

crossroads **connections**

connecting research across communities

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Youth Speak **Out:**

**Queer youths’
perspectives on
the School-to-
Prison Pipeline
and Ways to
Dismantle It**

“I had a really hard time getting to school, because I was in a single parent household, and my mom couldn’t speak English and had a hard time getting money and paying bills. So I didn’t have bus fare all the time. And the school would tell me “if you miss another class or are late again then you’re not going to pass or you’re going to be held back. They never asked me why I was late.”

– Latino Gay male youth from AZ, age 22

Who We Are, and What the School-to-Prison Pipeline Means to Us

We, the authors of this brief, identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) students of color from low-income families and “pink-slip” schools. We are UndocuQueer, Two-Spirit intellectuals, and are speaking out against unjust and harsh disciplinary policies that disproportionately affect our community. This brief is intended to tell our truths and share our revelations regarding the school-to prison-pipeline as we’ve encountered it, and ways that you – our teachers, administrators, lawmakers and fellow students – can help to eradicate this unjust system. ●

Check out the work of the GSA network:

www.gsanetwork.org

And

Crossroads Collaborative:

[mcclellandinstitute.
arizona.edu/
crossroads](http://mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/crossroads)





School-to-Prison Pipeline

Telling our truths and sharing our revelations

The School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP) is a side effect of zero-tolerance policies that push us (LGBTQ, Youth of Color, Gender Non-Conforming, Two-Spirit youth and youth with disabilities) out of schools and into the criminal justice system. Research gathered by the Crossroads Collaborative and the National Association of GSA Networks has shown that under zero-tolerance policies, we are being suspended, expelled, and pushed out of schools for self defense, self-advocacy, and simply wanting to be ourselves in a place that is supposed to foster a supportive and safe learning environment. We are often targeted by on-campus security and police officers, labeled as troublemakers, and ignored by teachers and administrators who are supposed to be educating, advocating and protecting us.

School policies that maintain the STPP don't just push youth out of schools but also isolate us while we are in school. We are not encouraged to participate in extracurricular programming and activities; we are pushed through grades/classes even when we haven't learned the material; and we lack curriculum that reflects our identities. The School-to Prison Pipeline also affects our teachers. Teachers are the ones who are mandated to implement zero-tolerance Policies in their classrooms, hindering their ability to build a

"I was at school and punched in the face by another student, and when I went to report it, the counselor just kept asking, "did you hit them back? Did you hit them back?" and when I said no, they said, "Good because we would have to suspend you too"

- Gender Queer Youth from AZ, age 19

positive and mutually respectful and beneficial relationship with their students.

LGBTQ students endure years of bullying from their peers, and even adults. The abuse might start slowly, with things like name-calling, and can be written off as "boys being boys." But often these unchecked expressions of homophobia and transphobia, or the downplay of these acts, escalate quickly to more verbal harassment, sexual harassment and possibly physical assault.

The lack of culturally competent and responsible training for school staff, teachers and officials on how to encourage and empower our potential as students, individuals, and intellectuals is one of the main reasons the STPP continues to be successful. When school officials create zero-tolerance policies that include dress codes, stringent tardy policies, and policies around violence that punish both the aggressor and the victim, they leave

no room for individual considerations (e.g., lack of bus fare or being afraid to go to school because of bullying and harassment). This means when we are bullied (physically or verbally) and speak out or fight back, we are punished instead of supported and advocated for.

In violent situations, some schools take the words of witnesses as to who is the aggressor

"I do get bullied, but I don't tell anyone much. It's not that I don't want to tell anybody that I just don't want to face anything else I don't want to face them coming up to me and throwing stuff at me and I don't want to face the same things I faced in middle school the principle was just picking sides."

- Gay youth from CA

sor. LGBTQ students are often considered outcast or unpopular, and are easily pinned as the aggressor even when we are not. Instead of school officials and security guards investigating and talking to us about what happened, they find the “easy way out,” which often leads to us being the ones punished and further victimized.

Conclusions

Zero-tolerance policies in schools have been successful in targeting and pushing out us and our peers. We have been harassed, isolated and silenced in and out of schools through disproportionate punishing and attempts to victimize us. We believe that this system needs to be dismantled and new disciplinary policies created that do not continue to funnel us through the school-to-prison pipeline but nurture us as learners within a system that supports our teachers to truly educate us.

Following are recommendations for students, teachers, administrators and lawmakers for taking action to help destroy this current system and create

“When I was finishing high school in this alternative program, I talked to my friend about what the School to Prison Pipeline is and how it affects us as LGBTQ youth of Color. After the conversation he realized that he experienced/is experiencing the School to Prison Pipeline, and that was part of the reason why he was in the alternative school too.”

- Two-Spirit Youth from AZ, age 21

and cultivate a new one in which all of us succeed. These suggestions are based on a restorative justice approach, which will keep students in school while teaching us valuable tools for addressing conflict with peers. ●

Glossary of Terms:

Zero-Tolerance Policies – A set of predetermined harsh punishments and consequences, usually resulting in suspension or expulsion, for a wide variety of infractions that are applied to entire school as well as the school district.

Pink-Slip Schools – Official documents given to students for minor and major infractions, usually placed in a student’s permanent educational record.

Two-Spirit – An identity used by some Indigenous/Native American LGBTQ people. Two-Spirit people often embody both feminine and masculine traits, and historically were seen as matchmakers, healers, and spiritual leaders.

UndocuQueer – A term coined by Undocumented, Queer youth activists. UndocuQueer is used to highlight the intersections of Queer, Undocumented youths’ lives, and how immigration issues are LGBTQ issues as well.

Restorative Justice – A positive approach to school discipline that keeps students in school while they learn ways to resolve conflict and fix potential harm done by their behavior.

Gender Non-Conforming – A person’s expression of gender. A gender non-conforming person may express their gender through the clothes they choose to wear, the activities they engage in, the pronouns they choose to use, and/or their mannerisms.



Recommendations for Students

Letting your peers know what is going down in your schools and districts is empowering! Many of our peers don't know their rights or what they can do to make a difference in their school. We as youth do have the power to make positive changes and take an active role in shaping what our learning environment looks like.

Here are a few suggestions for making the positive changes we want and need:

1. Gain knowledge about the School-to Prison-Pipeline and how it is implemented in your schools.
 - a. Read your school's disciplinary policy every year, and ask questions about anything that you do not understand, as well as changes to any of the policies.
 - b. Attend school board meetings and ask about discipline policies.
 - c. Find stories and articles about various ways zero-tolerance policies are being implemented across your state and then create a peer friendly pamphlet outlining students' rights.
 - d. Share your information with your parents or guardians, and let them know what their rights are as well, and how these policies may also affect them.
 - e. Give alternatives to zero-tolerance policies such as restorative justice practices.
2. Ask your peers about what they do and don't know about zero-tolerance policies within your school district and the different effects these policies have on them and the school climate.
3. When your peers need help, consider speaking out and advocating for them if you can. Talk to administration, a teacher, or even the person doing the harassing. Of course safety is important, so please be sure not to put yourself in danger.
4. Educate yourself on different identities. Take an LGBTQ 101 workshop, facilitated by your local LGBT community center or GSA and then share your knowledge with your peers, teachers, and administrators.
5. Create a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), Tolerance Club, or a diversity club on campus that makes announcements throughout the school year on topics such as LGBTQ issues, disabilities issues, and racial and economic justice.
6. Be kind. If you see a peer who looks "down," smile and say hi. This simple gesture could change their entire day.
7. Help your peers if you see they are struggling in class. Not all students were taught study habits in school. If you were taught various ways to study and prepare for class and you notice one of your peers may not have the same strategies, consider sharing your skills with them, and you might also learn some new ones.
8. If you know of someone who needs help getting to school or home safely and on time, give them a hand: talk to your parents and/or friends who live near them, get your classmates to school, and encourage them to keep going to school. ●



Recommendations for Teachers

Most public educators have at least one hundred students cycling through their classrooms every day. Many don't have time to get to understand every student's life: goals, study habits, temperaments, and learning style. Students who are "trouble-makers" or disruptive in the learning environment have underlying problems that need to be addressed. LGBTQ people and people of color have overcome much discrimination through clear communication, tolerance, and sharing support systems with one another. We believe it's time to introduce these skills to our education system.

Every student at school has individual needs and experiences. When stringent policies are in place and enforced, without room for negotiation or individual circumstances, we take away the humanity and personhood of the student. When students are consistently tardy, get into conflicts with peers, or perform poorly in school, it usually isn't because we don't care, but because there are other stressors in our lives that need to be addressed. We understand that teachers must implement school policies; however we believe there is a mutually beneficial way that this can happen. Teachers have the power to be positive influences in student's lives simply by treating us all as individuals and humans. Here are strategies based on restorative justice:

1. Attend cultural competency trainings. Not all school districts require teachers to attend mandatory trainings around best practices to serve LGBTQ students and other groups who may be marginalized. As an educator, a mentor, and a gatekeeper to youth, it is your professional and societal responsibility to create a supportive learning environment, and cultural competency is one of the first steps.
2. When you see bullying or harassment happening, address it right away, through education and not punitive actions. Sometimes students do things through lack of understanding and because they themselves are pressured into doing it. Educating students about their actions is a step to eliminating the School-to-Prison Pipeline.
3. It is not only other students who bully or harass LGBTQ students – teachers and other staff do as well. When YOUR peer is using homophobic, transphobic, classist, racist, or ableist language or actions, speak out too. It is important and powerful for you as an educator to educate your peers and be a role model.
4. Try to see things from a youth's perspective. If a student is struggling in your class or at school, instead of suspending the student or giving them detention, try having a conversation with them. There may be reasons that aren't visible to explain the student's behavior. Simply checking in with a youth can make these often-invisible challenges come to light.
5. Step out of your comfort zone. If there isn't a group on campus like a GSA, Safe Zone club, or a diversity group, create one. This may be a chance for you to not only get to know your students better, but learn from them as well.
6. Create classroom "agreements" to establish a positive school climate and learning environment. Examples include: "respect," "don't yuck someone's yum," and "all identities are welcome and respected here." ●



Recommendations for School Officials, Administrators, and Law Makers

Administrators and lawmakers have the responsibility of developing school policies and determining how these policies should be implemented and enforced. We understand that creating and executing these policies is not easy, and we appreciate and respect the effort that goes into developing them. With that said, the concept of zero-tolerance policies may be great, but their implementation is more harmful than helpful. Here are a list of suggestions that we feel will help in the development of future school policies:

1. Create statewide cultural competency trainings. Not all school districts require administrators and school officials to attend mandatory trainings around best practices for serving LGBTQ students and other groups who may be marginalized.
2. Eliminate zero-tolerance policies in your school districts and state. We understand that these policies are put into place to protect youth; however, the implementation of these policies has been used to target us instead. Consider the following restorative justice methods:
 - a. Instead of suspending or expelling the student, have them do a cultural exploration. If it is anti-LGBTQ bullying, require the student to do a research paper on the history of oppression and discrimination against the LGBTQ community, and ways to address the discrimination.
 - b. Create peer counselors. When there is a conflict amongst students, require them to go to peer mediation where they can address their issues with a neutral peer.
 - c. Create student courts. This will allow peers to facilitate alternative ways of addressing conflict amongst one another.
 - d. When violence happens, require both students involved to go to 1:1 meetings with the school counselor/social worker for a number of weeks in which they address different ways of dealing with anger. For the student who was victimized by the violence, have a 1:1 for a few weeks after the assault to address any issues around trauma from the experience.
3. Create a statewide anti-bullying and anti-discrimination act that includes gender identity, gender expression, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and differential ability.
4. Conduct focus groups with students and staff within your school districts:
 - a. Meet with youth to workshop possible disciplinary actions that don't include punishments that further jeopardize youths' education. When students have off-campus suspension or are expelled, they lose their access to learning. Create a structure in which students are held responsible for their actions (e.g., having study hall during free periods or lunch) but still able to attend class.
 - b. Ask staff and teachers what ideas they have around discipline that would encourage students to stay engaged in their classes even after being disciplined or redirected.
 - c. Spend a week in the life of a student and a teacher. Meet the student at their house in the morning before they leave, go to school on the bus with them, attend all their classes, eat

Recommendations Continued...

what they eat, and go home when they do. Really walk in the youth's shoes, and then do the same with a teacher. This will truly allow you to experience our lives from our perspectives.

5. Compensate your employees:

- a. Teachers and school officials are often underpaid for the amount of work that they do. Class sizes are larger than expected and teachers have to use their own money to purchase materials for their classes. Find a way to pay teachers what they deserve to allow them to do their jobs adequately and ensure that we as students get the education we deserve.
- b. Award your employees throughout the year with incentives that are not focused on test scores but on engaging students in school activities. Examples include:
 - i. Classroom with the best attendance
 - ii. Classroom with the most students who volunteer for other activities for the school
 - iii. Classroom with the most students who participate in Spirit Week. ●

"I had a high school math teacher my freshman year that every time I would bring my girlfriend in front of the class to you know, kiss her bye, give her a hug goodbye; every time he saw it, I'd have to sit outside of the class. And I couldn't be a part of the class because he wouldn't allow lesbians in his class. And this went on for about like four or five months, you know, and eventually got to the point where I wasn't even bringing her anymore...[A]nd he'd still say, 'Well you have to sit outside,' I failed math that year."

- Lesbian identified youth from AZ
age 21

"There was a boy who called me a faggot every day at school and in class, and the school administrators and teachers said nothing when I would complain. So one day he called me a faggot in class and I said to him 'well you're a terrorist!' And I was sent to the administrator's office because the student was Arabic. I told them that I called him a terrorist because I feel like he terrorizes me every day by calling me a faggot... they forced me to apologize, and said I couldn't call him a terrorists because he was Arabic and it was different."

- Transgender Female Youth from AZ, age
17

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Fernando Peyron Jr., born in Yuma, AZ, was raised in west Tucson, Arizona by his mother and father, with his younger sister. Fernando is of Apache and Mexican descent. School was difficult for Fernando because he struggled with coming out to his family, having a father who struggled with drugs and alcohol for awhile, and not being able to pass the Arizona standardized tests called AIMS. Fernando attended the Eon Youth Lounge, which taught him about social justice and advocacy, and gave him an opportunity to work in and build community. Fernando eventually left the public high school he was attending and enrolled in a charter school where he graduated at the age of 20.

Tadeo Valdez Celaya is 22 years old and was born and raised in Tucson, Arizona. He graduated from Rincon High School in 2011 and is currently attending Pima Community College, studying dance and massage therapy. Tadeo also dances with a local Tucson dance company called the Esperanza Dance Project, which focuses on raising awareness and addressing issues around teen and childhood sexual abuse. He hopes to do more with his community to help spread knowledge and healing.

Zami Tinashe Hyemingway. Zami is a Trans-masculine, Brown Boi activist, poet, femme ally, and spiritual warrior. He sees his work as an opportunity to share and develop his passion for educating people about intersecting oppressions within communities of color and the LGBTQ community, including how issues of race, gender, religion and sexuality are all intertwined and thus require people to consider identity and social injustices in multi-layered and nuanced ways.

The Crossroads Collaborative, funded by the Ford Foundation, brings stories and numbers together through action-oriented research with academics, youth-serving organizations, and youth from the community to develop knowledge, increase understanding, amplify youth voice, and share what we learn with the broader community.

For more information:

Burdge, H., Hyemingway, Z. T., Licona, A. C. (2014). *Gender Nonconforming Youth: Discipline Disparities, School Push Out, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline*. San Francisco, CA: Gay-Straight Alliance Network and Tucson, AZ: Crossroads Collaborative at the University of Arizona.

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Peyron, F., Celaya, T.V., Hyemingway, Z.T., and the Crossroads Collaborative.* (2014). Youth Speak Out: Queer youth's perspectives on the School-to-Prison Pipeline and Ways to Dis-mantle It. *Crossroads Connections*, 3(1), 1-8. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona.

*The Crossroads Collaborative also includes: Amanda Fields, Adela C. Licona, Londie T. Martin, Jason Rivera, Stephen Russell, Shannon Snapp, Leah Stauber, Jenna Vinson, & Ryan Watson.

For more on the Crossroads Collaborative: <http://mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/crossroads>