

Improving school disciplinary policies would improve juvenile justice system

By Lorenn Walker

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Thank you for the editorial on the need to reform our juvenile justice system and endorsing the recommendations of the Hawaii Juvenile Justice Working Group that I served on ("[Juvenile justice system needs reform](#)," Star-Advertiser, Our View, Dec. 18).

In addition to reforming how our justice system deals with juvenile offenses, we also need to increase the chances for students to succeed in public school to keep them out of the system.

Most youths involved with the juvenile justice system have serious substance-abuse problems. Research shows that students who experience school failure are more likely to develop such problems than students who are successful. The more educated a population is, the lower the level of criminal behavior.

The connections between school failure, substance abuse and criminal behavior are glaringly clear in Hawaii.

Our adult prisoners have an average sixth-grade level of education. This tells us that our schools are not educating our most challenged students, and instead are often pipelines to prison.

Students who are economically and socially disadvantaged are most at risk for school failure and involvement with the criminal justice system. Our schools need to help these students with their academic and social problems. It is easy to blame families for the students' failure, but often, the parents of these children themselves suffered the same types of problems and were ignored by our educational system. So the pattern is repeated.

Changing school policies, including eliminating zero tolerance policies, especially for substance abuse, can help youth to develop academically and socially. Most students who use drugs need treatment and are not helped by being punished or school suspension.

School districts in other states have seen the failure of zero tolerance, including one of the largest, Broward County, Fla., which has disbanded this failed

approach.

Public schools should also reconsider the 2.0 grade point average required for extracurricular activities, which hurts economically and socially disadvantaged students the most. We should be doing everything possible to keep struggling students engaged in school because the alternative is what we have today: a prison population of about 5,000 people with the education of 12-year-olds.

Research by the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that when students "feel cared for by people at their school and feel like a part of their school, they are less likely to use substances, engage in violence, or initiate sexual activity at an early age."

While the need for better student engagement is clear, school polices have gone in the opposite direction. According to a long-time Hawaii Department of Education administrator who works with students suspended for zero-tolerance infractions, "Teachers have no more time to hang out with students. They are so bogged down with all the bureaucracy. They close their doors when school ends to do their paperwork."

We need to give some autonomy back to teachers and individual schools to care about their students the way Finland does, which arguably has the best school system in the world. Finnish students not doing well in school who have discipline problems, are often diverted to family-based programs. Research shows that family interventions, including restorative justice, are the best juvenile diversion approaches.

Schools need to end zero tolerance, reevaluate the 2.0 GPA rule for extracurricular activities, and divert students who are experiencing problems at school to family programs.

Large sums of money are not needed to implement these programs. To help spawn new community-based programs for at-risk youth, the state Office of Youth Services recently issued a request for proposals: Grants between \$30,000 to \$100,000 for schools and other groups will help establish community services for at-risk youth.

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