

Discipline in the Schools
By: Alan Jay Rom

Schools should be for learning and school administrators should be looking to see how that can happen and deal wisely with disruptive students. Yet, we see an ever-increasing rate of school suspensions and expulsions. What can be characterized as drop-out rates is all too often attributable to students being “pushed-out” under the guise of “zero-tolerance” policies of public school districts. However, we know that two-thirds of those in prison do not have a high school diploma, so it is critical that we develop alternatives to suspensions and expulsions. In a recent case, a high school girl was suspended for wearing a sweater, which was not a part of the school “uniform.” She wore the sweater because it was cold in the building. When asked to comment, the superintendent said that she was not singled out; others who dressed similarly were suspended.

To the Education Law Task Force (ELTF), this is a “horror story,” and there are others. The ELTF consists of lawyers throughout the Commonwealth who want to address education issues adversely affecting students. One project is about discipline. ELTF is collecting “horror stories,” such as the above example, analyzing data from school districts and the Massachusetts Department of Education (MDOE) concerning suspensions and expulsions, and will be drafting recommendations for school districts on how they can treat disruptive students without leading them to what we call the school to prison pipeline. Solutions are not simple and it takes the collective efforts of school officials, teachers, parents, and interested members of the community to come together in forums to discuss how this pipeline can be stopped.

Research by the MDOE long-ago reiterated the need for systemic reforms. MDOE stated, “To address the underlying causes of school dropouts, *systemic, school-based changes* are needed to foster learning environments that meet the emotional, social, physical and cognitive needs of all students and staff.”¹ We must realize that there are negative messages sent by schools to those who are the most vulnerable students.

The available evidence is that most suspensions are not for serious infractions such as drugs and alcohol, fighting and assault, weapons, vandalism and destruction of property.² The vast majority are for so-called “friction” offenses (disrespect, insubordination).³

As a community, we have to look for the resources that will address disruption without giving up on these students. The youth suspended or expelled are not going away; if they are not in school, they will be on the streets and then, predictably, in prison.

¹ See *Changing Schools and Communities: A Systemic Approach to Dropout Prevention*, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Massachusetts Department of Education, November 1989, p.16.

² See *Structuring Schools for Student Success: A Focus on Discipline and Attendance*, Massachusetts Department of Education, 1991, p. 5.

³ *Id.*

We end up paying one way or another. It is better to put those resources into the schools so greater costs can be avoided later on.

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