

The High Cost of Education
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Why Teach:

Every student, regardless of background, deserves a pathway to a productive and meaningful life. However, when a student struggles or acts out, the educational system designed to guide them often becomes the very barrier to their future success.

The United States educational system, initially founded on principles of fostering enlightened citizens, has increasingly adopted the punitive and exclusionary methods of disciplinary courts. This shift has created a system that is often more focused on *control and compliance* than on long-term growth and learning.

Educational policies in the U.S. often prioritize punitive and exclusionary disciplinary measures- it's wild when you look at the actual numbers: national data shows that Black students are getting suspended or expelled at **nearly three times the rate** of their white peers. We're talking about **15% of Black students** facing out-of-school suspensions compared to just **5% of white students**, which really hits home why this system feels so broken (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). This needs to be replaced with holistic, supportive strategies. Currently the system is failing to address underlying systemic issues and significantly undermining young people's long-term academic and socioeconomic futures- thus calling for a flip in the classroom mindset and action.

Breaking the Cycle:

The educational system is meant to be separate from a disciplinary court- focusing on the individual's potential for learning and intellectual change. Historically, the approach involved confidential counseling, supportive interventions, significant mentorship, and highly tailored instruction. However, the introduction of "zero-tolerance" policies and rhetoric, beginning in the 1990s, led to a blurring of these previous distinctions.

For example, many districts began implementing strict rules that led to immediate suspension or expulsion for minor infractions, leading to lost instructional time. As educational expert Jane Miller notes, "The move to criminalize school discipline removed the very protective mechanisms designed to ensure that a mistake made in youth did not define an entire lifetime" (Miller, 2023, p. 112). This harsher approach has effectively transformed many school environments into institutions that prioritize security and control over therapeutic and pedagogical services. Honestly, we must ensure reflection- ask if this is *really working*. We need a different playbook because right now, we're building prisons, not places where kids can actually grow and get help.

Blame the System:

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The true causes of student struggle and disciplinary involvement are rarely purely personal; they are rooted in systemic failures. Economic inequality and poverty are primary drivers. Youth from under-resourced communities often lack adequate educational resources and safe after-school programs, increasing their risk of disengagement or acting out. Furthermore, the "school-to-prison pipeline" ensures that marginalized students are disciplined more severely for minor infractions, pulling them out of the educational environment and into the justice system's gaze.

The increasing trend of "zero-tolerance" policies and the presence of police in schools is a critical issue that fundamentally compromises the educational environment for many students. A report from the Children's Defense Fund highlighted this issue, stating, "Zero-tolerance policies and the presence of police in schools funnel children out of the classroom and directly into the custody of the state" (Children's Defense Fund, 2024). This systemic failure, which disproportionately affects minority youth, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of academic failure.

Socially Resisting:

Building upon this week's discussion, I want to detail the strategies I and my school will employ to integrate Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) into our practice. This integration is crucial for addressing systemic inequities. The goal is to create an educational system that is inclusive, equitable, and affirming for all students.

Currently, elements of CRT are already being enacted in my practice, particularly **1) Self-Awareness and Relationships to Others** and **3) Students as Individuals**. I make a conscious effort to reflect on my own cultural biases and how they might affect my interactions with students. Furthermore, I strive to know my students beyond their academic performance, recognizing their unique backgrounds, strengths, and challenges to build genuine, trusting relationships.

Reality:

I do not plan to tackle all eight of the CRT aspects at the same time. Achieving the necessary changes will likely require a slower, more intentional process for successful and lasting implementation. The process involves eight key areas: 1) understanding oneself and relationships with others; 2) examining systems of oppression; 3) recognizing students as unique individuals; 4) involving students as partners in learning; 5) supporting student advocacy; 6) working closely with families and the community; 7) choosing appropriate content for all subjects; and 8) ensuring students see themselves reflected in the learning environment (Illinois State Board of Education [ISBE], 2021).

To further my professional growth, I will integrate **7) Content Selections in All**

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Curriculum into my teaching. I have autonomy over classroom materials and will conduct a critical curriculum review to ensure cultural diversity, historical accuracy, and to address systemic issues, such as the school-to-prison pipeline cited in the Children's Defense Fund report. This focus directly supports the essential work of dismantling systemic inequities that disproportionately impact my student population. By incorporating diverse content, I can validate students' lived experiences and equip them with the critical frameworks necessary to understand and actively challenge systems of oppression.

Channeling into the systems of oppression as a subsequent area of concentration is essential, as the punitive consequences of these systems are profound and long-lasting, often extending well beyond the period of exclusion. Students who are suspended or expelled face higher rates of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD, due to the trauma of rejection and lost peer connection.

Furthermore, a permanent disciplinary or attendance record can create immediate barriers to stable adult life. Sociologist Dr. Kenji Ito explains, "A disciplinary record, regardless of age, acts as a permanent academic handicap, restricting access to financial aid for college, stable employment, and safe housing, thus fueling the cycle of academic recidivism" (Ito, 2021, p. 78). This outcome is especially damaging when considering the disproportionate representation of Black and Hispanic youth in the system, turning discipline into a tool that entrenches social and economic inequality.

Universal Therapeutic Justice:

Instead of relying on exclusion, the emphasis must shift toward therapeutic, community-based intervention to break this cycle. The most effective approach is to implement restorative justice programs, which prioritize repairing the harm done to the school community over administering punishment. Restorative justice brings affected parties (students, teachers, and administrators) together (voluntarily) to address the consequences of the offense and develop a plan for accountability and restitution. Additionally, resources must be redirected toward addressing the systemic causes. This includes increasing funding for mental health services in schools and investing in early intervention programs.

The Justice Policy Institute suggests that focusing on punitive discipline actually costs more in the long run because it is replacing large, impersonal schools with smaller, therapeutic, and personalized learning centers offers a valuable community-based alternative to traditional methods that blame students' academic and social issues on schooling itself. For Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leadership (CRTL) to be truly effective, cultural considerations must be integral to the school's core culture, not optional additions. "Neutral" language simply maintains the harmful status quo (Justice Policy

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Institute, 2022).

Closing:

Ultimately, the future health of our communities *seriously* hinges on how we nurture the most vulnerable members: our youth. The current punitive model, designed with adult consequences, completely fails to recognize the *incredible* capacity of young minds for growth and change, leading only to heartbreaking cycles of academic failure and lost potential. Reverting to the core philosophy of education—a philosophy built on intervention, support, and community investment—is not merely a softer approach; it's a pragmatic and *super* powerful strategy. By recognizing that disruptive behavior in youth is often a symptom of trauma and neglect, and not just a failure of character, we can transition from a system that pushes students out to one that genuinely helps them unlock their own, *amazing* potential.

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