

Q & A for ALF Class XXV Project

Dismantling the Cradle to Prison Pipeline: A Study of Solutions

Program Selection and Background on Project

1. *How did you select programs?*

Answer: We identified programs that are working effectively to shut down the pipeline and present a more positive future for the children and youth of our community. We conducted site visits with programs to learn more about their work and see their impact firsthand. We identified programs in four target areas: prenatal care and early childhood development, education, health and mental health care and juvenile justice.

Criteria for successful programs and practices include the following:

- Program is effective in **changing behavior**, not just providing information to families
- Program has **documented success** in dismantling the Cradle to Prison Pipeline
- Program **represents trends that would be helpful to policy makers** in dismantling the pipeline (i.e. smaller more intimate juvenile justice environments to create lower recidivism rates or longer school days and time on task to promote higher graduation rates.)
- Program promotes the **hopes and dreams of young people** and fosters a more positive future for children and youth
- Program can be **replicated and taken to scale** to impact large numbers of children and youth
- Program offers **leverage** that can be used to dismantle the cradle to prison pipeline

2. *Why are certain landmark programs missing?*

Answer: This is just the start of the conversation and we know that there are many organizations that are making a difference in our community. We hope that our report will help to identify additional organizations that are working to dismantle the pipeline. We have created a WIKI to list organizations that are making a difference. To add an organization to the list, please visit www.zero2three.org

3. *What is the goal of this project?*

Answer: Our goal is to educate business and community leaders about model programs and practices so that we can create the “public will” to promote preventive investment before children get sick, into trouble, drop out of school or suffer family breakdown.

4. *What is the Cradle to Prison Pipeline?*

Answer: The Cradle to Prison Pipeline is an urgent national crisis that gives Black boys born in 2001 a one in three lifetime risk of going to prison, Hispanic boys a one in six risk and White boys a one in seventeen risk of the same fate. High rates of incarceration are connected with child poverty and educational disparities: 83% of African-American fourth graders in Texas cannot read at grade level, compared to 79% of Hispanic children, 56% of White children and 52% of Asian children. The cost implications of high rates of incarceration are serious: it costs \$7,246 per pupil for a year of public education, while the cost of incarcerating a child for a year in the Texas Youth Commission is \$67,890.

Tens of thousands of children and teens are sucked into the pipeline each year. At crucial points in their development, from birth through adulthood, more risks and disadvantages accumulate and converge that make a successful transition to productive adulthood significantly less likely and involvement in the criminal justice system more likely. These include the lack of access to health and mental health care, child abuse and neglect, a lack of quality early childhood education to get ready for school, educational disadvantages resulting from low performing schools, zero tolerance school discipline policies, the arrest and criminalization of children at younger and younger ages for behaviors once handled by schools and community institutions, the saturation of neighborhoods with drugs and violence and the lack of positive role models.

5. *What can we do to dismantle the pipeline?*

Answer: We believe that intervention can make a difference in dismantling the pipeline and creating a more positive future for the youth of our community. With your help, organizations like those in our report can scale up to positively impact the future of all Houstonians. Specific ways that you can help to dismantle the pipeline are:

- 1. Providing financial assistance**
- 2. Volunteering time**
- 3. Contributing expertise**
- 4. Providing training, jobs or internships for those in need**
- 5. Raising awareness of the Cradle to Prison[®] problem**
- 6. Encouraging others in your network to help**
- 7. Applying these practices in your community**
- 8. Advocating legislative changes that focus on early prevention and intervention instead of costly incarceration**

6. *What difference will this make in my life? I didn't grow up in the Cradle to Prison Pipeline. Why should I care about this issue?*

Answer: By dismantling the Cradle to Prison Pipeline, we can make a significant impact on the future of all Houstonians. The quality of the region's workforce will be improved. Crime will decrease. Quality of life will improve. Taxes will be lowered or at least reallocated by a reduction in the prison population through less people entering prison and lower rates of recidivism.

7. *How is the American Leadership Forum Class XXV initiative different than the Children's Defense Fund's Cradle to Prison Pipeline initiative?*

Answer: The Children's Defense Fund published a national report on the Cradle to Prison Pipeline and held a conference at the University of Texas Law Center in March, 2008. CDF has taken the lead in raising awareness about the phenomenon of the Cradle to Prison Pipeline crisis. In looking at this problem, though, we felt there were two unique areas where ALF could advance the dialogue on this issue. First, we hope to use ALF's leverage to educate high level business and community leaders on the pipeline so that we can create real change. Second, we felt that it was important to study solutions of "WHAT WORKS" in dismantling the pipeline. For that reason, we created a report "Dismantling the Cradle to Prison Pipeline in Houston and Texas: A Study of Solutions."

8. *What do you plan to do with this report?*

Answer: We have created a powerpoint presentation and trained our class members and community leaders to teach business leaders, elected officials, faith leaders, educators – anyone who will listen – about the cradle to prison pipeline and solutions. Our goal is to educate business and community leaders about model programs and practices so that we can create the "public will" to promote preventive investment before children get sick, into trouble, drop out of school or suffer family breakdown.

9. *What is the American Leadership Forum?*

Answer: The mission of the Houston/Gulf Coast Chapter of the American Leadership Forum is to join and strengthen diverse leaders to better serve the public good. We do this through an intense yearlong program that fosters learning and trust among experienced leaders from every sector of our community. The result is a unique forum where barriers between people are removed, issues are openly discussed, and solutions emerge that benefit the entire community. Each class selects a project to better the public good. Our class decided to document WHAT WORKS in dismantling the cradle to prison pipeline with the hope that we could reach leaders like you and create the "public will" to invest in prevention programs.

10. Who is Class XXV of the American Leadership Forum?

Answer: There are twenty-six members of our class who represent diverse sectors of our community. We are business leaders, educators, elected officials, attorneys, media leaders, law enforcement officials, health care professionals, foundation and non-profit executives. But all of us are united in our belief that we have got to create the public will to dismantle the cradle to prison pipeline.

Policy and Social Issues

11. Do you believe that personal responsibility plays a role in how children are raised and the choices they make in their lives?

Answer: Of course. All parents need to assume full responsibility as the primary caregivers of their children, to put their children first and be empowered in as many ways possible to fight for the help their children need. We believe there should be a "Parent's Bill of Responsibilities" that each parent should pledge to follow, but when parents fail or falter, it is in everyone's best interest to rescue children.

- Make sure your children know they are loved unconditionally.
- Know where your children are and make sure they know where you are.
- Be a good role model and mentor.
- Don't tear down children's confidence –build it up.
- Really pay attention to your children.
- Don't think it's anybody else's responsibility to teach your children values, respect and good manners.
- Don't let TV or the Internet raise your children.
- Have high standards and expectations for your children.
- Teach your children they are powerful and can make a difference.
- Be grateful for your children and never give up on them.

12. Do teachers take the place of parents in children's lives?

Answer: No, but they play an extremely important role in a child's life. They must be committed to finding the gifts in each child and nourishing that gift. They must also help build a child's self esteem. The bottom line is that children have to achieve and those entrusted with educating them have to perform.

13. What is your position on initiatives to "get tough" on juvenile offenders?

Answer: It is imperative that our leaders focus on prevention and intervention and stop defaulting to incarceration as the answer when a child or youth makes a bad choice. Nationwide, more juveniles are being tried as adults, there is a weakening in confidentiality protections for juvenile offenders, and juvenile justice laws are shifting away from rehabilitation and towards punishment. The cost implications are serious: it costs \$7,246 per pupil for a year of public education, while the cost of incarcerating a child for a year in the Texas Youth Commission is \$67,890.

14. What is your position on zero tolerance school discipline policies?

Answer: Zero tolerance is a form of harsh school disciplinary policy used by many public schools across the country to automatically suspend, expel or criminally charge students for violating school rules. Zero tolerance policies were originally designed to keep students safe from drugs and violent crimes; however, many school districts have greatly expanded the reach of these policies so that they are now often used to punish non-violent student behavior. Some are using law enforcement to address issues like violating the school dress code, schoolyard fights and "disruptive behavior." As a result of these policies, children—especially children of color and children with disabilities—are criminalized at younger ages. They are acquiring a record that can be harmful to their futures and may be taken into consideration if they come before the juvenile system later in life. Zero tolerance policies are a key contributor to the funneling of children down life paths that often lead to arrest, conviction, incarceration, and in some cases, death – the *Cradle to Prison Pipeline*.

Below are examples of the impact of zero tolerance policies in criminalizing children at young ages for non-violent behaviors. Stories were compiled by the Children's Defense Fund.

A. Two 4-year olds refused to take their nap

In November 2006 in the Bronx, NY, Jaden Diaz and Christopher Brito would not take their nap. As a result, they were removed from class and handcuffed by police. The police threatened them saying they would never see their parents again and "when you go to jail, you're not going to have no fun, no TV, no toys."

B. A 6-year old first grader smacked his classmate's bottom

In November 2007 in Prince William County, Virginia, Randy Castro smacked his female classmate's behind. School officials wrote an incident report calling his behavior "sexual touching against a student, offensive" and called the police. Randy thought he was going to prison. Now he refers to himself as a "bad boy."

C. A 6-year old child had a temper tantrum

In March 2007 in Avon Park, Florida, Desre'e Watson was handcuffed and taken from her school to central booking at the county jail after 20 minutes of uncontrollable behavior. Desre'e was reportedly yelling, screaming, kicking, flailing, crying and wailing. Additionally, she pulled a school staff member's hair and "took flight" under a table. She was charged as a felon with battery of a school official and with two misdemeanors: disruption of school function and resisting a law enforcement officer.

D. A 5-year old boy misbehaved

In January 2008 in Queens, NY, Dennis Rivera, a 5-year-old boy with speech problems, asthma and attention deficit disorder, was handcuffed in school and taken to the psych ward of a hospital after throwing a tantrum and knocking items off of the principal's desk.

E. A 10-year old elementary school student took a pair of scissors out of her backpack during class

In December 2004 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, fourth-grader Porsche Brown was handcuffed and taken to the police station when she took a pair of scissors out of her backpack. School officials reported that she had not threatened anyone with the scissors but had violated a zero-tolerance rule which considers scissors potential weapons.

15. *What is your position on TV violence, hip hop culture and their contributions to the Cradle to Prison Pipeline?*

Answer: There is a great deal of violence in our society, on our television sets and in the music that young people hear. Adults must not only turn off these television programs and stand up to those marketing violence, but also stress more nonviolent values and conflict resolution in all aspects of American life.

16: *Is the problem of poverty due to moral weaknesses?*

Answer: The problem of poverty is not due to moral weaknesses. The problem of poverty is a result of an inadequate number of jobs which pay family-supporting wages, the lack of education and training for workers, unavailable quality and affordable child care, a minimum wage that has not kept pace with the cost of living, the lack of child support assurance systems, inadequate health care, and poor transportation, among other things.

17: *What can be done about poverty?*

Answer: In 2008, the federal poverty level for a family of four is \$21,200. It is extremely difficult to meet a family's needs on such a low income. We must move forward with a pro-work, pro-family agenda to end child poverty by:

- Expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit to families with three or more children;
- Making the child tax credit fully refundable;
- Increasing the minimum wage;
- Ensuring safety nets for families when they fall on hard times, such as programs that provide for nutrition, health, safe housing and child care;
- Expanding education and training for workers; and
- Enforcing the child support obligations of absent parents

18: *Wouldn't many children be better off if they had two married parents?*

Answer: Two parents are always better than one. However, it is not necessary for a child's happiness and well-being that they be in a family with married parents. Many children have been successfully raised by one parent, by supportive divorced parents, by relatives and other caregivers. What is most important is that every child has a loving adult presence in his or her life.