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Rethinking School Discipline

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INTRO: Rethinking Discipline in Schools

How schools maintain order in the halls can be just as important as what they teach in the classrooms. The way students are disciplined teaches them what consequences their actions will have not just in school, but as they grow into adulthood.

Across the nation, strict, zero-tolerance policies that rely heavily on suspensions are coming under harsh scrutiny. Education advocates use the term *School Pushout* or the *School to Prison Pipeline*. They're referring to the process by which students who need the most support get pushed further and further away from the classroom and closer and closer to the criminal justice system.

For New York City's schools, Chancellor Carmen Fariña has promised an updated school discipline code that might modify the department's stance on suspensions. Advocates are pushing the Department of Education to eliminate the clause that allows administrators to suspend students for "disobeying authority." But beyond school discipline, New York City students also have NYPD officers within schools to contend with. More than 5,000 NYPD School Safety Agents are embedded in schools throughout the city and can discipline students their own way using summonses and arrests. So a student can be arrested by School Safety Agents and suspended by administrators for the same thing.

Across the country, researchers have studied school suspensions and harsh zero-tolerance discipline policies and reaped an array of findings. Here's some of what the findings suggest.

1. Suspensions disproportionately target children of color.
2. Students who get suspended are less likely to graduate.
3. Among children of color, the darker a child's skin, the more likely they are to be suspended.

This project examines the role of the NYPD in city schools and the impact it has on school discipline. It will also look into one school in Far Rockaway whose principal has managed cut suspensions by shifting attitudes towards discipline.

PART 1: Policing Kids, Impact of NYPD in City Schools

As New York City schools chancellor Carmen Fariña rethinks the school discipline code,

parents, advocates and students are urging her to also reconsider the way city schools are policed. The NYPD's School Safety Agents are in control of security and can also issue summonses and arrests within schools. City council members and advocates are calling for greater transparency from the NYPD, asking for more specific information about where students are getting arrested. Right now the NYPD does not have to report the number of arrests and summonses by school campus or even by precinct.

But beyond the data, some child advocates and educators think that police presence in schools criminalizes adolescent behavior and funnels children into the criminal justice system. Here's a look at the how schools are policed and what long term impacts these tactics can have on kids.

PART 2: Leading the Way to School Discipline Without Suspensions

Suspending a student is supposed to be a last resort. But because the city's school discipline code allows for suspension when students "disobey authority" some troubled schools have used it to deal with all kinds of behavior issues.

M.S. 53 in Far Rockaway, Queens was one of those schools. The middle school was plagued with violence, low attendance and poor test scores for decades. Under a strict prior principal, teachers and staff were encouraged to suspend students in order to maintain order.

"Any little thing a child would be pulled out and suspended for," said Grace Williams, the school's math coach.

At the peak of the school's suspension craze in 2010, M.S. 53 doled out 280 suspensions, even though there were just 500 students in the whole school.

Since that year, however, M.S. 53 has done an about face, dropping to just below 40 suspensions last year. Violent incidents have dropped. Test scores and attendance are climbing, too.

The catalyst for this dramatic change at M.S. 53 is Shawn Rux, an energetic principal who arrived in 2011. He's recruited new teachers. He's restructured the school to keep students of the same grade on one floor of the building when possible, to minimize student movement, and he's divided some classes and lunch periods by gender.,

Beyond physical changes, Rux implemented a more holistic approach, one that's skeptical of suspensions as an effective tool for changing bad behavior.

“If you can find a different way to provide support, maybe through a behavior intervention plan, maybe through giving that student a call early in the morning to wake them up, maybe making sure the kid eats breakfast every morning or giving the kid a hug once a day,” Rux said. “Sometimes, that’s all it takes and behaviors can completely turn around.”