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Zero tolerance: School-to-prison pipeline must end

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At the close of the school year, most educators and parents were busy celebrating school promotion, graduation, academic awards and other milestones in their children's lives. A significant minority, however, had no cause to celebrate. Their children are traveling a darker pathway: the so-called "school-to-prison pipeline."

This is a phenomenon only too familiar to school discipline officials, public defenders and civil liberties advocates alarmed by the rate of juvenile incarceration in our nation. The pipeline describes the spiraling growth in zero-tolerance discipline, school-based arrests, disciplinary alternative schools and secure detention that have swollen our juvenile justice facilities and denied our most at-risk youths access to education. Even the American Bar Association has criticized zero-tolerance policies as too harsh, arguing that they have "redefined students as criminals, with unfortunate consequences."

In 2008, the S.C. Department of Juvenile Justice reported that the No. 1 cause of admission to the DJJ was "disturbing schools," a vague and broad concept. Around our state, news reports reveal that it is used to characterize offenses including food fights, slamming lockers and acting "obnoxiously."

According to the DJJ, such referrals had increased by 60 percent in the previous 10 years. This trend is reflected nationally. Across the United States, an increasing number of schools rely on police officers to patrol school hallways. Children are more likely to be arrested or interrogated at school — often for nonviolent offenses such as disruptive conduct — and to be expelled for truancy. These more minor cases of misbehavior swell the judicial system and divert resources from serious offenses.

Children with special needs are disproportionately represented in the school-to-prison pipeline despite having special protections under the law. Special needs students have been detained without access to medications or contact with their families for minor offenses. Surely the place for many of these students, rather

than behind bars, is with parents and counselors, literacy teachers and specialists who can offer positive behavioral support.

A severely punitive response to often trivial and nonviolent behavioral problems has not increased the safety of our schools, but it has drastically increased the cost to taxpayers of dealing with troubled youths. A conservative estimate puts the cost of locking up a child at double that of educating him or her. According to a report published by the Alliance for Excellent Education, if all of South Carolina's high school dropouts in 2007 had graduated with their class, their contribution to the economy of our state would be roughly \$8 billion over their lifetime. The productivity cost of incarcerating rather than educating these children is enormous.

Granted, the Department of Juvenile Justice's 2008 "Report Card," or agency performance appraisal, notes some progress in recent years: More school districts are committed to managing behavior problems and truancy without involving police, and to keeping more students out of the juvenile justice system.

To improve school discipline, we should create positive and supportive learning environments for students and teachers, and invest in classroom management training, conflict resolution, guidance counseling and mediation training.

In addition, it is vital that we diagnose and treat learning disabilities and mental illness at the earliest possible stage of a child's development. Waiting until students wind up in juvenile detention to diagnose and treat learning disabilities is both unfair to our children and costly to our community as a whole.

Though these kinds of measures are threatened by the current budget crisis, they in fact have been proven to reduce costs and increase public safety by keeping children in school. The costly alternative will be increased incarceration and unemployment.

The economic crisis offers an opportunity to invest in our children's future. It's an opportunity we can't afford to waste.

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