

# Polk County *School-to-Prison Pipeline*

2017-18

## Schools are Understaffed

**School counselors** support safe learning environments, to respond to behavior and foster healthy relationships.

**Social workers** help students access services to address unmet needs and trauma often behind behavior.

**School psychologists** address learning, motivation, behavior, mental health and social development.

Industry Recommendation	Actual Ratio	Schools with No Provider
250 students per Counselor	433	34
250 per Social Worker	2,458	154
500-700 students per Psychologists	2,248	160

## Counterproductive Discipline Continues

Exclusionary discipline like suspensions and expulsions not only increases risk of drop out and arrests, but has been found to be ineffective at curbing problem behaviors.

**7,289**  
In-school  
suspensions

**12,439**  
Out-of-school  
suspensions

**337**  
Expulsions  
and  
alternative  
placements

## Police Fill the Gaps

In the absence of adequate support for students and clear roles for police, behavior management is left to police, leading to students arrested for school fights, class disruptions and other behavior issues. A single arrest increases the likelihood of future arrests and school drop out.

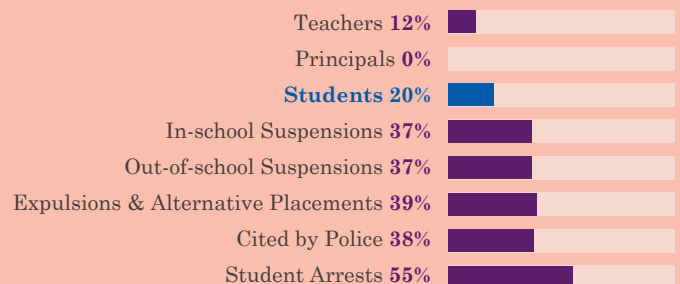
**440**  
Arrests at  
School

**348**  
Citations at  
School

**92**  
Arrests for  
Disorderly  
Conduct at  
School

## The Impact is Unequal

Students with disabilities, LGB and gender-nonconforming students and students of color, especially Black students, are particularly vulnerable to the school-to-prison pipeline. This chart illustrates Black representation in school staffing and discipline.



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## Captured by the Criminal Justice System



Out of the **3,846**  
total youth arrests:

**281**

were *eligible* for  
civil citations

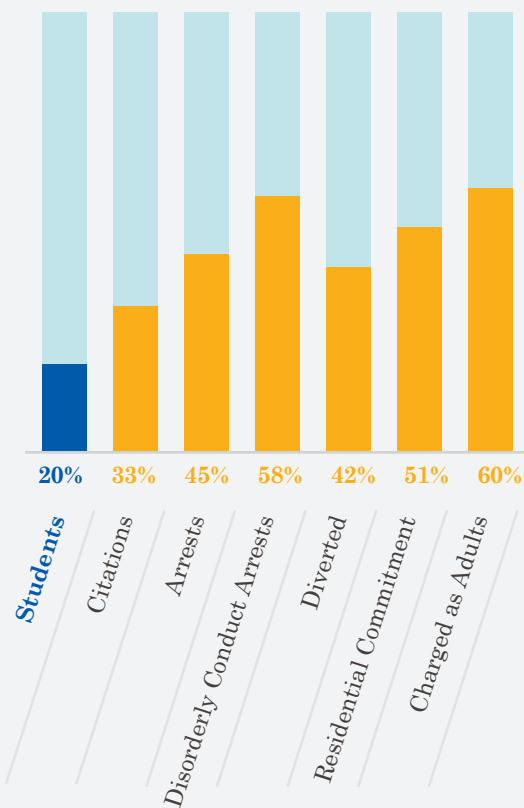
**166**

were *committed*  
to residential  
programs

**81**

were *charged*  
as adults

### Black Representation



### Recommendations - Polk County's Youth Should:

**Be Treated Fairly** - Revise policies on student discipline, school policing, pre-arrest diversion and transfers to the adult system to **promote** age-appropriate practices and uniformity.

#### Be Respected -

- ✓ **Increase** administrator and teacher diversity.
- ✓ **Require** implicit bias training for all staff and any security or police officers.

#### Be Supported -

- ✓ **Invest** in school-based mental health providers, like school counselors, social workers and psychiatrists, and use their expertise when making policy.
- ✓ **Train** teachers, including substitute teachers, and staff on de-escalation tactics, trauma-informed care, and positive discipline.

#### Be Disciplined, Not Punished -

- ✓ **Invest** in social-emotional learning and conflict resolution that teach students, not exclude them.
- ✓ **Ban** the use of exclusionary discipline and arrests for young students.
- ✓ **End** the arrest of students for disorderly conduct and disruption of a school function.
- ✓ **Invest** in community rehabilitation programming and services for at-risk youth.

#### Be Protected -

- ✓ **Ban** the use of Tasers, pepper spray and other violent policing tactics on juveniles.
- ✓ If school police are used, ensure their role is clearly defined to **protect** the students and not to police student behavior.
- ✓ **End** the practice of charging youth as adults without the input of a judge or grand jury.

June 25, 2019

Dear Superintendent Jacqueline Byrd and Polk County School Board Members,

After years of working to undo damage from fear-based policymaking, Florida is poised to repeat so many mistakes that have ruined young lives. We urge you to consider this very real threat as you implement new legislation and strengthen security at schools. To assist your efforts, we offer the attached report, *Safe to Learn: An Assessment of School Climate and Discipline in Florida*, and a profile of Polk County's School-to-Prison Pipeline.

### How does Polk County compare to other districts?

- Among the top 10 districts for most frequent use of expulsions with continuing education services (24 expelled students, plus 313 removed from school through alternative placement).
- School arrest rate of 4.2 per 1,000 students is significantly higher than state average.
- The second highest number of students arrested for disorderly conduct in the state (92).
- Among the top 25% of districts for the rate of referrals to pre-arrest diversion programs by police for school behavior - 355 students cited.
- Polk County's youth arrest rate is significantly higher than state average, with 14.8% of arrests for technical violations, such as violation of probation.

Our students continue to be undersupported, with no school district meeting the industry recommended student-to-professional ratios for school counselors, school psychologists or school social workers. Even when these professionals are employed in schools, they are too often used for administrative or student supervisory tasks at the expense of the support services they are trained to deliver.

This past Spring, the Florida Legislature amended s. 1011.62(16), F.S., to outline appropriate uses for the Mental Health Assistance Allocation. You must improve your student-to-support staff ratios and increase the time they are spending on supporting students. Undoubtedly, fiscal restraints continue, but the evidence shows investing in these professionals will improve school climate to reduce conflict, increase student achievement and engagement, and prevent violence.

**Student Support Staffing, FY 2018-19**

	School Counselors	School Psychologists	Social Workers
FTE	244	47	43
Student Ratio	<b>433: 1</b>	<b>2248: 1</b>	<b>2458: 1</b>
Industry Recommendation	250 : 1	500-700 : 1	250 : 1

Without the necessary student supports, schools are increasingly relying on police to maintain school discipline. Police presence in schools has grown, with police integrated deeply within school administration. The state does not require any special training for police to work in schools. It is up to you to ensure the police in your schools are trained to work with youth and have clearly defined roles that keep them focused on preventing and responding to serious physical threats to school safety and out of disciplinary matters. These can only be accomplished through clear, thorough policies and memorandums of understanding that are informed by families, students, teachers and community stakeholders.

**For the first time after decades of decline, more students are being arrested at school in Florida.** The youth arrest rate in Polk County declined significantly in FY 2017-18. However, Polk County continues to arrest more kids both in and out of school than average. As we review arrest rates, arrests for charges such as disorderly conduct and disruption of a school function are



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highly suspect. These sorts of charges are highly discretionary and result in stark racial disparities. For example, Black students were 7 times as likely to be arrested for disorderly conduct in Florida than their peers.

**Policing Students, FY 2017-18**

Cited by Police at School	School Arrests		
	All Arrests	Disorderly Conduct	Civil Citation Eligible
355	440	92	67

Reviewing pre-arrest diversion (i.e. civil citation) data gives a clearer snapshot of how kids are being pulled into the justice system. The Florida Department of Juvenile Justice tracks all first-time misdemeanor offenses, which by law are eligible for pre-arrest diversion. Examining this data for school-related offenses, we’ve found that police are accusing more youth of these first-time low-level offenses at school. **The number of Polk County students accused of pre-arrest diversion eligible offenses more than doubled from 196 students in FY 2016-17 to 422 students in FY 2017-18.** Many of these offenses, fighting, disorderly conduct, misdemeanor drug possession, were historically – and are more appropriately – handled by school administration.

As you examine your local policies and impliment state legislation, we urge you to look at the data. To assist in this, we have enclosed a synopsis of data related to how Polk County’s students are pushed out of the school system and captured by the justice system. You may find a more detailed report on our website, [www.aclufi.org/schoolsafety](http://www.aclufi.org/schoolsafety). This data is consolidated from publicly available data from Florida’s Departments of Education and Juvenile Justice. We encourage you to collect and track data within your district to both inform your policymaking and to see the consequences of it.

We encourage you to stand strong as a voice of reason in these highly charged times. Do not sacrifice the futures of Polk County’s most vulnerable students in your effort to be prepared for the rare worst-case scenario or in your quest for top-rated schools. Take measured steps and ensure that policies are informed by both child development experts and impacted students. Prioritize supporting student social and emotional learning. Purposely combat the disparities that are causing Polk County Schools to lose so many youth of color, LGB and gender-nonconforming youth and youth with disabilities.

**Work toward schools that are safe for all children, every day.** Striving for this goal is the very best way you can prevent the next tragedy and equip Polk County’s youth for a successful future.

Sincerely,

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