

Youth Who Make Mistakes Should Have Restorative Options

What Kids Need

Too many kids are caught up in a juvenile justice system that delivers harsh punishment that often derails a positive trajectory in their lives. We need a city-wide commitment to keep youth at home, in school, and off the path to prison.

A better approach is to fund a system of restorative options for youth who make mistakes so that they can take accountability for their actions while repairing relationships and refocusing on positive options that lead to graduation and employment.

The next mayor must:

- Invest in proven prevention programs to keep kids on track, in school, and with their families.
- Expand diversion programs and community-based alternatives to arrest, detention and residential placements for youth who can safely remain at home and continue to attend school.
- Assess the efficacy of the city's teen curfews with consideration from youth themselves.
- Ensure all children in the delinquency system are assessed for disabilities and receive appropriate services.

In addition, the mayor must direct school board members:

- Reform the truancy enforcement system managed by the school district so that the reasons youth are failing to attend school are addressed.
- Change school-based discipline protocols and reduce the presence of school resource offices so that youth are not likely to be adjudicated for school infractions.

Why This Matters To Kids, Parents and, The City

Youth who are incarcerated are more likely to encounter instability, which leads to their rearrest. Families and communities are undermined, rather than supported, and rendered more unsafe. Meanwhile, sending a youth to juvenile detention can cost over \$100,000 a year per child. Further these options serve to harden and harm rather than heal them.

The money spent on youth incarceration can be better spent on diversion programs, mental health services and counseling, tutoring, and other supports. Such investments keep kids on track and out of jail. They allow kids to learn and grow into productive citizens who contribute to our city as well as the safety of our neighborhoods.

The Details

In the School District of Philadelphia, more students are referred to law enforcement for in school behavior (4419) than are enrolled in AP classes (3273).¹ The vast majority of these referrals are for non-violent behaviors, but start students down the school-to-prison pipeline. Having a police presence in schools, either uniformed officers or School Resource Officers, can increase the use of law enforcement to address cigarette or alcohol possession or fighting, issues that can be handled with schools.

Last year (2021–22) 1869 youth were involved in delinquency cases in Philadelphia. It is important to note that only a small share of all gun crimes in Philadelphia are committed by youth.² Of those adjudicated, approximately 1500 Philadelphia youth were placed in juvenile facilities.³ While that number reflects a decline since 2017, Philadelphia youth made up 41% of juvenile placements in the state.⁴ Statewide, 73% of kids who enter facilities are there for their first offense, and 64% are there for non-felony offenses.⁵ Youth incarceration is associated with decreased likelihood of high school graduation, as well as worse physical and mental health in adulthood.⁶ It's also associated with higher rates of rearrest and reincarceration than probation and community alternatives, **which means detention doesn't deter youth from committing crimes, and it doesn't make communities safe.**⁷

When kids do make mistakes, both the city and the school district have wide discretion to use diversion rather than arrest or court referral to get kids the support they need to stay in school and in the community. For instance, Relationships First, is an example of the system stakeholders working together to implement a “comprehensive restorative justice–practices approach that is designed to transform relationships among and between adults and students in schools and improve outcomes for K–12 students” shows promise in reducing punitive and exclusionary discipline.⁸ Other restorative justice models, like Family Group Conferences or Community Reparative Boards, can be implemented in the city outside of an academic setting.⁹

The Philadelphia Department of Human Services must be charged with creating a full continuum of adjudication options that are rehabilitative and restorative and keep youth out of secure residential facilities. The federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention recommends strategies that can be delivered in either the school or community setting, including school-based classroom and behavior management programs and comprehensive community interventions.¹⁰

Currently Philadelphia has an under-developed diversion system that fails to keep youth out of secure placement. For instance, youth are increasingly being sentenced to wear a GPS monitoring system that permits them to serve their sentence, attend school and live at home or in a group home, However, the monitoring is not often connected to supportive services or counseling necessary for youth to heal. Other restorative justice models, like Family Group Conferences or Community Reparative Boards, can and should be implemented in the city outside of an academic setting.¹¹

Finally, the mayor can work with the School District to interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

Specifically, the mayor can appoint and direct school board members to address the causes of student truancy so that students will go to school. School board members, under the mayor's guidance, can change school discipline protocols and reduce the presence of school resource officers so that youth are less likely to end up entangled in the juvenile justice system for school infractions.

About The Kids Campaign

The Kids Campaign is a coalition of 60 plus child-serving groups in Philadelphia. Our coalition formed to make sure that the next mayor of Philadelphia is ready to do whatever it takes to ensure a **S.E.C.U.R.E.** future for every kid – a future with Safety, an Education, Careers, Uplift, Recreation, and a healthy Environment. A non-partisan effort, the Kids Campaign will share information parents and voters need to determine which candidate will make every day safer than the one before for children and youth. Organizations and individuals can learn more and join the Kids Campaign at www.thekidscampaign.org.