**SCHOOLS 2 PRISONS:** THE OPPORTUNITY GAP

INTRO:

Hello lovely digital listeners. Introducing Schools to Prisons, a collaborative research

project between Our American Generation and the League of Education Voters. This

project is about highlighting the concerning link between our nation’s prisons and public

education systems; a link that turns struggling students into juvenile delinquents.

Between us we have two non-profits: one a youth-driven social justice think tank, the

other, a statewide advocacy organization aimed at fixing Washington’s public school

system. Together these groups are exploring the role of race and wealth in our public

school system, and how different demographics usually end up with different outcomes.

Did you know that black male students are 3 times as likely to be suspended than white

male students? Why do Latino students consistently perform worse on standardized

tests when we know they are just as smart? These are some of the questions this series

hopes to answer.

We began this project in hopes of building off OAG’s *Crime and Community* zine. We

started simply by looking at the data we already knew existed. There is research out

there on what many refer to as “the achievement gap.” In a nutshell, since No Child Left

Behind was passed in 2002, schools nationwide have been required to release their test

scores and graduation rates broken down by race and economic status. Now that this

data is required, we have a powerful tool for measuring public school success rates by

race and by income.

When folks in the US started to observe this new data, a disturbing trend was revealed,

one that many already knew from experience—that our country’s public school system is

serving students of color and low income students worse than white or higher income

students.

It’s important to note that many studying this topic refer to it as the “achievement gap”

but for the purpose of our research here we are referring to it as an “opportunity gap” for

several reasons. Mainly we aim to move away from a discussion that is focused on an

individual student’s achievement on a test or a grade and more towards a discussion

that looks at how our schools systematically deny students opportunities for success.

This redefinition also helps remind us that there are large, societal implications for

disparities in educational attainment. It’s not just a matter of missed income for an

individual that doesn’t graduate from high school, it’s the general welfare and prosperity

of our entire nation that suffers.

In this first podcast of the three-part series, we’ll introduce you to the issue of

Washington’s opportunity gap.

We’ve been working together, researching and interviewing for several months now,

trying to answer some questions that are at the heart of this issue.

What *is* the Opportunity Gap? What is the school to prison pipeline? What causes these

phenomena?

In short, the opportunity gap is the gap in academic performance between white

students and students of color, and also between wealthy students and poor students.

The school to prison pipeline is the trend of school’s pushing their “bad kids” out -- and

into the juvenile justice system. But before we get to these larger questions, let us

explain why we were even asking them.

LEV and OAG started work together after some awesome reporting done by a previous

research team at OAG. In that report, titled Crime & Community, youth researchers

outlined current problems within our criminal justice system.

Those problems are two-fold: for one, the entire prison system is overcrowded, with 1 in

every 100 Americans detained in a jail or prison at **this** moment. The second problem is

the piece about race and privilege: 1 in 106 whites are in custody, while 1 in 15 African

Americans and 1 in 36 Hispanic Americans are behind bars. Despite this, there is tons of

research that shows that whites commit crimes at the same rate as people of color.

Who *actually* ends up serving time prison is due in large part to over-policing of areas

where people of color predominantly live, and harsher prosecution and sentencing in our

court systems.

The United States has a long history of discrimination against people of color—

sometimes that discrimination is physically written into laws, like segregation in the Jim

Crow era. Sometimes that discrimination plays out far more subtly, like who was

targeted for subprime mortgages in foreclosure scandals, or who can gain access to

banks and credit card accounts.

Our history books show that there was once a time when our society believed people of

color were biologically less intelligent than white people—an idea known as eugenics

that has long been discredited. However, many of the vestiges of eugenics still haunt us.

Far too often politicians and people in power blame social inequities on the

characteristics and personality traits of individual communities or ethnic groups. This

notion is scientifically unfounded and needs to be squashed. This is the reason it is so

important to create distinction between the words achievement and opportunity: it is not

a matter of individuals achieving less. It is a matter of how our social systems deny

opportunities to underrepresented populations. Dismal learning environments and

overuse of juvenile detention services are two examples of where we can begin the

discussion!

While discrimination and race-based biases are a known and common thread in our

nation’s history, the enormous rate of imprisonment is not. In fact, only three white-houses

ago, in the Clinton era, the United States embarked on all sorts of “tough on

crime” politics. Outside of schools, these politics led to a major escalation in law

enforcement, what is known to many as the Drug War. In the context of schools, tough

on crime meant the creation of “zero tolerance” policies for drugs, alcohol, and weapons

on school campuses.

The outcomes are over policed public school campuses, and tighter links between our

schools and juvenile justice systems.

When I first read the Crime and Community report, the wheels in my brain automatically

started turning and connecting these two institutions: the public school system and the

prison system. In particular, I kept remembering a horrifying story that circulates around

the education world: that some states have estimated the number of prison cells they will

need to build in the future based on their public schools’ reading or test scores—from as

early on as the third grade.

And then I started remembering the news story where two judges in Pennsylvania plead

guilty to wire fraud and income tax fraud for accepting over 2.6 billion dollars in

kickbacks from private youth detention centers. These judges sentenced over 5,000

young offenders to private juvenile justice centers in exchange for the cash. Four thousand of these rulings have been overturned since those two judges were removed

from their jobs.

So with a lot of concern but less knowledge, we set out to explore the opportunity gap,

and how it relates to the school-to-prison pipeline. The very first piece of information we

found was disheartening, but also gave our project greater importance in our eyes:

Washington is one of 9 states in this country whose opportunity gap is **still** growing.

Students of color within our state’s public school system also have disproportionately

higher rates of suspension, expulsion, truancy and drop-outs. Not only does this lead to

a disproportionate number of students of color falling behind in school, but BIG

disparities in the demographics of kids sent off to Juvi as well.

Academically speaking, suspension is the worst thing a school could do to a student. As

we could all guess, the less time you spend in the classroom with your peers learning

new material and practicing skills, the less likely you are to do well in school. Imagine

getting suspended then missing a week’s worth of classes and not being able to make up

assignments or projects. Then imagine getting tested on that material you never learned

a few weeks later. It’s no wonder where the inequities in standardized tests scores come

from.

On average in Washington’s public school system, 76% of white students graduate high

school on time. In contrast, only 60% of Black, Latino and Native Americans graduate on

time. Needless to say there is a problem here.

When we look at information that tracks how school districts discipline their students, we

see equally alarming data. In 2006, more than 3.3 million students were suspended or

expelled, which is a ratio of about 1 in 14 young people pushed out of the public school

system. In that same year, 15% of our nation’s African American student population was

suspended in comparison to only 5% of our nation’s white students.

These “gaps” are already egregious. As they grow, Washington digs itself deeper and

deeper into a hole. A hole that unfairly privileges white folks through policy, discriminates

against young folks of color, and ultimately leaves our society with alarming social

inequities.

The use of the term School-to-Prison pipeline has become a regular feature in the

research we’ve been studying. The language is intentional-- it suggests that there are

structures and forces that push young folks in certain situations out of the public school

system and directly into the custody of our prison systems. This is especially true for

young students of color and especially true for students from lower economic

backgrounds. The pipeline could also imply the fact that youth are almost always

unaware of the full consequences of the behavior, and plain don’t know the juvenile

detention center is what’s waiting at the end of the pipeline.

However, the idea of one single pipeline is limited. As we come to understand the vast

differences in student experience within the school and prison systems, it becomes clear

that there isn’t merely one path down this pipeline. We’re pretty sure a pipeline isn’t even

close to describing the enormous diversity of pathways a young person navigates to get

their education. Gasworks Park couldn’t house as many rusty pipes as we’ve got to

describe our journeys.

Some students trip and fall into a cycle of crime, some are caught in the wrong place at

the wrong time, some students come from challenging home situations that make school

a difficult place to stay, while others are simply unable to muster excitement for

classwork. Whatever the case, public schools have shown a tendency to rely on

punitive, disciplinary measures to deal with students. We’ve even heard of teachers and

administrators referring students into the juvenile court system for the purpose of getting

that young person the social services classrooms aren’t able to offer.

However, once that discipline starts to involve juvenile hall, we see that youth actually

begin committing more and worse crimes, in a sense starting to own the label of

“delinquent” they were given at school.

We’re asking readers and listeners to keep this in mind. The “pipeline” metaphor doesn’t

speak as much to the range of options young people have, but more to the systematic

denial of an opportunity to succeed, once students stray from a track towards

graduation.

Before we begin to dig deep into how and why there are major disparities in academic

achievement, and why we have a serious over-representation of students of color facing

discipline, we should say a quick word about what *literally* happens when a student gets

in trouble in school. There is *incredible* variation in the way students are disciplined in

within schools and that fact alone isn’t widely recognized. Policies vary widely from

student to student, school to school, district to district and state to state.

One consequence of this is that any attempt to contest a punishment is steeped in

bureaucracy. Parents have to take time off work to come into schools or courtrooms to

fight for their kids. Documents have to be read, understood and filed. Legal fees and

fines have to be paid for records to be cleared. Obviously parents that are struggling to

make enough money to provide for their families, cannot afford all this time off work in

order to face up to this paperwork and processing. The consequence of this becomes

very real, when suspensions are extended simply paperwork hasn’t been done.

Reviewing a typical students path through the school to prison pipeline starts to

illuminate where there could be opportunities for change.

In Washington State alone, there are 295 school districts. This means that as a state,

Washington takes 295 different approaches to discipline. The authority to pass district

wide policies regarding suspension and expulsion belongs to each school board and

superintendent. They adopt a set of rules and it becomes up to the principals to ensure

that the teachers within their building are enforcing those rules.

The gamut of discipline is wide: you can receive detention, get a phone call home,

receive in-school suspension. You could be sentenced with out of school short-term or

long-term suspension, or you could be expelled.

Discipline doesn’t just lie within the purview of the school administration though, upon

suspension or expulsion a student can be referred directly to a juvenile detention center

and prosecuted, depending on the severity of their crime. This is often perceived as the

crux of the problem—the relationship between school administration and the juvenile

court system.

This is where the metaphor of a pipeline comes in handy again. Rarely is it the case

where one student, one time, breaks a rule that lands them in jail. In reality, it is a series

of events, of pushes and pulls in and out of the classroom, that lead principals and

teachers to recommend a student leave the school permanently and face criminal

prosecution.

In the past two decades, we’ve seen a tremendous increase in adult *and* juvenile

incarceration rates and imprisonment. One source found that between 1987 and 2007,

the US prison population had tripled, totaling roughly 2.3 million people behind bars. As

we mentioned earlier, that led to 1 in every 100 Americans detained in a jail or prison.

Don’t forget the racial disparities in that stat either: 1 in 106 whites are in custody, while

1 in only 15 African Americans and 1 in 36 Hispanic-Americans are behind bars.

This “tough on crime” mentality permeated our schools throughout the 90s, meanwhile

incidents like the Columbine shooting was used by administrators and politicians to

justify a national crackdown in the public school system. What started out as a zero tolerance

policy against guns in schools, turned into zero-tolerance of violence,

weapons, gangs, drugs, truancy and tardiness. Some sources even cited zero-tolerance

policies on vague infractions such as “insubordination.”

The definition of a zero-tolerance policy is one that “mandates predetermined

consequences for rule infractions, regardless of the circumstance.” Basically, no second

chances. Theoretically, these policies are designed to create safe schools and safe

classroom cultures. They also provide protection for teachers by setting up a seemingly objective

protocol for how to deal with “disruptions” in the classroom.

Between 1974 and 2006 the rate at which US students were suspended and expelled

from school nearly doubled, from 3.7% of students in 1974 to 7.1% of students in 2006.

After one school district in New York adopted a zero-tolerance policy, they documented

suspensions of 4-10 year olds increasing by 76%.

In some instances, we’ve read that students were suspended for butter knives in their

lunchboxes, nail files in their backpacks or aspirin in their pockets. Examples like these

show exactly how zero-tolerance policies, which were intended to create an objective,

fair and safe environment, can and have become subjective, tedious and unnecessarily

punitive.

So we’re at a point now where the tough-on-crime policies that grew out of the 90’s are

*still* in place, despite the fact that our prisons are literally getting crowded, with youth and

adults alike. Punishment is still the go-to method for dealing with unruly students, despite

research from the 80s showing that youth develop and respond better to nurturing than

punishment. Studies also show young folks have a great capacity to change their

behavior through rehabilitation.

Sending them to prison is potentially the worst solution, because most prisons lack any

resources directed towards recovery, and youth have a greater tendency to commit

crimes once they have visited Juvi [juvenile detention center]. Also, once a young person has gone to juvi [juvenile detention center], they are

likely to commit more serious crimes upon leaving. Youth criminality has historically

been blamed on poor communities or dysfunctional homes, factors that people see as

ruinous to children. However, studies of developmental psychology actually show this to

be an incomplete indicator of criminality, and that the mental development of a youth is

affected by all mentors in her or his life, including teacher, peers, or even police. If one is

labeled a trouble-maker early on by a figure as influential as a teacher, one will be

disposed to believe that they are indeed trouble makers.

Activist and scholar Angela Davis describes over-incarceration as “a way of

disappearing people in the false hope of disappearing the underlying social problems

they represent” and in many respects, the same principles apply to adults attempting to

manage their classrooms.

During our research we touched based with a youth-led non-profit called Seattle Young

People’s Project. They are currently working on a campaign asking, amongst other

things, for the Seattle Public School System to release more data on “informal” types of

school punishment, such as in-school suspension and detention. When we asked the

middle and high school experts about contributing factors to the school to prison

pipeline, they told us that teachers who knew how to simply, “pull a student aside and tell

them what they did wrong,” were few and far between. The much more common

approach was to send a disruptive student out of the class. This included, to a certain

degree, a feeling of public shame for the student’s misbehavior.

As the Crime & Community report lies out, “instead of recognizing the distinct attributes

of youth, including angst, impressionability, and general confusion, prosecutors [and

teachers] will treat juveniles like they were grown-up hardened criminals.”

Without over-simplifying a hugely complex social problem, we really believe a few simple

things could help alleviate Washington’s opportunity gap. Students of color are pushed

out of the classroom, suspended, and truant at rates far exceeding those of their white

peers. It is then a logical conclusion that the very students who are kicked out and

barred from learning perform would perform worse on tests through the K-12 school

system. These gaps in reading scores and test scores are one direct consequence of

schools over-dependence on zero-tolerance policies, and discipline.

Research also tells us that environmental factors, like community and home life, are not

as impactful as people often estimate. We know there are schools and teachers out

there already turning the opportunity gap around. Later in our podcast series we’ll go into

much further detail about the practices that are helping ease the disparities in sentencing

and academic achievement. With honest and transparent work around humanizing the

discipline process, learning communities all over have already made progress.

Well - we hoped you all enjoyed this segment on the Opportunity Gap and the School to

Prison Pipeline. Any follow up questions can be posted as comments on the Our

American Generation or SoapBox blogs, and one of us we’ll find an answer for you. In

this segment we laid down the context of the opportunity gap, but we were not able to

dive in all the way to complicated questions about how race and class become tangled

into all this, and about exactly how much student potential we are losing. That will be

the task for the next two segment, The Price of Inequity, and The New Jim Crow. Make

sure to check back in every week this month for a new segment, and start getting

excited for the full zine that will follow this series! That’s all we’ve got for now; from OAG

and LEV, we love ya’ll, and we’ll see you next week!