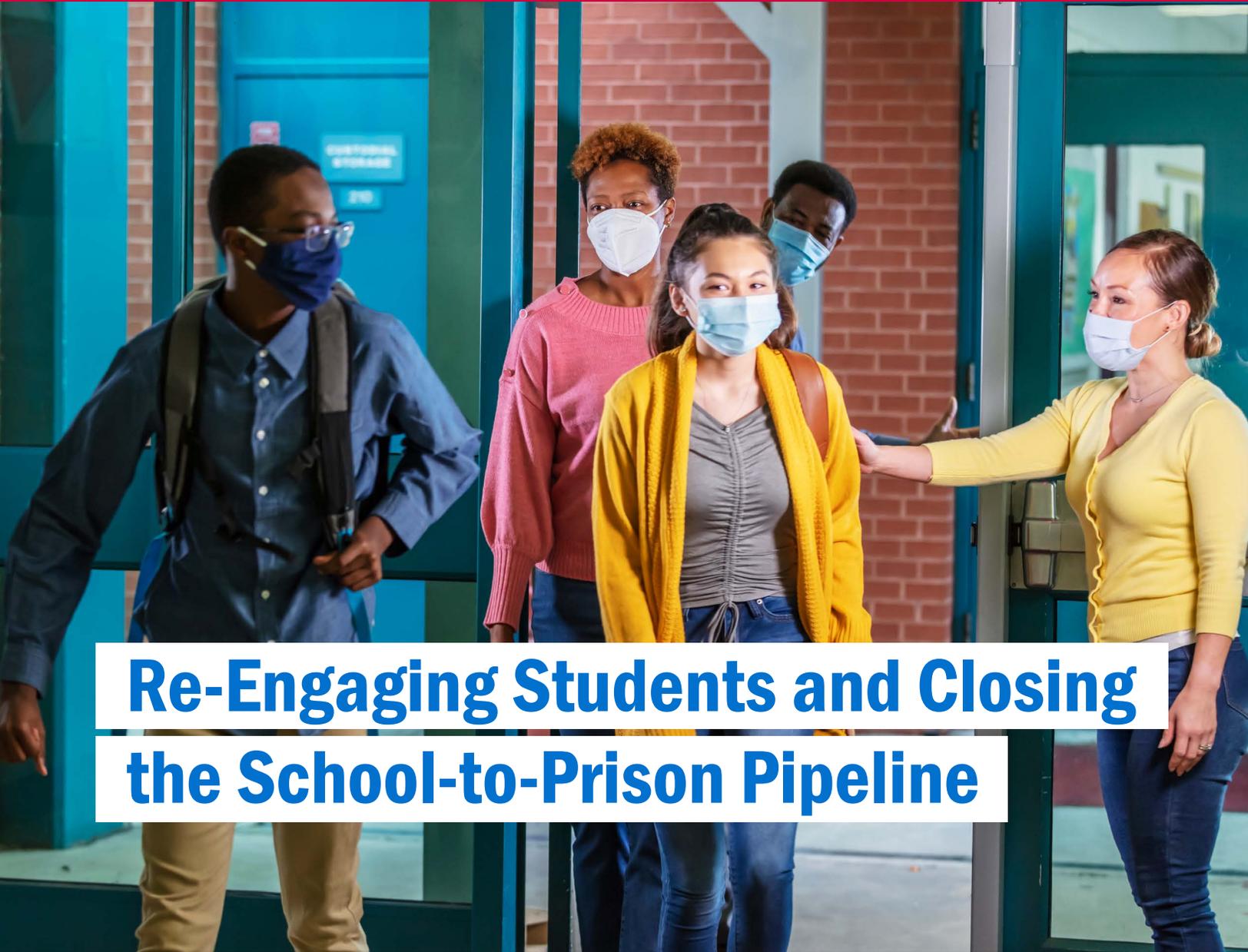


Back-to-School Action Guide: Executive Summary



Re-Engaging Students and Closing the School-to-Prison Pipeline



**THE
SENTENCING
PROJECT**

RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY FOR REFORM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The reopening of schools this fall marks a pivotal turning point for the U.S. education system.

Thanks to a \$122 billion infusion of federal stimulus funds and many important lessons learned in recent times, educators, advocates, and community leaders have unprecedented opportunities to close the school to prison pipeline and to keep students in school and on track for future success.

However, given the widespread disconnection, learning loss, and tragedy American children suffered during the pandemic, the moment will also be fraught with pitfalls.

ENORMOUS EDUCATION AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES

Since the covid pandemic began in March 2020, US school children's pace of learning has slowed considerably, and millions of children have become disengaged from school.

The damage has been especially acute for Black and Latinx students, and for those in low-income households, English language learners, and children with disabilities. The pandemic has created or worsened mental health problems for a substantial share of adolescents, and it has interrupted teen-age children's healthy adolescent development. As a result, schools will likely see substantially elevated behavior and attendance problems in the coming school year.

Even before the pandemic, U.S. schools employed many problematic practices that pushed young people out of school and sometimes into the justice system, and that perpetuated severe disparities and left many students behind.

- **Too many police officers stationed inside schools**, despite evidence that school-based police tend to increase counterproductive arrests for low-level offenses but do not protect public safety.
- **Not enough counselors or other mental health professionals**, despite evidence that – unlike police officers – their presence does promote safety and enhance student success.

- **Counterproductive overreliance on arrests and suspensions/expulsions to address student misbehavior**, despite overwhelming evidence that getting arrested or suspended seriously harms young people's futures.
- **Glaring disparities in arrests and suspensions**, with children of color as well as those with disabilities far more likely to be arrested at school or suspended.

Absent a concerted effort to reject over-policing of public schools, many young people could be thrust quickly into the justice system through unwarranted school arrests. Also, if schools sustain their overreliance on exclusionary discipline and fail to re-engage and support vulnerable students, many more youths will exit school prematurely, heightening their likelihood of future arrests.

These failures would exacerbate racial and ethnic disparities and deepen the difficulties faced by children with special educational needs, and those living in poverty – the very children who have suffered most during the pandemic.

AN UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITY

While the dangers facing the US education system are daunting, the current moment is even more noteworthy for the immense opportunities available to schools and communities nationwide. Combined with the \$68 billion allocated to public schools in the COVID stimulus laws enacted in 2020, the \$122 billion included in the American Rescue Plan represent the largest infusion of federal funding for elementary and secondary education in U.S. history.

If schools and communities invest these resources wisely and build on the emerging momentum to reject counterproductive zero tolerance policies, they can both foster success among returning students AND engineer an overdue shift away from ineffective and inequitable practices that have long plagued our education and justice systems.

Schools and community partners can adopt many promising and proven strategies to reform discipline strategies and close the school-to-prison pipeline.

- **Minimize arrests at school** by removing School Resource Officers (SROs); creating school justice partnerships that preclude arrests for low-level offenses; and employing emergency mental health response teams to address behavioral incidents at school.
- **Reduce the use of exclusionary discipline** by prohibiting suspensions and expulsions except for the most serious behaviors and by adopting Restorative Justice practices and other developmentally-appropriate alternative responses to student misbehavior.
- **Improve the social and educational climate within schools** by embracing Restorative Justice as a school-wide philosophy, adopting the Positive Behavior and Interventions and Supports (PBIS) model, teaching Social and Emotional Learning skills, and hiring additional counselors and mental health professionals.

In addition, research also highlights effective approaches to identify, engage and support students at high risk for school failure or dropout.

- **Collect and analyze data** to identify students who exhibit the early warning signs – involving attendance, behavior, and course completion – that pinpoint when children are likely to fail or drop out of school.
- **Mobilize the community to promote vulnerable students' success** by having community partners offer human services and expanded learning opportunities at school; involving parents and community members in school activities; and recruiting volunteers to tutor, mentor and support students.
- **Adopt promising intervention strategies** – including intensive tutoring, attendance promotion, targeted social and emotional learning programs; and quality afterschool and summer Instruction – to help students at elevated risk for school failure maintain good attendance, avoid disciplinary problems, and remain on track to graduation.

AN ACTION AGENDA

After more than a year of isolation, learning loss, missed adolescent development opportunities and trauma, states and local school systems must partner with communities and pursue a two-track approach to meet the challenges and seize the opportunities of this pivotal moment.

An all-out effort to re-engage students and help them succeed in 2021-22.

To avert a year of tragic educational backsliding, schools and their community partners must:

- Identify students at highest risk for failure in the new school year.
- Mobilize the community to locate and engage these students, and promote their success using effective intervention strategies described in the report.
- Vastly restrict exclusionary discipline and arrests at school.
- Promote racial and ethnic equity by reviewing available data, identifying policies and practices that exacerbate disparities, and exploring new alternatives.

Permanent shift to prioritize opportunity, not punishment for students.

Not just in 2021-22 but also for the long term, schools and community partners must adopt effective strategies to reduce longstanding disparities and support vulnerable student populations. Specifically, schools must:

- **Close the school-to-prison pipeline** by removing SROs from the schools, minimizing arrests, reducing exclusionary discipline, crafting developmentally appropriate responses to misbehavior, and adopting Restorative Justice as the guiding principle for promoting school safety.
- **Improve school climate** by forging close connections with community organizations and residents, making school buildings a hub for a wide array of services and enrichment activities, and institutionalizing school-wide strategies like PBIS and Social and Emotional Learning.
- **Partner with community organizations** to re-engage students who are chronically absent, and offer intensive tutoring and other promising interventions to help vulnerable youth learn needed skills and stay on track.

By investing in these solutions, educators and their community partners can avert potential tragedy in 2021-22 and establish a new normal in our education system that fosters success, promotes equity, and recognizes the realities of adolescent behavior and brain development.

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The Sentencing Project promotes effective and humane responses to crime that minimize imprisonment and criminalization of youth and adults by promoting racial, ethnic, economic, and gender justice.

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