Paying with their lives: One family and the school-to-prison pipeline

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With gratitude to Bridget, Jordan, and Philip for their willingness to share their personal experiences with a wider audience

Bridget: I was pretty trusting of the school system when my sons first entered. I was a young, single mom and not very confident as a mother. I thought it would be good for my kids to be in school and be guided by people better educated and more mature than myself. I had been a college dropout and was on welfare when my kids entered school. I was still trying to figure out what to do with my life and thought that teachers and principals were a more enlightened class.

Jordan: I had some behavioral problems in school. I had one teacher who would send me to the principal’s office and just leave me there for hours. I would miss a majority of my education. I wasn’t perfect but [this teacher] gave me no breaks. The only time I didn’t get kicked out was when she read a book called Where the Red Fern Grows. It was something that I liked and enjoyed...No one ever asked me what I liked or what kept me interested.

Philip: I probably have been suspended from school close to 40 times ... I remember being suspended for three days for sticking up my middle finger...I've been suspended for smelling like marijuana but was never offered chemical dependency [treatment] ...I've been suspended for fighting and cursing but never offered anger management...Going on and off suspension for kids is like going in and out of jail for adults. It becomes acceptable in one’s life and leads kids to believe that they are a part of trouble, so they should just stay that way.

This essay seeks to provide a meaningful, though distressing, look at the school-to-prison pipeline by relating the experiences of Bridget, a white woman, and her two sons, Jordan and Philip, both biracial (their father is African-American). As a single mom struggling to make ends meet, Bridget depended on the public schools in a large Midwestern city to help her sons find a path toward success. Frankly, they failed her. Today, Jordan is serving a ten year sentence in jail; Philip is on parole and a convicted felon with a permanent criminal record. Without releasing themselves from responsibility, Bridget, Jordan, and Philip provide a glimpse into how their experiences in school not only impeded Jordan and Philip’s success but actually pushed them toward incarceration. In this essay, we seek to examine how this is possible.
In addition to illustrating the school-to-prison pipeline’s real impact on real people, our purpose is to critique the institutional racism and classism that undergird it. In particular, we seek to interrupt the authoritative discourse of “zero tolerance” in our schools, a system of discipline that pushes many marginalized students, especially young black men, into the school-to-prison pipeline. At the root of zero tolerance is a deficit model discourse that too often positions students and families of color as “trouble,” “at risk,” or in some way “lacking.” Our contention is that kids of color are often taught in school and by the school that they do not belong. As teacher educators, we see a need for much greater vigilance in preparing future teachers to avoid problematic practices in their own teaching and to confront institutional racism and classism in schools. While the essay focuses primarily on the experiences of Bridget, Jordan, and Philip, we also begin to suggest what needs to change in schools. Most importantly, we argue for culturally relevant, student-centered teaching. We envision classroom and school-wide practices that strive to educate and nurture not only every child, but the whole child. We believe that teachers, administrators, and support staff should seek to build meaningful relationships with every student that enters our schools.

Both of the authors, Joe and Letitia, are white, middle-class teacher educators working at a small university located in the same metropolitan area where Jordan and Philip attended school. We are committed to fostering meaningful change through our teaching, though we still struggle with how to accomplish this most effectively. Both of us work with pre-service and practicing teachers in urban, often overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms. Both of us have young children in these urban public schools. Despite the challenges we have encountered as teachers, teacher educators, and parents, we remain hopeful and fully-invested in helping our urban public schools to serve all children. With this essay, we seek to interrupt the troubling discourse of “zero tolerance” as an essential first step in moving our schools away from a deficit model perspective and toward becoming truly inclusive and supportive communities of learning.

Letitia first met Bridget as a student in her Education and Cultural Diversity course (Bridget has since completed her teaching license and is now teaching overseas). In class, Letitia was struck by Bridget’s obvious passion for social justice. She often spoke with exasperation of her sons’ experiences in school. Letitia asked Bridget to write about her sons’ experiences in greater detail; this led to written correspondence with Jordan and Philip. We introduce each section of our essay with extensive quotations from this family, because they have powerful experiences and perceptions to share, and we so rarely hear directly from the victims of the school-to-prison pipeline. We wish to express our deep gratitude to Bridget, Jordan, and Philip for their willingness to share their experiences with a wider audience. Our hope is that their stories will
help to expose a disturbing trend in our public schools that is in dire need of critique and change.

Mass Incarceration Sets the Stage for the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Before examining the damaging effects of the school-to-prison pipeline, we step back to consider incarceration trends in the United States, because we see a direct link between these societal trends and discipline patterns in our schools. Today, we arrest and imprison staggering numbers of our fellow citizens. In Michelle Alexander’s (2012) provocative book *The New Jim Crow*, she argues that legal racial segregation has been replaced by mass incarceration as a system of social control. She reveals that “in the last thirty years the U.S. penal population has exploded from around 300,000 to more than 2 million” (p. 6), with six to ten times more people incarcerated in the U.S. than any other industrialized nation (p. 8). Ironically, during that same time, violent crime rates have dropped steadily. This means that we are incarcerating hundreds of thousands of our citizens for non-violent possession of drugs.

Alexander (2012) highlights how these arrests and convictions have targeted low-income communities of color almost entirely. The U.S. prison system imprisons startlingly disproportionate numbers of African-Americans and Latinos, exacerbating economic inequities for communities of color. Felony convictions often result in the denial of basic rights, leading to the creation of what Alexander calls a permanent “under-caste” (p. 7) made up almost entirely of poor people of color. Meanwhile, despite an oversimplified and often-stereotyped portrayal of “drug culture,” it is simply not true that people of color are more likely to use and sell drugs (Alexander, 2010; Snyder & Stickman, 2006), though we arrest and convict them at much higher rates.

Just what is going on here? Alexander (2012) argues that the label of “criminal” has now replaced the n-word as an acceptable way to identify those individuals who “must” be eradicated from mainstream society. We have significantly broadened our understanding of what it means to be a criminal and we have targeted those communities and individuals who are least equipped, economically, to defend themselves. “In the era of colorblindness,” writes Alexander,

it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination ... So we don’t. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color “criminals” and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals ... We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it (p. 2).
In the past several decades, our society has made important strides in rejecting blatant racism (e.g., lynching, cross-burning, Jim Crow laws, use of the n-word); at the same time, we have allowed and endorsed more subtle forms of institutional racism, particularly when it comes to crime and punishment. We police our communities of color more often and with greater vigilance, resulting in skewed incarceration rates and denial of basic rights to those who have been convicted.

Bryan Stevenson, Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative, similarly suggests that mass incarceration has completely undermined our legal justice system and he cites the war on drugs as the primary cause. Stevenson underscores the important link between incarceration and poverty, arguing that wealth often determines guilt or innocence in our legal justice system: “We have a system that treats you better if you are rich and guilty than if you are poor and innocent” (Moyers Interview, 2013). Stevenson’s legal work has focused especially on children in the criminal justice system. He points out that there are a quarter million kids in the adult system today, some as young as 8 or 9. Almost three-thousand children have been sentenced to life imprisonment without parole. Again, the racial disparities are frightening – 74% of those who have been sentenced to life without parole are kids of color (Moyers Interview, 2013). Even at a very young age, the markers of poverty and dark skin appear to ensure harsher treatment by our police and criminal justice system.

A similar pattern has occurred in our public schools. In the same way that poor men of color are targeted for arrest and incarceration on a societal level, boys and young men of color are in much greater danger of experiencing disproportionate discipline and exclusionary or repressive punishment in our schools. As Jordan and Philip’s stories will illustrate, these boys and young men tend to be targeted and labeled as “problems” in school; they are frequently pushed out of mainstream classrooms; they experience suspension and expulsion at disturbingly higher rates; and they often wind up in the school-to-prison pipeline (Christle, Jolivette, Nelson, 2005; Rashid, 2009; Solomon, 2004). Says Stevenson:

> Even in school systems now, we are arresting children – six and seven and eight-year-old kids . . . We put them in handcuffs; we treat them like criminals. It’s not something that any responsible parent could ever imagine being legitimate as applied to their children . . . What happens, of course, is that when you don’t see the child as your child – which happens to a lot of racial minorities, undocument children, and native children . . . we take a different attitude (Moyers Interview, 2013).
That “different attitude” has affected thousands of boys and young men in our school system. By labeling these kids early-on as “trouble makers” (which is to say, “budding criminals”), we give ourselves permission to treat them as “the other,” and we often fail to note or address the blatant racial disparity that accompanies such labels.

**Disproportionate and Exclusionary Discipline in Schools**

**Bridget:** Both of my boys had been in school for a few years and I was already getting the sense that boys in general, and especially black boys, were being treated more harshly than other kids. I saw it in the way teachers talked to the boys. I saw it in the way the boys came home angry... Jordan told me many times that [his teachers] showed favoritism toward the girls. There was complaining about what appeared to be white privilege. It seemed the white students got along better with teachers in almost every class... Teachers and school administrators think they have to keep a closer eye on boys, especially black boys, and crack down on them sooner to prevent them from becoming bigger menaces – a sort of nip-it-in-the-bud tactic... Unfortunately, this tendency to regulate black boys more frequently and harshly only contributes to the problems these boys already face.

**Jordan:** To witness mostly black kids in [special education] classes made me think something was wrong because some of them were very smart. My friend David, he was one of the smartest kids I knew. However, he was in [special education] all day because he was hyperactive. I always thought maybe they should give him more stuff to do instead of having him in a class below his level. Classes for [special education] students would always be filled with a majority of blacks... Higher income students or students who were good at sports always seemed to get a pass on things.

**Philip:** Once I was characterized by my teachers as a troubled kid, I felt I had to continue to be that way, upholding an image I thought was cool... I began to go to school to start trouble and I was a part of the troubled kids group... Every public school I went to there was a certain group of kids that was singled out to be “trouble” and other students were advised to stay away... Every student that I knew that was “trouble” that I grew up with is either dead, in prison, or has been to prison.

Bridget, Jordan, and Philip were clearly aware of the authoritative discourses at work in schools, such as white privilege, tracking, and the categorizing of certain kids as “trouble.” One important way in which these authoritative discourses function is through the use of disproportionate and exclusionary discipline practices. In his analysis of disciplinary practices in our public schools, Noguera (2008) finds that the most severe measures of discipline
(suspension and expulsion in particular) are often reserved for those kids who fit particular categories of “trouble.” They are overwhelmingly low-income kids, often diagnosed with learning disabilities. They tend to come from single-parent homes and foster homes; some are homeless. They are also disproportionately kids of color. In other words, we tend to punish and push away those students who are most in need of social services and steady, reliable adult guidance. Fenning and Rose (2007) have examined exclusionary discipline practices such as suspension and expulsion over the past three decades and document a clear overrepresentation of youth of color, particularly African American males. They also note a clear association between these harsh disciplinary tactics and eventual incarceration (p. 536).

The most obvious problem that results from the habitual use of suspension and expulsion is that it disconnects students from the classroom and disrupts their learning. This disconnect can be especially detrimental if it occurs frequently or over a long period of time. Students who miss a lot of class time fall behind and have difficulty catching up. If students are frequently suspended and not in school, this allows for greater periods of unsupervised free time and may increase the likelihood of criminal behavior. Equally damaging is the stigma created by multiple experiences of suspension and/or expulsion. Feelings of shame, humiliation, and anger may set off an irreversible downward trajectory, as Philip describes above. Students may begin to distrust their teachers and school. They may feel rejected and unwanted, resulting in a much higher risk for dropping out and/or landing in prison (Christle, et al., 2005; Rashid, 2009; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Rashid, 2009; Solomon, 2004).

In many schools, we over-rely on embarrassment and exclusion as quick-fix disciplinary tactics, rather than seeking to build long term relationships with our students and guide them toward more responsible choices. Noguera (2008) points out that the disciplinary action of exclusion is often wholly unrelated to the actual act of misbehavior. Repetitive experiences with exclusionary discipline can result in students building up resistance to its deterrent effects, which are already limited. Noguera argues that schools “must accept responsibility for racial disparities in discipline patterns (p. 138)” and seek alternatives, such as positive behavior support systems. Instead of using discipline as a way to get rid of troubled kids, we need systems that purposefully steer them toward responsible decision-making and productive learning. This important change must begin with a thoughtful critique of zero tolerance policies in our schools.

Zero Tolerance for Children

Bridget: One day in Mrs. Howard’s [third grade] classroom, they were celebrating birthdays in typical birthday fashion. There were decorations and cakes and singing songs. Some of the kids

Comment [2]: Bic, you suggested that we add a citation here, but we see this as a fairly straightforward claim -- kids who are kicked out of classrooms cannot participate in the learning. Let us know if you need something more here.

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Comment [4]: Again, we see this claim as simply describing the immediate effects of school suspension. We’re not sure what to cite here.
joked about giving the birthday kids spankings. Apparently, this kind of talk concerned Mrs. Howard so she gave an earnest lecture to the students about how there would be no hitting or spanking each other in the classroom... She reminded them that the school had zero tolerance for hitting and if you hit someone you could be suspended or expelled. Now, to Jordan, I guess her words seemed hypocritical, because the girls in the classroom repeatedly hit, pinched, and poked him without consequences. So in response to her lecture, he proceeded to get out of his seat, walk up to Mrs. Howard and slug her in the arm... Of course, since she had just given the entire class a lecture on zero tolerance for hitting, she had to follow through... She sent Jordan to the principal’s office...[The principal] kept Jordan in her office for the rest of the day and then sent him home on the bus with a paper saying he had been suspended.

This was Jordan’s first experience with the school’s zero tolerance policy. Zero tolerance policies were developed in the 1990’s by the federal government as a means to prevent drug use and gun violence in our schools. The initial purpose was to reduce and/or prevent significant and intolerable infractions like selling illicit drugs or carrying dangerous weapons. Today, zero tolerance policies are so over-used that students often receive severe punishments for misunderstandings, mistakes, or minor infractions. Many studies (Evans and Lester, 2012; Heitzig, 2009; Solomon, 2004; Youth United, 2011) have documented the misuse and abuse of zero tolerance policies and exposed them as a root cause of the school-to-prison pipeline. These studies all demonstrate a clear pattern of schools handing out the most severe disciplinary measures to boys and young men of color. Jordan clearly made a bad choice in the incident described above, but did it warrant invoking the school’s zero tolerance policy?

Bridget: After the suspension period was up, I went to the principal’s office with Jordan and his father... It wasn’t often that his Dad showed up for things, but for this I implored him. I thought it would be good for [the principal] to meet Jordan’s father and see that Jordan had a father. [The principal] told us almost as soon as we walked in the door that Jordan was being transferred to another school. I asked why and she said that her school had a zero tolerance policy for violence. I told her that she could not put in a transfer request without talking to the parents first. [District] administrators in the main office had told me this... She completely ignored us and said the transfer was complete.

Unfortunately, this kind of response to challenging behavior situations is not at all rare. In another setting, a ten-year old boy diagnosed with Emotional and Behavioral Disturbance (EBD) became angry with his classmates for constantly teasing and harassing him, even choking him in one instance. The boy yelled, “I could kill you!” to his peers. He was detained by the school and arrested by police for making terroristic threats (Brownstein, 2009). A group called Youth United for Change (2011) has examined the impact of zero tolerance policies in the Philadelphia...
schools. Their research suggests that such policies have been used regularly to punish students for insignificant, even petty, violations. One 15-year-old was suspended and transferred for having a butter knife in his school bag (he’d forgotten about it until it was scanned by security officers). This student “was handcuffed to a chair” until the police arrived to arrest him (p. 8). Another young man was arrested, suspended, and transferred for carrying a small pair of scissors that he’d been using the night before to wrap Christmas presents. A third “budding criminal” was found with a Boy Scout pocket knife in a pair of pants he’d grabbed from the laundry basket that morning. He was also arrested, suspended, and moved to another school (p. 8).

These examples are extreme, but they highlight two essential points. First, our schools are beginning to look and feel more and more like prisons, a dangerous trend that must be reversed if we are to have any hope of “leaving no child behind.” Second, zero tolerance policies leave little space for informed and compassionate adults (perhaps a group of teachers, parents, counselors, and administrators working together) to assess specific incidents in context and arrive at a fair, reasoned response that is in the best interest of the children involved. In each of the cases described above, contextual factors and extenuating circumstances call for a more nuanced and compassionate response to the particular student. As Stevenson reminds us, “We too frequently define [punishment] through the lens of a crime . . . But we give justice to people. We’re not actually condemning crimes, we’re condemning people” (Moyers Interview, 2013).

**Bridget:** The zero tolerance policy was very confusing to me from the beginning. It wasn’t until I started seeing its effects that I really started questioning such a strict policy... There should be lengthy discussion and serious thought put into how a child is punished... Each situation should be examined with an open, rational mind... In this case, I felt no respect from [the principal] whatsoever. I also wondered if it might have been a mistake to bring Jordan’s father along, because [the principal] seemed to have even more contempt for him. After the meeting, [Jordan’s father] stated the same thing to me. Her felt her contempt and disrespect.

I’m not condoning what Jordan did, but it’s pretty clear that he got railroaded. He was never given the opportunity to state his perspective of what had happened. He was never asked how he felt about his class or his teacher. There was no discussion of natural consequences related to the actual incident. There was no discussion with Jordan about how to change his behavior. He was given no opportunity to learn about making amends, reconciliation, or forgiveness. He was being viewed as a “violent Black male” at the age of eight... I think at almost every turn, my son has received overly harsh punishment.
The Downward Spiral

The male student of color stuck in a zero tolerance paradigm may begin to give up hope. Overzealous disciplinary response can lead to further incidents of “acting out” and increase the likelihood of academic failure (Heitzig, 2009; Rashid, 2009). Unless a caring adult can make a meaningful connection, despair may set in. Eventually, dropping out becomes the only viable option, greatly increasing the likelihood of criminal behavior and, ultimately, prison time. Both Jordan and Philip experienced this exact trajectory – the school-to-prison pipeline.

Zero tolerance policies have increased the use of policing tactics on school campuses, as well as the physical presence of police and armed security guards. As Giroux (2012) puts it, “punishment and fear have replaced compassion and social responsibility as the most important modalities mediating the relationship of youth to the larger social order” (p. xv). A visible police presence on a school campus can amplify emotional tension for boys and young men of color, even those who do not have criminal records. Constant surveillance may make them feel that they are always under suspicion of criminal behavior, an atmosphere that makes productive learning more difficult and may encourage oppositional attitudes. The daily attitudes and practices of a campus police and security force can strongly influence this atmosphere.

**Jordan:** The police presence was very strong at my high school. They even had their own office and officers would take you in there and put on black gloves and threaten you... They would arrange drug busts... I was taken to their office one time for an altercation and the police threatened me. They shouted stuff like “Do you know who Mr. ___ is? Do you know who we are?”

Writing about the resemblance of schools to jails, Fuentes (2001) observes that

children and adolescents spend the majority of their waking hours in schools that have increasingly come to resemble places of detention more than places of learning... [T]he public schools of the twenty-first century reflect a society that has become fixated on crime, security, and violence (p. 9).

In such an environment, is it any wonder that marginalized students feel alienated and rejected? Fuentes (2011) further notes that our societal paranoia about school safety has steadily increased during a period when the actual number of violent incidents has declined. She describes the peculiarly American paradox of seeing children as both victims and potential criminals. Perhaps the difference is rooted in how we see each child. Those who are identified...
as trouble lose their status as “our children” and become, instead, the budding criminal who must be pushed away and ultimately put away. Again, we seek to challenge an authoritative discourse that positions children from this deficit lens. Stevenson challenges this problematic paradigm in our schools and criminal justice system:

You can’t say that’s not really a child because he’s black or brown . . . because he’s had some problems, because he’s disabled, because he’s angry . . . You can’t say that makes him not a child (Moyers, 2013).

In fact, such children and their families often rely on the public schools to help them find a pathway toward success. Bridget suggests that she needed the schools to guide and mentor her sons, but found, instead, that they were being pushed away “at almost every turn.”

Students who feel marginalized by the dominant culture of the school and threatened by constant surveillance and monitoring often choose to adopt a counter-culture. Here, a sense of identity and belonging develops through collective resistance to a perceived oppressive power structure (Basford, 2010; Lee, 2001; Ogbu, 1987; Tatum, 2003). Counter-cultures are viewed as rebellious, subversive, and threatening to teachers, administrators, and the police, who then react in extreme ways to punish the “perpetrators” (Heitzeg, 2009; Raible & Irizarry, 2010; Solomon, 2004). A downward spiral occurs that forces many boys and young men of color out of school and into the prison pipeline.

How can we, as teachers, possibly reach these kids if they enter our classrooms with defiant and oppositional attitudes? An important first step is to realize that students often enter our classrooms with a significant history of negative experiences in schools that understandably influence their view of teachers. In the same way that white middle class people have been taught to fear young black men and boys, these students may have learned to be suspicious of and cynical about schools and teachers. In Jordan’s case, a series of incidents, beginning as early as first grade, nudged him toward a general distrust of teachers and administrators.

**Jordan:** When I was in first grade, my teacher would always want kids to stay in at recess. He would choose one or two kids to stay behind and read with him. One day he told me and my friend Tim to stay behind and read with him. When everyone was gone, Tim was sitting on his lap and he was advising me to sit on his lap also. He was rubbing Tim's inner thigh. When I told him no, he told me to listen to him and I told him I would read from my seat. He became very angry. He tried to grab me so I hit him and ran to the principal's office to tell the principal what he was doing. [The teacher] came in behind me and told the principal what I did and that I was lying. I was the one who got in trouble and suspended. I was six years old. A few years later at
the grocery store with my Mom, I saw [this teacher] in the paper for molestation at another school.

**Bridget:** When Jordan was in eighth grade, he and another boy beat up a white boy that called them niggers... There was a write up on Jordan and there was a big meeting with me and the principal and the social worker... They were determined to prove that Jordan’s story was a lie and that the beating was unprovoked... Jordan was guilty hands down and there was no opportunity for him to learn about his make mistake or make amends... I was told that my sons were “high risk” students. I honestly did not know what that meant. High risk for what? I was confused, angry, and losing trust fast.

A history of negative experiences in schools and classrooms may parallel troubling interactions with the police. Here, the student learns that he is the target of suspicion wherever he goes and he is not likely to find safety or support from adults in any setting. Below, Jordan and Bridget describe a series of troubling interactions with authority figures both in and out of school.

**Jordan:** One day, I was late going to middle school. I was walking slow because I was very sick. I had been throwing up all morning and I could not reach my mother at work... I was compelled to go to school because I did not want to get my mother in any more trouble. When I was three blocks from school, a police officer stopped me and asked me why I wasn’t in school. I explained to him that I was very sick and that’s why I was late. He told me to get in the back of the car. Then he gave me a black trash bag. I thought at first that he was going to drive me to school... but he took me downtown to the Juvenile Truancy Center. On the way downtown I started to vomit profusely. It poured out of my mouth into the trash bag and onto the back seat. The officer was more concerned about his seats.

**Bridget:** In high school, Jordan got into a shouting match with a vice principal. This guy was really old school. He had a reputation for knocking kids around in his office... He brought Jordan into his office one day because Jordan was being too loud in the hallway. Jordan got mouthy so the cop was called in. Before the cop got there, the VP hit Jordan and Jordan hit him back... The cop didn’t see that the VP had hit Jordan, only that Jordan had hit the VP... This situation was a nightmare for me... It seemed like the school was more interested in protecting the VP than anything else... I reported the whole thing to the [district] administration and demanded an investigation. The [investigator's] conclusions were more supportive of Jordan than the VP. She found reason to believe that Jordan had been abused by the VP. She recommended that three of the staff people be suspended. Before her report came through, which took months, Jordan had been sent to [another school].
Bridget: One day I got a call from the police that Jordan, Philip, and some of his friends were locked up because they were caught wandering the streets. They were all charged with truancy. Did you know it’s a crime now? The cop who arrested them was very rude to me while I was getting the boys. He told me that Jordan was someday going to end up in jail because of his mouth... I thought saying that in front of my child was terribly rude and insensitive.

Reflecting on Jordan’s overall experience in school, we see a child who has witnessed and experienced abuse in school from a very early age. We see a discipline system that pushes him away, rather than seeking to rehabilitate or re-establish meaningful connection. We see failed opportunities to hold him accountable for his actions by expecting him to make amends for his mistakes in the settings where they occurred. We see parents who feel judged and powerless in the face of non-negotiable school policy. We see interactions with the police that make the family suspicious of and cynical about authority. We see school administrators acting unprofessionally at best, illegally and immorally at worst. Perhaps most importantly from our perspective, given our role as teacher educators, we see a dearth of teachers who are willing or able to establish a connection with this young man – to see him as a person, not a budding criminal, and to seek out those topics, texts, and activities that might re-ignite his interest in school. In short, we see a school use the authoritative discourse of “zero-tolerance” as an excuse to give up entirely on a student and a family.

In Jordan’s case, the effect was permanent. At age 19, he was arrested for possessing crack cocaine and carrying a loaded gun. He received a mandatory ten-year prison sentence, five years for each charge. Today, he remains in jail. Our point here is not to suggest that Jordan was guiltless. Far from it – he was a challenging student to reach and he made a series of bad choices. Our point is simply to ask (for Jordan and for every other student who may wind up in the school-to-prison pipeline): How might this have been different?

Philip did not follow the same steady downward trajectory of Jordan. For a time, Bridget thought that Philip had recovered from some initial challenges and was doing well. He had several years of academic and athletic success, with basketball being an especially motivating factor for him in school. “The basketball coach loved him,” shared Bridget. Then, near the end of ninth grade, Philip was arrested for possessing a small amount of drugs. This led to suspension and his being kicked off the basketball team. Embarrassed and angry, Philip began to act out. “I kept thinking things would turn around,” Bridget shared, but Philip eventually found a new identity as a member of the “troubled kids group.” A seemingly endless spate of suspensions, expulsions, and truancy charges followed. He eventually landed in a juvenile detention center and later served time in state prison. Today, he has two felony charges on his
In Philip’s case, we see the damaging effects of one specific incident that the school responded to with “zero tolerance.” Again, our point is not to condone Philip’s choices, but to ask: What if the school had handled this differently?

**What Can Schools Do?**

*Jordan: My 6th grade year, my teacher was one of the best teachers I ever had. I cannot remember ever going to the principal’s office or getting suspended [that year]. He took the time to help every individual student in the class with what they needed... He would ask me to come talk to him when he would see a problem arising... He tended to the needs of each student, so that we all could learn and stay interested... His class was a very eclectic class and all of the students benefited.*

In this final section, we offer some suggestions for what schools can do to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. Again, we seek to challenge the authoritative discourses of “zero tolerance” and a deficit model that too often positions kids and families of color as “trouble.”

First and foremost, we need to recruit and retain highly-effective teachers, like the one that Jordan describes above. In her extensive research on U.S. public schools, Darling-Hammond (2010) finds that effective teachers are the primary factor influencing student success; they are also “the most inequitably distributed school resource” in our nation (p. 40). “By every measure of qualification,” writes Darling-Hammond, “less-qualified teachers are found in schools serving greater numbers of low-income and minority students” (p. 43).

What do we mean by a highly-effective teacher? In “Lessons from Teachers,” Delpit (2008) describes what she has learned from observing highly successful teachers working in some of the most challenging urban settings. Three essential themes run through her analysis. First is the importance of having high expectations for all students. Delpit argues that poor urban children need to be taught more, not less. Teachers must seek out and nurture the skills and talents of each child. Second (and directly related) is the importance of teachers truly knowing their students. This requires that teachers honor, respect, and learn about students’ home cultures and languages. And it requires that we see students as individuals, to identify and draw out those traits and interests that may help them to succeed in school. As Jordan describes above, such teachers “tend to the needs of each student, so that [they] all [can] learn and stay interested.” Finally, perhaps most importantly, Delpit (2008) emphasizes the need for teachers to create a true sense of supportive community with their students. Ideally, supportive communities exist in each classroom and span across classrooms (through cross-
curricular collaboration). They can also develop through varied extra-curricular opportunities in the school (as was critical for Philip as a member of the basketball team). And of course there needs to be a school-wide sense of community, beginning with the administration and involving every individual in the building. Had such communities of learning been in place, we wonder if things might have been different for Jordan and Philip.

There are many dedicated, talented teachers working in our urban public schools, but Darling-Hammond’s (2010) research highlights a disturbing trend: When talented teachers encounter daunting class sizes, inadequate resources, less-than-effective school leadership and prison-like working conditions, they are, understandably, more likely to leave such settings for better resourced, more supportive, more uplifting environments. Teacher turnover tends to be highest in low-income communities of color; those who remain are put under greater pressure and are at a higher risk for “burn out” (p. 110).

This challenge can only be addressed by creating a structure and a system that allows teachers to succeed – reasonable class sizes; effective school leadership; access to high-quality educational resources; and a discipline system that fosters an authentic, school-wide community of learning. Schools must be physically safe spaces. But a functioning community of learning also requires emotional safety and trust. We believe that meaningful education can only occur when students are free to take risks, make mistakes, try out new ideas, and experiment with different forms of expression. A school environment that resembles and feels like a prison or detention center is simply not conducive to learning and can have a particularly detrimental effect on students who already feel marginalized. Ideally, school facilities should inspire students to want to learn, not make them feel imprisoned. We oppose school structures and policies, such as “zero-tolerance,” that purposely set out to align our school system with our criminal justice system.

We envision a school discipline system that responds to students as individuals, while also emphasizing their membership in, and responsibility toward, a broader community of learning. Students do need structure, but they also need to feel that they belong. This requires a welcoming space that is not only tolerant of difference, but actively supports and nourishes it. The process begins with genuine opportunities for students to develop meaningful relationships. In a true community of learning, every adult in the building – teachers, administrators, counselors, advisors, coaches, maintenance and cook staff, and security personnel – should seek to foster meaningful relationships with kids. Every student should feel accepted and connected, not pushed away, mistreated or “left behind.” We see an essential role for school security personnel, who represent the daily face of “authority” for most students, especially those who may feel marginalized. Security personnel and individuals
responsible for school-wide discipline policies should be trained and professionally supported in culturally responsive communication practices. These adults need to know how to build positive and effective relationships with kids, particularly “at risk” kids like Jordan and Philip.

We close this essay with the wise words of Bridget, who reflects on how things might have been different for her sons and how we might reach more kids today. Bridget envisions a school community where we actively engage students in becoming agents of social change, including an opportunity to learn from past mistakes. She reminds us that many families truly depend on the public schools to help kids find their way in the world.

**Bridget:** Most schools don’t talk enough about the injustices in society which manifest violence... My sons came from a “broken home” and were growing up in a “crack neighborhood.” There were forces to contend with other than school. It would have been nice if I could have relied on schools as a means of improving our lives. But they actually impeded my sons’ success. I’m not sure exactly what the schools could have done to help Jordan. I just know that what they tried to do didn’t help and often made things worse, for him and for me.

The irony is that the guys who could come in and talk to kids about their experiences and what it has taught them are not allowed to be around kids because they are felons. My son Philip would make a great teacher... but he’s a felon and right now he doesn’t feel like he has much of a future ahead of him because of his felony status. This will follow him wherever he goes. There is no such thing anymore as “paying your dues.” People pay with their entire lives now.

**References**


