



Evidence-Based and Promising Practices as a Means to Level the Preschool-to-Prison Pipeline

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Abstract

The preschool-to-prison pipeline is a system characterized by the use of exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspensions and expulsions, that push children out of preschool and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. This article provides a concise synthesis of evidence-based and promising practices aimed at reducing the number of children from Black and other marginalized groups entering this pipeline. The effects of biased and punitive zero-tolerance policies on vulnerable children are discussed, along with practical solutions grounded in literacy, culturally responsive practices, self-regulation, and restorative approaches.

Keywords: preschool-to-prison pipeline; zero tolerance; evidence-based practices; promising practices

The School-to-Prison Pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline refers to the process by which students, particularly Black and Brown students, are pushed out of educational environments and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems through exclusionary discipline practices. Approximately 50 million students attend K–12 schools daily; however, many do not complete high school. Students of color are disproportionately affected, with behavior concerns often addressed through law enforcement rather than through educationally appropriate interventions (Owens, 2017). This movement from educational systems into carceral systems has been linked directly to zero-tolerance discipline policies (Kang-Brown et al., 2013; Mallet, 2016; Skiba, 2000).

Zero Tolerance and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Zero-tolerance policies gained prominence following the passage of the Gun-Free School Act of 1994, which mandated expulsions for weapon possession. Over time, these policies expanded beyond their original intent and began to encompass a wide range of behaviors, often unrelated to school safety (DeMitchell & Hambacher, 2016).

Although framed as equitable, zero-tolerance policies disproportionately impact students of color. African American students are more than three times as likely as White students to be expelled and are significantly more likely to drop out of school, increasing their risk of incarceration (Cramer et al., 2014).

Vulnerable Children and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Zero-tolerance policies disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, including students of color, economically disadvantaged students, students experiencing homelessness, and students with disabilities. Research has shown that trauma exposure is strongly associated with behavioral challenges that increase the likelihood of suspension or expulsion (Battjes & Kaplan, 2023; Loomis, 2020).

Schools often fail to account for these contextual factors when enforcing rigid disciplinary practices.

Preschool-to-Prison Pipeline

Research demonstrates that the pipeline begins as early as preschool. Black children are suspended at more than three times the rate of White children, despite representing a smaller proportion of enrollment (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2016). Gender disparities also emerge early, with Black boys and girls overrepresented in suspension data. These early disciplinary actions reduce access to high-quality early childhood education and exacerbate long-term academic and social disparities.

Teacher Perceptions of Behavior

Teacher perceptions play a significant role in discipline outcomes. Strong teacher–student relationships are associated with reduced risk of suspension and expulsion (McKinnon et al., 2018). Educators who view students positively are more likely to employ supportive strategies rather than exclusionary discipline.

Because teacher–student relationships tend to remain stable over time, early positive interactions may reduce later disciplinary risk.

Reading Ability and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Early literacy failure is strongly associated with later academic disengagement and incarceration. A majority of incarcerated adults and youth read below grade level, and students who are not reading proficiently by third grade are significantly less likely to graduate high school (American Civil Liberties Union, 2023; U.S. Department of Justice, 2016). Reading difficulties, combined with disciplinary exclusion, accelerate movement into the school-to-prison pipeline.

Evidence-Based and Promising Practices to Support Change

To disrupt the pipeline, school leaders should implement evidence-based and promising practices, including emergent literacy instruction, culturally responsive pedagogy, self-regulated strategy development (SRSD), universal design for learning (UDL), and restorative justice (RJ).

Emergent Literacy Instruction

Emergent literacy instruction targets foundational literacy skills such as phonological awareness, vocabulary development, and letter-sound knowledge (Bear, 2022; Invernizzi, 2003). These skills are essential for later reading success and must be intentionally taught in early childhood settings.

Culturally Responsive Practices

Culturally responsive pedagogy emphasizes social justice, cultural competence, and high expectations for all learners (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2014). When implemented with fidelity, these practices foster inclusive classroom environments and reduce discipline disparities (Aceves & Orosco, 2014; Samuels, 2018).

Self-Regulated Strategy Development

SRSD integrates academic strategy instruction with self-regulation skills such as goal setting and self-monitoring. Research supports its effectiveness for improving reading comprehension, particularly for students with disabilities and emotional or behavioral challenges (Mason, 2013; Rollins et al., 2022).

Universal Design for Learning

UDL promotes flexible, differentiated instruction to support diverse learners (Brand & Dalton, 2012). By offering multiple means of representation, expression, engagement, and assessment, UDL enhances accessibility and comprehension for all students.

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice emphasizes healing, accountability, and relationship-building rather than punishment. When implemented collaboratively and authentically, RJ reduces suspensions and improves school connectedness (Gregory & Evans, 2020; Sandwick et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Eliminating zero-tolerance policies is a critical step toward equity, but it must be accompanied by evidence-based and promising practices that support literacy, self-regulation, and restorative approaches. With proper training and institutional support, educators and administrators can dismantle the preschool-to-prison pipeline and create more inclusive educational systems.

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