Organizing to End the School-to-Prison Pipeline: An Analysis of Grassroots Organizing Campaigns and Policy Solutions
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Introduction

The establishment of zero tolerance policies in public schools has resulted in the creation of a school-to-prison pipeline where low-income and minority students are disproportionally subjected to extreme disciplinary measures including referrals to local law enforcement agencies and expulsion. In recognition of the deleterious effects of these policies, stakeholders are increasingly seeking legislative relief or advocating that schools implement early interventions that emphasize positive behavior training strategies. While these solutions may reduce the school-to-prison track they generally fail to authentically engage the community and address larger systemic concerns. Community organizing is one alternative strategy that seeks to create transformative and sustainable change by empowering individuals as leaders and political actors in their communities. This article examines the campaigns of six community organizing groups seeking to address the school-to-prison issue. Findings indicate an emphasis on the creation of counter discourse, the establishment of dignity based school discipline policies, and a demand for shared accountability among stakeholders. The authors argue that the resulting grassroots policy solutions challenge deficit model policies and increase the likelihood of transformative and sustainable reforms.

Defining the School to Prison Pipeline

Zero tolerance policies in US public schools began to take hold nationally in 1994 with the passage of the federal Gun-Free School Act (GFSA). Developed in response to a series of high profile school shootings it "required all states receiving funding from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to pass legislation that required local educational agencies to expel from school for a period of not less than one year a student who is determined to have brought a weapon to school" (1994). Many states and districts expanded the mandate to include other disciplinary issues (e.g. fighting, truancy, drug possession). Originally, school administrators argued that zero tolerance policies would eliminate bias and uneven administration of discipline, yet in many locales the opposite occurred. Under zero tolerance policies minority students are significantly over-represented in both numbers and the harshness of discipline, with many being pushed out of the classroom and into the justice system (Fowler, 2011; Wald & Losen, 2003).

As a consequence of zero tolerance policies communities have raised a variety of concerns. Among the key issues are the imbalance of punishments for minority students based on seemingly arbitrary rationale, the *de facto* partnerships that have emerged between school officials and law enforcement resulting in decision making being turned over to police and prosecutors, the lack of educational opportunities for students under disciplinary action, and concerns regarding violations of students' civil rights (Heitzeg, 2009). Students who enter the juvenile justice system also face significant barriers regarding their re-entry into traditional schools. The vast majority of incarcerated students never graduate from high school and the resulting drop out rates create additional challenges for communities with limited resources (Mauer & Chesney-Lind, 2002; Roberts, 2004).

Alternatives to the School to Prison Pipeline

As glaring disparities in disciplinary treatment have become more evident concerned community stakeholders are increasingly seeking relief from zero tolerance policies. Thus far efforts to address the pipeline can be broadly categorized into two approaches: legislative reform and school or district level policy reform (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). Sample legislative reforms include mandatory data collection and process monitoring related to arrests, summons, and referrals to law enforcement, improved communication of rules for referrals to both students and parents before and during the referral process, and the required presence of an adult advocate for the students immersed in the disciplinary process (Advancement Project, 2005; American Bar Association, 2001; NAACP, 2005). At the school and district level reform efforts are more focused on the implementation of behavior modification programs or curricula. Unfortunately, missing from the majority of these reforms is the input of the stakeholders who are directly impacted by zero tolerance policies: students, families, and local communities. In response to this dearth of representation, communities are increasingly mobilizing to address the school to prison pipeline using community organizing strategies.

Community Organizing for Education Reform

Education organizing is the utilization of community organizing strategies to address education issues. It typically involves the mobilization of parents and community members to generate power that can create change. The structures and strategies of community organizing groups (COGs) working on education issues can vary significantly depending on organization type and historical or contextual influences (Smock, 2004). For example, some COGs are networks of religious institutions addressing broad community interests, while others may consist of a small groups of individuals with a shared interest regarding a particular issue like special education. COGs may also have a number of different theoretical influences that shape their organizing strategies, ranging from the organizing traditions of Saul Alinsky, to the Civil Rights movement, to the settlement work of Jane Addams (Oakes & Rogers, 2006). Despite theoretical and strategic variations, Warren (2010) argues there are some features that are broadly shared by COGs and central to the organizing process: relationship building, leadership development, and action. These features help to distinguish community organizing work from the similar, but distinct efforts of activism, community development, legal action and advocacy (Schutz & Sandy, 2012). Over the past twenty years this approach has emerged as a viable supplement to more common forms of family engagement (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Its growth is based on its overall effectiveness and its empowerment of families that have historically been excluded from education dialogues based on linguistic, cultural, or class-based prejudices (Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009).

Methodology

The research in this study was generated utilizing a qualitative approach, specifically document analysis, to examine the phenomenon of education organizing campaigns focused on ending the school to prison pipeline. The six community organizing groups examined in this study were identified and selected using maximum variation sampling in order to achieve a representative sample of organizing work on the school to prison issue (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The use of a maximum variation sampling strategy allows researchers to capture core experiences and central themes based on the patterns that cut across diverse cases (Patton, 1990). The sampling process was based on the following criteria: availability of organizational documents, geographic representation, and organizational structure and demographics (see Table 1). The data include publicly available COG reports, websites, brochures, newspaper articles, informational literature, presentations, and press releases spanning 2000-2011 (n = 41). Initial rounds of data analysis resulted in fifteen general codes and these were gradually organized into the three dominant

themes described below. Multiple artifacts from each COG were used to triangulate the data and confirm the validity of the themes.

Table 1: Community Organizing Groups included in Study

COG Name	Location	Demographic Adult/Youth/Joint	Documents (N)	Actions/Solutions
Blocks Together (BTYC)	Chicago, IL	Joint	5	Student Placement Services Restorative Justice Establishment of Peace Rooms Training for school security guards
Gwinnett Parent Coalition	Atlanta, GA	Adult	6	Parent Education Forums/Workshops 100 Stories in 100 Days School Based Arrest Monitoring Political Advocacy Work
PODER: Young Scholars for Justice (YSJ)	Austin, TX	Joint	8	Peer Education (Student Rights) Peer Mediation Discipline Policy Report
Power U Center for Social Change	Miami, FL	Youth	4	Restorative Justice Student Leadership Training
CADRE	Los Angeles, CA	Adult	8	School Discipline Policy Reform School Wide Positive Behavior Support Discipline Policy Reports
Padres Y Jovenes Unidos	Denver, CO	Joint	10	Restorative Justice Know Your Rights Assemblies Discipline Policy Reports Community Participation in Teacher Training Political Advocacy Work

Grassroots Solutions for Ending the School to Prison Pipeline

An analysis of COG documents resulted in the identification of three overarching themes: counter discourse, dignity based alternative policies, and mutual accountability.

Counter Discourse

As described above, relationship building is a central component of community organizing. It serves to establish a foundation for action within a community, identifies potential leaders, and can provide individuals with the knowledge and confidence that their concerns are legitimate and shared with the broader public. Relationship building occurred in the six COG campaigns through one-on-one meetings, interviews, and community surveys and resulted in the compilation of a community knowledge base that challenged dominant social discourses. Mainstream media depictions of low-income and minority youth cultivate a culture of fear in many communities (Heitzeg, 2009; Kunkel, 1994) hence a disproportionate application of zero tolerance policies might be assumed as a legitimate outcome. However, community meetings and public testimony by local youth and families offered new perspectives. These new narratives refused to frame minority children as "problems" and focused instead on broader systemic challenges. Community testimony empowered marginalized students and parents by providing an opportunity for more authentic participation and solidified widely held beliefs that run counter to the dominant social discourse. For example, a community survey conducted by the group CADRE in Los Angeles found "that overwhelmingly both Latino and African American parents feel that schools have biases based on race, class, immigration status, and language that stand in the way of quality relationships between parents and schools" (CADRE, 2004, p. 8). Families across all six COGs recognized that school discipline needs to be addressed to insure high quality education, but they demanded a more nuanced approach that didn't automatically criminalize local youth.

Dignity Based Policies

Family, school and community relationships are occasionally complicated because of the assumption that families and communities will privilege the interests of their individual children while schools must make decisions based on the needs of the majority (Evans, 2011). Thus, school and district administrators might be hesitant to entertain community based reforms that they interpret as an effort to protect individual students. However, the campaigns of the six COGs in this study were not reactionary and all included alternative research based solutions to zero tolerance policies. The overarching theme of the proposed alternatives was an emphasis on recognizing the inherent dignity of individual students. COG participants shared a desire for safer schools and higher graduation rates with district officials, but they did not believe that it was necessary to compromise the rights of students to achieve these goals.

Five of the six COGs sought policies that emphasized restorative justice as a preferred disciplinary approach. The establishment of peace rooms and peer mediation programs were also present on an individual basis and consistent with the dignity theme. Restorative justice focuses on repairing relationships in order to avoid future conflict (Hopkins, 2004). The BTYC group in Chicago articulates the broader implications of this approach for the entire community. "Integrating restorative justice practices into the every day school life is a critical way of improving the culture and climate of a school in order to support the social and emotional learning and the academic performance of all students and strengthen partnerships among all stakeholders" (High Hopes Campaign, 2012, p. 5). The COGs recognized that communities need disciplinary policies capable of addressing both immediate concerns and contributing to broader systemic issues.

Mutual Accountability

Finally, all of the COGs in this study demanded mutual accountability. This theme manifested itself in two ways, first through COG commitment to reform implementation and secondly through an emphasis on more holistic solutions that require change on the behalf of multiple stakeholders. Typically community organizing groups are the impetus for change, but they refrain from playing a role in implementation preferring to leave the execution of reforms to professionals. However in education organizing COGs frequently remain involved because education professionals may lack the skills to

effectively work with communities. Furthermore, COGs want to make sure that reforms are carried out at the school or district level. As the Gwinnett Parent Coalition notes,

> We have well over 1,000 court reported incidents generated from our Gwinnett schools each year, and many of those incidents are for minor offenses. It is important to monitor the data and have trained advocates in the community who are available to connect students and families with the right resources to protect their civil rights. Regrettably, this measure is necessary because schools have changed school based discipline into *literally* policing student behavior (2009, p. 2).

In three of the COGs, there was also a demand that school and district personnel (teachers, administrators, security officers) have training that included sessions on working with diverse communities. In Denver the group Padres & Jovenes Unidos would even play a role in the training of new teachers. This type of community based education is an example of best practices being implemented in schools and a statement that all stakeholders (educators, families, and students) must work to establish effective and respectful relationships.

Implications and Discussion

In general there is a need for more research regarding the impact of different disciplinary policies. Neither zero-tolerance policies nor the alternatives described above have a strong empirical research base (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Czeh, Cantor, Crosse & Hantman, 2000). However, what remains clear is that zero tolerance policies are disproportionately applied to minority and low-income youth. If schools and districts are committed to reducing expulsions and suspensions and offering meaningful educational alternatives for misbehaving students then educational institutions and leaders must stop criminalizing adolescent behavior (Meiners, 2007). To achieve this goal schools need to include more student, family and community involvement in disciplinary decision making and pursue the collaborative development of alternative intervention strategies (APA, 2006; CPSV, 2008; NASP, 2008). Research indicates that effective alternatives to zero tolerance policies require high levels of student and community support (Osher, Sandler, & Nelson, 2001). The findings from this study suggest that COG campaigns can help generate this type of support, and moreover deliver a level of engagement that can help sustain these reforms and even transform school culture. Community based organizations have the potential to serve as important conduits between schools and communities (Lopez, Kreider, & Coffman, 2005) and the COGs in this study were eager to work as partners to resolve the school to prison issue. Yet, the study also indicates that participants in COGs will not be satisfied with the traditional support roles that are often relegated to families and communities. As noted in one CADRE report, "Schools must raise their standards about the relationships they need to have with parents in this community. We ask that schools face and answer our tough questions. Engage us, so that we fully play a role in addressing this crisis" (2004, p. 3). COGs are seeking authentic engagement opportunities where they can fully participate in policy formation. This level of collaboration is rare in the field of education and may require school leaders to reconsider their perspectives regarding family involvement (Crowson & Boyd, 2001), but it is only through this type of authentic engagement that schools can successfully eliminate the school to prison pipeline.

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