

School-Justice Partnerships: A Broader Perspective
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I wonder what I can add this afternoon. There is a great deal of expertise in this room and you have already been at work for a day and a half, on top of the cumulative decades of experience and knowledge you have. That said, I have a few thoughts. At the least, I can claim to have been working at many of these issues for a while, too.

I want to congratulate you for having this conference. We talk a lot about the cradle-to-prison pipeline but I worry that we talk much more than we actually deliver about the genuine crisis that it constitutes. The fact that you are having this meeting shows that you know that the details of creating successful and constructive school-justice partnerships are complex. You will have to undo highly imbedded practices that have been in place for too long. You will have to replace destructive policies and practices and replace them with positive youth development approaches. That is not easy.

I want to start with some thoughts about broadening the perspective of the work, as when the picture one sees through a lens broadens and reveals backgrounds and context when one backs up and becomes aware of the bigger picture. School-justice partnerships cannot succeed in a vacuum. Then I want to spend some moments taking our lens in the other direction, focusing on the details more minutely and seeing the finer grains in the picture.

First the broader perspective. Poverty. Race. Criminal justice policy generally. The quality of education. Family dysfunction. Healthy communities. Just to name a few. We need to do everything we can to reduce the number of children and young people who even come close to leaving school before they graduate. Keeping kids in school and out of the justice system is a complicated challenge. School-justice partnerships are a small part of the necessary effort. It begins at the beginning of life and it includes the quality of the community in which the child grows up as well as the family in which the child is raised.

Children born into poverty are much more likely to grow up in poverty than even children who experience a spell of poverty during their childhood, let alone children who do not experience poverty during childhood. And, sad to say, for too many children poverty means an absent father and too often means issues in the quality of parenting a child receives. For too many children poverty means not being read to and talked to except to be disciplined, and therefore means children who are simply not ready for school at age five.

Perhaps you are not in a position to take direct action about jobs and income for the parents (other than to vote and be active politically on a personal level), but you can be part of your community's commitment to developing a much more robust system of child development for the zero-to-five age group. Every year the science tells us more about how crucial the preschool years are. Beyond child development, we are now seeing initiatives around the country that involve parents and young children simultaneously, helping parents with employment and parenting and providing child development services at the same time. Getting children on a path toward a successful transition to adulthood starts with infancy (and with prenatal care, actually).

Public funding is obviously essential for a community to have the kind of child development system that ought to exist everywhere. But we also need to understand that no amount of funding will produce an effective system in a community unless there is a local civic and professional commitment to create it.

If child development for preschoolers is vital, so, obviously, is the content of K-12 education: the quality of the teaching, the relevance of the content, everything. I won't go into the exact details of what needs to be done to create high-performing public schools. I will say that it is critical that we attack poverty simultaneously. Excellent schools will produce better outcomes for many low-income children, but they will get the best results if the wages and income of families go up at the same time. It is not only crucial that children not come to school hungry or having witnessed or been a victim of violence or having been a witness to drug and alcohol abuse, but children must have a sense of opportunity as well.

In this regard I want to spend a few minutes on career and technical education. I'd love to have an x-ray of what each of you is thinking right now. I'll bet that some of you groaned to yourselves when I said that. You thought of the vocational education of the 20th century – voc ed -- the kind of education that was a dead-end track for those whom the school decided were not college material, a group that was always predominantly made up of young people of color. Nor has that kind of vocational education totally disappeared.

But, as I hope most of you know, there is a new CTE that has sprung up all over the country, although, sadly, not often enough in high schools attended disproportionately by low-income young people and young people of color. Career Academies and similar curricula exist in thousands of high schools around the country. These are sector-specific curricula – health care, computers and other technology, travel and entertainment, etc. All are geared to going on to post-secondary education because the good jobs of the 21st century demand education beyond high school. They involve work experience in the field while learning in the classroom. They have been evaluated. They are successful.

Think of the young people who are standing on the street corner, some of them still technically enrolled in the local high school but not showing up. What if they had a tangible sense of opportunity caused by programs in their schools that concretely result in decent-paying jobs if the young person will do his or her part of the job to get from here to there?

Do we want people to stay in school and not get immersed in the justice system? That's why we're here. Career and technical education is a part of the answer. A tangible sense of opportunity. That's why President Obama proposed a Race to the Top for CTE in his State of the Union address earlier this year.

Like creating a child-care system in a given community, creating clear pathways into the labor market for every young person is a civic responsibility. Schools, community colleges, employers, unions, other civic leaders, and public officials need to come together to create the necessary pathways. It won't happen unless there is leadership and collaboration and collective impact in the community.

IF CTE is a vital piece in a school-completion, crime-prevention strategy, so is facing up to the mess that we have created all over the country in locking up people, disproportionately young men of color, for long periods of time in many cases for minor crimes. Crime is down all over the country, so why are so many people still locked up? It's the long sentences, especially for minor drug offenses. We're going to have to have nursing-home prisons shortly. Attorney General Holder finally spoke to the issue a few

weeks ago. I was glad to see his speech, but I'll tell you that my wife and I looked up simultaneously from our breakfast newspaper reading and said, "What took him so long?"

If I am telling you what you already know, fine. Join together and go to your legislation and reform your criminal justice system here in Michigan.

And let's insist on an honest discussion about race. Do you know about Judge Shira Scheindlin in New York City? She's the judge who declared the way they do stop-and-frisk in New York City to be unconstitutional because it constitutes race and ethnic discrimination. Stop-and-frisk is not inherently unconstitutional, or so the US Supreme Court tells us. But applying it discriminatorily is. All of a sudden after Judge Scheindlin issued her ruling, editorial writers and columnists and commentators started talking about race. Good. We need America to see that, as Cornel West titled his excellent book, "Race Matters." Especially in the criminal justice system.

Those are some thoughts about the bigger picture. You can't create successful school-justice partnerships without addressing the bigger picture. How about the micro side of the perspective?

I'll be somewhat more brief here, because I think you know everything I'm going to say, not that I said anything previously that was new to anyone.

What should school-justice partnerships look like? Well, basically the opposite of what the relationship looks like now.

School discipline policies push children into the arms of police, prosecutors, courts, and incarceration, and schools resist taking them back when law enforcement is finished with them.

That is what has to change. Completely. Every step of the way has to change. It's not that we don't know how to do in-school suspensions. They were in wide use when zero tolerance steamrolled nearly everything sensible. The mantra should be that no child gets arrested and immersed in the juvenile justice system unless it's absolutely necessary.

Of course that costs money. If there are going to be services associated with the school that can help young people with the real behavioral problems that exist everywhere and especially in inner-city schools, that costs money. If we are going to face up to the crying need for mental health services in or associated with schools, that costs money. But guess what, detention and placement in institutions and residential settings cost money too – a lot. It could be a zero-sum game – in this case, a good zero-sum game.

The school policies have to look and actually be different from what they are now and so does the juvenile justice system. If these steps are not taken, whatever someone calls a school-justice will not be the real thing.

I want to say a specific word about girls. In many ways girls are handled even more inappropriately than boys. They get arrested and detained for behavior that wouldn't land a boy in detention, frequently for being sexually trafficked. If they abscond, their status offenses turn into juvenile delinquency offenses and they are put into training schools or whatever the state's particular lingo for institutions is. A major reason is the lack of appropriate services, especially mental health services.

Both boys and girls are far more trauma-affected than our approaches admit. Girls in particular are scarred by sexual trauma far more than we admit. Their response is different from boys, essentially going inward instead of outward. There is a literature on gender-specific therapeutic actions, but it is seldom applied. It should be applied in schools as well as in the juvenile justice system itself.

There is no question that a genuine and positive partnership between schools and the justice system can make a difference. The principle has to be one of building a sense of tangible opportunity among young people and seeing to it that the schools accentuate the positive in their policies and practices. Schools and law enforcement must agree and act on the idea that whenever possible, the effort must be to keep the student in school, not push him or her out.

At the same time, all of us must understand and contribute everything we can to fulfill the broader changes that we need to make in our nation and our world to pursue justice in the broadest sense for everyone, everywhere.