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S.C. sends too many kids to DJJ

BY VICTORIA MIDDLETON

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Most mothers want the best for their children, and that includes a good education. This coming Mother's Day should be an occasion to reflect un sentimentally on how we are providing for all our children.

Let's just look at the facts — too many children are being tracked into juvenile detention rather than kept in school. According to the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), over the last 10 years, the number of children entering the juvenile justice system for "disturbing school" — a vague term that can be applied to a variety of situations ranging from serious to relatively minor — is rising sharply. According to the DJJ's own 2008 Report Card, "The number of disturbing schools cases has increased 60 percent in the last 10 years, raising questions about the causes."



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Surely it's time to "raise questions about the causes." Nationwide, schools have increasingly shown a preference for incarcerating rather than helping struggling children, a phenomenon known as the "school to prison pipeline." Suspension rates have soared from 1.7 million in 1974 to 3.1 million in 2000.

Compounding the problem is the possibility of disproportionate punishment for children of color. In 2003, African-American youth constituted 16 percent of the overall juvenile population in our nation but accounted for a whopping 45 percent of juvenile arrests. Special-needs students are also disproportionately represented in the pipeline.

In South Carolina as around the country, far too many children are on the fast track from the schoolhouse to the jailhouse. This trend does nothing to make our schools safer or improve our communities. It also hurts us financially. Quite simply, it costs more to send students to jail rather than keep them in school. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, if all the kids in South Carolina who dropped out of high school in 2007 had graduated with their class, the state would stand to gain nearly \$8 billion over the course of their lifetime.

South Carolina has made some progress in recent years. The DJJ report also notes that more schools are managing truancy without involving police; as a result, fewer students are sent to the juvenile justice system. We should be exploring additional ways to give our youth the tools they need to succeed rather than punish them for behaviors that could be better solved by addressing the underlying causes. For instance, are we diagnosing learning disabilities and mental illness early enough and making timely intervention possible? We suspect the answer is "no." We suspect that many students are diagnosed for the first time when they wind up in juvenile detention. Our state deserves a failing grade for our treatment of such children. Looming budget cuts threaten the alternative remedial programs that can turn around children's lives; if they continue, these cuts will only make things worse.

Better methods for creating positive school climates — techniques like positive behavior supports — have been shown to work. Teachers in South Carolina and around the U.S. have reported that purely punitive approaches, like suspending students, don't work. They prefer classroom management training, conflict resolution, guidance counseling, and mediation as ways of improving discipline. Identifying learning disabilities early on in order to treat them will also help schools get students the support they need and reduce the number of students sent to court.

Some, but by no means all, school districts in South Carolina have made progress in this direction. Many of these measures have been implemented successfully in other states, and all can reduce costs and increase public safety by keeping kids in school. We should demand increased funding for programs that diagnose, counsel, and educate children; there can be no better return on our investment in the future safety and prosperity of our community.

We must funnel both our children and the money used to incarcerate them back into our public schools. Otherwise, we risk creating not another "Greatest Generation" but a "Lost Generation."

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