescinding, the 2014 Discipline Guidance Package, which recommends specific strategies to reduce the disparities without jeopardizing school safety.”

Critics say the pressure to reduce reliance on suspensions has meant keeping disruptive or dangerous students in the classroom, thereby posing a threat to other students and staff members.

*Whatever intentions were set forth in the guidance, the response to the guidance **has been kind of knee-jerk in nature that has ended up hurting all of the children.** It takes away the rights from the victimized students, as the offending students are left in the classroom to avoid suspensions.”*

However, the GAO report shows that national suspension rates had already begun to fall before the guidance was implemented. [This was predictable, sure reports showed a decline, schools that did not show declines could feel the hammer of Big Daddy. Similarly, this is what happened when the push was on to increase graduation rates; they all magically increased in just one year without any effort to do so; the high schools simply graduated any human body that had blood running in their veins and even some “ghost students”, but also added was very creative graduation arithmetic—another sordid story].

MY COMMENTARY: How can data show disparities and discrimination when minorities are, in fact, overrepresented in high poverty schools (up to 80%) meaning that such schools are in the inner city? How can they be overrepresented among their own peers? It's important to understand that these reports come from analyzing paper records with no actual footprints on the ground. As I have indicated before, Such reports hide a lot of relevant data. It's easy to generalize data, it is much harder to prove the analysis and conclusions.

Summary

What should be obvious from these advocates propose is that every single one follows the same playbook script: end the school to prison pipeline, end zero-tolerance policies, end police presence in schools, etc. **End them all, but they will not end or remediate the reading deficits that cause what the advocates claim are the problems.**

Furthermore, despite various court actions to curb supposedly racial bias in disciplinary actions, **absolutely nothing has been said or done to address the core issue: it's unconstitutional to force students by law to attend failing schools where they are held in bondage (literally incarceration because there is no way out except to dropout). Further, these Zombie schools are known to be the breeders of the school to prison pipeline caused by schooling miseducation and educational malpractice that results in failure to teach effective reading skills to boys, particularly boys of color.**

Such successful litigation would put an end to the failing, Zombie, schools, but that would only be a first step. What must then follow is the critical next step.

The students who had attended the failing schools must have available and doable options to attend successful schools or programs where they can be taught effective literacy skills.

The third and most important step is to monitor the progress of these students to ensure that they get promoted each year with the required reading skills needed to succeed in the next grade. Only in this way will all the other problems that the advocates want ended will go away with no further actions needed.

When students feel successful in school they will not need to be unruly, frustrated, and angry that then causes a culture of chaos within themselves and in schools that then negatively impact those students in the majority who want to learn. **In fact, these are the forgotten children in all of these discussions; rather shameful to say the least.**

In addition, none of these advocates have had any significant and critically needed actions to address your reading deficits.

Although they provide a wealth of tools and action steps, none eliminate your reading deficits. All that is done is to reduce disciplinary actions without getting at the cause and that's why there has been no significant improvement other than playing with meaningless statistics.

Any school district, right now, with no further authority needed, can end the school to prison pipeline by shutting down failing schools that can be done with a simple vote of the school board or action by the superintendent. Why isn't it being done is the question of the century. And as pointed out, that is only the beginning; it must be followed up and monitored with options for students to attend successful schools and/or programs

What all of this does not do is to deal with you who are incarcerated. As indicated earlier, you are likely in rehab or some sort of educational programs to help you learn. What you must do is to show your teachers this open letter so that they will understand what the real problem is to see if they can do something to help with your reading problem. A simple reading test will reveal your specific deficits. The problem will be that because of your age, your teachers will not be elementary school teachers who know at least something about teaching reading. But they do have access to the state department of education to get guidance on teaching reading to

those of you who have serious deficits. And there must be some resource in the system to have a reading consultant to assist temporarily to get started. This should not be a financial problem. Even asking for volunteers from the community would, I am sure, prove helpful.

What I am saying is that you must be your own advocate; and you would be even more successful if you had other like inmates join your effort. I think this open letter provides all of the necessary information to justify efforts on your own behalf to get the help you need.

However, if that does not prove successful, there are legal resources mentioned in this letter that you can contact to get legal help. If that should fail, there are legislators in your area to contact for help.

If none prove helpful, do what I have done. Write an open letter to publish in local and national newspapers and websites. If necessary, get help to write a good letter to get it published as letters to the editor and to other news outlets.

I am not giving you any excuses for failing. There is a last resort, write a book; yes, it may sound ridiculous if you have a reading problem, but even if it is somewhat crude in correct English, it can be effective. I guarantee that if you seek volunteers to help write it by writing a letter in the local newspapers asking for help, it will come. If I can be of assistance send me an email: fusco.a@comcast.net. Also, let me know your reaction to this open letter.

Good luck, yes, you will need it, and it does happen; but it will be up to you to make it happen!

Next week will begin a tantalizing series on the Robin Hoods in school finance..