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Point of View

NC lawmakers widening the school-to-prison pipeline

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It's difficult to keep track of the unyielding missteps and destruction by North Carolina lawmakers. Their anti-poor people, anti-people of color, anti-women, anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ, anti-environment, anti-democracy, anti-public education, anti-gun control, anti-religious freedom agenda has generated widespread outrage and media attention.

But absent from public discussion about their countless failings is a recognition of how their policy agenda will expand North Carolina's school-to-prison pipeline.

The school-to-prison pipeline is a system of laws, policies and practices that pushes students – disproportionately economically disadvantaged students, students of color and students with disabilities – out of school and into the juvenile and criminal systems.

North Carolina has a huge pipeline. Last year, students missed nearly 800,000 school days as a result of almost 260,000 short- and long-term suspensions and languished for hundreds of thousands more days in inadequate in-school suspension rooms and alternative schools and programs.

Law enforcement officers – without adequate training, limitations and accountability – are stationed in schools across the state. Over 40 percent of delinquency complaints are school-based. Thousands of students are becoming court-involved as a result of minor misbehavior at school (e.g., disorderly conduct and truancy) that should be treated as normal adolescent behavior and teachable moments by educators.

If we don't stop them, the governor and General Assembly will make our state's pipeline even larger. Four pending bills and the governor's proposed budget would hurt vulnerable students and make schools and the juvenile and criminal systems harsher, less rehabilitative and more punitive.

- The “Excellent Public Schools Act of 2013” (SB361) would eliminate teacher tenure, making it more difficult for districts to retain highly qualified, veteran teachers who're best able to engage students and manage behavior. The bill also initiates an A through F grading system for schools and declares the legislature's intent to implement performance pay. Grading and performance pay would be based primarily on high-stakes, standardized testing, which contributes to the pipeline by encouraging teaching to the test, making school less engaging and creating incentives to push out low-performing students.
- SB516 would eliminate Personal Education Plans, which include evaluations, interventions and progress monitoring for students at risk of academic failure. When students are failing, they're less likely to be engaged and more likely to lose incentive to behave appropriately. The bill also would eliminate class size limits, making it more challenging for teachers to engage students, provide individualized attention and manage behavior.

- The “School Safety Act” (HB452/SB589) would provide \$20 million for school districts to station law enforcement officers in elementary and middle schools, even though there’s no evidence that school policing improves school safety. School policing contributes to the pipeline by diverting valuable resources, increasing arrests and court referrals for minor offenses, and creating an atmosphere of hostility, fear and control.

The governor’s proposed budget reduces funding for teacher assistants who’re essential in providing interventions and managing behavior. Moreover, his budget would maintain North Carolina’s distinction as one of the worst states for public education funding and would fall short of what districts need to ensure the availability of high-quality prevention efforts, interventions (behavioral assessments and plans, mentoring, counseling, substance abuse treatment, and social work services) and alternatives (restorative justice programs and high-quality alternative schools).

North Carolina already has a direct pipeline to prison. It’s the only state that treats all 16- and 17-year-olds as adults when they’re charged with criminal offenses and then denies them the ability to appeal for return to the juvenile system.

HB217 would result in more children becoming involved in the adult criminal system. Currently, judges decide after a hearing whether to transfer youth ages 13-15 charged with serious felonies (except murder) from the juvenile system to the adult system. HB217 would take that power away from judges and give it to prosecutors, who’ll make the decision without a hearing. It’d also preclude more children from receiving rehabilitative services in the juvenile system and surround more children with adult criminals, increasing rates of reoffending.

Instead of passing laws that’ll make teachers’ jobs more difficult and push more students into the school-to-prison pipeline, lawmakers should support students and teachers and work toward creating safe and fair schools. Otherwise, they’ll soon find themselves pushed out of office.

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