Here’s your chance to learn about the school-to-prison pipeline

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The ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ is what happens when minority students are punished more than white students for the same offenses. According to experts on the subject, the pipeline starts with detention and suspension and ends with incarceration. (Port City Daily photo / FILE PHOTO)

WILMINGTON — When some students are punished more often and more severely for the same infractions committed by their peers, the result is called the “school to prison pipeline.”

According to Dr. Mara Schiff, an internationally recognized expert on the school-to-prison pipeline, it’s often students of color who receive inequitable treatment.

“It’s an emerging term, over the last five to eight years, that describes the process where kids of color – are disciplined at a greater rate, about two to three times than their white peers, for similar incidents,” Schiff said.

Schiff is a professor in Florida Atlantic University's School Criminology and Criminal Justice. She has spent years studying criminal juvenile justice, and she will be the keynote speaker at the University of North Carolina Wilmington’s upcoming symposium on the school-to-prison pipeline.

Schiff said the body of research to back up these disparities is broad, but pointed in particular to pioneering statistical research done in Texas public schools. A study by Texas Appleseed pointed not only to an increase in suspensions and expulsions but also the increased use of civil citations for students; in both cases, black and Hispanic students received
disproportionate punishment.

This phenomenon is particularly noticeable with more subjective offenses, like “willful defiance, talking back, or insubordination,” where teachers have to make a judgment call about whether or not an infraction has occurred, Schiff said.

Individual incidents ultimately come down to a judgment call – made by a teacher or administrator – but Schiff said over time inequitable disciplinary action against black and Hispanic students separates them from their peers and sets them on a distinct trajectory.

“Once you’re suspended it makes you much more likely to be suspended again, which leads to expulsion or dropping out, and then to the justice system,” Schiff said. “That’s the school-to-prison pipeline.”

The school-to-prison pipeline results from unequal treatment, but Schiff pointed out that it not necessarily the result of malice or deliberate action.

“It’s not on purpose, it has more to do with cultural competence, and implicit bias and structural injustice,” Schiff said.

“Anyone who has been questioning climate, culture and discipline as it is approached in schools, and is wondering if there’s an alternative – and wants to see one alternative that’s been used across the country and around the world” – Dr. Mara Schiff

A different approach

So what can schools do? Schiff’s approach is called restorative justice practices. Schiff contrasted a traditional disciplinary interaction – say a schoolyard fight – where the perceived aggressor, and sometimes the victim, are given detention, suspension or expulsion, with a different approach that brings in more actors.

“(A traditional disciplinary method) doesn’t address what the victim needs to make it right, it doesn’t address for example a sister, who might now be afraid to come to school, it doesn’t address what parents need to make it right,” Schiff said.

“It’s not about punishing one student, it’s about identifying what is the problem that needs to be solved and how do we repair the damage – what needs to be done to make it right.”

According to Schiff, schools have a variety of options, including “training, bringing in consultants, and getting technical assistance to build internal capacity.”

Schiff will be discussing these options, along with local leaders familiar with the educational and judicial system, including Judge Julius J. Corpening, from New Hanover County Juvenile Court, Judy Stubblefield, behavior specialist for New Hanover County Schools, Glen Locklear, principal of J.C. Roe Center, Frankie Roberts, executive director of Linc Inc., and Janna Robertson, professor at the Watson College of Education.

Who should be interested in the event?
“Anyone who has been questioning climate, culture and discipline as it is approached in schools, and is wondering if there’s an alternative – and wants to see one alternative that’s been used across the country and around the world,” Schiff said.

“Combating the School-To-Prison Pipeline” will take place at 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, Feb. 15, in the Warwick Center’s ballroom 5. The event is free and open to the public. It is sponsored by the UNCW College of Arts and Sciences and Department of Sociology and Criminology.

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