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Target student discipline to better address issues

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Student discipline is "an opportunity to teach. It is not supposed to be painful. It is educational. People who get it are successful in this business. If people don't get it, then bad things happen."

With this statement, Dr. Hector Rodriguez, principal of Austin's Alternative Learning Center, cut through the noise surrounding student discipline recently and drew much-needed attention to what should drive adult-student interactions in our public schools — the embracing of the "teachable moment."

The Austin school district is absorbing the lessons that mounting research into punitive school discipline have to teach — that too often, an over-reliance on suspension, expulsion and Class C misdemeanor ticketing for minor student misbehavior can mean "bad things happen."

Last summer's landmark study released by the Council of State Governments compared individual juvenile justice and school disciplinary records for nearly 1 million Texas students for a six-year period and found that just one out-of-school suspension, expulsion or Disciplinary Alternative Education Program referral:

- Tripled the likelihood of that student coming into contact with the juvenile justice system within the subsequent school year.
- Disproportionately impacted minority and students with emotional disabilities at rates double or more their representation in the overall student population.
- Dramatically impacted educational achievement: 31 percent of students with one or more suspensions or expulsions repeated their grade level at least once and nearly 10 percent dropped out of school, which is five times the dropout rate of other students.

Texas Appleseed recently heard from a North Texas mother seeking help for her son who had received a Class C misdemeanor ticket on a criminal mischief complaint for taking an extra "free" bag of potato chips after completing a standardized test.

"They said he was stealing," she said, "but surely giving him a ticket and sending him to court is not the way to address his taking an extra bag of chips. My son is not a criminal."

In recent weeks, we've taken calls concerning a 16-year-old with autism from the Houston area, who was ticketed on an assault by contact complaint for kissing another special needs student on the cheek and on the mouth, and an indigent 15-year-old who owes \$774 in unpaid school-issued tickets, including a \$300 fine for truancy.

If she can't pay these fines in the next 18 months, she risks arrest and jail when she turns 17.

The majority of ticketing complaints that Texas Appleseed receives are from black parents in school districts across the state.

Disproportionate representation of minority students in the school disciplinary system has been documented by the Council of Governments study and by three separate Texas Appleseed reports on suspension, Disciplinary Alternative Education Program referrals, expulsion, and ticketing practices in Texas schools.

Austin school district Superintendent Maria Carstarphen told a reporter last week that she is aware that this "is a pattern across America, but I am hopeful that Austin is going to be different."

We applaud the superintendent and the Austin school district board for adopting a policy in December to reverse this trend.

Under the new policy, many students targeted for suspension at the discretion of the school would remain on-campus, and additional teachers would be brought in to help with disciplined students, who would also participate in programming to help improve their behavior.

The Austin district's two disciplinary alternative schools would be merged to serve fewer students with more severe behavioral issues.

Unfortunately, an unforeseen roadblock has emerged: the Austin school district has yet to identify a third party to operate its disciplinary alternative school program.

We encourage the district to be true to its vision and to do all it can to implement its new approach to student discipline in the coming school year.

Why? The Austin school district is poised to provide a "teachable moment" to other Texas school districts that are looking to restore common sense to student discipline.

In the process, it will save taxpayer dollars and keep more students' lives in school and on track.

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