

OPINION

Shut down school-to-prison pipeline

The following is a counterpoint.

By Lewis Pitts

Coverage about SROs and Tasers in public schools has failed to mention STPP, the school-to-prison pipeline. In plain language, unfounded claims that students are out of control and must be reined in by law enforcement, coupled with pressures on teachers and administrators to rid schools of students who cannot score well on high-stakes standardized tests, have led to astronomical increases in school suspensions, juvenile delinquency complaints and arrests of children.

In other words, students are being pushed out of schools for conduct that is predictable for school-age kids.

This is a national as well as local phenomenon and research is voluminous to document it. African American and Latino youth are disproportionately suspended and arrested, yet there is no evidence they are engaging in more conduct violations.

The most comprehensive and recent report is from Washington, D.C.-based Advancement Project, titled “Test, Punish and Pushout” (www.advancementproject.org). I urge everyone to read it. Several pages are devoted to the problem in North Carolina.

For 2008-2009, school-based delinquency complaints filed by SROs made up 41.6 percent of all delinquency complaints submitted in Guilford County. This figure was the highest of any school district in the state. Because North Carolina is one of only two states that treat children 16 years and older as “adults” for criminal charging, that rate doesn’t include adult arrest warrants initiated by SROs.

I know from my Legal Aid representation of some of these children that the alleged offenses were bogus and dismissed — but not after serious costs and disruptions to the child and parents.

On top of that, to have SROs carrying and using high-tech cattle prods called Tasers should draw all citizens into this discussion.

After all, they are our “public schools.” Some school board members appear to understand the STPP phenomenon and want Tasers out of schools, as I do. But others propagate the unfounded notion that certain children are merely criminals-in-waiting and want to give unfettered discretion to law enforcement to push them into the criminal system.

I plead with the News & Record editorial board, all school board members and citizens to learn about STPP and act to end it. We can have safe and fair schools.

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