

SNAPSHOT: THE WAR ON DRUGS MEETS THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

a Drug Policy Alliance publication



Schools should provide environments that foster student development and help students attain the highest levels of education. Schools should also support students who are struggling with health and social issues. But harsh disciplinary policies and increased police presence, fueled in part by the war on drugs, have led to the criminalization of youth in schools, especially youth of color. Underlying this criminalization are assumptions propagated by the drug war that students who possess drugs or commit other policy violations cannot be good students; do not deserve an education or support; and must be removed before they disrupt other students' learning. We must disentangle drug war logic from our educational systems in order to provide the support and opportunity our youth deserve.

While police were first put in schools in the mid-20th century to respond to white resident concerns that youth of color would disrupt white youths' education, the war on drugs provided a moral, non-rationally explicit justification and funding to increase police presence and roles in schools across the country.¹ Federal laws enacted in the 1980s and 90s provided funding incentives to hire school police and purchase surveillance equipment like metal detectors and cameras in the name of addressing overblown concerns about youth drug use and violence.²

Based in part on prevailing drug war logic, schools began to institute "zero-tolerance" policies in the 1990s. These policies prescribe severe disciplinary measures, including expulsion, for any student conduct violation, regardless of circumstances. Federal law spurred school police

expansion across the country by requiring zero-tolerance laws for having a gun at school in order to receive federal education funding.³ Many states and localities expanded these policies to apply to all disciplinary infractions, including drug violations, despite the lack of any connection to violence in schools.⁴ Drug use has become the second-highest source of referrals of students to police.⁵ These policies remove any ability for school officials to support students, and they promote harsh punishment over resources and education on drug use.

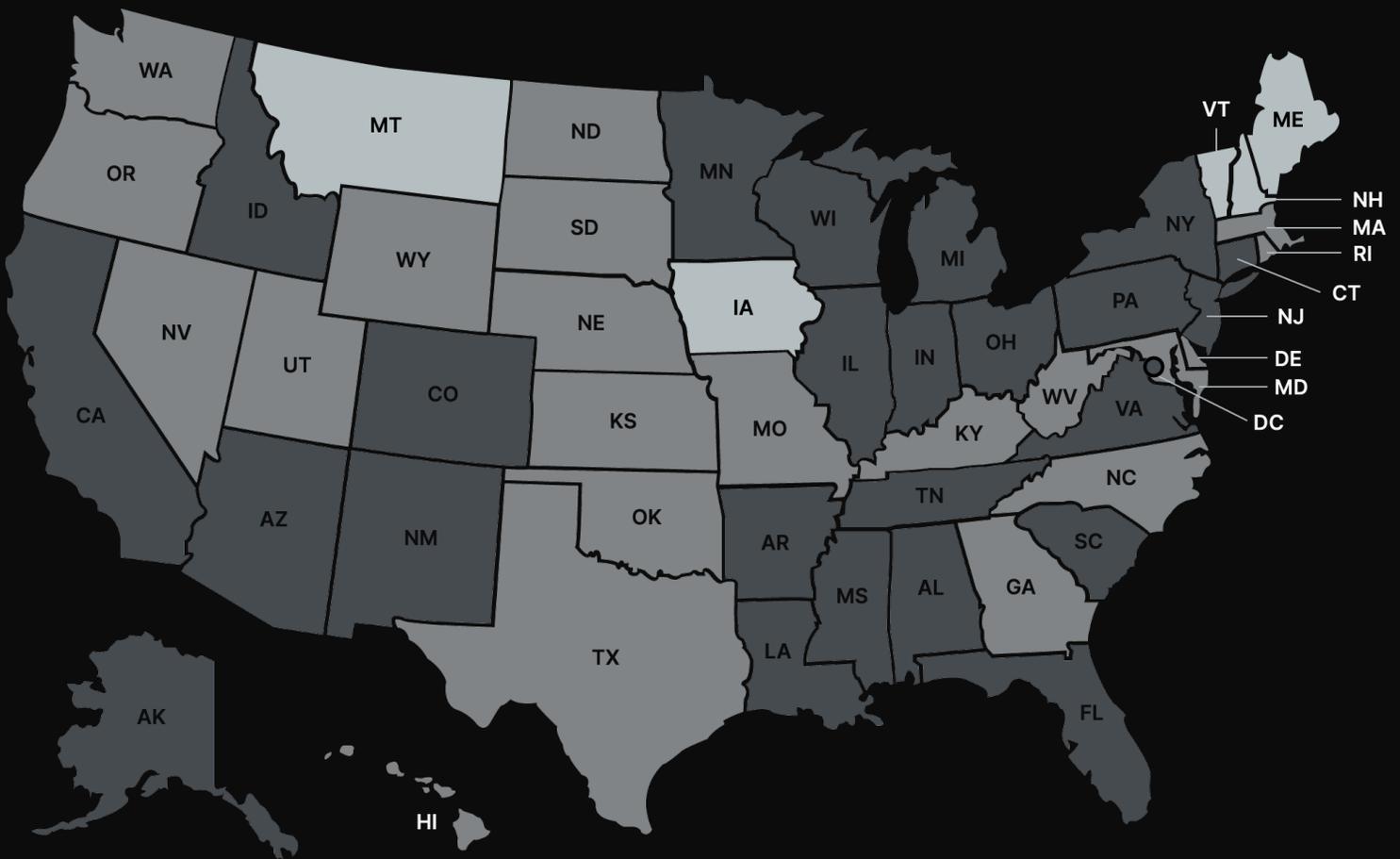
Further, many schools have created policies that actively seek out students to punish them for drug violations. Drug possession is among the most common reasons students are arrested and referred to police.⁶ Over one-third of school districts have policies for randomly drug testing students, some requiring tests for students as young as 11 years old.⁷ Police routinely use specially trained dogs to sniff students' backpacks for contraband.⁸ Not only does drug testing unjustly punish students; it does not achieve its purported goal of ending drug use.⁹ This drug war mindset has resulted in disturbing treatment of students, including the strip search of a 13-year-old girl by school officials after an unfounded accusation that she had ibuprofen (i.e., Advil or Motrin) at school.¹⁰

Despite no evidence that police in schools improve safety or reduce drug use, the number of police in schools continues to grow each year.¹¹ Rather than protecting youth, police presence has led to a dramatic increase in disciplinary measures that disproportionately impact students of color.¹² On the other hand, schools

with more support staff like social workers have better educational outcomes.¹³ Every dollar spent on police in schools is one not spent on teachers, nurses, social workers, counselors, and mental health professionals. Ten million students are in schools that have law enforcement but no social workers.¹⁴ Twenty-four states and the District of Columbia have almost as many police and security officers as they do school counselors.¹⁵

Every time a student receives harsh school discipline or comes into contact with the criminal legal system, including through school police officers, their likelihood

of dropping out increases.¹⁶ This leads to further risk of being arrested and incarcerated, a phenomenon known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.”¹⁷ Dropping out is also associated with higher unemployment and chronic health conditions like heart disease and diabetes.¹⁸ Ironically, harsh discipline such as expulsion for a drug violation can contribute to more arrests for drug offenses or the development of a substance use disorder.¹⁹ By strictly punishing students instead of providing resources to help them succeed, the criminalization of youth in schools contributes to a variety of negative individual and societal consequences.



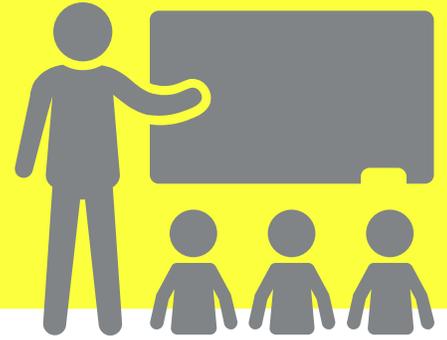
RATIO OF COUNSELORS TO POLICE AND SECURITY OFFICERS IN K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- 5-6 counselors per officer
- 3-4 counselors per officer
- 1-2 counselors per officer

Twenty-four states and the District of Columbia have almost as many police and security officers as they do school counselors. Federal match funding driven, in part, by the drug war has enabled schools to hire more police and security officers in schools and prioritize staff focused on school discipline over staff working for student well-being. This is despite a lack of evidence that law enforcement in schools increases safety or reduces drug use.

Source: American Civil Liberties Union (as of 2016)

Emphasis on enforcement and punishment creates an adversarial relationship between students and school officials and undermines the role that schools should play for students: a safe place for learning and support.



The drug war has also infiltrated educational curricula. The Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) program employs police officers to teach youth about drugs and their consequences through an abstinence-based, criminal legal lens. At its height, D.A.R.E. was present in 75 percent of the nation's public school districts. Despite a multitude of studies confirming the D.A.R.E. program does not work, it remains the predominant drug education curriculum in the country.²⁰ Instead of lessons from trained teachers based in health and science, police replace teachers and wage the drug war in the classroom. This adds to the criminalization mentality, even producing examples where children report their parents' drug possession to school officials to have them arrested.²¹

Higher education is an important promoter of economic mobility,²² but the drug war has ensured that many otherwise qualified people do not have access to education after high school by locking out people with drug convictions. Prior to December 2020, federal law prohibited educational grants and financial aid to people in prison, one-fifth of whom were there for a drug offense.²³ Fourteen states have some temporary or permanent denial of financial aid for college or university education for people with criminal records.²⁴ Before December 2020, drug convictions could lead to temporary or indefinite suspension of federal financial aid for students.²⁵ Drug convictions are one of the only offenses that led to suspension of federal aid. Because people of color are far more likely to be targets of drug law enforcement and less likely to be able to afford college or university without financial aid, these disqualifications have shut many Black, Latinx, and Indigenous youth out of higher education.²⁶ It is also impossible to know how many potentially eligible students have been deterred from applying for aid based on the mere existence of questions about past drug convictions on Free Application for Federal Student Aid

(FAFSA) forms. Without access to higher education, these youth are denied one of the most important means of improving their economic future. In turn, these structural factors—access to education, employment, and economic opportunity—can negatively impact health outcomes, including increasing the risk of developing a substance use disorder or dying from a drug overdose.²⁷

Emphasis on enforcement and punishment creates an adversarial relationship between students and school officials and undermines the role that schools should play for students: a safe place for learning and support. Denying education to students, primarily students of color, for drug possession and other policy violations leads to negative consequences, including increased unemployment, income inequality, costly health problems, and incarceration. **Instead of shunning students and foreclosing educational opportunities, we should prioritize:**

- Removing police from schools.
- Increasing school nurses, counselors, social workers, and mental health professionals.
- Eliminating zero-tolerance policies.
- Eliminating drug testing in schools.
- Eliminating D.A.R.E. programs and replacing them with curriculums based in health and science, like Safety First.²⁸
- Fully removing bans on financial aid for higher education for people with drug convictions.
- Removing questions about conviction history from the college application process.

Endnotes

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