



Comment: Bad discipline hits too many students

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Texas may be known for its oil and gas pipelines, but the newest Texas pipeline funnels children from schools to prison, by way of alternative education programs and juvenile detention centers.

While students who present a danger to classmates must be segregated, too many students are falling into this pipeline. The Legislature must stem the tide of schoolchildren who are being unnecessarily written up and written off.

The Houston Press reports on the expulsion of model student Pavlos Karnezis of Hightower High School in Fort Bend Independent School District. Pavlos was expelled for bringing a 2.9-inch buck knife to school. The knife was exposed when a teacher asked if any student had scissors she could use.

An honors student with no prior disciplinary record, Pavlos starred on the soccer team, tutored younger students and volunteered at a hospital, senior home and his church.

The school had 17-year-old Pavlos handcuffed, arrested and taken to jail, contacting his parents only after he was on the way to the big house, where he interacted with accused drug dealers and murderers. Pavlos was expelled, and banished to a boot camp for the rest of his senior year and charged with a third-degree felony.

Even after the district attorney dropped criminal charges, the merciless principal continued to impose the expulsion and boot camp placement until she was overruled earlier this year by the school board — some five months after the expulsion.

In response to such outrages, legislators in 2005 passed House Bill 603 clarifying that, before expelling a student, schools may consider "self-defense; intent or lack of intent at the time the student engaged in the conduct; a student's disciplinary history; a disability that substantially impairs the student's capacity to appreciate the wrongfulness of the student's conduct."

However, at the behest of school lobbyists, the legislation was watered down. State Rep. Rob Eissler, R-The Woodlands, and other lawmakers have vowed to strengthen this legislation next session.

Lawmakers must also address the excessive number of removals to Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs, or DAEPs, which now have more than 100,000 students. Remarkably, these programs must provide only two hours of daily instruction, compared to the standard seven-hour school day. Because school districts receive full state funding for these students, there is no excuse for providing them with only a half-day or less of instruction.

Due to minimal state oversight, there is no data on whether DAEP students are learning, whether their behavior is being corrected and how many end up in the juvenile or adult justice systems. The campus rating system does not apply. Although DAEP students' performance cannot be fairly compared with regular campuses, DAEPs should be rated relative to similar programs.

Finally, state legislators must restrict school districts' issuance of criminal citations in school for routine

disciplinary violations that are not otherwise criminal offenses. State Rep. Harold Dutton, D-Houston, successfully defended an 8-year-old girl in municipal court who was issued a Class C misdemeanor for chewing gum in class. Many judges say they now feel like vice principals, as they are being inundated with thousands of similar cases.

While students who endanger classmates must be removed and, when necessary, prosecuted, those who make honest mistakes can benefit more from in-school restorative programming. Parent-teacher conferencing, school-assigned community service, school-based teen courts and better teacher training in discipline and special education issues are among the solutions.

It is time to turn off the spigot in the school-to-prison-pipeline and tell schools to stop passing the buck — and the paddle.

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