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Better discipline

DURHAM - When members of the new Wake County Board of Education meet for the first time in December there will be many issues to consider. For example, recent articles and a report by the SAS Institute have highlighted the abysmal graduation rate for minority students in Wake County and have identified policies that permit lower expectations for poor and minority children. These realities are evidence of a problem that has gone unaddressed in Wake County for far too long: the school-to-prison pipeline.

This pipeline is a system of education and public safety policies that pushes students out of school and into the delinquency and criminal systems. It operates directly when students are arrested at school and/or referred to juvenile court. It operates indirectly when students are suspended or expelled, and consequently fail academically and engage in delinquent activities.

Long-term suspensions for Wake County students almost always mean exclusion for the rest of the school year, which can be well over 100 days. Data from the N.C. Department of Public Instruction reveal that last school year Wake County gave out 1,015 long-term suspensions - the most of any district in the state. The Wake district is North Carolina's largest, but the number was 24 times that given by Charlotte-Mecklenburg, a district almost as big.

As individual schools, both Enloe High in Raleigh and Garner High gave more long-term suspensions last year than 107 of the 115 school districts in the state

Wake also files charges against many of its students in juvenile court, even though over 80 percent of those charges amount to minor misdemeanors at worst. According to data from the N.C. Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, one third of all delinquency complaints in Wake County are school-based.

It's essential that the Board of Education closely examines the data. Board members should not believe the myth that school violence is nearing an epidemic stage, necessitating forceful strategies. Last academic year there were no reported incidents of rape, sexual offense, death or setting fires in the Wake schools. Less than 7 percent of the "reportable acts of crime and violence" in the schools are actually for "violent offenses." Moreover, studies show that expulsions and suspensions haven't proven effective at increasing safety and order in schools, and in fact, have shown to have the opposite effect, increasing misconduct.

When examining the data, school board members must also realize that studies have consistently identified destructive consequences of school suspensions and juvenile court

involvement. These children may experience more opportunities to socialize with deviant peers; feelings of alienation and failure that lead to unemployment, gangs and crime; a self-fulfilling belief that they are incapable of abiding by schools' social and behavioral codes; and a decreasing motivation to learn, with worsening academic performance - all of which can lead to isolation, suicidal thoughts, substance abuse and a greater likelihood of dropping out.

Addressing the school-to-prison pipeline is one way the new board can demonstrate its commitment to minority students, since this issue disproportionately impacts African-American students. They receive a disproportionate percentage of suspensions and referrals to juvenile court, accounting for almost 75 percent in each category, compared with their 30.7 percent total in the overall student population. Moreover, of the expulsions in Wake County in the last few years, 24 of the 25 were given to African-American students.

Misbehavior results from a complex convergence of factors, some of which schools can't control. Parents and communities must step up in an effort to alleviate the pipeline - as we've all heard, "It takes a village." However, schools must also be part of the solution, rather than part of the problem. Members of the Board of Education are best-positioned, as policymakers and leaders, to guide progress toward reducing the number of unnecessary suspensions and court referrals in Wake County.

Other school districts and communities across the nation have pioneered successful ways to address the problem, while keeping schools safe and improving outcomes. Wake County's school board should follow suit by getting feedback from the community; emphasizing positive behavior management strategies; expanding services for the most at-risk students; creating alternatives to suspensions for minor infractions; eliminating "zero tolerance" punishments; ensuring the disciplinary process is fair and accurate; and creating more high-quality alternative education programs.

This is the time for the new board to set its priorities and address the most urgent issues. This is the time to stop the school-to-prison pipeline in Wake County.

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