



POSITIVE YOUTH JUSTICE INITIATIVE BRIEF

ORGANIZING FOR A HEALTHY JUSTICE SYSTEM

DISRUPTING THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

The Positive Youth Justice Initiative (PYJI) is helping communities across California transform juvenile justice practice and policy into a more just, effective system that is aligned with young people's developmental needs. In 11 California counties, PYJI supports community-based organizations that are working in partnership with grassroots organizations and youth and family members most impacted by the juvenile justice system. Each coalition has tailored its community organizing and advocacy activities to the policy context in its county. Together, they are accelerating a statewide movement toward a healthy juvenile justice system – focused on youth well-being, improved system practices and reduced justice system involvement.

INTRODUCTION

Several community-based organizations supported by PYJI focus on improving school climate and reducing the number of youth who enter the juvenile justice system through schools. These PYJI partners are working to address the criminalization of youth in schools and the connection to the justice system through tactics such as developing policy alternatives, organizing their communities, advocating for change, and facilitating discussions about the school-to-prison pipeline.

THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

The school-to-prison pipeline, as described by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), is a “disturbing national trend” that pushes youth out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Students of color are particularly vulnerable to school pushout and the differential use of exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspension and expulsion).¹

A recent analysis of California school discipline data shows that compared to other students, Black and American Indian/Alaska Native students experience much higher rates of days of lost instruction annually due to suspensions (see table).² Students who are suspended are more likely to drop out of school and to have contact with the juvenile justice system.³



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INSTRUCTION DAYS LOST DUE TO SUSPENSION

Race/Ethnicity	Instruction Days Lost in 2016–17 (per 100 students)
Black	39
American Indian/Alaska Native	27
Pacific Islander	15
Hispanic or Latino	12
White	10
Filipino	4
Asian	3
Total	12

Source: Losen @ Martin, 2018

This is worsened by the fact that many students are more likely to interact at school with law enforcement or security staff than with a psychologist, nurse, social worker, and/or counselor.

Nearly one-third of students nationally (31%) and in California (30%) have police in their schools, but are lacking a school psychologist, nurse, social worker, and/or counselor.⁴

These disparities exist despite evidence that law enforcement and security guards do not deter negative behavior in schools, and that school-based health and mental health service providers enhance school climate and improve school safety.⁵ Moreover, punitive discipline policies increase students' likelihood of justice system contact, which disproportionately affects children of color.⁶

BEST PRACTICES FOR ADDRESSING THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

Improving a school's climate is a common focus of school-based approaches for dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline. School climate improvement can take forms such as implementing restorative practices as an alternative to exclusionary discipline and strengthening staffing to support students. A positive school climate creates a culture in which students feel supported, valued, and connected, which can benefit student and teacher engagement and students' perceptions of their physical, social, and emotional safety.⁷

The use of restorative practices—such as restorative circles, restorative conferences, mediation, and community building—can dramatically bolster a school's climate. Research suggests that school-based restorative practices can reduce suspensions, decrease racial disparities related to discipline, improve student–teacher relations, increase students' feeling of school connectedness, and benefit student attendance.⁸

Across California, PYJI partners are working with school districts to introduce, promote, and sustain efforts that holistically support students' growth and learning, prepare them for the future, and reduce the likelihood of juvenile justice system involvement.

ORGANIZING FOR POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE RESOLUTIONS

PYJI partners and their coalition members—including RYSE in Contra Costa County and Mid-City CAN in San Diego County—are leaders in promoting positive school climate efforts in their communities. In both counties, community members—including youth—conducted research, engaged students and school district leadership, and made public comments at school board meetings in support of district-wide resolutions designed to implement alternative, restorative practices to school discipline. Each positive school climate resolution was approved unanimously by its respective school board in 2017.⁹

During the 2018–19 school year, youth from RYSE and other community partners developed recommendations for the West Contra Costa County Unified School District's Local Control Accountability Plan to foster a positive school climate. These included increasing funding for bilingual mental health clinicians, training community safety officers in nonviolent and restorative communication practices, and providing additional support for juvenile justice system-affected students.

IMPLEMENTING RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Using restorative practices is key to interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. Youth in Contra Costa and San Diego counties have pushed for successful passage of positive school climate policies. Furthermore, they have taken steps toward lasting change by engaging in conversations with decision makers in law enforcement and school

administration—and, on the ground, with teachers and school administrative staff.

Moreover, through the introduction of a restorative justice diversion program in Contra Costa County, young people will have an opportunity to avoid further justice system involvement. In May 2019, RYSE entered a partnership with the Contra Costa County District Attorney’s Office and Impact Justice to provide a pre-charge restorative justice diversion program for youth. For each case, the program will bring together the young person arrested for a felony or serious misdemeanor with the person(s) harmed. This meeting will lead to developing a plan to make things right; once the youth completes the plan, no charges will be filed. RYSE will provide trauma-informed, culturally relevant, and developmentally appropriate wraparound services for participants.¹⁰

ADVOCATING TO REALLOCATE SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICER FUNDING

PYJI partners in several counties have advocated for the reduction or elimination of on-campus law enforcement, with the goals of leaving student discipline matters to the schools, decriminalizing youthful behaviors, and allocating more funding for positive supports for students. Fresno Barrios Unidos coordinated candidate forums to increase community awareness related to local funding allocations for school resource officers (SROs) and other policy matters affecting juvenile justice reform. They report a noticeable uptick in community involvement at school board meetings. Also in Fresno County, nine youth participated in a Dignity in Schools campaign called National Week of Action Against School Pushout that focused on investing in counselors instead of law enforcement on school campuses.

In Contra Costa and San Joaquin counties, youth reviewed information about their school district’s spending related to on-campus law enforcement. For example, in San Joaquin County, data indicated that the Stockton Unified School District budgeted nearly \$3 million of its Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) funds—which are state funds meant to support English-language-learner, low-income, and foster-youth students—for on-campus police.¹¹ In both counties, youth helped to develop policy recommendations that were presented to the local school boards. RYSE and

Fathers & Families of San Joaquin report that after these efforts, their local school boards stopped designating LCFF dollars for campus police and security.

Similarly, in Sacramento County, youth advocated for and engaged their community around the local presence of SROs. Through activities such as attending board of education meetings and engaging with board members, the youth and their families pushed for the Sacramento City Unified School District not to renew its contract with the police department and to remove SROs from their schools. Sacramento Area Congregations Together (Sacramento ACT) reported that through their collaborative’s advocacy, the school district ended its contract with the Sacramento Police Department. Sacramento ACT is continuing its organizing efforts with the goal of passing a district policy that bans SROs on school grounds. In addition, at the board of education’s direction, the district will convene a selection committee for hiring a school safety director; this committee will include community members.

CONCLUSION

PYJI is supporting community-based organizations in their fight against the school-to-prison pipeline. These organizations marshalled the resources provided through the initiative and translated them into concrete steps, working in conjunction with their local partners to attack the pipeline at different stages and levels. Through this work, organizations throughout California are affecting a system that criminalizes youth and sets them up for a cycle of justice involvement. PYJI partners are paving the way for an equitable future where youth are not enmeshed in the school-to-prison pipeline; instead, they are gaining tools and training to prevent and dismantle it.



POSITIVE YOUTH JUSTICE INITIATIVE (PYJI)

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

- Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ) (Alameda County)
- Fathers & Families of San Joaquin
- Fresno Barrios Unidos
- Resilience Orange County
- RYSE Youth Center (Contra Costa County)
- Sacramento Area Congregations Together
- San Diego Organizing Project
- Sigma Beta Xi, Inc. (Riverside County)
- Silicon Valley De-Bug (Santa Clara County)
- Young Women's Freedom Center (San Francisco County)
- Youth Justice Coalition (Los Angeles County)

EVALUATING PYJI

The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) is evaluating the current phase of PYJI and has prepared four briefs to highlight findings and learnings on some issues that PYJI partners are addressing. The evaluation draws on multiple sources of quantitative and qualitative information, using existing data from funded partners'

semi-annual progress reports, reviewing other sources, and collecting primary data at PYJI activities. Through the evaluation, NCCD has produced findings that The Center at Sierra Health Foundation and PYJI's philanthropic partners can use to support communities in strengthening local infrastructure for organizing and advocacy toward a healthier justice system.

END NOTES

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