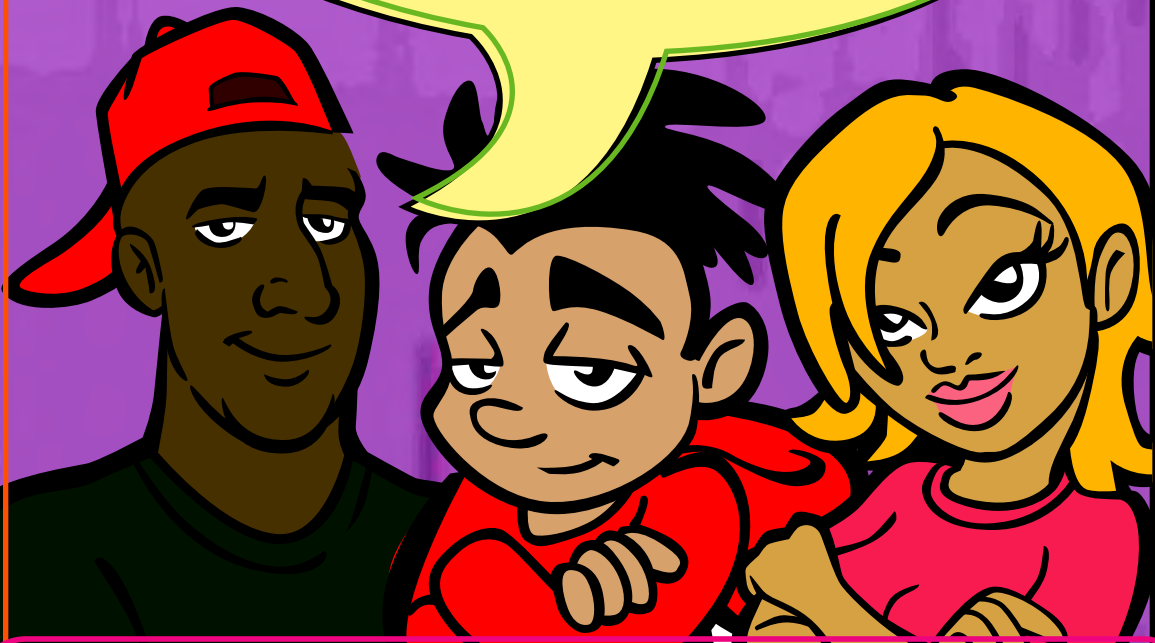
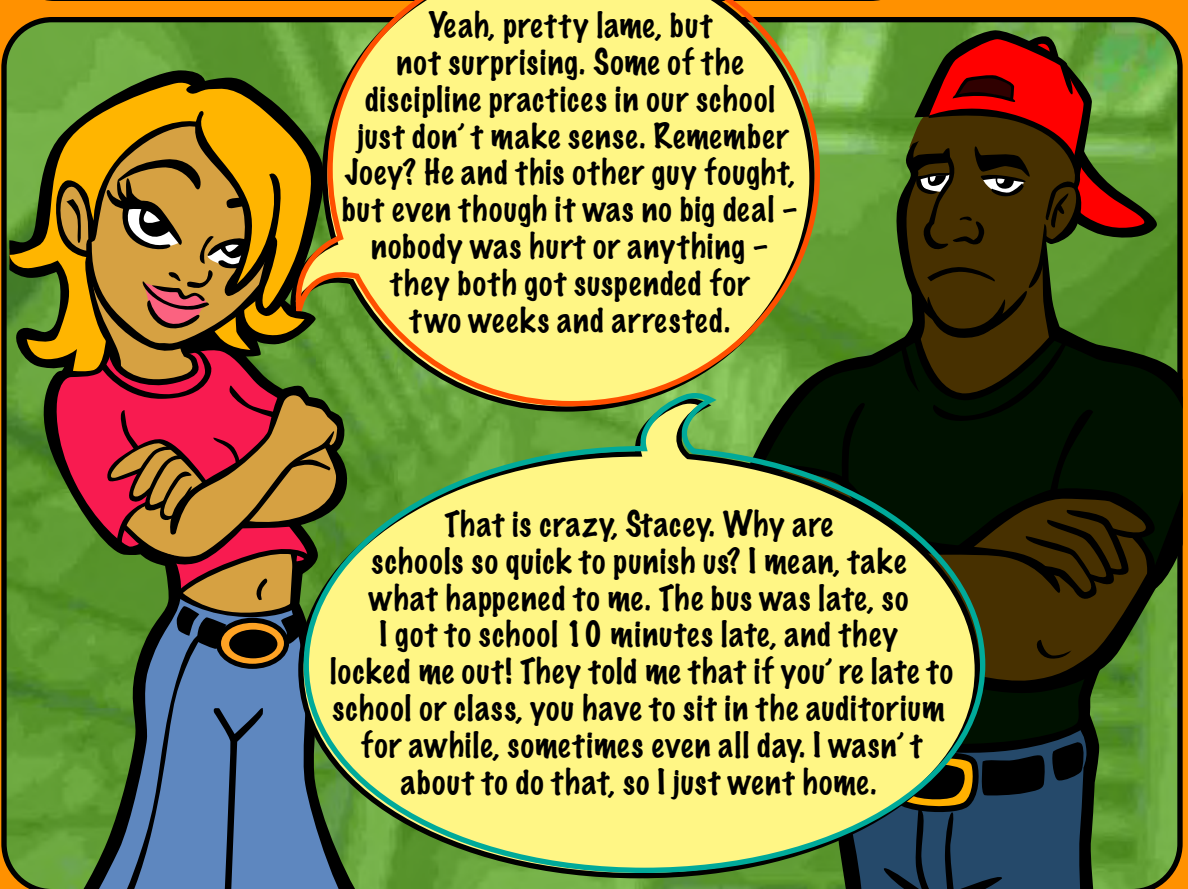
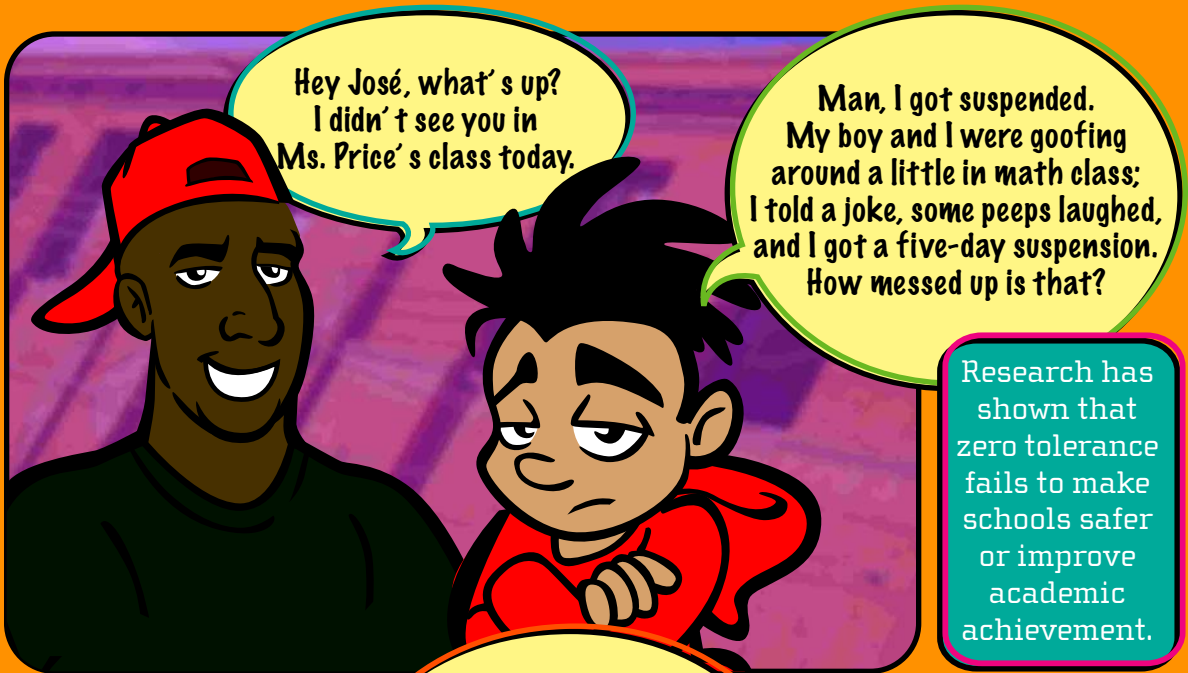



TELLING  
IT LIKE  
IT IS!



Miami Youth Speak Out on the  
School-to-Prison Pipeline

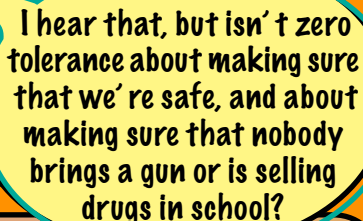


Youth at Power U Center for Social Change surveyed over **600 Miami students** to get their thoughts on school discipline. **15%** of the students reported having been locked out of school by staff at least once, meaning they were prevented from even entering the building. Almost all those students were locked out for being late, skipping, or for not wearing the right uniform.

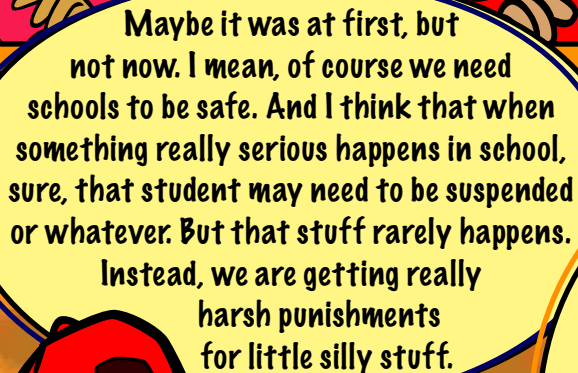


Dang, Mike, I probably wouldn't have stayed either! What's the point?! Of course you should try to be on time, but all locking you out does is make the problem worse. That's what I don't get about this zero tolerance stuff. When we screw up, aren't adults supposed to help us learn from our mistakes? Instead, they punish us and create even more problems for us!

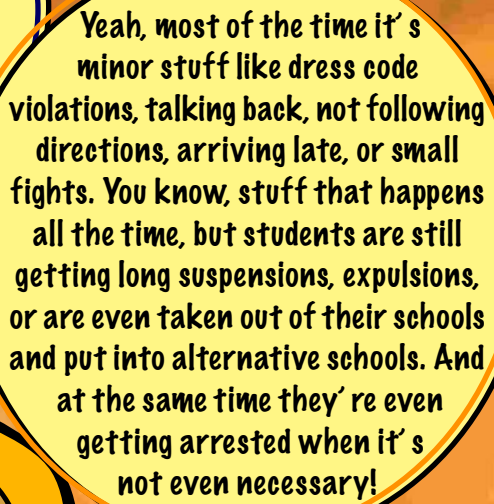
At the beginning of the school year, Jason\* was placed in in-school suspension for three weeks for violating the dress code, even though the reason for it was that his mom couldn't afford to buy him the appropriate shirt. As a result, he fell far behind in his classwork.



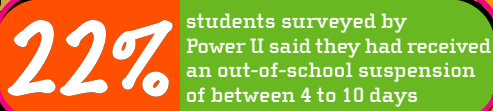
I hear that, but isn't zero tolerance about making sure that we're safe, and about making sure that nobody brings a gun or is selling drugs in school?



Maybe it was at first, but not now. I mean, of course we need schools to be safe. And I think that when something really serious happens in school, sure, that student may need to be suspended or whatever. But that stuff rarely happens. Instead, we are getting really harsh punishments for little silly stuff.



Yeah, most of the time it's minor stuff like dress code violations, talking back, not following directions, arriving late, or small fights. You know, stuff that happens all the time, but students are still getting long suspensions, expulsions, or are even taken out of their schools and put into alternative schools. And at the same time they're even getting arrested when it's not even necessary!



**22%** students surveyed by Power U said they had received an out-of-school suspension of between 4 to 10 days



**over 80%** of those suspensions were for minor things that are really common among young people – dress code violations, being late, skipping, disobedience, and fighting

\*Names have been changed to protect student privacy.

It's true. All these security guards and police officers in school, I mean I know it's their job to protect people and keep bad things from happening, but a lot of the stuff they do isn't right.

Yeah, in my school they harass us all the time. Having them yell at us, push us around, and watch us all the time doesn't make me feel safer. It's like our schools are scared of us and expect us to do something wrong. It's like they see us as criminals.

It makes school feel like prison, ya know? I don't think anyone deals with police more than us students. It's even worse than when we're outside school! And if something does happen in school and the police are there, it gets real serious, real fast. There have been students I know who've been taken out of school in handcuffs. I've even heard about elementary school kids getting cuffed and arrested. It's crazy! And it's unfair!

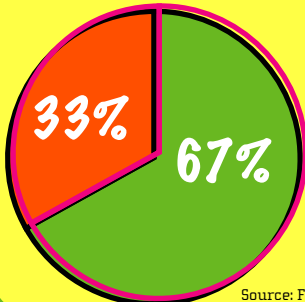
58%

of surveyed students believe schools depend too much on police to handle discipline

56%

believe students are arrested for minor offenses

### Florida School-Based Referrals to the Juvenile Justice System 2009-10

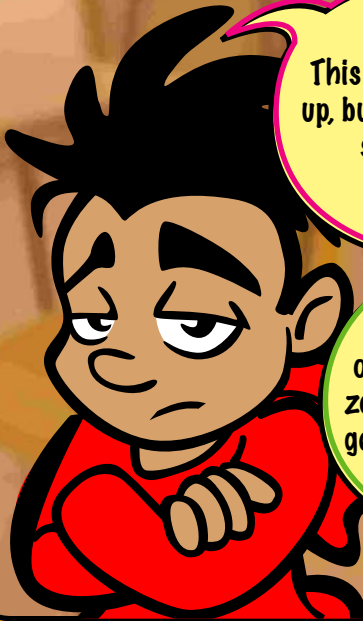


- Misdemeanors (e.g. Disorderly Conduct, Low Level Assault/Battery, Trespassing Fighting, etc.)
- Felonies

Source: Florida Department of Juvenile Justice



For the 2009-10 school year, there were **more than 18,000 referrals** of Florida students to the Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), and over **12,000 were for misdemeanors (not felonies)**. Black students were sent to the DJJ three times more often than White students.

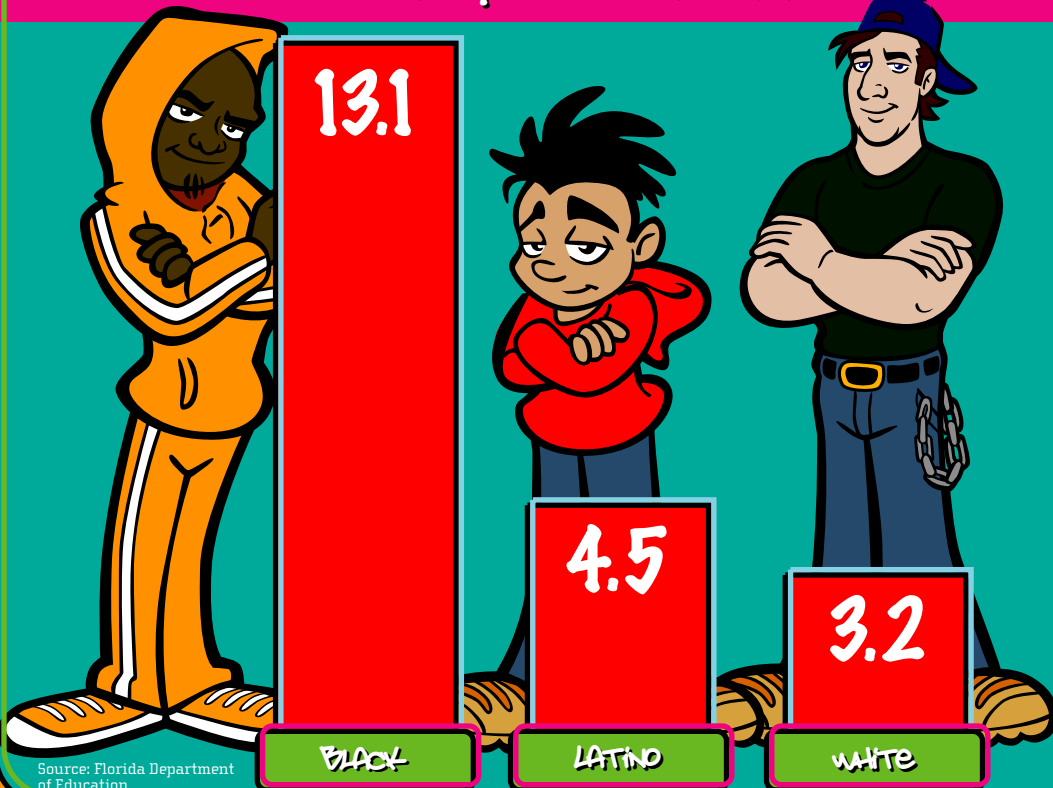


How is it unfair?  
This stuff is totally jacked up, but if we're all facing the same rules, it's not unfair, right?


Do you really think all students are treated the same? Sure, students of all races and ethnicities are affected by zero tolerance. But Black and Brown students get the worst of it. We are far more likely to be suspended, expelled, and arrested than other students.



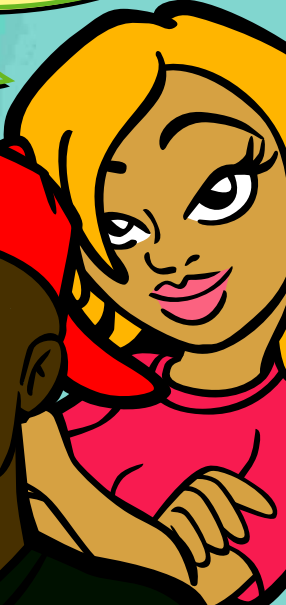
### Miami-Dade Out-of-School Suspensions 2008-09 Rates per 100 students




Source: Florida Department of Education



I hate to ask, but is that because we act up more in school? That still wouldn't make it right, but if we're the ones breaking the rules, then that would explain why we're the ones getting punished, right?

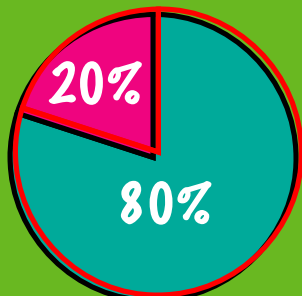




But that's not what happens, José. We do the same things as other students, but we get punished more often. Or we get worse punishments. So many times, it's like the rules for Black and Brown students are totally different than they are for other youth.



Exactly. I mean, how is it that my experience in school is so different than my boy Adam who goes to another school a mile away? In my school, if you fight, you're getting suspended and arrested automatically, no questions asked. In his school, nothing like that happens. They have students talk to a counselor to help them work out their problems with each other. They don't even have cops over there! Not in my school, though. It's like we're punished just by what school we go to.

**Power U Youth Survey:**  
Students Believe When  
Returning from  
Suspension, the  
Situation is:



 Worse/Stays the Same  
 Better



Yeah, in my school, if you mess up, that's it - you're out of there, first offense. They say they have to teach us a lesson.

## Fuzzy Numbers

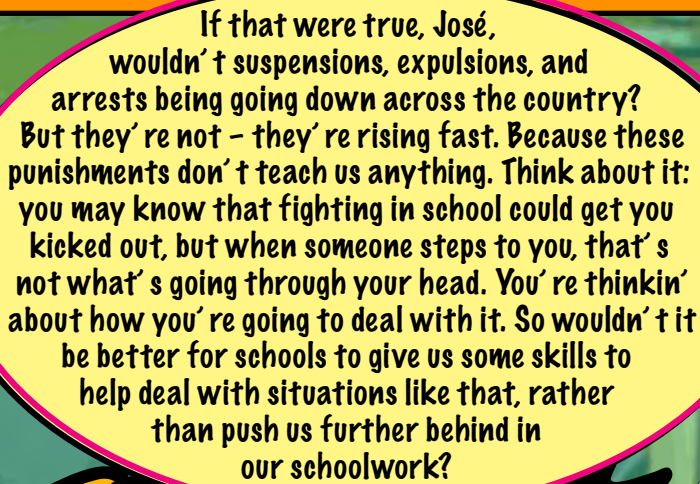
Zero-tolerance discipline is often used more often than what is reported. For example, over the last year, **11%** of youth surveyed had been kicked out of school and sent home without being officially "suspended."

What lesson are they teaching you? That you should be inflexible, uncaring, and unforgiving? You'd never treat your friends or family that way, would you? Nah, if your boy messes up, you work it out, forgive him, and move on. If not, you probably wouldn't have any friends. Or think about your ma. She doesn't kick you out the house every time you screw up. If she did, they'd probably report her to social services. But schools just kick you out for any little thing - and get away with it. Now how does that make sense?

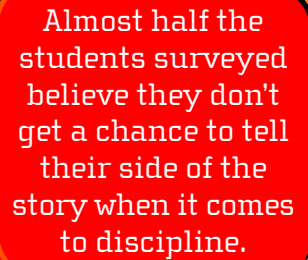
True that. Speaking of lessons, how about this: We get in trouble because they say we're violent or disrespectful, but almost every day I see security guards and police officers mistreating students. And a lot of the adults in school yell at us for no good reason. So what's up with that? Aren't they supposed to be our role models? How are we in trouble for doing the same things they're doing?



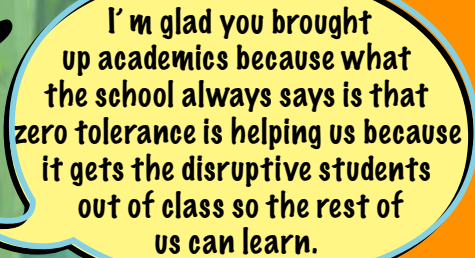
Research shows that students who want to be suspended less would be better off changing schools than improving their behavior or their attitudes.



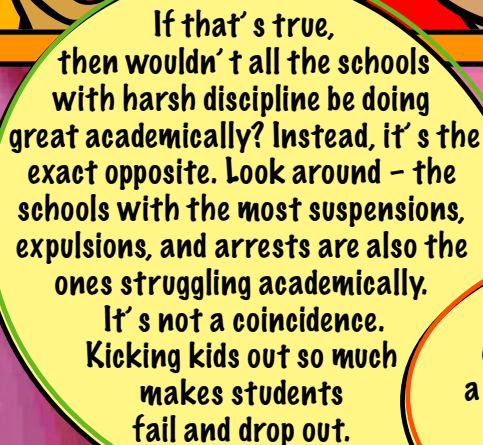
If that were true, José, wouldn't suspensions, expulsions, and arrests be going down across the country? But they're not – they're rising fast. Because these punishments don't teach us anything. Think about it: you may know that fighting in school could get you kicked out, but when someone steps to you, that's not what's going through your head. You're thinkin' about how you're going to deal with it. So wouldn't it be better for schools to give us some skills to help deal with situations like that, rather than push us further behind in our schoolwork?



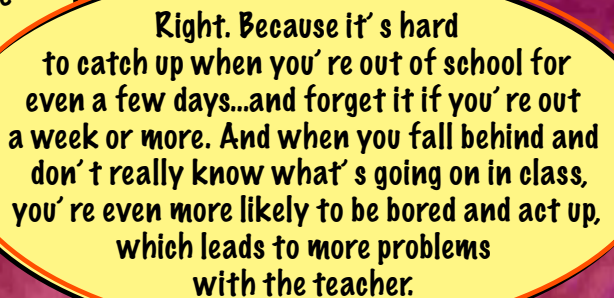
Almost half the students surveyed believe they don't get a chance to tell their side of the story when it comes to discipline.



I'm glad you brought up academics because what the school always says is that zero tolerance is helping us because it gets the disruptive students out of class so the rest of us can learn.

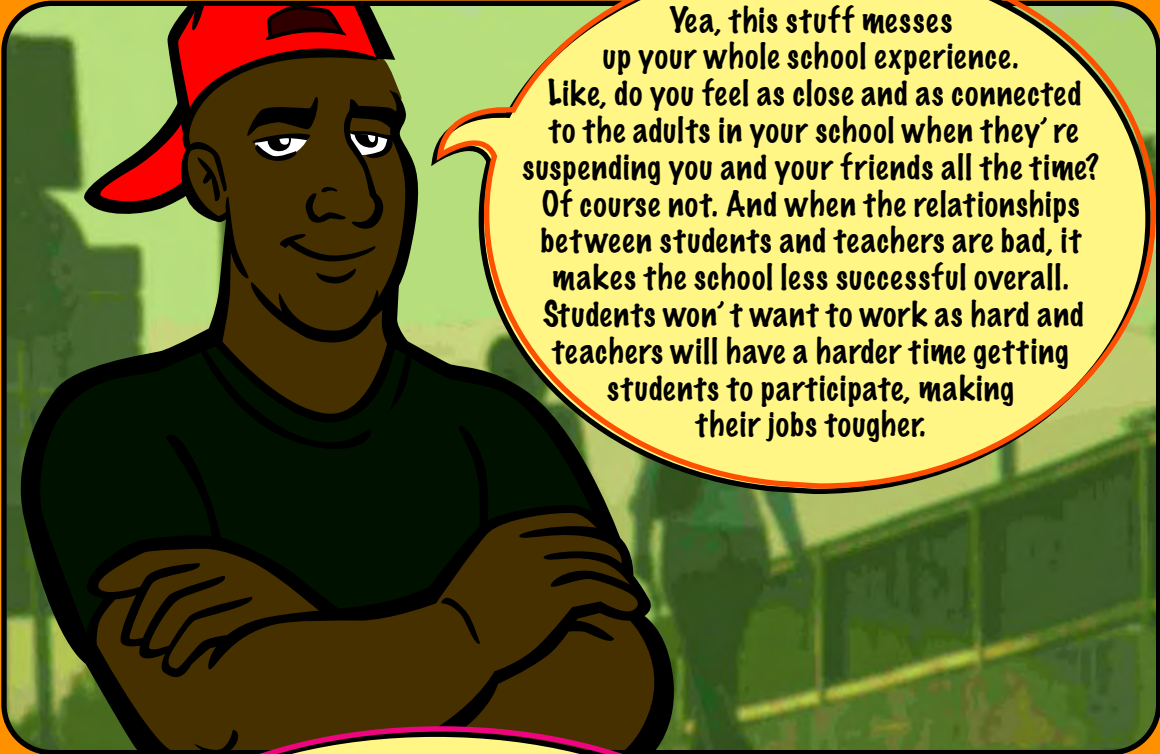


If that's true, then wouldn't all the schools with harsh discipline be doing great academically? Instead, it's the exact opposite. Look around – the schools with the most suspensions, expulsions, and arrests are also the ones struggling academically. It's not a coincidence. Kicking kids out so much makes students fail and drop out.

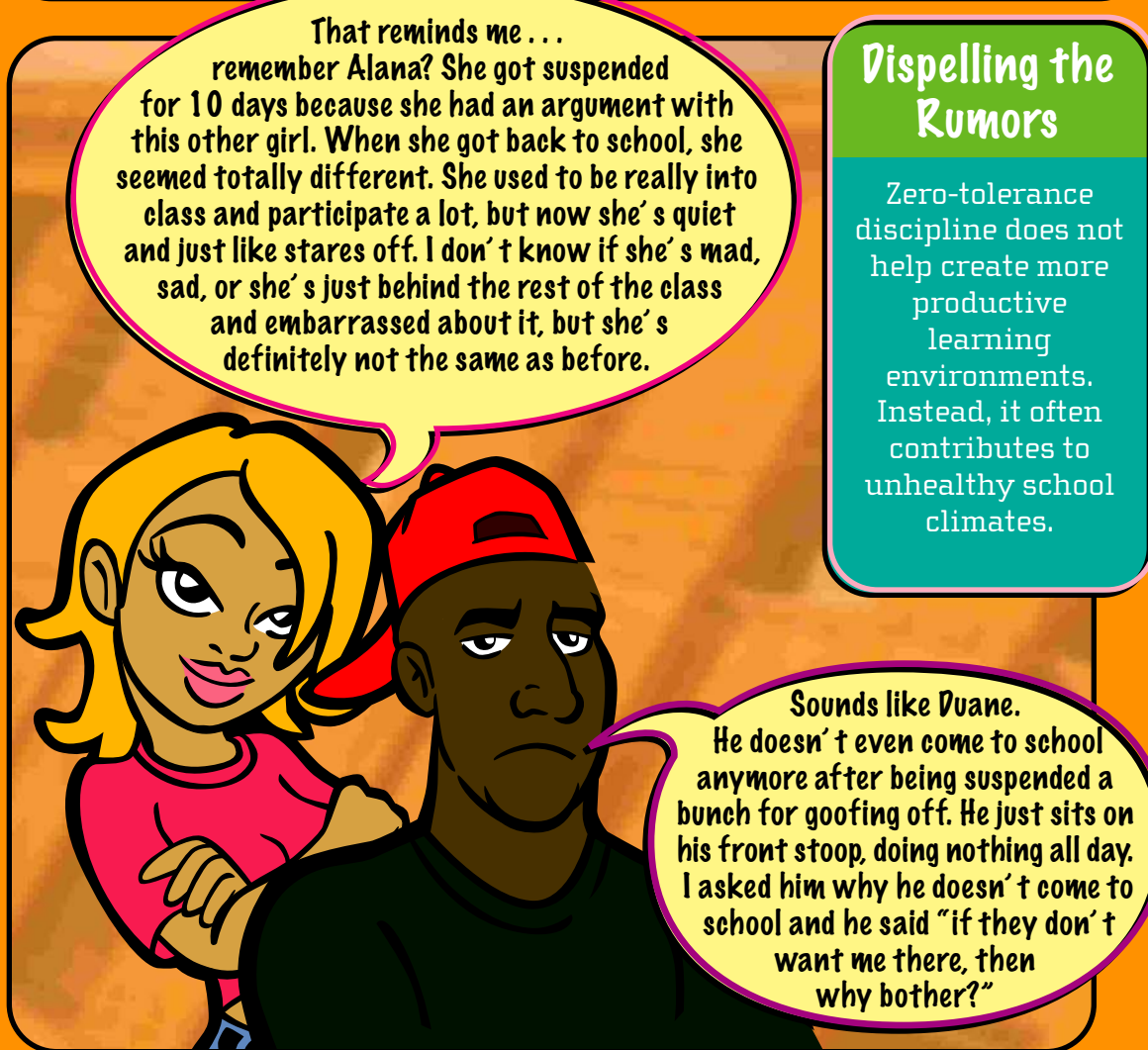


Right. Because it's hard to catch up when you're out of school for even a few days...and forget it if you're out a week or more. And when you fall behind and don't really know what's going on in class, you're even more likely to be bored and act up, which leads to more problems with the teacher.





Yea, this stuff messes up your whole school experience. Like, do you feel as close and as connected to the adults in your school when they're suspending you and your friends all the time? Of course not. And when the relationships between students and teachers are bad, it makes the school less successful overall. Students won't want to work as hard and teachers will have a harder time getting students to participate, making their jobs tougher.



That reminds me... remember Alana? She got suspended for 10 days because she had an argument with this other girl. When she got back to school, she seemed totally different. She used to be really into class and participate a lot, but now she's quiet and just like stares off. I don't know if she's mad, sad, or she's just behind the rest of the class and embarrassed about it, but she's definitely not the same as before.

## Dispelling the Rumors

Zero-tolerance discipline does not help create more productive learning environments. Instead, it often contributes to unhealthy school climates.

Sounds like Duane. He doesn't even come to school anymore after being suspended a bunch for goofing off. He just sits on his front stoop, doing nothing all day. I asked him why he doesn't come to school and he said "if they don't want me there, then why bother?"

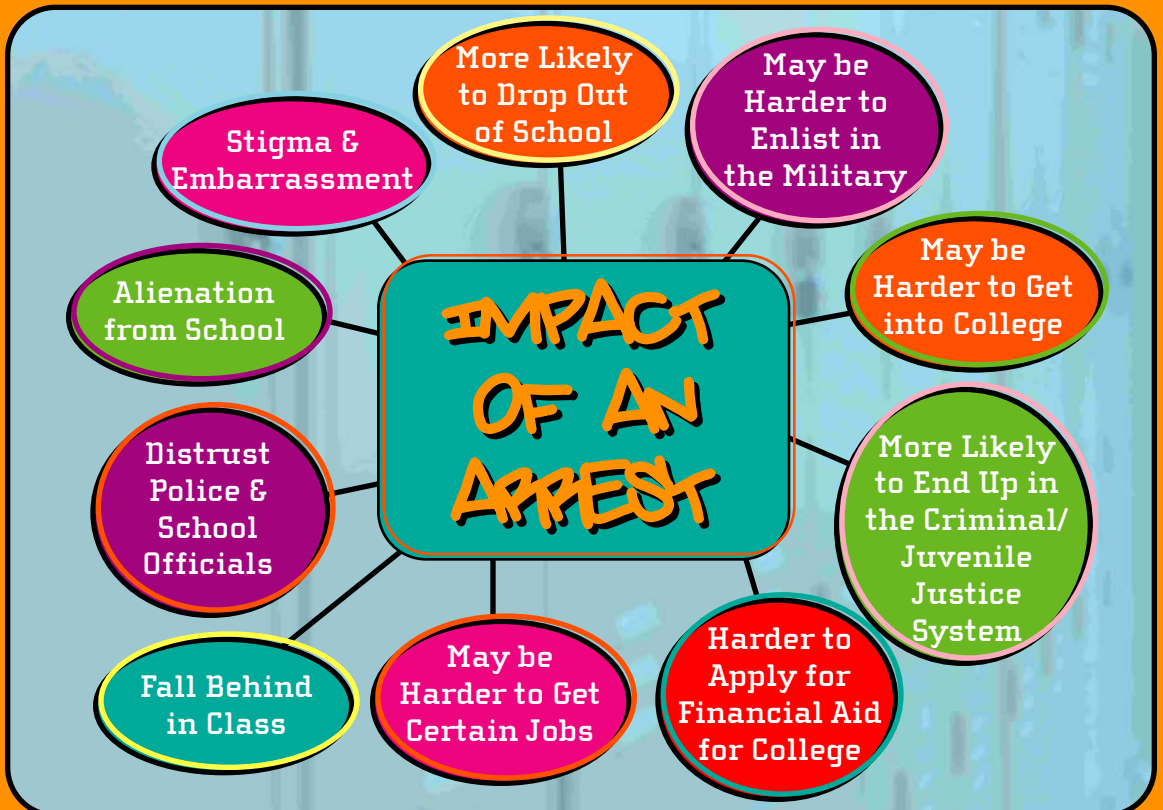
Zero-tolerance discipline can make students feel less “connected” to school, worsening relationships with adults in the school and making it more likely that a student will engage in risky behaviors, violence, and alcohol or substance abuse.


That’s pretty sad. But if he’s not getting along with his teachers, maybe it’s for the best. Now he can get a job and do his own thing. He’s got options.

How many places do you know that hire high school dropouts for anything other than minimum wage? He may have options, but there aren’t many good ones. And check this: not only was Duane getting suspended all the time, he got arrested once in school for some nonsense, and that follows you forever, yo! It makes it harder to go to college, join the military, or even get certain jobs. Without an education and a good job, Duane’s just more likely to get in other trouble now.



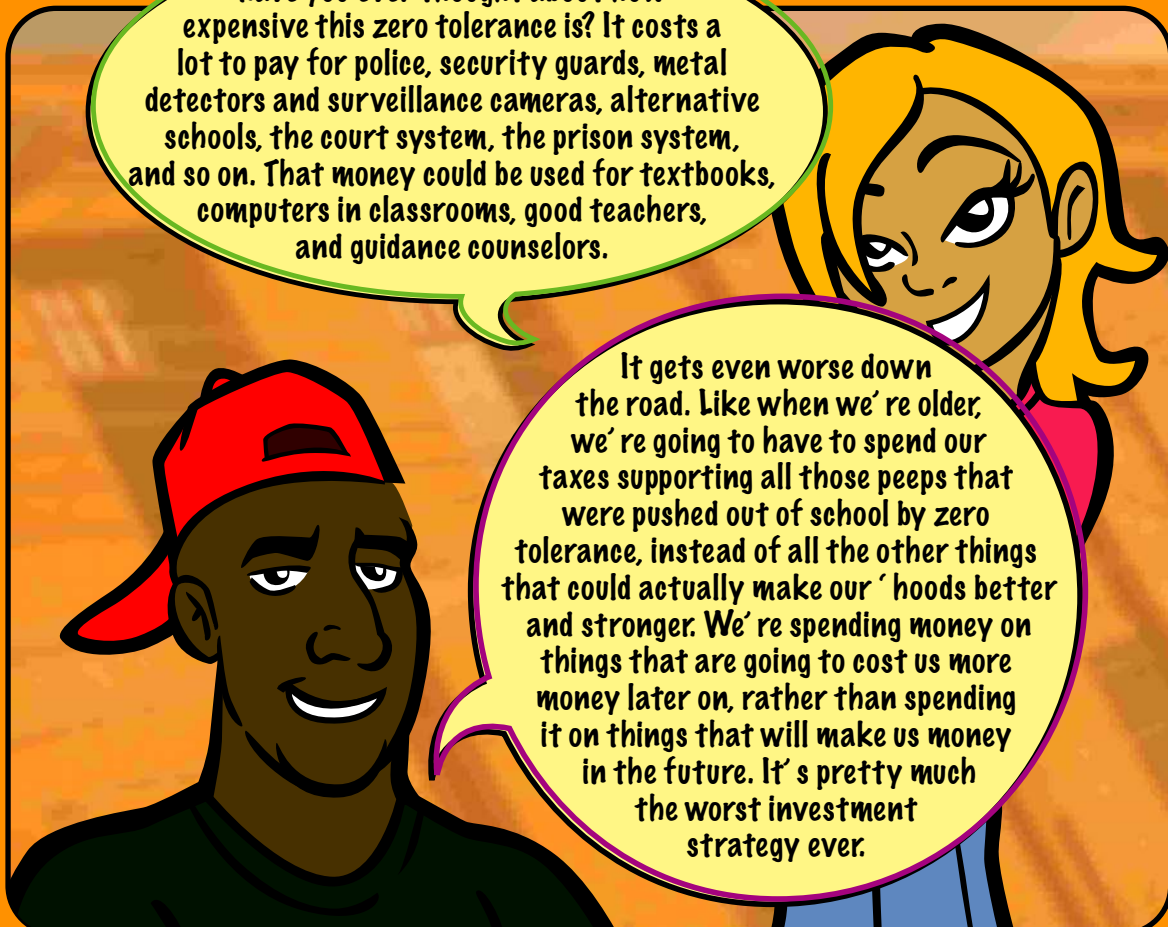
Suspensions and expulsions are linked to higher likelihoods of dropping out of school and entering the criminal or juvenile justice systems.





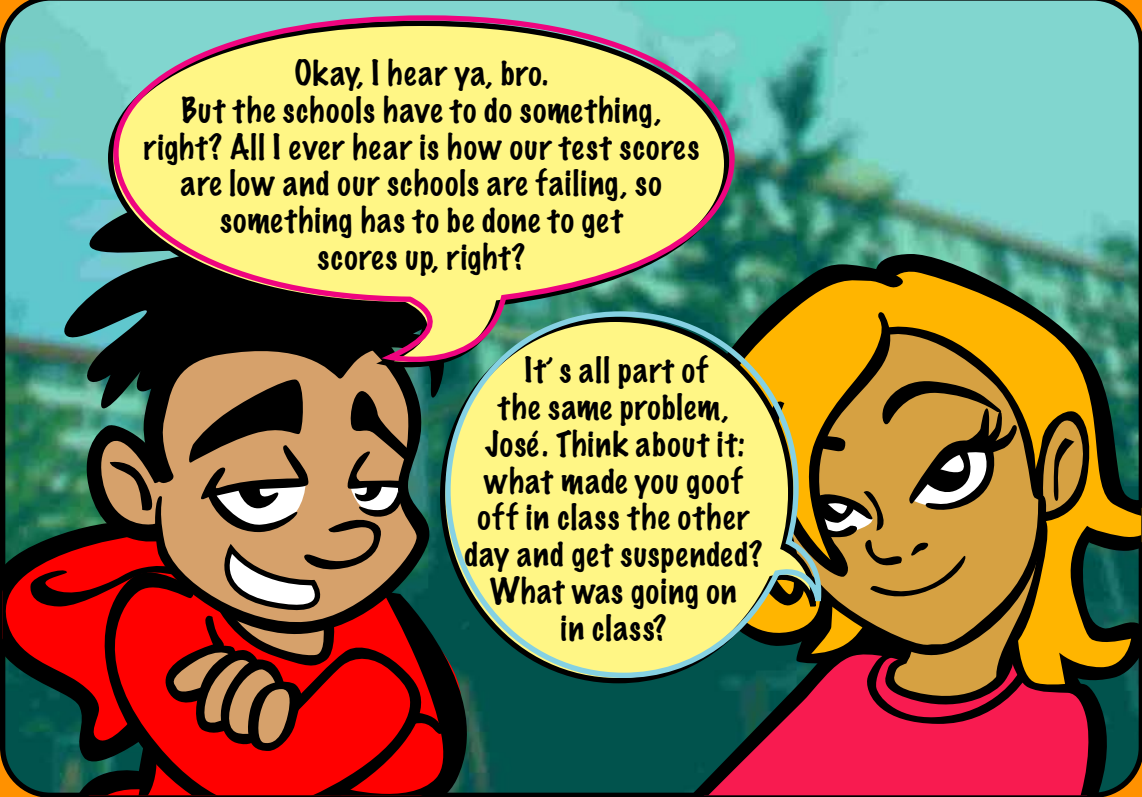
That's right! Students who don't graduate high school are about eight times more likely to wind up in jail or prison. And just think about what this does to our community! We've got all these peeps who should be in school but they are just out on the streets, doing nothing. That makes our 'hoods worse for everybody. It makes us less safe, makes our communities less healthy, and it means less money for our 'hood too!

Less money?



Have you ever thought about how expensive this zero tolerance is? It costs a lot to pay for police, security guards, metal detectors and surveillance cameras, alternative schools, the court system, the prison system, and so on. That money could be used for textbooks, computers in classrooms, good teachers, and guidance counselors.

It gets even worse down the road. Like when we're older, we're going to have to spend our taxes supporting all those peeps that were pushed out of school by zero tolerance, instead of all the other things that could actually make our 'hoods better and stronger. We're spending money on things that are going to cost us more money later on, rather than spending it on things that will make us money in the future. It's pretty much the worst investment strategy ever.



Okay, I hear ya, bro.  
But the schools have to do something,  
right? All I ever hear is how our test scores  
are low and our schools are failing, so  
something has to be done to get  
scores up, right?

It's all part of  
the same problem,  
José. Think about it:  
what made you goof  
off in class the other  
day and get suspended?  
What was going on  
in class?


Amy\* moved to Miami from another country and enrolled in high school three days before the FCAT, Florida's state standardized assessment. The principal told her that because she didn't know English well enough, she couldn't take the FCAT, and instead, she would have to drop out and get a GED. The principal gave her no other information and she ended up staying home for seven months before eventually finding another education program on her own.

Nothing, it was just  
boring. We were doing these  
lame drills and practicing  
filling in our bubble sheets,  
like most days.


Exactly. Because of all these  
tests we have to take, the interesting  
parts of school have been cut back. That means  
less science, art, music, PE, and social studies.  
Instead, we get more drills, mindless memorization  
exercises, and more time prepping for tests.  
It makes school more boring, and it's harder to  
pay attention. So we goof off more,  
making it even more difficult  
on teachers.

\*Names have been changed to  
protect student privacy.






My math teacher used to have all these great lessons she'd do that really helped us learn new things and make us think differently. And they were also really fun and interesting. I always raised my hand and she made time to answer questions. But she says she can't do that stuff anymore and instead we sit around doing lame test-prep work. It's awful!



And not only that, but because our teachers are being judged on our test scores, they're under pressure to get all the so-called "bad" students out of class so they can get high scores. I know it's not right, but I get it, because their jobs are on the line. If we get bad scores, they could be the best teacher in the school, but they'll still get fired. It's like zero tolerance for teachers!



You got it. Have you ever stopped to think about how screwed up this all is? We go to school in the morning trying to learn, and instead we get harassed by cops and security guards. When we walk in the halls, we're watched by surveillance cameras. When we go to class, we get a boring, dumbed-down curriculum that is totally irrelevant to our lives, and we spend half our time filling in bubbles. And every time we make a mistake, or point out how messed up it all is, we get kicked out of school or even taken to jail. And peeps act surprised that truancy rates and dropout rates are high! I mean, what do they expect in that sort of hostile, disrespectful environment?

And let me guess...we wind up paying the price with more suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to alternative schools?

## Prisons vs. Schools

Did you know that the U.S. spends almost **\$70 billion** per year on incarceration, probation, and parole? Over 20 years, funding for incarceration increased six times more than funding for colleges and universities.

Yea, that's why they call it the **School-to-Prison Pipeline**. It's about making it harder to get a high-quality education, and easier to wind up in jail or prison. Instead of making sure we're getting what we need to succeed, they decided they needed to get tougher on us youth. So they took the same types of policies and practices that led to the U.S. having the highest incarceration rate in the world and applied them to us. So it's no surprise that we're getting pushed out of school and finding ourselves in the backs of police cruisers.

Okay, I get that the system is jacked up. It's unjust, it's unfair, it hurts schools, and it wastes resources. But that's just the way things are, right? Why stress about it if there's nothing to do about it?

No way, man. These are choices that people have made. These are the schools that peeps have decided to give us. This didn't just happen; somebody decided to implement zero tolerance. Somebody decided to put cops in our schools. Somebody decided it's more important to spend our time taking tests rather than actually having interesting classes that prepare us for college and careers. It wasn't always like this.

## Funding Increases: Incarceration vs. Higher Education 1987 - 2007

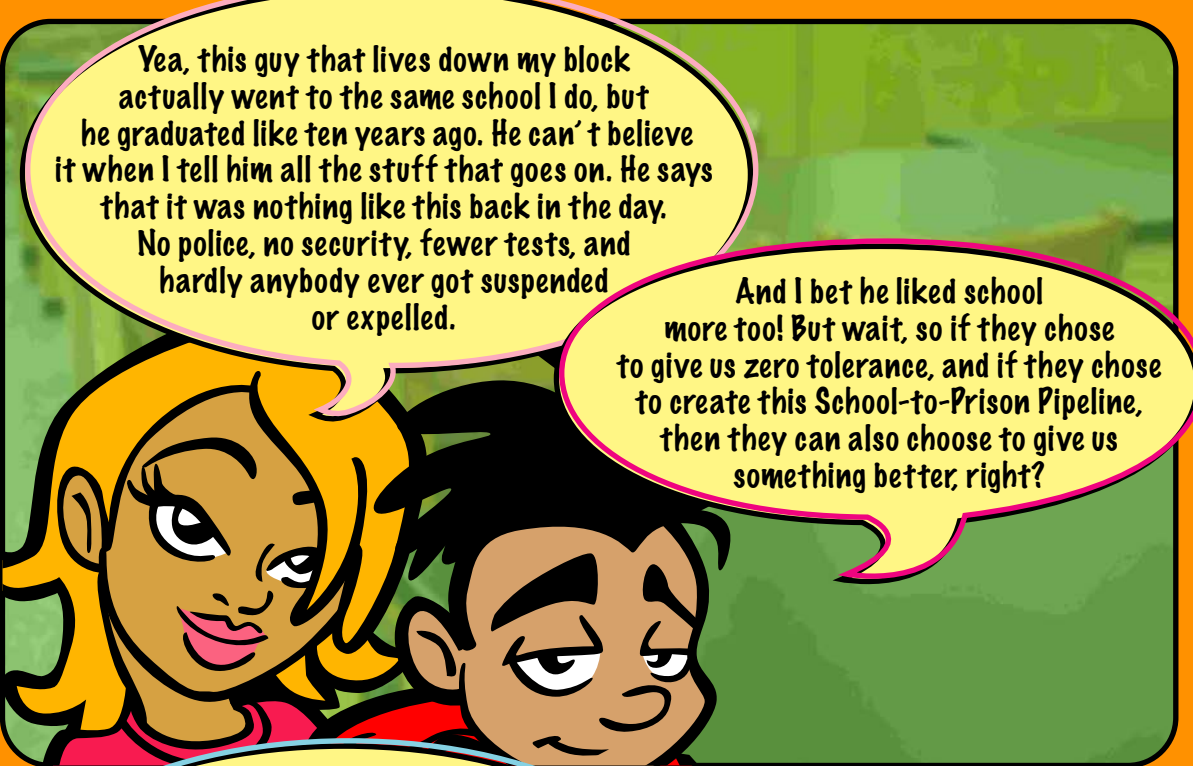
127%

21%

INCARCERATION


HIGHER ED

Source: Postsecondary Education Opportunity



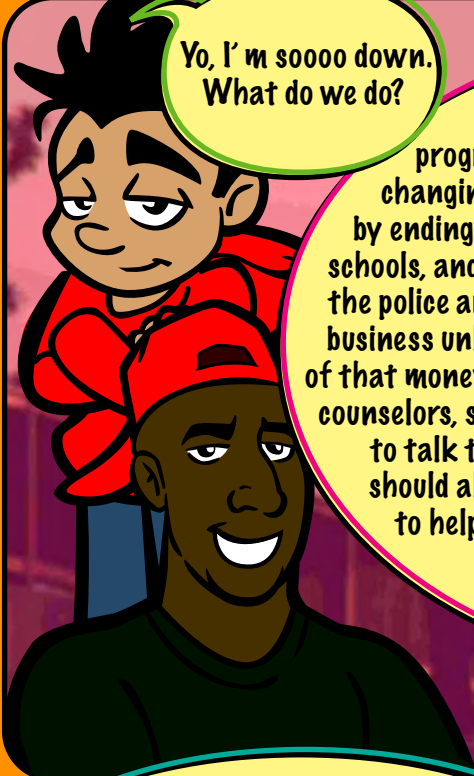
Yea, this guy that lives down my block actually went to the same school I do, but he graduated like ten years ago. He can't believe it when I tell him all the stuff that goes on. He says that it was nothing like this back in the day. No police, no security, fewer tests, and hardly anybody ever got suspended or expelled.

And I bet he liked school more too! But wait, so if they chose to give us zero tolerance, and if they chose to create this School-to-Prison Pipeline, then they can also choose to give us something better, right?



Heck yea! It's just like back in the day when schools were segregated, and we had to fight to get them integrated. And since then we've had to fight to make sure our schools get equal funding, and that we get a chance to take the same classes as everybody else. And now we have to fight to get rid of the School-to-Prison Pipeline, because it's like they're setting us up to fail, rather than setting us up to succeed!

This is about our right to an education! If we can get put out of school for days, weeks, months, or even years, and sent to jail for stuff that is common for peeps our age, then we really don't have a right, do we? So we have to make sure that right is protected, because otherwise, all of us are at risk.



Yo, I'm soooo down.  
What do we do?


Check it - the first thing we do is replace zero tolerance with programs that work and support us. That means changing schools so the adults care for and support us by ending suspensions, expulsions, referrals to alternative schools, and arrests unless it's necessary to keep us safe. And the police and security guards should not be all up in a school's business unless there's serious trouble. Then we can take some of that money spent on police and security and use it to hire more counselors, social workers, or psychologists so we have someone to talk to when things are rough. The way I see it, there should always be someone there to help work things out to help prevent things from happening again and to help figure out why we have problems. That should be the answer, not the police!

I totally agree.  
We need to start training schools on better, healthier ways to deal with discipline and resolve conflicts in school. And we need to use alternatives to zero tolerance that actually make schools stronger and safer, like restorative justice.

Restorative justice - I learned about it from the youth group, Power U in Miami. They're fighting for alternatives to zero tolerance.

Huh? Restorative what?





RJ is about changing the way schools treat students so that we can stay in school to get our education but also work together to learn from our mistakes. Instead of just being punished right away, it works with us to create a space to figure out what went wrong, how we harmed someone by what we did, and what we need to do to make it right.

Yeah, restorative justice gets at the reasons behind issues between students, or between students and adults, so that we can communicate better, solve problems more effectively, and prevent future problems. So instead of pushing students out, school discipline can actually help change the feeling of the school and make it more positive so that it's a place where we want to go and where we can learn.

And it's not just for the students involved. Teachers can even use it in classrooms, or in homeroom. Like we could talk about what's going on in our lives or in the world to help us be cool with talking more with each other and the teacher.

I'm liking this. But how do we convince all of our schools to do this?

Lots of school districts all over the country already use restorative justice, with great results! A lot of these changes are even being led by students like us!

Did you know that studies show that restorative justice practices have not only resulted in fewer discipline incidents, but have also improved student attitudes, the overall school environment, and relationships with the school community?

# Moving Away from Zero Tolerance Works!

Students in Denver, Colorado convinced their school district to change its school code of conduct so that now, school staff must handle minor misconduct at school; students can only be suspended out-of-school, expelled, or referred to the police for serious misconduct; schools are required to eliminate racial disparities in discipline; and discipline data must be reported. Restorative justice programs were also implemented in many middle and high schools. As a result of the work of these youth, school-based **arrests have dropped over 60%** and out-of-school **suspensions have decreased by 40%**!

Baltimore City Public Schools (see arrow chart below) also changed its discipline policy in 2008-09 to limit suspensions and expulsions for minor offenses. Instead, schools focus on addressing student needs, supporting academic achievement, and using alternatives to harsh discipline. The result has been over a **60% drop in suspensions across the District!**

Right on.  
And at the same time,  
there's youth across the country  
organizing to end the School-to-Prison  
Pipeline and make sure that every  
student has a full and equal opportunity  
to get the type of high-quality education  
they need to fulfill their potential, achieve  
their goals, and improve their lives.  
That means no more putting us in  
dumbed-down classes, no more  
wasting time on lame tests,  
no more zero tolerance, and  
no more criminalizing us  
for minor things!

**2003-04:**  
26,000 Out-of-School  
Suspensions &  
Fewer than 1 out of  
2 Black Males  
Graduated from  
High School

**2009-10:**  
9,700 Out-of-School  
Suspensions & 2 out  
of 3 Black Males  
Graduated from  
High School

Sign me up, yo!  
This School-to-Prison  
Pipeline stuff is crazy but  
it's mad cool that there  
are things out there that  
work better. It's time  
to make our  
voices heard!



# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Advancement Project** is a next generation, multi-racial civil rights organization. We tackle inequity with innovative strategies and strong community alliances. With a national office in Washington, DC and two offices in California, we combine law, communications, policy and technology to create workable solutions and achieve systemic change. We aim to inspire and strengthen movements that expand opportunity for all.

Advancement Project: The Audacity to Make Change Happen.

Learn more at [www.advancementproject.org](http://www.advancementproject.org) and  
[www.stopschoolstojails.org](http://www.stopschoolstojails.org).

**Power U Center for Social Change** is a GRASSROOTS organization based in Miami, Florida; **FIGHTING** for our land, our people, our community; **ORGANIZING** for justice in our schools and communities; **SUPPORTING** the struggle of social, environmental, and economic justice.

Learn more at [www.poweru.org](http://www.poweru.org)  
(305) 576-7449  
164 NW 20th Street #104, Miami, FL, 33127





TELLING  
IT LIKE  
IT IS!