

Take Charge Of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved.



ESTHER L. BUSH

The School-to-Prison Pipeline: What We Must Do

This month's health page "Take Charge of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved." addresses a topic about which I am deeply passionate. As a former high school teacher and education advocate, I have pushed for economic and social equality initiatives that benefit African Americans and, thereby, our entire community. I have long argued for the vital importance of equitable access to education and have championed for youths to have the supports they need to achieve their potential. My efforts were recognized as a Champion of Change in the Educational Excellence for African Americans program at the White House during President Obama's administration.

In fall 2019, the Mayor Peduto's Gender Equity Commission released a report by University of Pittsburgh researchers showing that the City of Pittsburgh's rate of school suspensions and police referrals of Black students is among the highest compared to 89 other cities across the country. We must acknowledge how serious a problem this is for our children. When we push children and youths out of school and into the juvenile court system, we are contributing to loss of human potential.

Addressing this systematic inequality is what researchers Drs. Vaughn-Coaxum and Huguley are tackling in their work. Dr. Vaughn-Coaxum explores ways in which harmful environments and adversities during childhood may influence the ways in which children cope with stress. She calls for greater emphasis on mental health supports for children who have disruptive and challenging behaviors. Dr. Huguley has developed an innovative intervention project called "Just Discipline" that brings restorative practices and relational approaches to transform schools and increase supports for youths. The program also helps student leaders to promote change in their school environments. Already, this project has shown substantial reductions in the number of school suspensions.

As our children and youths return to school, I am calling on all of us to come together to encourage our schools to reduce suspensions and strive to keep youths in school. The more we can disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline through innovative practices in schools and increased behavioral health supports, the greater the chance that our children and youths will thrive. The children in our region deserve no less.

Esther L. Bush
President and CEO,
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Greater Pittsburgh

Stopping the School-to-Prison Pipeline

For some children in the United States, school is not only a place of learning but can be a point of entry into the criminal justice system. In some schools, even minor breaks from the rules can lead to children's behavior being criminalized and dealt with by authorities outside of school—sometimes without consideration of what motivated the behavior. Behavioral consequences can include children being removed from school and coming into contact with the juvenile court system/incarceration. This movement is commonly referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline.

Not all children who break school rules are sent on this pipeline in equal measure. According to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, school disciplinary policies disproportionately affect students of color. Black students are suspended and expelled three times more than White students. Knowing these disparities exist and that the school-to-prison pipeline is a problem, how can the situation improve?

In part, the answer may lie in understanding the root of the problem—why some children are exhibiting certain behaviors in school. Research has shown that adverse life events—like fewer economic resources, child abuse and neglect, exposure to community violence or bullying—have



RACHEL VAUGHN-COAXUM, PHD

"It's important to consider in what ways we punish behaviors that may serve to protect children in other environments."

- Dr. Rachel Vaughn-Coaxum

significant effects on mental health, emotion regulation and other skills people need to function well.

Rachel Vaughn-Coaxum, PhD, assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, says, "Experiences of deprivation of resources

are associated with changes in cognitive functioning and development, including language learning, flexible thinking, memory, self-control and time management. Experiences related to threats to well-being are associated with emotion regulation. These experiences

are usually seen as disruptions in development. But, it's important to consider that something that looks atypical in a child's development might be adaptive. What some people view as a deficit in development may actually be a necessary adaptation to survive in less stable environments."

Dr. Vaughn-Coaxum says it is important to consider that, in certain environments, the consequences of adversity may put children at much higher risk for difficulties at school. If children are having difficulty regulating their emotions and are more likely, because of their race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status, to receive more punitive measures at school, this could put them at risk of becoming part of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Childhood adversity puts children at higher risk for behavioral and mental health issues, including anxiety and depression. Not all children receive the help they need to process adverse life events (research shows that 50% or less of children get the mental health assistance they need—<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2724377?guest-AccessKey=f689aa19-31f1-481d-878a-6bf83844536a>).

In addition to getting treatment, children also need treatments that work best for them. Dr. Vaughn-Coaxum is currently conducting

two* studies** that are looking at the way adverse life experiences influence the way children learn basic coping skills in treatment and examining the effectiveness of certain therapy skills. Research shows that standard treatments for depression do not always work as well in children who have a history of adversity. Dr. Vaughn-Coaxum wants to understand why in order to better target the delivery of helpful coping skills to children who have experienced higher levels of stress and adversity.

Children need to be able to get support for mental health issues, get the treatment that works best for them and there needs to be consideration that some disruptive behaviors emerge from adverse life experiences.

"It's important to consider in what ways we punish behaviors that may serve to protect children in other environments," says Dr. Vaughn-Coaxum.

To learn more about Dr. Vaughn-Coaxum's studies, call 412-526-8667 or email ECYMHlab@pitt.edu.

* LEADS Study Pitt+Me page: <https://pittplusme.org/studyarms/publicdetails?guid=bac43d1e-1ecd-456d-8fa8-c0e87923ad5>

** ShARE Study Pitt+Me page: <https://pittplusme.org/studyarms/publicdetails?guid=6002f3c2-1dc5-48d2-9f15-8519ea271b15>

Just Discipline Project: Promoting Thriving through Middle Childhood Schooling

by James P. Huguley and Rachelle H. Haynik

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The school-to-prison pipeline holds consequences for the academic, criminal justice and mental health needs of African American youth. Since 2017, the Just Discipline Project (JDP) has been working in Pittsburgh-area schools to decrease the impact of the school-to-prison pipeline using a model of whole-school cultural change. The model includes placing a restorative practice coordinator in every partner school, training teachers and administrators in using restorative and relational approaches to school climate and empowering student leaders to become changemakers in the face of challenges to their well-being.

JDP represents the middle child cohort intervention



JAMES P. HUGULEY, RACHELLE H. HAYNIK



under The Pittsburgh Study. Through our transformational model, school communities seek to understand students deeply and to have a keen sense of the assets and challenges that are present in students' lives. These empathetic insights defuse many misunderstandings and biases before they escalate into conflict. When problems do occur, we build on relational capital

to respond in ways that restore community. Under our model, struggling students are often recognized for their fullest potential, with many entering our Leaders in Training program (L.I.T. Leaders) to maximize their gifts. Through this aspect of the work, children not only benefit themselves, but they are trained to use restorative practices to mediate conflicts in ways that help their peers thrive, as well. Teachers also play a major role in this school climate transformation. In classrooms each week, teachers hold community circles that allow students to better relate to each other, while giving teachers the opportunity to learn more about their

students' lives and to share about their own. Moreover, for students who need more intensive support—like the ear of a social worker, school psychiatrist or other professional—the restorative practice coordinator is a trusted adult in the school building full-time, to whom students feel comfortable contacting in times of need. We also are launching a trauma-responsive intervention this fall for students facing ongoing adversity outside of school.

The model's results to date have been quite promising. In the first two school years of the program, the pilot school saw a 22% decrease in suspensions and a 30% decrease in referrals. Academic achievement in-

creased in math, science and language arts, and students surveyed said they felt safer and that they had more of a voice in the school. Of the teachers surveyed, 91% said they would like the restorative practices to continue. This fall, staff from JDP will be in at least ten schools in Allegheny County, building on past successes.

Restorative Justice and culture-building programming started in the Pittsburgh Public Schools in the spring of 2017 and has continued since that time. Evaluation of the work is ongoing.

