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<b>Author(s):</b>	Maya Williams & Samantha Guz
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# Notes From the Field: Four Macro Interventions That Combat The School-To-Prison Pipeline

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*Maya Williams & Samantha Guz*

## **Abstract**

Although research indicates that the school-to-prison pipeline is an oppressive system which excludes youth of color from education and often leads to their incarceration, interventions have been understudied. Continuing social work education is necessary to inform social work practice around this issue. The Social Work Code of Ethics highlights two principles which include social workers challenging social injustice and addressing social problems. The school-to-prison pipeline remains an ethical issue, removing students of color from schools while increasing their contact with the criminal justice system. This paper focuses on social workers' use of macro practice as a tool to eliminate the school-to-prison pipeline. Four interventions (demilitarizing schools, improving school policies, implementing restorative justice, and connecting schools to neighboring communities) are recommended for school-based social workers to decrease discriminatory practices in schools and to increase educational opportunities for students of color.

## **Introduction**

The school-to-prison pipeline is a form of systematic oppression; daily societal practices cause students of color to face injustice within schools. Rooted in zero tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline, the school-to-prison pipeline has pushed African American and Latino students out of school, causing them to drop out and later enter the criminal justice system. To demonstrate, the school dropout rate for minority youth in juvenile detention centers is higher than dropout rates for White youth at 44-47% (National Center for Juvenile Justice, 2014). In turn, youth who drop out of school are eight times more likely to be institutionalized than students who receive a high school or college education (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014; Christle, Jolivet, & Nelson, 2005). Due its these negative impacts, the school-to-prison pipeline has been defined by the American Academy of Social Work and Social

Welfare (2016) as a grand challenge within the field of social work. As the demand for cultural component practice and evidence-based practice increases, it is important for social workers within schools to prevent exclusionary practices.

Research has consistently demonstrated that zero tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline excessively target students of color (Wald & Losen, 2003; Christle et al., 2005) and lead to drop out. For example, a record of a single suspension increases a student's chances of dropping out by 77.5%. In over 60% of juvenile justice cases, the student's record showed at least one suspension or expulsion from school (Melde & Esbensen, 2011). As a result, these students lose a disproportionate amount of instructional time and educational opportunities (Gonsoulin, Zablocki & Leone, 2012; Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Ultimately, punitive discipline is a form of systematic oppression and social exclusion (Skiba et al., 2014).

The crux element of social work is service to vulnerable populations, such as students of color. Therefore, to reinforce a punitive system is to ignore ethical obligations as a social worker (NASW, 2015). Social workers have the ability to combat the pipeline at the macro level and should help deconstruct a system that fails students of color. Therefore, a core element of continuing education for social work practitioners is understanding the school-to-prison pipeline as a force of oppression, as well as knowledge of evidence-based macro interventions to combat the pipeline. Continuing education on the topic of racial inequality in the education system fortifies service to oppressed populations, as it helps practitioners identify signs of oppression and ensures that clients receive the best possible care. The literature demonstrates that interventions targeting the school-to-prison pipeline involve working with a macro level. It is important for social workers to continue understanding the influence of macro intervention and be able to demonstrate the worth of these interventions to

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*Maya Williams, is an MSSW student at The University of Texas at Austin.  
Samantha Guz, is an MSSW student at The University of Texas at Austin.*

## Four Macro Interventions That Combat The School-To-Prison Pipeline

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their agencies.

Existing resources acknowledge the causes of the school-to-prison pipeline and recommend possible solutions. However, few resources link the school-to-prison pipeline and social work values, which creates a significant gap in the literature for social work practitioners. The information presented links research and practice in social work by providing four interventions social workers can use at the macro level to combat the school-to-prison pipeline. These interventions include demilitarizing school campuses, altering discipline policies, utilizing restorative justice, and connecting schools to neighboring communities.

### Defining Macro Practice

A duality exists in social work practice between macro and micro systems. Social workers in the field often operate on a spectrum, moving between individual clinical work and social change work. When combating issues of racial justice, such as the school-to-prison pipeline, clinical social workers may find themselves filling new macro roles within their agencies. In an effort to recognize the interpersonal and structural challenges of the school-to-prison pipeline, this paper will utilize Austin, Coombs, and Barr's (2005) definition of macro work: community-centered clinical practice. Austin et al. (2005) state that the goals of macro practice are similar to those of clinical practice: empowering clients, organizing services, planning interventions, and creating action for social change. The scope of the work simply changes from individuals to communities. Therefore, it is important that social work literature reflect the uniqueness of social work practice—its person-environment perspective. Community-centered clinical practice encourages the use of this perspective by utilizing the skills of clinical social work in macro settings.

### Interventions

#### Demilitarize School Campuses

The history of militarized school campuses began in the 1950s when police officers began working at high school campuses. The initial purpose of police presence at schools was to build positive relationships between students and

officers (Peake, 2015). However, the role of police officers in schools changed drastically after the deadly shooting at Columbine High School in 1999; following this event, parents began demanding additional protection on school campuses, which was immediately translated to the rise of police presence in schools. The increased use of police officers on school campuses has not resulted in less violence, and in some cases, the force used by police officers has caused tension between the administrators and students (Peake, 2015; Young, 1990). Currently administrators do not know what constitutes a safe school environment. The general lack of regulation and supervision placed on police officers on school campuses results in students of color facing physical brutality for nonviolent crimes (Alexander, 2012; Peake, 2015). Although educators use law enforcement to manage school behavior and increase achievement, it fails many students and feeds them into the school-to-prison pipeline (Wilson, 2014). According to Porter (2015), learning cannot be conducted effectively in an environment where schools look more like prisons than classrooms. The militarization of schools is a mechanism of the pipeline that excludes students of color from receiving a quality education. To illustrate, African American students account for about 15% of the student population, but are 2.6 times more likely to be suspended than their white peers (Wald & Losen, 2003).

Social workers can demilitarize schools by creating and advocating for best practice standards regarding campus safety. Ultimately, parents, teachers, administrators, and social workers want students to be safe. By building on this shared interest, social workers in schools can foster dialogue among parents, students, and school staff. When creating practice standards, it is essential to work within the existing community rather than over the community. This means making a space for all voices, especially the voice of the affected population (students and parents). Through this macro practice intervention, social workers can empower parents and students, build the campus's capacity for social change, and develop safety standards for a campus that meets the needs of the staff, parents,

and students (Austin et al., 2005).

### **Eliminate Zero Tolerance Policies**

Zero tolerance policies are those that uncompromisingly and severely punish students for nonviolent crimes, such as being loud and having 'an attitude.' The origin of these policies lies in the War on Drugs, a movement that brought police officers into urban communities of color and resulted in an intolerably high number of incarcerated African Americans being locked up for nonviolent drug offenses (Robinson, 2013; Alexander, 2012). It is essential for social work practitioners to realize that the school-to-prison pipeline is not a static symbol of racism but a systemic movement, a shrinking of boundaries between the education and justice systems.

Harsh policies, such as zero tolerance, encourage teachers and administrators to use suspensions, expulsions, police, and juvenile detention center referrals as a method of behavior management (Jones, 2013). Unfortunately, these policies disproportionately affect students of color. Dialogue surrounding racism within the education system paints a picture where Latino and African American students are more likely to experience suspension and expulsion than their White peers (Castillo, 2013). However, the reality of the school-to-prison pipeline is students of color are *at risk* of being *targeted* by exclusionary policies. Seventy percent of arrested students referred to law enforcement are either African American or Latino; this results from discipline policies that monitor students of color more than students of other racial and ethnic groups. In fact, a student of color is three times more likely than a White student to be harshly disciplined (Porter, 2015). Once students adopt the mentality of school as a 'bad place,' it causes them to fall behind academically and to drop out completely. Studies show 68% of African American inmates do not have a high school diploma and have turned to a life of criminal behavior (Porter, 2015).

Research shows that zero tolerance policies have been unsuccessful in schools and negatively impact the life outcomes of many students of color (Daly et al., 2016). When suspensions rise in schools behavioral misconduct does not diminish due to harsh discipline (Robinson,

2013). These policies cause many students of color to drop out of school and have contact with the judicial system (Robinson, 2013). Morris and Perry (2016) have found that zero tolerance policies contribute to the academic marginalization of students of color. Therefore, even separate from their racial bias, zero tolerance policies are not evidence-based nor best practice. Social workers are obligated in the National Association of Social Work (NASW) code of ethics to deliver the best possible services to clients (NASW, 2015). This standard does not merely exist for clinical practice but also macro practice. If an agency (school or community-based organization) is supporting policies that are harmful to the clients, it is essential that social workers both address the issue and provide alternatives such as behavioral and emotional support for students.

Additionally, social work practitioners have an obligation to keep students of color safe. There is a reflective relationship between schools and their surrounding communities (Wilson, 2014). Punitive forms of discipline are more common in disadvantaged urban schools with higher populations of African-American, poor, and Latino students (Welch & Payne 2010). If students of color are attending a school in a neighborhood plagued by high crime, it is likely their physical safety may be threatened in school (Willits, Broidy & Denman, 2013). The threat can come from fellow students who may be gang members participating in illegal activity or carrying weapons. Initially, punitive discipline was intended to increase the safety of students. However, these policies have not eliminated violence between students nor violence between students and staff (Smith, 2015). The threat from staff members does not have to be physical; these threats can be manifested in verbal remarks and other forms of harsh discipline. It is important that the school-based social worker advocate for the safety of students in these cases. Although a social worker may be employed by the very system that is oppressing students of color, practitioners must behave ethically and align themselves with the Social Work Code of Ethics (NASW, 2015).

## Four Macro Interventions That Combat The School-To-Prison Pipeline

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### **Restorative Justice**

Restorative justice is an evidence-based model which gives students the opportunity to understand the impact of their behaviors by restoring their community; it is a model which social workers should strive to reinforce within the school system. Research indicates that lowering out-of-school suspensions results in higher test scores (Losen, & Gillespie, 2012, p. 8). Alternatives to frequent disciplinary exclusion have been successfully implemented in districts with high suspension rates like Baltimore, where a reduction in suspensions coincided with higher graduation rates (Losen, & Gillespie, 2012, p. 35). Many schools are successfully applying a restorative justice approach in response to disruptive student behavior (Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg, 2006).

The use of restorative justice practices in schools has grown exponentially in the United States since 2008 (Gonzalez, 2012), with documented success of reducing behavioral referrals and suspensions (Stinchcomb et al., 2006). The Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue (Armour, 2013) utilizes a restorative justice approach, Restorative Discipline in Schools. Restorative Discipline is a system-wide intervention and philosophy that focuses on education with building relationships at the forefront of this model (The Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue, 2016). Broadly defined, restorative justice engages all people who are impacted by an issue or behavior in a balanced group process to resolve conflict in a way that builds on existing relationships (Gonzalez, 2012). Instead of responding to disruptive student behavior with punishment, Restorative Discipline aims to change the school climate so that the staff, students, and families focus on the causes of student misbehavior and the students' needs (The Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue, 2016). Causal factors are addressed through an interactive process that strives to repair harm while addressing needs for restitution, accountability, and personal growth (Gonzalez, 2012; Jones, 2013). Recently, reductions in the use of off-campus suspensions

have been documented at 30 percent, 50 percent, and 84 percent in various middle and high schools in California, Minnesota, and Texas, respectively (Jones, 2013).

Restorative dialogue is the most widely practiced restorative justice process; it includes victim-offender mediation, group conferencing, circles, and other dialogue programs (Umbreit, Vos, & Coates, 2006). Group conferencing and circles are commonly utilized practices in schools, where mutual respect, active listening, and equal voice are emphasized. Three meta-analyses have demonstrated statistically significant reductions in rates of recidivism for youth who participated in victim-offender mediation, or mediation and group conferencing, when compared to youth who were not involved in restorative justice practices (Umbreit et al., 2006).

Despite the clear evidence of the effectiveness of restorative justice practices in school environments, their success depends on the school community's ability to overcome many obstacles. The power dynamics between educators and students must be shifted during group conferencing in order to emphasize equal voice. This can be a challenging shift for many educators who fear that their authority in the classroom will be compromised as a result of the shift (Armour, 2013). Likewise, some students fear that there may be repercussions in the classroom for being honest during group conferencing (Sumner, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010). In addition, time constraints may present obstacles for teachers, students, and working parents alike. Group circles require time and attention from everyone involved. Finding the time can be especially difficult for working parents and teachers (Armour, 2013). In order to effectively change the culture of a school community from zero-tolerance to one that embraces restorative justice, support for the program is needed by administrators, educators, social workers, and community members.

### **Government and Community Intervention**

Evidence-based practices indicate that the community and schools should be responsible for addressing the school-to-prison pipeline and high

incarceration rates of youth of color (Boyd, 2009). In Denver Public Schools, a legal action group called The Advancement Project and a grassroots organization called Padres y Jovenes Unidos created restorative justice programs that decreased suspensions by 53.8% in 2006 (Boyd, 2009, p. 590). Moreover, the community should be responsible for the youths' success by having libraries, faith-based organizations, businesses, and service clubs work together to support and promote the education of youth of color (Wilson, 2014). For example, community members in Michigan have advocated for the youth to speak out against injustices through Youth Voices. This program was created in 2014 to call nationwide attention to the school-to-prison pipeline (Wilson, 2014). Restorative justice has helped schools create other restorative practices that allow disciplinary problems to be handled peacefully and productively (Wilson, 2014).

Failure to provide community services to youth can detrimental effects; evidence-based community services have been established as vehicles to develop power within individuals and in communities (Checkoway, 2010). However, research indicates that less than 10% of youth in the juvenile justice system have access to evidence-based community services (Phillippi, Coccozza, & DePrato, 2013). The school-to-prison pipeline stifles youths' ability to develop skills and renders them powerless. Therefore, community initiatives and support are necessary to dismantle to school-to-prison pipeline.

### Discussion

The school-to-prison pipeline marginalizes and segregates students of color from a productive life through exclusionary discipline, community isolation, and legislation which targets racial minorities and increases their contact with law enforcement. This disparity is also consistent among school age children and adolescents experiencing incarceration; African Americans make up 17% of America's youth but are accountable for 45% of minor arrests (NAACP, 2005). Previous literature has discussed the school-to-prison pipeline as a rational, structural mechanism increasing minority youth contact with the juvenile justice system and causing their

incarceration rather than education. However, there is a gap in the literature which fails to acknowledge the school-to-prison pipeline as an issue of human rights where social workers must take action. Based on the social work code of ethics, these professionals are obligated to intervene when racism is observed on individual campuses. Education is not simply an issue that can be distilled to race, class, or gender; rather, the ability for everyone to pursue an education must become a fully recognized as a basic human right.

Social workers are called to address this social issue in order to create schools and communities where marginalized populations feel safe and protected rather than targeted and attacked. It is crucial for social workers to understand the school-to-prison pipeline as it negatively impacts the families and communities these helping professionals work with. Students are able to learn and accomplish more when they know that they have the support of the administration, social workers, or teachers and when they perceive that these support systems will help them in every step of their educational journey (Coggshall, Osher, & Colombi, 2013). These role models must be available to motivate, encourage, build strong connections, and treat students fairly and respectfully in all encounters (Coggshall et al., 2013). The school-to-prison pipeline fails to educate youth of color, primes them for the judicial system, increases crime rates, and subsequently destroys communities and disintegrates families (Porter, 2015; Alexander, 2012). The government, educational system, social workers, and community members must focus on empowering students of color rather than locking them away to become prisoners of the state. Social workers can help offset the rise of imprisonment of youth of color by supporting students and their families through positive interventions in schools such as demilitarizing schools, altering policies, restorative justice programs, and positive government and school-based interventions.

## Four Macro Interventions That Combat The School-To-Prison Pipeline

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