Center for Workforce Studies & Social Work Practice Recent Publications

**Children & Families**
- Social Work Services with Parents: How Attitudes and Approaches Shape the Relationship

**Clinical Social Work**
- 2012 Medicare Updates for Clinical Social Workers
- Clinical Social Workers and 5010: Frequently Asked Questions
- Clinical Social Workers Be Aware: Version 5010 is Coming
- Documenting For Medicare: Tips For Clinical Social Workers
- Retiring? Tips For Closing Your Private Practice
- Risk Management In Clinical Practice

**Education**
- Addressing the Educational Needs of Older Youth
- Gangs: A Growing Problem in Schools

**Leadership and Organizations**
- Beyond Survival: Ensuring Organizational Sustainability
- NASW Leadership in Palliative & Hospice Social Work
- Organizational Integration of Cultural Competency: Building Organizational Capacity to Improve Service Delivery to Culturally Diverse Populations
- Organizing For Office Safety

**Poverty**
- The Affordable Care Act: Implications for Low and Moderate-Income Women’s Health and Well-Being
- Overcoming Economic Hardships

**Workforce & Career Development**
- Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs): Opportunities for the Social Work Profession
- Career Coaching: A Valuable Resource For Social Workers
- Furthering Your Social Work Education: Obtaining A Doctorate
- Negotiating A Higher Salary
- Networking: Finding Opportunities for Career Development
- Setting and Maintaining Professional Boundaries
- State Health Insurance Exchanges: What Social Workers Need to Know
- The Value Of Social Work Mentoring
- Translating Across State Lines: Licensing Tips Beyond
- 9 To 5: Working As A Consultant
- 2012 Medicare Updates for Clinical Social Workers
- Clinical Social Workers Be Aware: Version 5010 is Coming
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**Practice Perspectives Spring May 2013**

**Call the Principal, Not the Police:** Preventing the School to Prison Pipeline

The “school to prison pipeline” is a phenomenon that has occurred over the last few decades as school systems have increasingly relied upon zero tolerance policies and law enforcement to manage discipline in schools, resulting in rising incidents of suspensions, expulsions and school-based arrests. This trend represents a shift from discipline being handled fully by the school administration in a more individualized manner, attending to the nuances of the student and the misconduct, to a shift towards criminalizing even minor offenses with rigid consequences that are often extreme for the offense.

Factors such as decreased funding for education, including minimal allocations for specialized instructional support personnel; stricter teaching standards, including student performance based evaluations; and the growing fear of school-based violence have driven troubled youth away from the school environment and into the juvenile justice realm. Pressed by increased reliance on testing and inadequate resources, many schools are choosing to forgo mentorship and intervention for students in favor of exclusion and arrest (NAACP, 2013). Both situations leave vulnerable students without education during the allotted time frame. In other systems, these students are sent to disciplinary alternative schools that are frequently operated by private, for-profit companies, and immune from educational accountability standards (such as minimum classroom hours and curriculum requirements) (ACLU (a), 2013). Both situations leave vulnerable students without the educational supports they need.

In August 2006, a Zero Tolerance Task Force convened to explore the effectiveness of these policies. The report concluded that the zero tolerance policies in schools, although intended to reduce school violence and behavior problems, can actually have the

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In 2005, 48% of public schools responding to a United States Department of Justice survey reported having on-site police officers. Today, there are an estimated 17,000 school-based officers (ACLU (d), 2012).

Research has shown that the presence of police officers frequently results in more student arrests and more arrests for misbehavior previously handled informally by educators and parents (ACLU (d), 2012).

In 2010, nearly 1 million students were arrested and 242,000 were “referred” to law enforcement by school leaders, meaning the students were not necessarily arrested or cited (St. George, 2012).

Disparities in Discipline
These extreme discipline rates are resulting in astounding disparity gaps. Students of color, particularly African-American boys, account for the overwhelming number of school-enforced punishments, as well as the majority of arrests for school-related incidences around the country (NAACP, 2013). African-American students, overall, are near equally three times as likely to be suspended, and latino students are nearly another one and a half times as likely to be suspended, as their white peers (NAACP, 2013). Studies show that students of color receive harsher punishments for engaging in the same conduct as white students (NAACP, 2013).

As these extreme discipline measures become more prevalent, it is common for schools to increasingly ignore or bypass due process protections for students, leaving students unable to defend themselves (ACLU, a, 2013). Many students are denied procedural protections once in the court system and many court-involved children do not have lawyers (ACLU (a), 2013). In addition, provisions for supplemental academic supports, counseling, mentoring, and educational involvement have been replaced by policies that promote exclusion from both schools and academic success. The lack of due process is particularly acute for students with special needs—who are disproportionately represented in the pipeline—despite the heightened protections afforded to them under the law (ACLU (a), 2013).

How Social Workers Can Help Prevent the Pipeline

Promote Awareness. Many parents, families and professionals, including social workers, teachers, and school administrators are unaware of the volume of this problem within the country. Many adults assume that school discipline policies are similar to when they were in school decades ago and are unaware of how the lack of funding, limited budget allocations, these positions are becoming fewer and fewer as school systems reduce services that are not directly academic. Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISP) provide direct services such as education, therapy, counseling, assessment, diagnosis, and referrals for all children and youth who are experiencing problems that interfere with learning. These services help engage students in school and act as a prevention measure. They are also often the main focus of intervention when a student has a discipline issue. These services, by design, can support a student in a more individualized way and help them feel more connected to school.

Advocate for effective discipline measures. Many researchers are calling for eliminating the unintended consequences of zero tolerance policies. However, many school systems still employ them as the backbone to their discipline programs. A way to still receive funding for using these measures. Social workers can offer valuable information regarding the negative impact of zero tolerance policies and propose positive solutions for alternative measures. Research has shown that when students are more engaged in school and feel connected, rates of violence go down and school safety increases. They can also provide the strength and quality of classroom engagement by creating caring, supportive, creatively responsive learning environments that are often effective in reducing rates of violence (Osher, Bear, Sprague & Doyle, 2010). Social workers can support administrators and teachers in gaining skills to better manage the wide range of discipline issues, especially minimally disruptive misconduct.

Support funding and policies for Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISP)
SISP includes professions such as school social workers, as well as school counselors, school nurses, psychologists, school psychologists, counselors, social workers, occupational therapists, physical therapists, art therapists, dance/movement therapists, and music therapists, speech-language pathologists and audiologists. SISP professionals work in various ways to help foster student achievement and academic success. Due to lack of funding and limited budget allocations, these positions are becoming fewer and fewer as school systems reduce services that are not directly academic.

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Resources

**Standards for School Social Work Services outlines standards for professional practice, professional preparation and development, and administrative structure and support**
socialworkers.org/practice/standards/NASWSchoolSocialWorkStandards.pdf

**NASW School Social Work Specialty Practice Section**
A customized option with NASW membership that provides resources and training directly relevant to school social-work practice through opportunities for professional development via live practice specific teleconferences, free CE, chat, Email, and many socialworkers.org/sections/default.aspx

**The Certified School Social Work Specialist Credential (C-SSWS)** is exclusively offered by NASW and aims to enhance the skill and knowledge of the field of school social work. Awarded two years of post-MSW supervised school social work experience and adheres agreement to abide by the National Code of Ethics, and the NASW Standards for School Social Work Services and the NASW Standards for Continuing Education. socialworkers.org/credentialsspecialty/c-ssws

**The National Alliance of Pupil Services Organizations (NAPSO)** is a coalition of national professional organizations whose members provide support and a variety of school-based preventative and interventional services to assist students becoming effective learners and productive citizens. NAPSO organizations represent over 500,000 members, including school counselors, school nurses, psychologists, school social workers, occupational therapists, physical therapists, art therapists, dance/movement therapists, and music therapists, speech-language pathologists and audiologists.

The department’s Office of Civil Rights collected data from 72,000 schools across the country for the 2009-10 school year showing that 96,000 students were arrested and 242,000 were “referred” to law enforcement by school leaders, meaning the students were not necessarily arrested or cited (St. George, 2012).
School Resource Officers
The pervasive lack of financial resources for education has resulted in many schools relying on law enforcement rather than school administrators and teachers to manage discipline issues. In addition, research has shown that the presence of school-based officers frequently have high referrals and caseloads complicated by multiple school locations, limited funding and complex schedules (Issuradatt, 2010).

How Social Workers Can Help Prevent the Pipeline

- Promote Awareness. Many parents, families and professionals, including social workers, teachers, and school administrators are unaware of the variety of options within their communities. Many adults assume that school discipline policies are similar to when they were in school decades ago and are unaware of how school districts fund school-based accountability and other major changes have affected how students are disciplined for even minor misconduct in schools.

- Advocate for effective discipline policies.

- Support funding and policies for Specialized Instructional Support Personnel (SISP).

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- NAACP, 2013.


- Social workers can support administrators and teachers in gaining skills to better manage the wide range of discipline issues, especially minimally disruptive misconduct.

- Preclude, reduce, and prevent the pathways and processes that lead to school exclusion.

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The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU (c), 2013) reports “zero-tolerance policies criminalize minor infractions of school rules, while high-stakes testing programs encourage educators to push out low-performing students to improve their schools’ overall test scores. Many of these children have learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse or neglect.” The safety net that once supported these vulnerable students no longer exists.

The Myth of Zero-Tolerance
Zero tolerance policies are a mandated; “one-size fits all” approach to discipline. “Zero tolerance” resulted from a 1994 federal law that required all states receiving federal money to require school districts to expel any student found to have brought a weapon to school for at least one year (Science Daily, 2010). Often zero tolerance policies result in students being suspended, expelled and even arrested. The zero tolerance approach has become a standard method in schools for managing discipline issues. In some school systems, students who have been suspended or expelled as a result of zero tolerance policy enforcement are not entitled to receive any education during the allotted time frame. In other systems, these students are sent to disciplinary alternative schools that are frequently operated by private, for-profit companies, and immune from educational accountability standards (such as minimum classroom hours and curriculum requirements) (ACLU (b), 2013). Both situations leave vulnerable students without the educational supports they need.

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