

Stamford Eyes Alternatives to Student Suspensions

by Felicia Hunter 03/21/11

Imagine being suspended from school after a disruptive incident. Now imagine you're only 5 years old.

Kathryn Meyer, an attorney and fellow with the Center for Children's Advocacy, doesn't have to wonder. It happened within her jurisdiction. Not once, but twice.

"I've had two 5-year-old clients this year," said Meyer. One was suspended within the first three months of school, she recalled. Police were called for the second youngster, who repeatedly pulled others' clothing. It was requested the child be arrested for assault.

About 60 area parents, students, teachers, school administrators, criminal justice practitioners and social services providers came together Monday for a community discussion about the intersection of the education and justice systems. The event was held to share concerns about school suspensions and arrests, and ways they can be decreased. The event was presented by the Stamford Youth Services Bureau.



Forum moderator Lara Herscovitch, right, addresses the audience while Kathryn Meyer, one of four panelists, looks on. Photo credit: Felicia Hunter

"Kids are being arrested for minor offenses that will put them on the path into the juvenile justice system. So we need to just take a look at what we're doing," said bureau director Terri Drew. "We want to make sure we're working in the best interest of the child and the families, and providing the resources they need."

Peer mediation, mentoring and rewarding positive actions to promote better behavior are all alternatives to suspension, said Annemarie Hillman, a policy fellow with Connecticut Voices for Children. She noted that Hispanics are three times more likely than whites to get suspended from school, African Americans four times more likely.

"When we're talking about suspensions," said Jo Ann Freiberg, education consultant for the Connecticut Department of Education, "we're saying to that kid, 'We don't want you.'" She said professionals must "look at the problem differently" and determine "what we can do to engage kids, to connect them to school so that they want to come back." Freiberg said five measures that determine school success are positive school relationships, positively anticipating going to school, feeling a part of the school environment, feeling fairly treated by adults and feeling safe physically, emotionally and intellectually.

Police Officer Caleb Lopez, a middle school resource officer in South Windsor, said he and his counterparts in other schools often can de-escalate a problem before it gets out of hand. "[W]e're embedded in the situation, so we have an advantage," he said. "I also want the kids to have a certain openness to know that they can come to me."

The forum was moderated by Lara Herscovitch, senior policy analyst with the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance.

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