

OPINION

Editorial: Common sense prevails on punishing juveniles

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As long as schools have been in existence, students have gotten in trouble. What has changed: how adults respond to wrongdoing. In too many schools, zero tolerance policies and exaggerated fears about school violence have resulted in overzealous punishment.

Instead of writing sentences on a chalkboard, young children are often suspended in many districts. Kids from kindergarten through second grade were formally removed from Iowa classrooms 3,224 times in the 2014-15 school year. Rather than detention, a teen may be sent to the sworn law enforcement officer permanently stationed in the high school.

[Is 'zero tolerance' failing Iowa schools?](#)

What did “getting tough on kids” accomplish? Alienating young people, damaging future academic success and setting kids up for failure. Research consistently shows suspending and arresting young people [causes harm](#).

“Even one court appearance during high school increases a child’s likelihood of dropping out of school,” Melodee Hanes of the U.S. Department of Justice told members of Congress in 2012. The former Polk County prosecutor was providing [testimony](#) during a hearing on the “school-to-court pipeline,” which funnels youth from classrooms into the criminal justice system.

The good news: School officials and law enforcement in Polk County are listening to concerns about the handling of misbehaving juveniles. A June [report](#) from the Iowa Department of Civil Rights found a steady and substantial decrease in school removals and arrests in recent years.

During the 2010-11 school year, students were suspended or expelled from Des Moines Public Schools 9,283 times. The number of removals fell to 3,504 during the 2014-15 school year. That is a reduction of nearly 64 percent. Especially encouraging is a 91 percent reduction in suspensions for school attendance policy violations. It makes no sense to kick kids out of school for skipping school.

“Fewer removals from school for disciplinary reasons will not only lead to more instruction time in the classroom, but also, over time, an improvement in student behavior,” said Phil Roeder, communications director for the district. “With little evidence showing that excluding students from school solves behavior problems, our educators were asked to develop and utilize other approaches.” These may include providing behavior instruction or working to repair damaged relationships that lead to behavior problems.

We hope other Iowa school districts will follow the example being set by Des Moines. Though much attention has been given to the negative impact of suspensions on students, the removal rate of students statewide [decreased only 4.5](#) percent between 2012 and 2015, according to state data.

Des Moines police deserve credit, too. In 2011, juveniles in the city were arrested 2,543 times. In 2015, that number fell to 1,732, a reduction of about 32 percent. (There was a 21 percent reduction in the arrests of African-American youth.) Fewer arrests mean fewer referrals to juvenile court and less likelihood of a criminal record to haunt someone.

Banishing children from school and nudging them into the criminal justice system should be the last result. Fortunately, leaders in Des Moines now recognize this.

Community steps up

AMOS ([A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy](#)) has partnered with schools and law enforcement to reduce school suspensions and juvenile court filings. In recent years it has implemented a "Let's Talk" program in six Des Moines middle schools. Administrators and teachers refer students who might otherwise be suspended to a team of community facilitators to sit down with youth, resolve conflict and devise an agreement to avoid trouble in the future.

“At Hiatt Middle School, for example, Let’s Talk team leaders have trained all of the teachers and administrators in restorative justice circles, and facilitated circles with the entire student body,” organizer Liz Hall told a Register editorial writer last week. “Meredith Middle School, where we started using this approach three years ago, has seen a dramatic drop in out-of-school suspensions.”

Link to article: <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/opinion/editorials/2016/07/12/editorial-common-sense-prevails-punishing-juveniles/86972912/>