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Cool Justice: School to jail tracking practices get some resistance

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By Andy Thibault

Wake me up. I just read a report.

That's how I feel with many reports. Not so with a 21-pager <http://tinyurl.com/bxl7exm> issued last month by the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance <http://www.ctjja.org/>.

The group strives to keep youngsters out of jail and out of the system for normal adolescent behavior. That sounds simple enough. Unfortunately it is not.

Public policies in Connecticut and throughout the nation have resulted in unprecedented levels of arrests for misbehavior including giving a kid a wedgie, possession of cigarettes or minor fistfights.

As Georgia Juvenile Court Judge Steven Teske notes in the report, "Zero tolerance is zero intelligence."

During the 2010-2011 school year in Connecticut, boys were twice as likely to be arrested as girls; black children were nearly four times more likely to be arrested as white children; Hispanic children were more than three times as likely to be arrested as white children.

Children in the state's poorest districts were more than nine times as likely to be arrested as those from the wealthiest districts.

Yeah, well, it's a good thing race and class are not taboo subjects in textbooks, public schools or the mainstream media.

Special thanks to Connecticut Voices for Children <http://www.ctvoices.org/> which analyzed data for the report.

Besides exposing race and class distinctions in education and social justice, the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance also did something remarkable about the problems. The group worked with educators and court officials in Manchester, Windham and Stamford to turn the tide against incarceration for offenses that in prior generations would have resulted in trips to the principal's office.

They developed a "Graduated Response Model" prescribing specific steps to be taken short of arrest in response to different behaviors. These practices were codified in memorandums of agreement between local police and educators. Manchester's student arrest rate fell 78 percent in one year. The report said similar programs are being generated in Torrington and Waterbury.

The numbers show why this is so important. Arrest doubles a student's risk of dropping out. One of five juvenile arrests that made it to Connecticut courts during the 2011-2012 school year originated in schools.

Living proof of the positive results resulting from open discussion and creative action is 19-year-old Sacha Gomez, now studying to be a social worker at Quinebaug Valley Community College in eastern Connecticut.

Gomez is a graduate of Windham High School, one of the poorer districts in Connecticut. By the time she was a sophomore, she had been arrested several times for fighting. On the verge of being expelled, Gomez was paired with teacher Lynn Frazier who coached the Young Poets group.

Frazier listened to Gomez vent and steered her to more interesting work than what was required in class. The teacher helped her develop an idea for a talent show that turned into a successful fundraiser for three consecutive years. Money went to the Young Poets project and a van for a disabled student.

"You want us to go to school and show you some respect, but you're not listening to us," Gomez said in the report, referring to the pre-Frazier partnership. "... I don't know why every teacher can't be like Ms. Frazier."

In addition to attending college, Gomez works at an after-school program helping youngsters cope and find outlets. She told me about a girl who came to her complaining of being bullied and called "weird" and "retarded."

"I know everything that goes on in school," Gomez said. "I used to act out. I tell them to go on a different path and focus on school. They trust me.

"I used to write in a notebook about how I felt," she continued. "I told the girl, 'You should be proud that you are different.' I brought her to a dance group and she felt better.

"That's what she does now."

Andy Thibault is a contributing editor for Journal Register Co.'s Connecticut publications and the author of *Law & Justice In Everyday Life*. He formerly served as a commissioner for Connecticut's Freedom of Information Commission. Reach Thibault by email at tntcomm82@cs.com. Follow him on Twitter @cooljustice.

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