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## Perspectives on Keeping Kids in Classrooms not Courtrooms

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## **NATIONAL YOUTH-AT-RISK CONFERENCE SAVANNAH**

**Conference Dates:** March 3-6, 2019

**Proposal Submission Deadline:** August 27, 2018

1. **TITLE:** Perspectives on Keeping Kids in Classrooms not Courtrooms

2. **RELEVANCE:**

The presentation is relevant to the Hands and Heart strands. Exclusionary discipline and referrals to law enforcement further reduce school engagement and a sense of community in the classroom.

3. **BRIEF DESCRIPTION:** The school to prison pipeline begins with school disciplinary incidents that result in suspensions and/or referrals to law enforcement. With the support of the National Institutes of Justice, the presenters explored factors that inform decision-making about exclusionary discipline practices and law enforcement referrals in Virginia. Educators and School Resource Officers are invited to discuss strategies for promoting well-being of youth-at-risk.

4. **SUMMARY:**

Several complicating factors have been identified with regard to the School-to-Prison Pipeline including high use of exclusionary discipline (suspensions and expulsions), direct involvement of law enforcement in schools, and racial, ethnic, and special education disparities. With the support of the National Institutes of Justice (Award No. 2015-CK-BX-0007) and in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Education, Department of Juvenile Justice, and Department of Criminal Justice Services, the presenters explored factors that inform decision-making about exclusionary discipline practices and law enforcement referrals in Virginia schools. As part of a large scale, multi-year process, the presenters explored rates of discipline and juvenile justice referrals, and the contributors to each. To more completely understand that decision making process, in-depth qualitative interviews with over 30 school leaders (e.g. school counselors, principals, etc.) and law enforcement officers across Virginia revealed compelling themes. Participants described the complex interaction of student behavior, the home and school context, and the balance between supporting students and maintaining the school culture. Practical implications and recommendations for all members of the school-law enforcement-juvenile justice collaboration will be described in detail.

5. **EVIDENCE:**

The school to prison pipeline (STPP) is a term which refers to policies and practices in K-12 schools which increase the likelihood that a student will not graduate from school and/or will become involved in the court system (Curtis, 2014; Fabelo, Thompson, Plotkin, Carmichael, Marchbanks, and Booth, 2011; Skiba, Areddondo, & Williams, 2014). This concept has garnered much attention as of late and is a source of great concern within the education and youth services communities. Recent reports suggest that almost 260,000 law enforcement referrals are made annually by schools, with 92,000 of those referrals resulting in arrests (Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Suspensions of students, another contributor to the STPP (Skiba, Areddondo, & Williams, 2014), have increased from 3.7% of students in 1974 (Wald & Losen, 2003) to more than 6.6% of students in 2010 (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). These suspensions are made for disciplinary infractions representing minor (Skiba, Areddondo, & Williams, 2014) and even normal student behaviors that were once addressed by schools instead of law enforcement (American Psychological Association, 2008).

Students are three and a half times more likely to interact with the juvenile justice system

when they have been suspended (Fabelo, Thompson, Plotkin, Carmichael, Marchbanks, and Booth, 2011). One study finds that students are 27% less likely to graduate from high school if they were arrested before the age of 16 and 26% more likely to enter a correctional facility as an adult (Hjalmarsson, 2008). Our goal is for every child to graduate from high school and go on to a rewarding career, but the factors that relate to the STPP interrupt and derail this process. Race and disability status influence the STPP as well. National data sets have consistently identified disparities in the rate and frequency of suspension, expulsion, law enforcement referrals, and school-related arrests for students who are black or disabled (OCR, 2014). Once students are in the juvenile justice system, the chances that they will drop out of school and return to the system again increase (Mendel, 2011; Neild and Balfanz, 2006). This in turn increases the likelihood of future incarceration.

It is not surprising that policy around the STPP has received attention from national and state associations. Comprehensively addressing the STPP requires districts to improve data management and usage, provide alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices, and promote positive behavior intervention programs that support the capacity for climate building in schools (APA, 2008; NSBA, 2013). Such recommendations seem even more important given the economic implications of exclusionary discipline, which have been critiqued as expensive and ineffective strategies (Dahlberg, 2012, Fabelo et al., 2011). Economists suggest that a 50% reduction in the current number of dropouts would save taxpayers nearly \$90 million dollars (National School Board Association, 2013). One study went so far as to project that student dropouts in Texas from 2012 alone would cost the state between 5.4. and 6.9 billion dollars in lost wages and tax revenues, continuing education expenses, and increases in welfare and prison costs during the course of their lives (in Metze, 2012). School resource officers are an additional expense attached to the STPP. In the middle of the 20th century, it was almost unheard for a school district to employ police officers for their schools (Dahlberg, 2012). By 2007, there were more than 19,000 (James and McAllion, 2013) police officers employed by school districts.

There has been a great deal of research into the STPP but those studies examine one of the influences on policy and practices that support the pipeline. The current study explored factors that inform decision-making about exclusionary discipline practices and law enforcement referrals in Virginia schools via in-depth qualitative interviews with school leaders and law enforcement officers. Additional quantitative analyses provide context for the qualitative findings. Practical implications and recommendations for all members of the school-law enforcement-juvenile justice collaboration will be described in detail.

## **6. FORMAT:**

Preferred presentation format: Individual presentation.

## **7. BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH:**

Gerard Lawson, PhD is a professor of Counselor Education at Virginia Tech. He is a licensed professional counselor and board-certified counselor, and has worked in juvenile justice and community mental health for over 20 years. Dr. Lawson is PI or Co-PI on nearly \$4 million in federal research grants and has authored and coauthored more than 40 refereed journal articles, book chapters, and scholarly instruments.

Laura E. Welfare, PhD is an associate professor of Counselor Education at Virginia Tech. A licensed professional counselor and approved clinical supervisor, she worked as a counselor

in clinical mental health and school settings with children, adolescents, and adults prior to joining the faculty. To date Dr. Welfare has been PI or Co-PI on 16 research grants totaling over \$2,500,000 and has authored and coauthored more than 28 refereed journal articles, book chapters, and scholarly instruments.

Tameka O. Grimes, PhD is an assistant professor of Counselor Education at Virginia Tech. Prior to joining the faculty at Virginia Tech, she worked as a school counselor in both traditional and non-traditional high school settings. Additionally, she taught in Title I schools in urban and rural districts prior to becoming a school counselor. Her current research interests include school counseling in rural communities and school counselors' knowledge, attitude, and skills for supporting students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

Ariann Robino is a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education program at Virginia Tech. She is also a licensed professional counselor and board-certified counselor. Her clinical experience has been as an advocate at the intersection of mental health and criminal justice, specifically as the coordinator and counselor of a substance abuse track within a juvenile diversion program. Ariann has worked as a research assistant on multiple juvenile justice grants as well as collaborated for strategic planning with the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

**KEYWORDS: school-to-prison-pipeline racial disparities Special Education disparities Discipline**

#### **7. CONTACT INFORMATION:**

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