

IDEA EXCHANGE

A University of Pittsburgh education forum on addressing the school-to-prison pipeline challenges participants to think differently about discipline and justice. by Carmen J. Lee



They came from across the country — about 450 people strong — to exchange ideas, best practices and a shared sense of outrage about what has come to be known as the school-to-prison pipeline.

The pernicious phenomenon that connects racial disparities in school discipline to juvenile detention and adult imprisonment was the focus of the July educator forum, “Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Reimagining Policies, Practices and Politics in Education.” The University of Pittsburgh School of Education’s Center for Urban Education organized the three-day conference, which was funded by The Heinz Endowments.

Participants interacted with local activists and some of the nation’s renowned academic and social justice thought leaders. Among the internationally recognized justice system reform advocates were television journalist Marc Lamont Hill and legal scholar Michelle Alexander, whose acclaimed best seller “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness” is often credited with elevating awareness of America’s prison population crisis and its racial implications and impact.

While topics ranged from grassroots activism to mentoring, central themes included confronting racist practices in schools, advocating for students of all backgrounds, and rethinking ideas of discipline and accountability in both school and the justice systems.

“There’s a deeper crisis of imagination. We have to get out of the mindset where we think justice means punishment and punishment means confinement,” Mr. Hill said during one panel discussion. “So, the work of school is to help us unlearn some of that stuff because that’s sometimes the first place where we learn what justice means.”

As part of a different panel, Ms. Alexander described how while writing “The New Jim Crow,”

she had envisioned not only reducing incarceration rates in the United States but also building movements that would end “this cycle of creating enormous systems of racial and social control in this country.”

“Many of the folks who are building social movements, Black Lives [Matter] and beyond, have a deeply transformational, revolutionary consciousness in their work,” she said. “They don’t necessarily have all the answers, but they are striving to figure out what it means to reimagine what our justice system looks like, reimagine what our education systems look like, rethink how we view democracy on a local level as well as national level. Those kinds of conversations are absolutely essential.”

Dr. T. Elon Dancy II, director of Pitt’s Center for Urban Education and the Helen S. Faison Endowment Chair in Urban Education, said he and other forum organizers had wanted to expand participants’ imaginations about the role and future of education. They decided to generate more national visibility for what historically had been a local conference while supporting Pittsburgh communities that are grappling with the realities of the relationship between school and prison.

Coordinators of the event intentionally invited people and groups that universities usually ignore to enrich everyone’s understanding of the current

status of education and where it needs to be to educate for the public good, he explained. They also passed on having a single keynote lecture, opting instead to focus on dialogue between featured panelists and the audience to encourage active engagement and learning based on experience.

“Our attendees were not only teachers and administrators, but we went beyond educational professionals to include youth, parents, activists, artists and academics,” Dr. Dancy said. “The expectation that they talk to each other embraces the values of accountability, truth and critical reconciliation, where researchers and administrators must shape policies and questions in response to the experiences of the most vulnerable populations.”

This approach was one of the reasons the smaller breakout sessions with local community leaders were just as vital to the forum’s goals as the larger plenaries with big names such as Ms. Alexander and Mr. Hill.

For example, a session that looked at the role of grassroots advocacy and activism in dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline had a panel that included the Rev. Cornell Jones, group violence intervention coordinator for the City of Pittsburgh and the panel moderator; Jasiri X, a Pittsburgh-based artist and activist, and co-founder of the artist-activist collective 1Hood Media; Evans Moore, Pittsburgh regional

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During the University of Pittsburgh Center for Urban Education's summer educator forum, author and journalist Marc Lamont Hill, right center, discusses ways to change education approaches and school systems to prevent the school-to-prison pipeline. He is joined by Columbia Teachers College associate professor Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, left center, and Chicago State University associate professor Crystal Laura, far left, who served as moderator. A sign language interpreter, far right, translated the conversation.

organizer for the national criminal justice reform organization FAMM (Families Against Mandatory Minimums); Amber Sloan, a Homewood community organizer; and Tracey McCants Lewis, deputy general counsel and human resources director for the Pittsburgh Penguins.

During the discussion, the panelists explained how they are trying to address the school-to-prison pipeline based on their different life and work experiences. Ms. Sloan, who had been a gang member as a teen, talked about how she is out in the community getting involved in students' lives and showing how she cares about them. Ms. Lewis said she works with a team of law students to help expunge former offenders' criminal records, which could hinder their future economic opportunities. Mr. Moore described his organization's efforts to eradicate mandatory minimum sentences and advance other sentencing reforms. And Jasiri X described a 1Hood Media program at Shuman Juvenile Detention Center that is helping to raise students' self-worth and stimulate their creativity.

"Pittsburgh is a place where if you're a person of color you can feel unheard, you can feel unseen. Sometimes a child will act out so that we see them and we recognize them—not necessarily that they're bad, but they want to get your attention," Jasiri X said in explaining his group's approach to both working with youth and stemming the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon.

"We try to create an environment where you can get attention using your gifts, skills, talents and creativity. Our piece is about empowering the youth that we work with, letting them know that whatever circumstances you're in or place where you come from, your voice is viable, your voice is important, and you're as much a part of the future of this city as any other person in this city." **h**