

REMARKS

OF

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ASSISTANT ATTORNEY GENERAL  
OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS

AT THE

2014 CONGRESSIONAL BLACK CAUCUS FOUNDATION  
ANTIPOVERTY POLICIES AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM ROUNDTABLE

ON

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WASHINGTON, DC

Thank you, Dr. Demessie. I'm delighted to be here and thrilled to join so many distinguished members of Congress and their staff. Representative Lee, I thank you for hosting this roundtable and for calling attention to the disproportionate impact of poverty on people of color and to the many problems it breeds.

Representative Hoyer, Representative Fattah, Representative Beatty, and Representative Scott, I'm grateful to all of you, as well, for shining a bright light on these issues and for your leadership in Congress on behalf of all Americans.

I'm encouraged to see this gathering of recognized leaders and committed advocates, all working together to diagnose and address the problems facing the poor and disadvantaged. I'm especially pleased to see your focus on the issues facing our young people, particularly those who are at risk for coming into contact with the juvenile justice system.

We know there is a strong link between poverty and involvement with the justice system, and until we find a solution to the one, we will struggle mightily to solve the other. Of course, the answers to these problems are not easy – if they were, we'd be looking for something else to talk about today. But I think the most promising starting point we have is the assurance of a solid education.

It's a truism that education is the key to success. So then we have to wonder why so many of our children have such a hard time getting one. And we have to wonder why, when our kids are in school, they are often hustled out the door for minor infractions and ordinary misbehavior.

A 2011 study in Texas that tracked students over the course of six years found that 60 percent – 60 percent! – were suspended or expelled at some point in middle or high school. And most of these suspensions and expulsions were the result of simple violations of schools' codes of conduct, like using tobacco or acting out.

These zero tolerance policies disproportionately penalize minority students. Studies show that black middle school students are suspended nearly four times more often than white youth, and Latino youth are roughly twice as likely to be suspended or expelled.

Think about that: we want our kids to do well in school, so what do we do – we kick them out of school.

And the result isn't simply that they're missing the opportunity to learn and grow, which is bad enough. In many instances, they're being put on a path that leads them, directly or indirectly, to arrest and, too often, confinement.

Too often, youthful indiscretions that should be dealt with by the schools or in the home have become matters for the court. Too many of our young black men are being

dispatched to our criminal and juvenile justice systems. In too many cases, what should be the last resort is the first response. This must change.

That's why I'm proud that the Department of Justice, under the leadership of our Attorney General, is taking steps to help restore some common sense to our school disciplinary practices. Under the Supportive School Discipline Initiative, we're working closely with our partners at the Department of Education to try to foster safe, supportive, and productive learning environments while keeping students in school.

We've issued guidance to school districts on steps they can take to reform zero-tolerance discipline policies, and we are making \$5 million available this year to promote positive behaviors and increase school safety. Our goal in all of this is to keep young people in school and out of court – on a path to success, not in a pipeline to prison.

This work is all part of the President's *My Brother's Keeper* Initiative, which is designed to give every young person who is willing to work hard and play by the rules the chance to reach his or her full potential. Across the federal government, through partnerships with private foundations, we're working to give kids the advantages that many of them have never had and help them succeed. This is something about which the President is very passionate. He's pulling out all the stops to address the challenges our young people face.

And there's another opportunity for us to use education to influence positive outcomes for at-risk youth – and that's by expanding access to learning in our juvenile confinement facilities. Whether a youth is sent away for more than a year to a state juvenile correctional facility or spends a night or two in a local detention center and is released to community supervision, the impact on his or her development can be significant. And in many cases, these youth never return to school.

As part of the work of the Federal Interagency Reentry Council, the Attorney General and the Secretary of Education recently sent a joint letter to every state school chief and every state attorney general signaling our commitment to ensure that confined youth have access to high-quality educational services.

While too many youth in confinement don't have access to quality education, there are some bright spots. The Maya Angelou Academy at New Beginnings Youth Development Center in Washington, D.C., provides all youth with the opportunity to take English, math, science, and social studies classes that are aligned with D.C. public school standards.

And several states – Oregon, Indiana, and Pennsylvania, to name three – are using technology to connect confined youth to academic content on a par with traditional schools.

For our part, our Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Department of Education are collaborating to design an evidence-based education model for returning youth and to support demonstration projects in selected jurisdictions.

These are promising trends, and I'm optimistic that we're moving in the right direction in ensuring access to quality education for confined youth – and for all young people.

A child's future success is determined by many things – a supportive family, a strong social network, his or her own initiative, and the opportunity to be part of something larger. A solid education should take its place at or near the top of the list. Sadly, there are too many young people who have been denied that fundamental opportunity. And while youth who have made mistakes must be held accountable for their wrongs, they must also be given a fair chance.

That's why we – all of us – must work together to make sure that all our children can learn and grow and become good, productive citizens. The health and safety of our communities depend on it, and the future of our country depends on it.

Thank you.

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