



*Plain Language Edition*

# **School-to-Prison Pipeline**

Many students with disabilities face restraint and seclusion. Disabled students of color often face punishment in school. They are more likely to have law enforcement called on them. These experiences can be very traumatic, and feed into the school-to-prison pipeline. This toolkit will explain what the school-to-prison pipeline is.

## **What is the School-to-Prison Pipeline?**

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School-to-Prison pipeline is the idea that punishment in school leads to jail. This happens much more often to students of color than white students. The school-to-prison pipeline exists because of racism. We'll talk more about how racism creates the school-to-prison pipeline later on.

Punishment in schools includes restraint, seclusion, suspension, expulsion and arrest. Punishments are more likely to happen to students of color than white students. Punishments are also more likely to happen to students with disabilities. This means that schools punish students of color with disabilities the most. Restraint and seclusion is one step on the school-to-prison pipeline.

## **What are restraint and seclusion?**

Restraint and seclusion are two types of actions used against students. These actions are most often used as punishments but are not ok even if used in another way.

Restraints prevent students from moving. School staff like teachers sometimes restrain students. For example: a teacher holds a student's hands behind their back. This is dangerous and upsetting. One type of restraint is prone restraint. Prone restraint is when staff holds someone face down. Prone restraint is dangerous. It is very likely to cause injuries. It can also cause death.

Seclusion is a type of punishment. Someone puts a student alone in a room against their will. Sometimes, students want to spend time alone. This is not seclusion. Seclusion is forced time alone. Many special education classrooms use seclusion. This is not okay. Seclusion can make it difficult or impossible for a student to ask for help. An example of seclusion is putting a student in a locked closet. Seclusion can injure and kill students.

## **Why do we say there is a pipeline from school-to-prison?**

There are many factors that cause the school-to-prison pipeline. Some of those factors are about your life at home.

- School is harder if you don't have a place to live.
- School is harder if you don't have food at home.
- School is harder if you can't go to the doctor when you are sick.

These factors mean that it is harder to learn! When it is harder to learn, you might be frustrated.

Some of those factors are about how people treat you in school:

- School is harder if your teachers do not try to communicate with you
- School is harder if other students bully you.
- School is harder if your teachers think you are lazy and not trying.

These factors mean that school is upsetting!

Some of these factors are about your community:

- School is harder if your school can't buy textbooks.
- School is harder if there are not enough teachers.
- School is harder if you live in a community with lots of violence.

These factors mean that you don't have the resources to learn!

All of these factors lead to the school-to-prison pipeline. These societal factors are amplified for disabled students and students of color. Low income students and students of color face more challenges in school because of these factors. When these students are also disabled, participating during school is hard as well.

The biggest factor is discrimination! Teachers and school staff discriminate against students. They discriminate against students because of their race. They also discriminate against students because of their disability. Often teachers will excuse white students, and punish students of color. This isn't fair! We talk more about how teachers and staff discriminate against students in this section and the next section.

Students are punished for not doing their homework. Sometimes students don't do their homework because they don't have a place to live. They are still punished. This isn't fair!

If a student is being bullied, they may be upset. Teachers may think they are aggressive. They may use restraints or suspend the student. The school doesn't ask why the student is upset. This is not fair! Students of color are more likely to be seen as aggressive, and teachers punish students of color more. This is wrong. Teachers also punish students with disabilities more. Special education classrooms use seclusion and restraint more than other classes.

Staff increasing punishment towards students with disabilities and students of color leads to a direct path (called a “pipeline”) to prison. Prison can include jail, juvenile detention, or “troubled teens” programs. These programs can often make it harder for students to qualify to get help if and when they get back into school later on, since they now have a crime on their record. Students who are punished more often have more events where they could have police called on them.

The school is more likely to use student resource officers (SROs) with these students. Student resource officers (SROs) are police officers who work in schools. They can and often do use more force than a teacher. They can also charge students with crimes. SROs in schools are another part of the school-to-prison pipeline.

School staff are more likely to call law enforcement on students of color. Students punished by law enforcement are criminalized. Criminalizing students may include putting them into jails or juvenile detention. Juvenile detention is similar to prison. It is designed for people under age 18.

The school-to-prison pipeline is also called a pipeline because it is hard to escape. Students often don't have the resources to pick a different path. Teachers do not help them. The school does not help them enter college or a job.

This could be because their community doesn't have resources. It can also be because adults think that they are "troublemakers."

After someone leaves prison, it is hard to survive. Many employers don't want to hire people who were in prison. Many landlords don't want to house people who were in prison. If someone can't find a job, they can't make money. They need money to pay for food and housing.

If they can't make money any other way, they might steal money. If they get caught, they go back to jail. Then they leave prison, and they still can't find a job.

## **How does racism create the school-to-prison pipeline?**

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Racism is systemic. That means that racism is a problem that is part of our whole society. Since it is part of society, racism shows up everywhere. Racism is a part of our government's policies, our education system, and the way people treat each other.

Students of color are underdiagnosed. Underdiagnosed means that fewer students of color who have disabilities are diagnosed with a disability. Students of color are also misdiagnosed a lot. This means that they are diagnosed with the wrong disability.

Students of color are sometimes labeled as having “emotional disturbance”. “Emotional disturbance” is often used to avoid diagnosing a student with other disabilities. Diagnosing a student with a more specific disability requires the school to give accommodations. Not diagnosing a student with a more specific disability means that they often do not get accommodations they need. Without accommodations, they don’t have an equal chance to learn.

Students who are labeled as having “emotional disturbance” may have their needs ignored. The school is more likely to punish them instead. School staff are more likely to call law enforcement on students of color. Police use more force. They can also charge students with crimes.

Many punishments involve removing students from the classroom. These punishments include in-school suspension and out-of-school suspension as well as seclusion. These punishments mean disabled students of color are taken away from their classes more than white students. Spending more time away from class means that those students are likely to miss important information. That can lead to them having lower grades and worse performance on tests. Also, punishing students can make them feel bad. It can make them feel like they don’t belong in school.



# Trauma and the school-to-prison pipeline

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Seclusion and restraint cause trauma. When someone has a very upsetting experience, that can change the way they think and feel later on. Those changes are trauma. Restraint and seclusion makes many students experience trauma. They may not want to go back to school. They are sometimes scared of teachers. Law enforcement, like police or school resource officers, also cause trauma. An example of trauma might be the police arresting a student. Disabled students must not be treated as an inherent threat.

After experiencing trauma, it can be harder to do daily activities like going to work or school. Some people have trouble communicating about their trauma. That makes it harder to get help. People who experience trauma may be angry, scared, or nervous. Some students break rules because of trauma. For example, a student doesn't want to go back into seclusion. They might resist or yell at the teacher. Many schools respond to this by punishing students more. Teachers may restrain the student. This causes more trauma.

# What can staff members do instead of defaulting to punishment?

People sometimes say that punishments and law enforcement are only used in emergencies. But in reality, school staff sometimes use these actions as a way to handle students breaking the rules. This is not fair! Students should not be restrained or secluded.

If restraint and seclusion happen at your school, speak up! If you are a staff member:

- You can refuse to restrain students.
- You can refuse to seclude students.
- You can suggest your school receives training about how not to use restraint and seclusion.
- You can talk to coworkers about how restraint and seclusion is dangerous.

In some states, parents are supposed to be told if their child was restrained or secluded. Many schools don't tell the parents. This is a problem! You should tell parents if their child was restrained or secluded.

# **Teachers should think of all students as full and complete human beings.**

Disabled people have thoughts and feelings. They have reasons for their behavior, just like other students. Some people with disabilities may not be able to communicate what they are feeling in a way that teachers understand. Some people with disabilities aren't listened to when they tell people about their problems. Everyone gets upset sometimes. Children have problems that they don't know how to deal with. If a student is upset, they may break the rules. They may cry in class. They might fall asleep. They might eat in class. They have reasons why they are breaking the rules. If teachers punish them without listening, it makes the problem worse. It also isn't fair.

Teachers should be willing to listen, learn and help.

1. Disabled students often are treated like it is not possible for them to understand or learn things. They are frequently talked about as if they are not there. This is particularly true of nonspeaking students and students with intellectual disabilities. That is not okay.

It is very important to presume competence in all disabled students. That includes students who you might have challenges communicating with or understanding at first. Nonspeaking students communicate in a variety of ways, and behavior can sometimes be communication.

For instance, if you try to hold their hand or move them without their consent, a student moving away from you or yelling often means they do not want you to do that. While they are not using words, they are telling you how they feel about what you just did.

2. Learn what makes someone feel comfortable. Having trouble handling big emotions is a part of learning. Educators should help students access resources that can help them regulate and express their emotions. That does not mean making them look or act less disabled. It means helping them understand their feelings and their options for handling them, such as stim toys, talking it out with a friend or counselor, or asking for a five minute break.

It is also worth noting that all communication and emotional regulation can be impacted by access barriers, such as bright lighting, loud sounds, uncomfortable seating, or a too-large or too-small amount of sensory input, depending on the student. If a student cannot focus due to these barriers, they may struggle to focus on you or what's going on around them.

3. Help students access resources.--- AAC devices, vocational rehabilitation, an Individualized Education Program (IEP), food stamps, free lunch etc. If they are having a problem that makes them physically or emotionally unsafe, it is also our job to help them get help to solve that problem. For example, if a student is hungry, that might look like helping them get free and reduced lunch or access to food stamps with the help of a social worker. Expecting students to “just deal with it” actively makes the situation worse.

Excessive punishments do not help staff members understand why a student is breaking the rules. It does not help them understand how to help the student follow the rule. It does not help them understand if the rule needs to change.

It is important to pay attention to the student to understand what is causing their distress. If they are nonspeaking, you need to communicate with them on their terms. If you need help understanding how to get communication support for a student, look at this [guide](#).

It is important to remember that disabled students can have problems they are dealing with outside of school, such as abuse, discrimination, or relationship issues. Professionals need to look at these students as complete people, and not as a set of behaviors to correct.

In an immediate crisis, there are alternatives to causing harm to the student. You can learn more about research on different methods [here](#).

## **Where can I learn more about the school to prison pipeline?**

Here are some resources about the school-to-prison pipeline, restraint and seclusion, and related legislation.

[ACLU: School to Prison Pipeline](#)

[How the School-to-Prison Pipeline Works](#)

[ASAN - Keeping All Students Safe Act](#)

[The Alliance Against Seclusion and Restraint](#)

[Communication First: LISTEN](#)

[The Pedagogy of Pathologization: Dis/abled Girls of Color in the School-prison Nexus](#)

[Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected](#)

[School Resource Officers are a Waste of Resources, Says New Report](#)

[Data Shows 3 of the 5 Biggest School Districts Hire More Security Officers Than Counselors](#)

[Your Rights In School: A Good Education for All](#)

[Your Right to Privacy: How “Safety” Policies Can Threaten Privacy and How You Can Fight For It](#)

[School Climate: How People with Disabilities Are Harmed In School and How We Can Fight Back](#)

[Effective Communication: Your Right to Your Voice](#)

[ASAN joins COPAA, Communication First and families in settlement banning restraint and seclusion in Fairfax County Schools](#)