



## Sample Talking Points on the □Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track□

### THE VISION

- ❖ Our schools should be places where children are nurtured rather than punished. Every school should be a place where students are cared for, supported, challenged, inspired, treated fairly, and given every opportunity to succeed. Young people make mistakes, but unless the safety of the school is threatened, they should not be pushed out of school and deprived of an education for those mistakes. Rather, those instances should be opportunities for teaching, learning, and providing students with the support they need to become healthy, productive adults.

### THE PROBLEM

- ❖ Students across the country are being systematically pushed out of school by overly harsh “zero tolerance” school discipline policies and practices. This “schoolhouse to jailhouse track” results in students being denied class time because of extended and unnecessary suspensions and expulsions, and also being directly fed into the juvenile justice system by school-based arrests for even trivial misconduct.
- ❖ Zero tolerance discipline practices were initially intended for weapon and drug offenses, but they have been expanded so that harsh consequences such as suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement are increasingly common for minor misconduct, such as acting up in class, name-calling, and fighting.
- ❖ At the same time that school policies have become more punitive, school districts have also expanded the role of law enforcement and school security in enforcing school discipline. School districts are literally delegating their responsibility for school discipline to police, resulting in a large number of incidents that are now handled by school police and juvenile courts that could be – and were once – handled by a trip to the principal’s office or a call home to a parent.

- ❖ If we know anything about young people, it is that they will occasionally act out and defy authority. By ratcheting up the consequences for those normal youthful behaviors, we set young people up for failure.

### THE IMPACT

- ❖ As school districts across the nation rely more on the police and the juvenile justice system to handle even these most trivial acts of misconduct, they turn away from traditional education-based disciplinary methods. Instead, today, in too many schools, young people are criminalized for acting their age: children as young as 5-years old are being handcuffed, arrested, booked, hauled before a judge, and sometimes locked up for being disruptive in school.
- ❖ The “schoolhouse to jailhouse track” has dire consequences for children and their families and puts aside any notion of forgiving and teaching children. It also removes students from the learning environment and places them in the often unstructured environment outside of school, where they are more likely to get in additional trouble. Additionally, children who are repeatedly and unjustly suspended or arrested often miss many days of school, fall behind in their classes, become discouraged, and drop out of school altogether.
- ❖ School police are usually not trained to distinguish between youthful misbehavior and truly criminal behavior that threatens the safety of the school. It also often costs schools districts millions of dollars for school police officers who spend most of their time disciplining students for conduct that should be addressed by classroom interventions, school programs, and counseling. Moreover, the costs to the community of pushing these students out of school far exceed the costs of keeping them in school.

#### *Racial Disparities*

- ❖ Students of color are more likely than their White peers to be suspended, expelled, or arrested in school for the same conduct. Yet there is no evidence that Black and Latino students misbehave more than their White peers.
- ❖ Students of color also receive longer suspension and expulsions than their White peers for the same behavior.
- ❖ Students of color are also more likely to attend schools that have harsh disciplinary policies and extensive security forces, making them more susceptible to draconian punishments.

### *Students with Special Needs*

- ❖ Students with special needs are also affected more than their peers by harsh disciplinary practices and police presence in school. Frequently, these students are dramatically over-represented among those being suspended, expelled, and arrested in school.
- ❖ School security guards and police officers are often un-trained in working with students with special needs, placing these students at even greater risk.

### *Academic Impact*

- ❖ Schools are not any safer or more effective in disciplining children than before zero tolerance policies were implemented in the 1980s. There is also no credible evidence that zero tolerance policies are an effective means for changing student behavior.
- ❖ Research has shown that zero tolerance policies are associated with lower academic achievement, lower graduation rates, and worse school climate. Also, students who are arrested and appear in court are more likely to drop out of school.

### *Lingering Effects*

- ❖ The impact of the criminalization of children by their schools stretches beyond the teenage years. The emotional trauma, embarrassment, and stigma of being handcuffed can have long-lasting effects. And in some places, even just being arrested in school can become part of a child's criminal record. In some instances the arrests carry over and become a part of a student's adult records. Even if a student manages to get his or her record cleared, often he or she must still report an arrest to future employers.
- ❖ Research has shown that children who are arrested for the first time at a young age are more likely to be arrested again in the future. According to some studies, a student arrested in school is more than twice as likely as another student to be arrested later in life.

## **THE SOLUTION**

- ❖ Prevention and intervention strategies have been proven highly effective in addressing school-based misconduct, promoting a positive school

- climate, and making schools safe. These measures are also more cost effective than hurling students into the juvenile justice system.
- ❖ These alternatives to out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and school-based arrests range from the most simple classroom teaching techniques to comprehensive school-wide and community-based programs. In fact, the vast majority of student misconduct is best addressed through non-punitive classroom and in-school strategies. Most require little to no time or school resources, and are far more effective than exclusionary measures in creating a sustainable positive climate within schools.
  - ❖ Many school districts are now realizing how ineffective their zero tolerance policies are and have begun the process of reform. Districts in cities such as Denver, Los Angeles, and Baltimore have moved away from a punitive approach toward a more supportive, educational, and child-focused approach to discipline.
  - ❖ Districts such as these are: placing renewed emphasis on resolving low-level misconduct in the classroom; focusing on using developmentally appropriate disciplinary techniques that limit the amount of time spent outside of class; treating misbehavior as a teachable moment, rather than as a chance to punish; stressing the importance of fairness and uniformity, and the elimination of racial disparities; and calling upon law enforcement only for serious or immediate threats to the safety of the school.
  - ❖ Solutions to the “schoolhouse to jailhouse track” include:
    - Limiting zero tolerance school discipline policies to only conduct that poses a serious and/or immediate threat to school safety.
    - Placing renewed emphasis on resolving low-level misconduct in the classroom.
    - Creating or expanding prevention and intervention programs, in particular programs that keep students in school, learning, and in a structured environment, rather than pushing them out of school (e.g., in-school suspension rather than out-of-school suspension).
    - Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of school police. Any agreements between school districts and police departments for school resource officers should be very clear about when police should intervene, and should require police to receive training on how to effectively interact with youth and children with special needs.

- Increasing or diverting funding for more guidance counselors and social workers who are available to address students' academic and behavioral problems.
- Requiring school districts to collect discipline and arrest reporting data in schools disaggregated by offense, age, gender, grade, race, ethnicity, disability, and school.
- Investing in professional development for teachers and administrators on classroom management, conflict resolution, and implementing a non-punitive approach to discipline.
- Developing incentives for schools to: keep students in school rather than push them out of school, demonstrate reductions in school disciplinary actions, and utilize alternative discipline programs that keep students in school and learning.