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Taking School Safety Too Far?

The Ill-Defined Role Police Play in Schools

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This past November, a food fight in a Chicago middle school resulted in the arrest of 25 students between the ages of 11 and 15. Parents, youth advocates, and others rightly questioned the decision to criminalize teenage antics that, let's face it, seemed relatively mild. Plenty of us, after all, can recall hurling food at friends in the school cafeteria at a similar age.

As we write this essay, the final resolution of the Chicago incident is not yet known. But regardless of what that may be, the 25 students involved are likely to carry with them for a very long time the trauma of being handcuffed, taken away in a police van, and forced to sit in a jail cell for several hours.

Our research suggests that, while this incident may be noteworthy because of the large number of students involved, it is by no means an isolated event. Rather, it reveals broader and more systemic problems about policing in schools that should be of concern to parents, communities, school boards, and state legislatures across the country. It highlights the ambiguous and frequently ill-defined role that police play in schools, the unclear lines of authority that often exist between school officials and police placed there, and the highly subjective way in which decisions are made about when and under what circumstances a student's conduct becomes criminal. All of these issues have taken on greater urgency since school police, currently numbering about 17,000, have permanently moved into public schools during the past decade.

The middle school's official statement about the November food-fight

incident is telling: “The Chicago police officers who help protect our school, concerned about potential injuries resulting from the fight, felt it was necessary to arrest those responsible.” In other words, the decision to arrest the students and to call for law-enforcement backup seems to have been made by the police, not the educators in the building. And therein lies a serious, structural problem with the way in which school policing works.

Last year, we interviewed school resource officers and police chiefs in 16 school districts in Massachusetts . Many of them are dedicated and compassionate professionals who care deeply about the students they monitor, often advocating against arrest on their behalf. But there is an inherent tension when police officers and educators occupy the same space, overseeing the same group of students, yet approaching them with very different orientations.

Police, not surprisingly, see their primary mission as maintaining order, preventing crime, and apprehending lawbreakers. Educators are supposed to develop students’ academic potential and social skills, and prepare them to participate in a democratic society. Through one set of eyes a food fight can turn into a chaotic and violent situation that must be suppressed and controlled immediately. Through another, it may be a developmentally typical, albeit annoying, behavior that offers an opportunity to teach teenagers valuable lessons about settling differences peacefully, controlling impulses, and cleaning up their own mess.

Unfortunately, these inherent tensions are rarely worked out, or even expressly articulated. Instead, school resource officers and administrators forge uneasy alliances that are often based more on personalities and temperaments than on any set of objective criteria. Their decisions can be idiosyncratic, unpredictable, and highly confusing to students. Within the same school, a shoving match between two students in the hallway might produce a reprimand, or a lengthy suspension, or an arrest for “assault.” The same holds true for verbal altercations, or the catchall offense of “disrupting a school in session.” Students may find themselves facing a juvenile judge for flicking a rubber band, refusing to take off a hat, or being disrespectful to a teacher.

The risk of abuse is compounded by a lack of transparency and shoddy data collection. Advocates across the country report difficulties in trying to wrestle school-based arrest data out of any institution or system. Their requests are routinely dismissed, denied, ignored, or referred elsewhere. Schools and, incredibly, state

education departments insist that they do not keep information about arrests. Police departments provide aggregate arrest numbers often only under duress, with no details included. The lack of credible data makes meaningful oversight almost impossible.

Another area of concern involves training requirements—or the lack thereof. School resource officers must deal daily with hundreds of students, many with serious health and mental-health needs. Yet they are not required to undergo any instruction in adolescent development or psychology, in de-escalating volatile situations, or on the effects of exposure to trauma, violence, or poverty on adolescents' behavior. They are not taught how to recognize manifestations of students' disabilities. As a result, students with special needs, students of color, and students from disadvantaged communities face a heightened risk of arrest.

Arguments that such heavy-handed tactics are necessary to keep schools safe no longer fly. Schools with harsh, zero-tolerance codes and heavy police presence are often less safe than those that embrace more flexible and nuanced responses to student misbehaviors. They are also frequently the same schools with shockingly high dropout rates.

A wide array of promising interventions and strategies exists for addressing problem behaviors without resorting to the mass arrests of students. These include, among others, “positive behavioral interventions and supports,” or PBIS, an approach that makes use of graduated sanctions, promotes positive overall school environments, and provides wraparound services for students with more-extensive needs. Restorative-justice practices push students to examine their actions and make amends to those they hurt. Trauma-sensitive programs help school personnel create environments more sensitive to the needs of students who have been traumatized. School-based clinics are staffed with professionals who can address some of the unmet health and mental-health needs of students.

Imagine what a restorative-justice approach to a school food fight might accomplish. Students would be required to clean up the cafeteria for a month. They might spend several Saturdays cooking and serving food to needy families. They would be forced to acknowledge the damage they had caused and to practice more-constructive forms of conflict resolution. In the process, they might learn valuable lessons about respecting one another, themselves, and their environment, without experiencing the terror of being arrested, handcuffed, and detained—and without the

realization that their school was becoming more like the streets outside it. In addition, the district would be spared the court, police, and legal costs incurred when many children are processed through the system.

Fortunately, a growing coalition of educators, juvenile judges, and law-enforcement professionals understands this. Thanks to the advocacy of organizations such as the Advancement Project, the American Civil Liberties Union, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Padres Unidos, and others, large schools districts in cities like Birmingham , Ala. , Denver , and Los Angeles have revamped their disciplinary codes. Florida recently passed a law restricting the school-based offenses subject to law-enforcement intervention. In Clayton County, Ga., Steven Teske, a juvenile-court judge, spearheaded a successful effort among stakeholders to reduce the number of children being referred to his court from schools. He now provides technical assistance to other districts seeking to undertake similar efforts.

These developments are promising but insufficient. As the recent example in Chicago reminds us, students across the country continue to be traumatized by the unnecessary and unwarranted intrusion of law enforcement in schools. All too often, police too quick to arrest are abetted by school officials eager to rid themselves of students they perceive to be problems. We must demand more monitoring, oversight, and accountability—not just of our children, but also of the adults charged with their education and protection.

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