



# **Transforming the School-to-Prison Pipeline to the School-to-Career Pipeline: Investing in Mentoring Programs that Support African-American Students**

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## **Executive Summary**

The school-to-prison pipeline starts by removing students from school through suspension or expulsion. Those consequences fall most heavily on students of color and students with disabilities, who are disproportionately suspended, expelled and arrested at school (ALCU Washington). This issue forces students into negative outcomes and life trajectories early on, without providing them with positive social supports. There are a number of community-based strategies and restructuring of school policies that could help address this issue. In order to break the school-to-prison pipeline Congress should fund initiatives that will bring positive change to the education system. It is especially important that education is enriched in the United States following COVID-19, which will have a lasting impact on students and educators. In order to transform the education system, Congress should fund historically black college and universities (HBCUs) to partner with high-needs middle and high schools in their communities to create youth mentoring programs where HBCU students and alumni serve as mentors to African-American students.

## **Problem Statement**

In 1994, zero-tolerance policies in schools became prevalent as a response to substance abuse and school violence to specifically prevent students from bringing weapons to school. Many of these policies were accelerated because of the Gun Free Schools Act, which was passed by Congress and made it mandatory for schools to expel students for having a firearm in school, while the bill was made to focus on severe offenses, it became a policy that also allowed schools to expel students for less important or minor issues (National Clearinghouse on Supportive School Discipline).

Zero-tolerance policies criminalize minor infractions of school rules, while law enforcement in schools leads to students being criminalized for behavior that should be handled inside school. Students of color are especially vulnerable to being subjected to zero tolerance policies (ACLU). Due to these policies, basic behaviors of young people can be perceived as breaking zero-tolerance policies, which can lead to discipline in school and criminal records outside of school. When combined with bias from a majority white teaching force, this contributes to systemic inequities for students of color (National Center for Education Statistics). Some examples of zero-tolerance policies being used to criminalize students of color include students being expelled or suspended for writing on desks, pointing their fingers like guns or responding negatively to a teacher.

African-American students represent 15.5 percent of all public-school students and account for 39 percent of students suspended from school (GAO 2018 Report). A recent study described these suspension disparities as, “mechanisms connecting the achievement gap to the discipline gap, such as teacher biases and feeling isolated at school; affecting mostly African-American students” (Spector). Since research has found no indication that African-American youth violate rules at higher rates than other students, these suspension disparities cannot be explained by differences in behavior; implying that there is inequitable enforcement of zero tolerance policies. 83 percent of the nation's teaching ranks are filled by whites, mostly women, and stereotypes can shape the decision to suspend or expel a student (Heitzeg). Zero-tolerance policies allow teachers and administrators to use bias when enforcing harsher punishment in school. Due to a hostile school climate, students sometimes choose not to attend school because of the impact of racial stress and trauma, which harms them psychosocially and physically (Birioukov). These students are often labeled as having defiant tendencies, when really they are dealing with trauma because of their school climate and the impact of harsh discipline from teachers. When students have good relationships with teachers, they are less likely to behave negatively towards them and more likely to improve their behavior when supported.

Since research shows that zero-tolerance policies have not proven to be effective, there must be an analysis of its negative effects on students and what positive supports exist to help students. There are important interventions that can occur to

support a student's positive social-emotional development and help combat the school-to-prison pipeline. School-based mentoring is an important way that students can be connected to a consistent adult relationship who can help them with mental health resources, support students with trauma from home and school and provide them with academic, emotional, and social support (National Mentoring Resource Center). A 2007 study of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America's school-based mentoring model "found evidence of statistically significant impacts primarily in school-related attitudes, performance, and behavior (such as attendance)" (National Mentoring Resource Center). School-based mentoring creates a more balanced form of discipline that can work against zero-tolerance policies by understanding the whole student, not just one part of them. Mentors can work with the student and help relay the information about the student to teachers and administrators. They can be an advocate for the student if any behavioral issues occur in school. This could also help school districts better understand the flaws in zero tolerance policies. Mentors can help students to understand what zero-tolerance policies are, and they can work as intermediaries that improve the cultural climate of the classroom.

While working on a solution to the school-to-prison pipeline, mentoring also supports students in their journey to post-secondary success. 41% of African-American students and 61% of Hispanic students are first-generation (National Center for Education Statistics). When it comes to pursuing post-secondary success, first-generation college students could benefit from extra support particularly in school. First-generation college students face many issues as they prepare for college, and do not always have financial, social or academic resources. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, "36% of first-generation students in their first or second year of undergraduate education reported taking a remedial class after high school, compared to 28% of their peers whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree" (National Center for Education Statistics). First-generation college student's social supports in middle and high school makes a huge difference in their success in post-secondary education. Is it important that first-generation college students are prepared emotionally, academically and socially for post-secondary education, well before they arrive and school-based mentoring programs are an effective way to support them.

Youth with a parent or guardian currently or formerly incarcerated are

disproportionally students of color. They experience stress and disruption at home and school. The act of having a parent or guardian arrested or incarcerated is traumatizing for a young person. The young person is often put through a number of circumstances because of the incarceration, which often leads to more instability and stress. A lot of young people who have incarcerated parents or guardians are unable to visit their parent or guardian, which can create behavioral issues at home and school. These behaviors are often mistaken by teachers as aggression or misbehavior, but they are responding to the stress of having a parent or guardian incarcerated. It has been proven that “families facing incarceration are often exposed to many individual and environmental risk factors and research has established that over and above the disadvantage and dysfunction these families experience, the removal and incarceration of the parent has an additional and independent aggravating influence on the child” (Jarjoura). School-based mentoring programs can specifically address this issue and have in many cases supported students in processing trauma, connecting students to resources and helping support positive behaviors. Students who have an incarcerated loved one are often met at the intersection of education and punishment, which is proven to only make situations worse, mentors can help change that through support and appropriate resource connection.

Supporting youth mentoring is supporting the successful transition of at-risk students from the K-12 education system to post-secondary success. Since mentors are in various fields of practice, students are exposed to different careers and forms of entrepreneurship. Mentors work as intermediaries in schools that help support students. The mentoring effect can be a powerful factor in reducing the number of youth disconnected from school and work, improving America’s economic state, and in turn create a more productive nation. A conservative study of mentoring estimates a return of at least 3 dollars to every 1 dollar invested (MENTOR). While the school-to-prison pipeline costs taxpayers approximately \$27,832 for each federal prisoner, which is about \$77 per day (United States Courts). Investing in school-based mentoring is investing in education. Investing in education is investing in a productive America.

## **Policy Recommendations**

The main goal of these policy recommendations is to transform the school-to-prison pipeline into the school-to-career pipeline, which will increase student engagement and post-secondary success.

### **Recommendation 1**

**Congress should establish federal funding for HBCU students and alumni to serve as school-based mentors to African-American Students who attend schools that receive Title I federal funds.** Students and alumni of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) should serve as mentors to African-American students in grades 6th through 12th in Title I public schools in their communities. The Department of Education should provide \$85 million in competitive grant funding for HBCUs to apply for funds to establish these school-based mentoring programs. The HBCU mentoring programs must partner with Title I schools to be eligible to apply for this grant together. Each HBCU will have one member of their staff who manages the mentoring program, and they will be the Director of Mentoring Programs. This grant process for FY21 has a projected use for up to 8 years before a new grant cycle will occur. In FY25, this grant program will undergo an evaluation to determine the logistics of the program for FY29. The Department of Education will create a report to Congress on the evaluation in FY25 to report progress of the grant.

### **Recommendation 2**

**Congress should assign a non-profit intermediary to support HBCU's who receive federal funds for school-based mentoring to enhance capacity and support their work.** The intermediary organization will work as a liaison by monitoring the programs and projects, maintain a network of HBCU school-based mentoring programs and ensure the success of the programs. The intermediary will also train HBCU mentoring directors so that they could train their mentors on how to effectively support students. It will also provide ongoing training and technical assistance and support to the programs in the network.

### **Recommendation 3**

**Congress should ensure that all HBCU school-based mentoring programs use a portion of their funds for mentors and mentees to create learning projects or reports that can benefit the school or community.** Each mentor and mentee match will be allotted a certain amount of funds specifically to work on a project. Some example projects would be writing a report together on a topic the mentee cares about related to school climate and using the funds to find research or attend a conference on the topic, starting a club together on fashion, music or other topics in their schools, or creating a STEM related science initiative that benefits the school. The project has to either improve the mentee's school or community. Each mentor and mentee match will have to apply for the funds by writing a project proposal, which will be reviewed by their respective Director of Mentoring Programs. At the end of every school year, the projects they create should be celebrated at a gala to encourage students to continue their work. The intermediary will determine which projects from across the nation will be presented in a report to Congress.

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