

New Tools Proposed To Decrease School Arrests Legislation Also Would Require In-School Arrests Tracked By Gender, Race & Ethnicity

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The Hartford Courant

7:57 PM EDT, March 12, 2012

Far too often children are arrested and taken out of school for minor infractions — squabbles, talking back to teachers, carrying tobacco or hanging out in the halls — when school-administered discipline would be more appropriate, children's advocates and others told legislators Monday.

"Evidence of the negative impact of harsh school punishments and in-school arrests on academic success abound and are recognized by many ... as a significant component in the school-to-prison pipeline," Alan Bruce, director of the criminal justice program at Quinnipiac University, told the judiciary committee. "Clearly in-school arrest is a policy that contributes to this alienation and school failure."

The committee held a hearing Monday at the Legislative Office Building to consider a bill that proponents say would provide the state with tools to reduce unnecessary and inappropriate school-based arrests.

The bill would require schools to reach formal written agreements detailing the roles and responsibilities of police officers stationed at the schools.

In addition, the bill would require schools to collect detailed data on arrests, so that districts could assess whether students of certain gender, race or ethnic backgrounds were being arrested in disproportionate numbers. The data also would track the number of students arrested who were in special education programs and those who are learning English.

Sarah Esty of Connecticut Voices for Children told legislators in testimony that preliminary and "imperfect" state statistics show that during 2010-2011, black children were nearly four times as likely, and Hispanic children three times as likely, to be arrested as white children. Special education students were more than twice as likely to be arrested as other students.

Esty said that about 3,000 Connecticut students were arrested last school year. Being arrested doubles the probability that a student will drop out, Esty said, and a court appearance nearly quadruples that.

Hannah Benton, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy, said that during the 1990s with the rise of zero-tolerance policies, the number of police officers on school campuses rose, as did the number of arrests for relatively minor offenses.

She said that 41 percent of school-based arrests that landed in juvenile court between Sept. 1, 2011, and Feb. 27, 2012, were for either breach of peace or disorderly conduct.

"Those two charges encompass a wide range of examples where students were arrested for things that might be technically a breach of peace, but really were pretty normal behaviors that could have been addressed within a disciplinary" framework, Benton said.

She told legislators of 9-year-old boy who got into an argument with another student and was arrested. The charges against him eventually were dismissed, but he was processed through juvenile court and spent a week-

end in detention because of the arrest.

Benton described another client, a girl with an attentional disorder, who was arrested for running down a hallway and screaming at school staff.

Bridgeport Police Chief Joseph L. Gaudett Jr. told legislators that he fully supports the bill and he plans to work with his superintendent to reach the type of formal written agreement specified in the bill.

"We want to keep to keep our kids in school because education is the way up. It's the way out," Gaudett said.

"We want our children to be as well educated as they can be and not sitting in some jail somewhere."

Gaudett said there will be times when arrests are appropriate, but for minor offenses he supports "giving an officer some more tools in the tool box, letting them make referrals to services and programs as opposed to juvenile court."

He said that referring a student for in-school suspension or to a community service program may be a far better alternative than the juvenile justice system.

In Manchester, where a written agreement between police and school officials has been in effect since September, the number of arrests decreased by about 87 percent in the first four months of the current academic year, compared with the same four months last year.

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