

# Keeping Kids in School

PHILADELPHIA POLICE SCHOOL DIVERSION PROGRAM

# and Out of Court



**Children** can't learn if they don't feel safe.

**Teachers** can't teach effectively if there are disruptions, distractions, or threats against them or their students.

Yet zero tolerance policies—the safety procedures used for decades by schools around the nation, including in Philadelphia—have hurt more than they have helped. Thousands of students were pushed into the juvenile justice system, creating a veritable “school-to-prison pipeline.” There were nearly 1,600 school-based arrests in Philadelphia during the 2013–2014 school year.

But while the number of arrests skyrocketed, the number of behavioral incidents did not go down.

As in other cities, Philadelphia's policies also resulted in troubling racial disparities, with African-American males arrested at higher rates for similar behaviors and confronted with harsher disciplinary actions, such as suspension and expulsion, than students from other backgrounds.

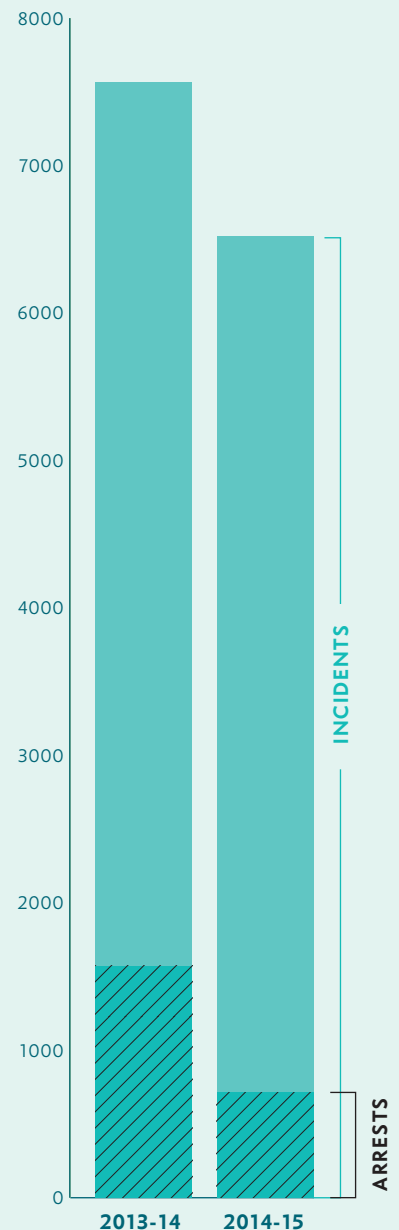
In 2012, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) ended its zero tolerance policy in favor of a disciplinary code that emphasized a more individualized approach, giving principals and staff more discretion in their responses to misbehavior.

Then, in spring 2014, the Philadelphia Police Department and the City's Department of Human Services partnered with the SDP to bring a new Police School Diversion Program to the schools. As an alternative to arrest, professionals intervene with a range of social services and counseling for students—and, crucially, their parents or caregivers—when children first get into trouble. Collaborating partners include Family Court, the District Attorney's Office, the Department of Behavioral Health, and the Defender Association of Philadelphia.

In 2014–2015, its first academic year, the Police School Diversion Program already demonstrated great success: arrests are down 54 percent, and hundreds of young people and their families have been afforded an opportunity to turn their lives around. Importantly, a reduction in the number of school-based behavioral incidents accompanied this reduction in arrest rates in Philadelphia schools—there were 1,051 fewer behavioral incidents than in the previous school year.

**Principals, staff, and SDP police officers are essential to making this potential model successful.**

Within the first year of the Diversion Program, not only did the number of arrests drop by 54%, but there were 1,051 fewer behavioral incidents in SDP schools.



## WHY DEVELOP A POLICE SCHOOL DIVERSION PROGRAM?

The zero tolerance policy enforced in the SDP from 2002 to 2011 mandated predetermined punishments for certain school infractions, regardless of the reasons for the behavior. For example, possession of anything that could conceivably be used as a weapon was punished with arrest. It didn't matter whether the "weapon" was a pair of scissors mistakenly left in a backpack or a loaded gun brought to school on purpose.

The one-size fits all response of zero tolerance policies disregards the fact that thousands of students in the SDP have been deeply affected by traumatic events in their homes or neighborhoods. Many have experienced poverty, hunger, unstable family lives, and street violence. One estimate from the Philadelphia-based Education Law Center indicated that two out of every three of Philadelphia's 142,000 public school students have experienced trauma.

Furthermore, recent census data shows that more than 1/3 of all youth in Philadelphia live in poverty. As a result, many children come to school with heightened fight or flight responses, putting them on edge and increasing perceptions of threat, feelings that may be accompanied by a sense of hopelessness. These children face very real threats in their neighborhoods, which may lead them to bring pepper spray, for example, so that they can feel safe on their way to and from school.

Surveys find a disturbing percentage of Philadelphia students with suicidal thoughts (14.1 percent) and actions (11.2 percent).

Such children need to feel supported and safe in a positive school setting, not pushed away, isolated, and rejected. Research now shows that seeking to prevent misbehavior with the threat of serious consequences may lead to children's fear and isolation, causing more acting out.

2 out of 3 students have experienced trauma:

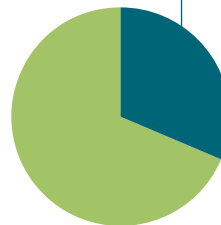
**94,667** students



Philadelphia Youth Risk Behaviors Survey, 2011

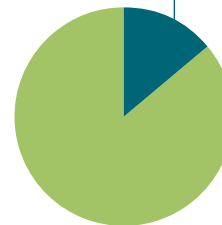
**31.5%**

FELT SAD OR HOPELESS every day for two weeks in a row



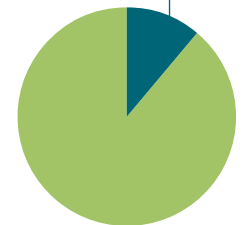
**14.1%**

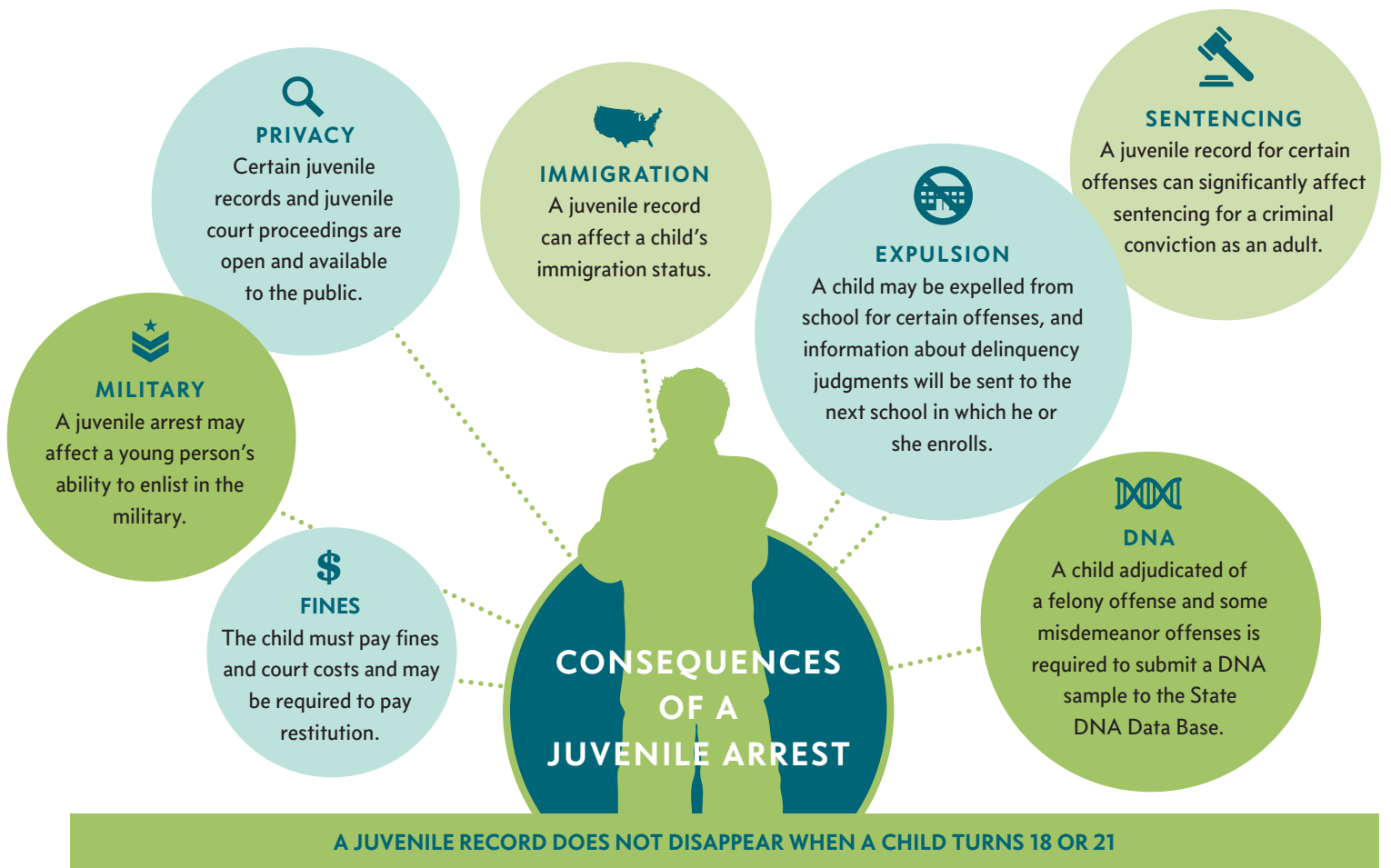
SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED SUICIDE



**11.2%**

ATTEMPTED SUICIDE





Consider the experience of being arrested in school: students are handcuffed, removed from school, transported to the police station, fingerprinted, photographed, and held for processing for up to six hours. The trauma of the arrest process can be devastating, and the collateral consequences of a juvenile record can extend into adulthood, potentially affecting future employment and creating other obstacles to success.

While a juvenile arrest is not equal to an adult conviction, it is often treated like one. Contrary to what most people believe, a juvenile record does not disappear when a child turns 18 or 21. It can affect a child's opportunities for the rest of his or her life.

Being arrested can make it even more difficult for children to cope with the challenges they already face. Being removed from school increases students' chances of dropping out or failing to graduate on time—and increases the risk of future delinquent behaviors. Missing school weakens academic performance and, often, these misbehaving students are the very ones who are already struggling academically. Students miss the positive adult guidance that school provides. And an arrest can undermine students' trust in adults.

The need for trauma-informed programs that take into account the damaging consequences of juvenile arrest has become obvious. It is in the best interest of students, as well as the school and community members, to handle low-level misdemeanor delinquent acts without arrest.

Further, the Police School Diversion Program aligns with Philadelphia's participation in President Obama's My Brother's Keeper Initiative which ensures that boys and young men of color, who are disproportionately affected by harsh disciplinary practices, are supported and provided the opportunity to succeed.

**By providing community-based social services to students as an alternative to arrest, the Police School Diversion Program can address young people's needs while keeping them out of the justice system, thereby increasing their chances of staying in school and reducing the risk of future misbehavior.**

## HOW DOES THE POLICE SCHOOL DIVERSION PROGRAM WORK?

The Police School Diversion Program is open to students who are at least ten years old, who have no previous delinquency adjudications and are not currently under juvenile probation supervision, and who are involved in low-level summary or misdemeanor delinquent offenses, such as marijuana possession, fighting, disruptions, graffiti, bullying, threats, or possession of certain items that could be used as weapons.

Participation in the Police School Diversion Program is not available to students accused of high-level offenses, such as drug dealing, gun possession, sexual assault, or arson.

Administering the Police School Diversion Program is a cooperative effort by Philadelphia’s child-serving agencies, including principals, teachers, and staff from Philadelphia’s 214 public schools; the Philadelphia Police Department (PPD), including 320 SDP police officers and 84 specially trained PPD school police officers; the Juvenile Justice Services Division of the City’s Department of Human Services, including social workers and staff, as well as community-based service providers; and Philadelphia’s other juvenile justice system agencies.

With the Police School Diversion Program, qualifying students are not arrested, but rather diverted to prevention services to meet their underlying needs.

DHS’s community-based Intensive Prevention Services (IPS) providers work with the youth and families to prevent truancy, to steer youth away from delinquency by offering positive role models, improve school performance, enhance life and social skills and in many cases help family relationships through individual/family counseling and constructive activities.

DHS IPS Providers and their service areas include: West/South West Overbrook; South Philadelphia; Germantown/Mt. Airy; North Philadelphia; Kensington/Frankford; and Northeast Philadelphia.

### ONE STUDENT’S STORY

In the fall of 2014, an academically gifted 17-year-old North Philadelphia girl was caught with a small amount of marijuana in her school backpack—and she could have been arrested for drug possession. Had she entered the justice system as a result, she would have been torn from her family and community, and might have been damaged beyond repair.

But she did not enter the system. The Philadelphia Police Department school officer and a dedicated social worker at the Department of Human Services saw that this girl had been struggling as her parents went through a rocky divorce. The social worker understood how she could be led into thinking that marijuana would ease her anguish.

So the social worker, along with a school district police officer and Philadelphia Police Department school officers, enrolled the girl in the Philadelphia Police School Diversion Program. She was not arrested. And this past June, she received her high-school diploma. This fall, she’ll be a college freshman.

### A COOPERATIVE EFFORT

Multiple entities work together to ensure the success of the Police School Diversion Program.



# THE DIVERSION PROGRAM

## STEP BY STEP

When a student has been involved in a behavioral incident or “delinquent act:”

1



The principal or the school police officer contacts the PPD school police officer.

2



The PPD school police officer comes to the school and reviews the case, talking to any adults involved, including the child’s teacher, counselor, principal, or SDP police officer.

3



NO HISTORY OF OFFENSES

STUDENT HAS A RECORD

### LOW-LEVEL SUMMARY OR MISDEMEANOR DELINQUENT OFFENSE

The PPD school police officer contacts the Diversion Intake Center to determine if the student has a previous delinquency finding or delinquency diversion or is currently under juvenile probation supervision. If the student has a record, he or she is arrested.

### HIGH-LEVEL OFFENSE

The student goes through the arrest process: he or she is handcuffed, taken to police headquarters, fingerprinted, photographed, detained for a maximum of six hours, and assigned a police identification number that stays with the student into adulthood.



PPD: Philadelphia Police Department SDP: School District of Philadelphia

### EXTRA HELP

As part of the Police School Diversion Program, the Good Shepherd Mediation Program is providing training to school principals in conflict resolution and mediation to strengthen their skills in de-escalating tension within schools and facilitating more successful outcomes when working with PPD school police officers, SDP police officers, families, and other interested parties. PPD school police officers and SDP police officers have received similar training.

In addition, groups of students involved in altercations or behavioral incidents can be referred to the Police School Diversion Program. Those cases are handled by Good Shepherd using the principles of restorative justice so that the students themselves can have the opportunity to repair the harm they caused.

4



*If the student has no such juvenile justice history, the student may return to class while arrangements are made for him or her to be given the opportunity to enter the Police School Diversion Program. The principal and school administrators can continue to make independent school disciplinary decisions.*

Within 72 hours, a social worker from the City's Department of Human Services visits the student's home and speaks with both the student and the parent/caregiver.

As part of the interview, the social worker asks questions to help identify underlying issues that may be influencing the student's conduct: the student's level of alienation from others, rebelliousness, friends involved in delinquent behavior, bullying (either being bullied by others or acting as a bully), whether a parent/caregiver is incarcerated, the parent's/caregiver's general attitudes toward the problem behaviors, and the parent's/caregiver's or student's use of alcohol or drugs.

In addition, the social worker tries to identify other issues that may be affecting the student's attitude or behavior. These can include:

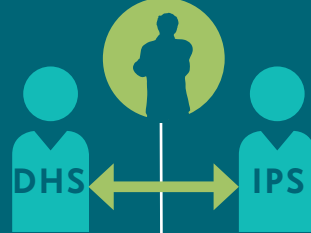
- **THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT**, such as access to sufficient food and clothing, stable housing, and sufficient heat and cooling.
- **PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES** such as family conflicts; social or educational issues that may impact the student's life at school; or parental issues, like unemployment or legal problems.
- **HEALTH ISSUES** in the family such as illness or disability.

5



With this information, the social worker determines whether a referral for prevention services is appropriate. The social worker explains the terms and conditions of the Police School Diversion Program as well as its value to the student and parent/caregiver. Nonetheless, the program is voluntary. If either the student or the parent/caregiver chooses not to participate, the Philadelphia Police come out to explain the collateral consequences. However, nearly all students and parents/caregivers accept the services.

6



If the student and parent/caregiver agree to participate in the program, they are referred to an Intensive Prevention Services provider. The Intensive Prevention Service provider conducts a thorough intake to identify the specific services that are needed. The provider identifies the specific services that could help the student change his or her behavior.

7

- ACADEMIC SUPPORT
- SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL COMPETENCY BUILDING
- MENTORING
- RECREATION
- WORK READY PROGRAMMING
- COMMUNITY SERVICE/ENGAGEMENT
- PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The Intensive Prevention Services provider assigns a case manager to the youth and family and schedules services. Throughout the process, professionals work together to coordinate assessment and support, as well as follow-up.

Over the course of a family's participation, a social worker visits the home at least twice each month for up to a year and stays in contact with school officials.

## EVALUATING OUTCOMES

Dr. Naomi Goldstein and her research team from Drexel University's Department of Psychology are the Police School Diversion Program's research partner. They are evaluating the program's effectiveness, including academic, behavioral, and well-being outcomes at the individual, school, and district levels.

Diverting Philadelphia students from arrest to individualized prevention services can help derail the "school-to-prison pipeline" by meeting students' individualized needs rather than trapping them in the legal system for minor misbehavior.

The Police School Diversion Program has the potential to benefit individual students, as well as the rest of the school community, by keeping youth in school, preventing further disruptions, and creating a more peaceful school environment.

During its first year, the Police School Diversion Program already resulted in a 54 percent reduction in number of arrests within SDP schools from the previous academic year and was accompanied by approximately a 75 percent reduction in number of expulsions and school disciplinary transfers. Schools also saw a 17 percent reduction in number of school-based behavioral incidents, indicating that school climate can improve even when students remain in school following minor incidents.

## PROGRAM PARTNERS

City of Philadelphia,  
Department of Human Services, Juvenile  
Justice Division

City of Philadelphia, Office of Grants

City of Philadelphia,  
Office of Public Safety

Defender Association of Philadelphia

Drexel University  
Department of Psychology

Good Shepherd Mediation Program

Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas,  
Family Court in the First Judicial District

Philadelphia District Attorney's Office

Philadelphia Police Department

School District of Philadelphia

## ALIGNED INITIATIVES

My Brother's Keeper Philadelphia

Philadelphia Youth Violence Prevention  
Collaborative

*Special thanks to the Stoneleigh Foundation for its commitment to Philadelphia's children and youth and its generous support of the Police School Diversion Program.*

