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## The Pandemic and the Pre-School to Prison Pipeline: A Public-School Teacher's Perspective

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## **The Pandemic and the Pre-School-to-Prison Pipeline: A Public-School Teacher's Perspective**

We simply do not have access to best practices for leading, teaching, and learning during a pandemic, as this experience is new. Quarantining, social distancing, teaching remotely, and learning from home have taught us so much about the endless possibilities of education. We are learning that the existence of multiple learning models can shape the next generation of teachers and learners if implemented effectively. On the other hand, we are also learning that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

The global COVID-19 crisis, which has moved students from learning in classrooms to learning in their own homes, poses an immediate and lasting threat to the progress made to eradicate the school-to-prison pipeline. For example, inequitable practices of exclusion have extended beyond school campuses to the online learning environment. The school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon involves the funneling of students from their respective schools into the juvenile, then criminal justice system. While most students have returned to school for face-to-face instruction, some students continue to learn from home or by way of a blended model, which combines traditional and online learning. While there has been a shift in learning models during this global crisis, there has also been a shift in the school-to-prison pipeline.

Remote, blended, and face-to-face learning during the COVID-19 crisis can potentially contribute to the influx of minority youth being introduced to the juvenile criminal justice system and labeled as criminals. If equitable, restorative justice plans are not developed, shared, and implemented with fidelity, the pipeline will continue to exist and flourish no matter the learning environment. The school-to-prison pipeline shows up in various overt and covert ways in public education, from zero-tolerance policies to culturally irresponsible pedagogy. The pipeline is a social justice crisis that perpetuates social inequalities in the United States, as it disproportionately affects Black and Brown students, who have been subject to harsher disciplinary consequences than their White peers for decades. Some believe the origins of the pipeline stem from the infamous war on drugs declared by the Reagan administration in the 1980s. The focus on drug crimes in society led to the implementation of zero-tolerance policies in schools. The rigid policies in schools left little room for error on the part of Black and Brown students, branding them juvenile delinquents. Excessive suspensions, expulsions, citations, and other disciplinary actions threaten to interrupt the education of Black and Brown students, limiting their options for making a decent living, thus, enhancing the appeal of illegal activities. Regardless of the location in which learning is happening, the school system is still crucial in the development and safety of our youth. Through teacher preparedness, parental support, campus policies, district plans, and legislation, the system should act as a champion for student achievement, an advocate for student progression, and an active participant in student development and safety.

Since the start of the pandemic, the media has reported several cases of students facing harsh punishments while learning from home. In Birmingham, Michigan, a 15-year-old Black female high school student, Grace, was incarcerated for an alleged probation violation. Grace had previous run-ins with the law for assault (arguing with her mom) and theft (taking an iPad from

school without permission). A learner with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), Grace was arrested at her home for failure to keep up with her online schoolwork during the pandemic. The pandemic came at the beginning of her scheduled probation. When it was reported that she was not keeping up with her assigned coursework, the decision was made to prompt the court system's intervention. The judge labeled Grace a threat to the community and cautioned her that she would be held to the letter of her probation. Grace spent 78 days in a juvenile detention center. In Colorado Springs, Colorado, an 11-year-old Black male middle school student, Isaiah, was suspended and visited by a Sheriff's deputy after an incident that occurred on Zoom. A student with ADHD, Isaiah was seen on camera by his teacher moving a toy gun from one side to another. Isaiah's action prompted another student to pick up his toy gun and wave it in the camera. The teacher reported both students to the principal, who escalated the incident to local law enforcement. Isaiah's mother was not informed of the incident until after law enforcement was alerted. The suspension was eventually canceled. Incidents like Grace's and Isaiah's are not uncommon - most are just not broadcasted in the media.

COVID-19 is a trauma-filled pandemic, and we can count on feeling its remnants for years to come. Trauma should not be unduly added to our students by their respective learning communities. To act against policies that detrimentally impact Black and Brown students and promote policies that are mindful of how overlapping forms of oppression mediate student experiences in and out of school, I recommend:

- Parents- try to create a safe and conducive learning environment in the home.
- Community- come together to develop a plan that supports the youth in your area.
- Teachers- be mindful of varying learning environments and barriers that students must navigate. Teach and lead your classroom with grace for each student's social, emotional, and intellectual circumstances, paying close attention to how your implicit and explicit biases impact your students.
- Counselors- work closely with teachers to help them create and foster a safe physical and virtual learning environment.
- School leaders- implement meaningful professional development to help teachers assess and address their students' needs remotely. Also, be mindful of not overcrowding digital classrooms. Remember, teachers are responsible for catering to the individual and the collective needs of our students. It is impossible to do so when we are responsible for upwards of 50 students at a time.
- District leaders- evaluate the disciplinary processes implemented by your schools to ensure they are unbiased and fair.

The education system plays a significant role in societal perpetuity, and our roles as scholars, educators, educational leaders, parents, and community members are to promote and protect a fair system that moves our society forward. The school-to-prison pipeline is the antithesis of a fair system, as it sustains inequity and harm for Black and Brown students. Promoting student equity and safety requires actively protecting all students from unfair and harsh punishments during and after the COVID-19 crisis.