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Graduate Them, Don't Incarcerate Them!

The problem isn't a secret: California schools suspend more students than they graduate, tracking them to jail instead of to success. But Ramiro Rubalcaba was surprised when he found himself being part of the solution.

Rubalcaba told his story at a forum on school discipline held in Los Angeles on September 10, sponsored by the California Endowment, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torkelson, and the Office of Attorney General Kamala Harris.

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Rob McGowan, CADRE's associate director of organizing, pointed out that most suspensions in California have nothing to do with drugs or violence. "Willful defiance is largest single reason for suspension" — a term that lends itself to subjective interpretation and bias.

"We want a moratorium on non-serious suspensions," said Madison. "Replace a life sentence with life lessons."

CADRE called for access to disciplinary data broken down by race, ethnicity, disability, language, and gender.

Statistics are valuable consciousness-raising tools. "Teachers don't realize their split-second decisions are leading to discrimination," said Ali, "until they see the aggregate."

"You can't apply a race-neutral solution to a race-based issue," said Curtiss Sarikey of the Unified School District of Oakland, "a city that has a lot of pain, a lot of hurt, a lot of violence." He explained that school superintendent Dr. Tony Smith considered specific needs in implementing the Thriving Students Model. For example, Manhood Development Classes designed for young African American men almost eliminated suspensions and absenteeism among those attending and also upped their GPAs.

Although students with disabilities presumably have extra procedural protections, other disturbing data shows they are actually suspended at a higher rate.

And there's a category that gets overlooked entirely in the statistics.

"As LGBTQ youth are more openly out in the school, increased visibility has meant less safety" said Geoffrey Winder of the Gay Straight Alliance Network. As a result, students may get in trouble for carrying a weapon they believe they need for self-defense. There's bias on the part of administrators and, too often, gay students who have not come out at home find their parents are notified of their orientation by the school administration, resulting in rejection, violence, kids forced to leave home.

Ali added that LGBTQ students are suspended when administrators see gender nonconformity as willful defiance or disruption.

Brandon Serpas, a youth leader, related his own experience as a bullied gay student. When he was harassed in class, the teacher ignored it. With the school supposedly committed to anti-bullying efforts, he went and talked to the assistant principal. The result: the offending boy was suspended, much to Brandon's dismay. "Suspension doesn't help harassment or bullying. It doesn't address the attitudes." The boy was back in school three days later, and Brandon had real reason to fear. What he had wanted was a program of restorative justice and a way to teach respect.

Restorative justice asks Who was harmed? What are the needs and responsibilities of all the parties? How do all the people affected work together to address needs and repair harm?

Read the full article:

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News Article

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