

The growing problem of over-policing our schools

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
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Imagine being four-years-old and put into handcuffs because you and your friend wouldn't take a nap in your pre-K class. Or being five-years-old, handcuffed, and taken away from your school by ambulance to a hospital psychiatric ward after throwing a tantrum in the kindergarten room. These scenarios might sound far-fetched, but both are true stories that captured the local media's attention after they happened to children at their New York City public schools.

The over-policing of public schools—not just in New York, but around the country—is one more threat to our nation's children at risk of entering the pipeline to prison.

In New York, the expanded police presence started becoming especially obvious about ten years ago when the New York Police Department (NYPD) took control over school safety from the Board of Education. By the start of the 2005-06 school year, the NYPD employed 4,625 School Safety Agents in New York City schools—more personnel than there are officers in the police forces of Washington, DC, Detroit, Boston or Las Vegas, according to the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) report, *Criminalizing the Classroom: The Over-Policing of New York City Schools*. In addition to increasing the numbers of these school safety agents, who are unarmed but can make arrests, the city also launched the Impact Schools Initiative, in which armed police officers have been deployed in the city's "most dangerous" schools. Modeled after the NYPD's Operation Impact program for fighting street crime, the initiative is designed to flood those schools with armed officers and surveillance cameras. Over the last five years, a total of 28 schools have been designated as "impact schools."

A June 2005 report by the Drum Major Institute found that impact schools were among the most overcrowded and underfunded in the city and serve a student body that is disproportionately poor, Black and over-age for their grade. Another report by Fordham University found that targeting a school as an impact school led to a significant decline in attendance there. This is exactly the opposite of what schools serving poor, at-risk youths should want to happen. But since the NYPD-takeover of school security, many students and teachers have said that their schools feel more like prisons than places of learning.

One English teacher described the scene this way in the NYCLU report: "On this random Wednesday morning, scanners were set up in the cafeteria of the public high school in the South Bronx where I work. Students' bags were placed on a scanner, they were forced to walk through metal detectors, and any item deemed inappropriate for school—including food, keys and spare change—were taken away. Many students were patted down, some even with their hands on a police car. An overwhelming ratio of adults to students made the cafeteria seem a lot like a police station... [C]an we please not treat already-struggling, inner city teenagers who have gotten themselves to school like they've committed a crime?"

In some ways, the sense that too many schools are turning into prisons is very real. Students are learning that many school disciplinary incidents, including the kind that used to end with a trip to the principal's office, can now lead to an arrest. The NYCLU recently filed a Freedom of Information Act request in order to obtain police arrest data, and learned that the NYPD has illegally arrested over 300 students under age 16 for non-criminal violations such as loitering and disorderly conduct. Under state law, children younger than 16 can only be taken into custody without a warrant if they have committed a crime, not a violation. But the incidents

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mentioned earlier about the four-year-olds at a Bronx public school and the five-year-old Queens kindergartener only highlight how soon children can be at risk of over-policing in schools.

In response to the excesses of school policing in New York City, the NYCLU has convened a Student Safety Coalition to address the school-to-prison pipeline in that city and promote solutions. Children's Defense Fund New York is an active member of this coalition and is working with others to promote positive approaches to school safety and discipline. We are also collaborating with the NYCLU and a group of other organizations on the School to Prison Pipeline Mapping for Action Project, whose goal is to map out current policies that push children out of school and into the juvenile justice and adult criminal justice system, so that changes can be made to stop them. It's an important step, and the problem certainly doesn't begin or end with New York City. At-risk schools in New York and across the country deserve to be flooded with resources and support instead of police. And students at those schools need to be applauded and encouraged for being at school and wanting to learn, not made to feel as if they are criminals just for trying to go to class. It is time to treat children as children and not as criminals—especially at very early ages.

Marian Wright Edelman, whose latest book is [The Sea Is So Wide And My Boat Is So Small: Charting a Course for the Next Generation](#), is president of the Children's Defense Fund. For more information about the Children's Defense Fund, go to www.childrensdefense.org.