

The Path from Prison

Editorial

Boston Globe, May 26, 2003, pg. A10

Dominic Hall journeyed from being a South Boston High School student to a South Bay House of Correction inmate. It's an all too familiar path for minority students who experience academic and behavioral problems and a story that has up to now been told more with anecdotes than with facts.

That should begin to change as a result of a recent Harvard University conference that brought together 250 scholars, school officials, juvenile justice experts, and advocates to explore how community and public agencies can prevent students like Dominic from ending up on the wrong side of the law. The conference was a healthy start in addressing how schools themselves can unintentionally perpetuate the pipeline to prison and what they can do to shut it off. In the 1990s, many school districts adopted "zero tolerance" policies to deal with disciplinary problems, which coincided with states passing laws to make it easier for juveniles to be tried as adults. Some schools began overreaching by suspending or expelling students for infractions that were once handled inside the classroom.

At the gathering, sponsored by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard and Northeastern University's Institute on Race and Justice, scholars told of students being suspended for tardiness, rudeness, or loitering. In a few school districts, behavior such as shouting, refusing to cooperate, or having a verbal altercation was referred to police under vague statutes that include "disrupting school."

There are already laws and policies to deal with the most aberrant behavior. Moreover, there are some excellent alternative schools in Massachusetts where such students can get both a good quality education and a reality check. Locking the door and calling the police shouldn't be the only solution.

Dominic wound up at South Bay for nine months because he did all the wrong things: He fought at school, got suspended, and then dropped out. He started hanging with the wrong crowd. Then he was caught carrying a handgun while on probation. While in jail, he found out about a program called Youth Opportunity Boston, and he is putting the pieces of his life back together by acquiring job skills and working toward his graduation equivalency diploma.

Looking back, Dominic takes responsibility for his actions, but he also hands some to the school system, lamenting the absence of a good teacher. Research unveiled at the conference indicated that the most effective teachers aren't the ones kicking kids out of classrooms and that high-quality teachers have fewer disciplinary problems.

Teachers need training to become expert not only in the subjects they teach but in the children they teach. The conference made headway toward unclogging the school-to-prison pipeline.