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JUSTICE STRATEGIES

*WORKING PAPER*

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# **School Yard or Prison Yard: Improving Outcomes for Marginalized Youth**

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**SCHOOL YARD OR PRISON YARD:  
IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR MARGINALIZED YOUTH  
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The use of school suspensions/expulsions has increased dramatically over the past 25 years, despite data that show a decline in school violence. Suspensions/expulsions precipitate dropping out of school which in turn is a significant link in what is increasingly understood as “the school to prison pipeline.” A confluence of challenges to public education in the U.S. has helped construct this pipeline. Under-resourced urban schools that are ill equipped to address the needs of impoverished students, zero tolerance and other punitive disciplinary policies, “high stakes testing,” and racism are all pipeline components.

The dimensions and causes of the school to prison pipeline are increasingly a subject of debate and study. Less attention however has been directed to interventions that can reduce student suspensions. This study looks at such an intervention, Strategies for Success (SfS), that was designed by the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) to help young people step off of the prison track.

CCA’s approach emphasizes youth development-focused social supports to 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students placed in the District’s alternative schools. The long-term goals of the program are to prevent re-suspensions, prevent replacements in alternative schools, improve school attendance and grades, and increase pro-social connections, attitudes and behaviors among participating youth. The achievement of these objectives in turn is expected to increase the likelihood of graduating from school and avoiding criminal justice involvement.

The program’s design includes individual support to students as they enter and exit the alternative school and for six months after they return to “mainstream” school. The individual support – transitional planning – entails working with young people in and out of school, in their homes, and in community settings. Other program components include after-school programming, school breaks and summer programming that focus on arts-based education, work experience, and leadership training in areas related to reducing violence and risky behaviors that compromise health. Mentoring and community service activities are also among the program’s approaches to improve youths’ social connections to adults and their community. The program relies on the cooperation of the individual schools, principals and staff to provide the services.

To assess the efficacy of the program, CCA undertook a program evaluation that examined the process of program implementation and the program’s outcomes in three key domains: reducing the likelihood of re-suspensions, improving grades and attendance, and reducing the likelihood of criminal justice involvement. The evaluation included a comparison group of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students who were assigned to an alternative school but never enrolled in the Strategies for Success program.

The evaluation found that Strategies for Success participants came into the program more disadvantaged than the comparison group of alternative students. Yet despite facing greater obstacles, SfS participants showed greater improvements on all outcome measures, while the comparison group showed either no improvements or further declines. Our findings show that Strategies is effective in reducing the likelihood of resuspensions, placements in alternative school, and criminal justice involvement and in raising grades and rates of school attendance.

Our findings lead to several conclusions and recommendations. The first is that comprehensive programming that provides social supports that extend from school to community and family results in positive outcomes for students. The second conclusion is that

the methods used to avert resuspension to alternative school are readily adaptable to prevent the use of out-of-school suspensions. This would require school policies that significantly curtail the use of out-of-school suspensions, and better training of staff on issues that form the context of the lives of urban youth, and behavioral management techniques that more effectively address the negative behaviors that arise as a result of dire family and community conditions. School boards and district personnel need a deeper understanding of the consequences of school suspension particularly for African American young men.

The third conclusion is that the school to prison pipeline can be disrupted by investing in interventions for very high risk students. The youth who participated in and/or completed the SfS program had less criminal justice system involvement, faced less serious charges, and if involved, received less severe justice system sanctions. This finding underscores the role that schools can play in helping marginalized youth, particularly young men of color, avoid criminal justice system involvement. The role of schools as a crime prevention/incarceration prevention strategy is worthy of further study and discussion.

The fourth conclusion is less hopeful. Despite the positive results of the SfS program, the population of students remains educationally at risk. The attendance rates of even the SfS completers remain below the district-wide average, and their grade point averages remain very low. Thus, it is important to consider how to provide long term academic support for these students and how to ensure that mainstream schools have training, resources, and programming to reduce both suspensions and re-suspensions.

Beyond the individual-level challenges presented by youth, programs to improve outcomes for youth who enter the school to prison pipeline face challenges within the broader context of urban education and inner city life. At the school and community level, placement in alternative schools is seen as the mark of a “bad” kid, a stigma that remains regardless of efforts to improve the image of these schools. Alternative school placement is understood as a punitive response by students, parents, school personnel, and the community alike.

Programs like Strategies for Success, no matter how well designed and implemented, confront a larger socio-political environment that has left urban education grappling with budget uncertainty and chronic under-funding that shortchanges the neediest of students. However, the value in continuing efforts to improve outcomes for these students extends beyond their education, to their prospects of future employment and ability to avoid a life of incarceration. The public school system must find ways to keep young people in the school yards and out of the prison yards.

## **SCHOOL YARD OR PRISON YARD IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR MARGINALIZED YOUTH**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The use of school suspensions/expulsions has increased dramatically over the past 25 years. According to data from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (2000), between 1974 and 2000, the rate at which America's students were suspended and expelled from schools has almost doubled from 3.7% of students in 1974 (1.7 million students suspended), to 6.6% of students in 2000 (3 million students suspended). Out-of-school suspensions increased despite data that show that school violence, student victimization and student fear of violence declined during the 1990s (Donahue, Schiraldi & Zeidenberg 1998; Kaufman, et al. 2000). School disciplinary policies imposed as part of "zero tolerance" have been a major cause in the dramatic increase in suspensions/expulsions. Responses to school suspensions vary by states: in some states, expulsion means virtual exclusion from all educational settings; in others such as New York State, school suspensions in many districts often means assignment to "alternative" educational settings.

Middle school and early high school years present important opportunities for fashioning interventions to prevent dropping out of school and criminal justice system involvement. Preventing school suspensions and expulsions can reduce juvenile justice system involvement that is in turn a gateway into a lifetime of incarceration.

School suspensions/expulsions precipitate dropping out of school which in turn is a significant link in what is now called "the school to prison pipeline" (Wald & Losen 2003). Nationally, 30 percent of high school sophomores who drop out of school had been suspended, a rate three times greater than students who remained in school (Skiba & Peterson 1999). Western, Pettit & Guetzkow (2002) estimate that 1 in 10 young (age 22-30) white high school dropouts were in prison or jail and 52 percent of African American male high school dropouts had been incarcerated by their early thirties. A lack of education is a characteristic shared by many incarcerated people: 68 percent of state prisoners do not have a high school diploma (Harlow 2003).

Punitive school disciplinary policies, such as the zero tolerance standard and school suspensions or expulsions, can be viewed as a first step of what becomes a cumulative pattern of disparity in the treatment of minorities in the criminal justice system. Youth of color are more likely to be suspended, suspended youth are more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system where minority youth are more likely to be detained at arrest, adjudicated and sentenced to a custodial placement than are white youth (The American Bar Association 2004; Poe-Yamagata & Jones 2000). Racial disparity is even more pronounced in the juvenile justice system than in the adult system (Sampson & Lauritsen 1997) and provides the foundation for further discrimination in the criminal justice system, as defendants' juvenile records are typically considered in sentencing. A juvenile justice record becomes a mechanism that fosters subsequent differences in the treatment of whites and minorities in the criminal justice system (Pope & Feyerherm 1990).

A confluence of challenges to public education in the U.S. has helped construct this pipeline. Under-resourced urban schools that are ill equipped to address the needs of

impoverished students, zero tolerance, and other punitive disciplinary policies, “high stakes testing,” and racism are all pipeline components.

The dimensions and causes of the school to prison pipeline are increasingly a subject of debate and study. Less attention however has been directed to interventions that can reduce student suspensions. This study looks at such an intervention that was designed by the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) to help young people step off of the prison track. Strategies for Success (Strategies or SfS) is noteworthy not only for its focus, but for the quasi-experimental design it employed. The study looked at the extent to which the intervention is associated with:

- a reduction in post-program suspension rates?
- a reduction in post-program assignments to alternative schools?
- post-program improvements in academic achievement and attendance?
- post-program increases in pro-social attitudes and behaviors?
- post-program involvement in the criminal justice systems?

Our goal is to demonstrate that interventions, properly designed and implemented, can help dismantle the school to prison pipeline and encourage public policy that invests in such programs. This paper describes the Strategies program and its environmental context; discusses the theoretical framework for the program, discusses the implementation of the program, describes the study and its findings; and concludes with a discussion of implications for practice and policy.

## **BACKGROUND**

CCA’s relationship with the Syracuse City School District’s (SCSD) alternative schools began more than 15 years earlier as a result of its advocacy on behalf of youth in the juvenile justice system. CCA works with courts to secure alternative-to-incarceration sentences<sup>1</sup> that provide community-based services that hold youth accountable for delinquent behavior. These programs are designed to identify and address youth needs and interests in an effort to minimize the likelihood of recidivism. As to be expected, judges expect and mandate that the youth dutifully attend school, no small task for these young people, many of whom had histories of truancy and suspension along with charges of delinquency.

As many of the young people served through our court advocacy program had also been suspended from mainstream school, CCA found itself on the steps of the Beard Alternative School, which at the time was the SCSD’s only alternative school.<sup>2</sup> Over a 15 year period, CCA worked with the alternative schools to bring additional resources into the schools which otherwise had few or no extracurricular activities or social supports. In 2000, U.S. Department of Education funding provided an opportunity for CCA to partner with the SCSD to develop systems and services designed to improve alternative school programming as well as individual student social and academic outcomes. Strategies for Success is the result of this partnership.

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<sup>1</sup>In New York State, youth under the age of 16 charged with crimes, are processed in family court, and if adjudicated a delinquent may be “placed” in a Office of Children and Family Services facility. Youth 16 years and older charged with crimes are processed in the adult court system, and if convicted may be incarcerated. For purposes of this paper, we are using the term incarceration to encompass any custodial sentence imposed upon a youth convicted/adjudicated of a crime.

<sup>2</sup>In 1994, in response to the “Gun Free Schools Act, passed by Congress, the SCSD established the Violence is Not the Answer (VINTA) program.

CCA began the SfS program at a time of emerging concern, driven by the leadership of the Superintendent, about the District's approach to alternative education. The concerns were prompted in large part by the increase in the number of youth sent to alternative schools, an increase in juvenile violence in communities, and the realization that many of the youth involved in street violence were assigned to the alternative school.

The SCSD's Committee on Alternative Education, comprised of teachers, administrators, parents and community and business members, was appointed by the Superintendent in 2000 to review and evaluate the SCSD's alternative programs. In its report issued July 7, 2000 (Committee on Alternative Education 2000), the Committee identified several deficiencies that echoed criticisms of alternative schools nationwide: a lack of clear and coherent mission; the stigmatizing nature of alternative school placement; a chaotic and disorganized environment due in part to rolling enrollment and exit; the disproportionate use of alternative schools for minority students; and a lack of social supports and youth development activities. The committee concluded:

“The long term recommendations of the subcommittee reflects its understanding that a large segment of the students placed in the District's alternatives programs are poor and minority students who frequently drop out of school and end up in the juvenile justice system. The long term consequence of continuing on such a course is catastrophic. While alternative programs may be necessary in order to hold students who are chronically and persistently disruptive and violent accountable and to ensure the safety of other students and faculty, these programs must be able to deliver quality education and not serve as an “alternative to education.”

#### **STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS: THEORETICAL MODEL**

Strategies for Success is intended to reduce school suspensions, alternative school placements, grades, and school attendance among program participants and improve a range of pro-social behaviors that, in the long run, are expected to increase the likelihood of graduation from high school and help marginalized youth avoid the prison “track.”

The program design is based on the research on school and community environments that are confronted by “high risk” youth as well as on effective programming for such young people. The theory of structural violence provides a useful framework for interpreting the context of the lives of poor, minority, urban youth. First coined by Galtung (1969), structural violence refers to the way that institutions limit or constrict access to opportunities and the ability to reach one's potential. A vast body of research had documented the relationship between social and economic inequality and anti-social and non-productive behaviors, such as crime, delinquency, and school drop out rates. While structural violence may involve violence on the part of the state or related powerful institutions, such as the excessive use of force by police (Jacobs & O'Brien 1998), it more often takes the form of invisible and accepted punitive or harsh conditions. Inadequate, under-resourced urban public schools, impoverished communities, and high levels of violence all are manifestations of structural violence.

The SfS program serves youth gravely impacted by structural violence. Kostelny and Garbarino (2000) compare these young people's environments as paralleling conditions found in war-torn countries. Such environments lead children and youth to become despairing, hopeless, and filled with a sense of powerlessness. These community conditions diminish intellectual

inquisitiveness and present obstacles to parental support and encouragement, thus opening doors to delinquency (Schwebel & Christie 2000).

The theoretical underpinnings of the intervention's design are found in the work of Garbarino (1995) who identifies the structural nature of the risk factors faced by poor, minority youth as a "toxic environment" and calls for an "ecological" approach in overcoming these risk factors. Specific factors that help to mitigate these risk factors consist of individual-level competencies (e.g., coping, social, and cognitive skills) and policy-driven investments in quality education and social supports outside of the family, particularly opportunities for bonding with caring adults.

Noguera's (1995) research on programs that reduce youth violence and promote more successful engagement in school offers additional considerations for program design. Effective programs for urban, "high risk" youth are those that are innovative in approach, include youth in the design of the program, are delivered in ways that clearly expect youth achievement, address issues salient to the particular community, and serve as a bridge between community and school. Effective intervention programs do not operate in a vacuum: they take into account the role of environmental and cultural factors on youth behavior both in and out of school and develop specific strategies to counter this "toxic" environment.

Sensitivity to community conditions requires that a program like Strategies for Success attend to the particular challenges facing the students typically placed in alternative schools - African American males. In order to help these students improve their attachment to school as well as their academic performance, Noguera (2001) recommends that programs address what the "construction of Black male identity" and how this identity impacts the way that African American youth perceive the efficacy of education.

The Strategies for Success program uses a multifaceted, integrated approach to achieve its goal of mitigating those factors that contribute to the school to prison pipeline. Its focus on middle school students is based on research that identifies those years as a crossroads when youth get on the graduation or drop out track (Haney, Abrams, Gruia, Madaus & Wheelock 2003; Legters & Kerr 2001). Strategies for Success embeds social supports into the school environment and extends them into the community and family. The program's design calls for it to work in close collaboration with school principals, teachers and staff; foster connections to families; develop comprehensive, youth-centered services that keep the youth engaged in pro-social activities; and create opportunities for students to develop bonds with one or more caring adults. Transitional support is offered to students as they enter alternative schools and continues during the first six months of their return to the mainstream school as research shows that gains made during alternative school placement, if any, dissipate once the student returns to their regular school (Kochar 1998). The students' return to their home schools is a difficult journey when the stigma of alternative school placement reemerges. Thus transitional support is a means to help students cope more effectively with their placement in an alternative school and subsequently re-engage in mainstream school.

## **PROGRAM ELEMENTS**

### ***Transitional Planning***

The program is anchored to "transitional planning" services that focus on helping students to make a successful transition back to a mainstream school. The Strategies program is introduced to parents and youth the day the youth is enrolled in the alternative school. A staff

person, either the project coordinator or social worker, explains the program's purpose, engages in a discussion and question and answer period, and, if the parent and student agree, enrolls the youth in the program and introduces the youth to his or her transitional planner (TP). The TP becomes the key liaison among the youth, parent, alternative school, and mainstream school as well as a link to other SfS and community services. TP services continue throughout the student's stay in the alternative school, and extends for six months following transfer back to mainstream.

The development of the transitional plan involves youth and family members in an assessment of youth interests and personal goals. The assessment process starts in school and continues with follow-up meetings with parents/guardians at home. It involves gathering school and other records to identify past problems as well as achievements. The transitional planner works with youth and parents/guardians throughout the year, regularly meeting with them to encourage improvements in student performance and behavior in and out of school.

Student achievements are documented in a portfolio that accompanies the youth back to mainstream school in an effort to accentuate the student's accomplishments and mitigate the stigma of alternative school placement. The transitional planner meets with key staff in the mainstream school to review the transitional plans and portfolios and indicate the continuing support available to the student.

#### ***After-School/Youth Development Activities***

An important component of SfS is the introduction of after-school and other youth development activities into the alternative school environment, which previously provided no comparable programming. These activities are intended to tap into youth interests and give them opportunities to be active leaders and creators. Many of the activities are designed with input from focus groups with youth. For example, prior to setting up the after-school component, we asked students what would entice them to participate in an after-school program when they are apparently reluctant even to attend school with regularity. The youth suggested that a sound studio to record hip hop music would draw students to the program. In keeping with a youth leadership approach, after-school activities are designed to promote a peaceable, respectful learning environment. Youth helped to establish rules for the use of the sound studio: lyrics cannot use obscenities or be homophobic or misogynous. Material produced is intended to be used pedagogically by youth who serve in peer leadership positions, training other youth in adopting behaviors and attitudes that promote alternatives to violence and reduce the risk of HIV. To accomplish these goals, the students complete peer educator training in violence prevention and HIV/health education. To hone their skills as song writers, they participate in a writing workshop. The results are a CD and anthology of poetry that are previewed at an annual Youth Banquet attended by youth, teachers, parents and program staff.

Leadership training and interactive activities are a major part of the program and youth are eligible to earn stipends through their peer leadership work. The after-school program also provides academic support and computer training, arts and crafts, sports, and martial arts. Finally, the program also includes work readiness workshops and opportunities for paid summer internships with local businesses.

#### ***Family connections***

Home visits and telephone calls to parents are a key way to encourage and facilitate parent involvement. The program also hosts monthly parent support groups and special events

that allow parents to see their children in active leadership roles. Examples of the kinds of topics addressed in the parent groups are effective advocacy for your child, effective parenting techniques, and planning for a safe and happy summer. Parents have invited key school district administrators to meet with them to discuss concerns. Work with parents is individualized and recognizes the struggles that characterize their parenting such as low wage jobs, hours inconvenient to child rearing and uses a strength-based approach that does not presuppose a negative stereotype.

### ***Adult connections***

Beyond close contact with parents, SfS offers many opportunities for youth to connect with one or more supportive adults. Alternative school students are typically disconnected from youth-serving organizations, and the negative labels attached to alternative schools and their student body has resulted in few agencies being willing to work in these settings and with these youth. The SfS program addresses these students' lack of pro-social connections by creating a variety of opportunities for social bonding with caring adults. The assignment of a transitional planner is intended to establish a long term, one-to-one relationship that starts from the day the student enters the alternative school. Students are exposed to other adults through SfS as well. These include instructors who conduct youth development activities that are part of the after-school program - a writing/poetry workshop, alternative to violence and health education, leadership skills, martial arts, computer skills, and sound studio production. Teachers often serve as academic consultants to the after-school program, providing tutoring and academic supports. Finally, CCA also recruits and matches adults from the community to mentor youth. Many of these mentors are willing to continue their relationship with the youth after their formal program commitment is over. Mentoring programs are intended to provide youth with informal supports to encourage them to stay in school and engage them in recreational and cultural activities.

### **PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION**

Strategies is a voluntary program that began to intake students in March 2001. Between that date and April 2004, Strategies enrolled 227 alternative school students in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Students are enrolled in SfS when they enter alternative school. The process of intake involves referral by the school staff person (typically the guidance counselor or principal) who conducts the school intake. The intake for Strategies is expected to take place immediately following the school intake and involves an interview with the student and parent, and a consent-to-participate form signed by both. Where the referral is not made at the time of school intake, CCA staff attempt to contact the parent by telephone to introduce the program and determine whether or not the parent and youth are interested. These follow-up attempts continue for two weeks following the student's enrollment in the alternative school.

Other than student and parent interest, there are no other criteria for program entry. While CCA will not actively pursue a student after the two-week period, students can request to be enrolled in SfS at any time while they are in the alternative school. Reasons for non-participation vary, with the primary reasons attributed to students and families already receiving case management or similar services from another agency and activities outside of school that make them less interested in Strategies.

As of August 2004, 41 percent of students enrolled in Strategies had successfully completed the program, defined as transfer back to mainstream school plus six months in

mainstream without re-assignment to an alternative school. Another 26 percent were still active. Eighteen percent of program participants have been discharged from the program for chronic failures to meet with their transitional planner, expressed disinterest and chronic lack of participation in program activities. Arrests or other school problems are not reasons for termination. The remaining 15 percent were closed prior to completion for a variety of reasons including moving out of the district, placement, or reasons not directly related to their program participation.

### THE EVALUATION PROCESS AND FINDINGS

Through the program grant from the U.S. Department of Education, CCA undertook an outcome evaluation that focused on post-program suspensions, assignments to alternative school, academic achievement, attendance, pro-social attitudes and behaviors, and involvement in the criminal justice system. For the analysis of suspension, alternative school, academic, and attendance-related outcomes, the study employed a quasi-experimental design: a comparison group was composed of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students who were assigned to an alternative school but who did not participate in the SfS program. The School District provided the project with data regarding attendance, academic achievement, suspensions, and assignments to alternative school; the Onondaga County Probation Department provided us with information about post-enrollment adjudications and convictions; and pro-social attitudinal and behavioral data were provided by a survey (“the Youth Survey”) administered to Strategies participants at intake and at the time they were closed from the program. This section contains a brief summary of the evaluation’s findings that will inform the discussion that follows.

Table 1 shows that comparison group students differed from Strategies students in a few key respects: Strategies students were more likely to be African-American, female, eligible for subsidized lunch, and have poor attendance and levels of academic achievement. Of particular relevance to an interpretation of the evaluation’s findings, SfS participants and completers were much more likely than the comparison group to have been suspended to an alternative school one or more times in the past. These characteristics indicate that the Strategies program was not creaming students and suggest that they were likely to find their return to mainstream school to be a challenging experience. It is noteworthy that all three groups represented in Table 1 reflect a population that is disproportionately male and African American, with low educational achievement, high incidences of learning disabilities, and poor attendance.

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics, January/March 2002 - August 2004, By Group

	SfS Participants (N=227)	SfS Completers (N=92)	Comparison Group (N=560)
Percent African American	78.0	78.3	66.8
Percent Male	63.0	59.8	67.1
Percent Free/Reduced cost lunch	96.5	97.8	93.0
Percent Learning disabled	16.3	15.2	20.4
Percent with one or more prior suspensions	64.3	66.3	41.0

Percent with one or more prior assignments to SCSD alternative School	48.0	55.4	12.7
Percent GPA $\geq$ 70	27.2	37.5	32.1
Percent attend $\geq$ 4 days per week	57.5	63.7	63.1

SfS participants showed greater improvements in school behavior, as measured by changes in four outcome measures between the year prior to their enrollment and two years following their enrollment. Table 2 shows the percent change in four measures of students' behavior, broken down by group. The results show the greatest improvement on resuspension and replacement in alternative school. There was a 63 percent decline in the number of youth who completed in the program being sent to a suspension hearing and a 64 percent decrease in their placement in an alternative school. In contrast, the percent of students in the comparison group who were sent to a suspension hearing declined by only 14 percent, and the percent of comparison group students reassigned to an alternative school actually increased by 13 percent.

Table 2: Percent Change in Behavior Between Baseline and Two-Year Follow-Up, by Group<sup>3</sup>

	SfS Participants	SfS Completers	Comparison Group
Sent to One or More Suspension Hearings	-53.2	-62.8	-14.2
Assigned to an Alternative School	-47.0	-63.6	+13.3
GPA	+7.3	+1.9	-8.7
Attendance	+5.9	-.0	-5.4

Table 3 provides information on criminal justice involvement of participants and the comparison group based upon records provided by the Onondaga County Probation Department. These records indicate that SfS participants, and particularly those youth who completed the SfS program, have somewhat better criminal justice outcomes. SfS completers are less likely to have been convicted in criminal court, or been convicted of a felony offense. Finally, of those convicted/adjudicated, those youth who have successfully completed SfS were less likely to receive a custodial/incarceration sentence.<sup>4</sup> SfS participants also show the same pattern of more limited criminal justice system involvement.

<sup>3</sup>These changes reflect cohorts 1 and 2 only, i.e. students who enrolled in the Strategies program between January 2000 and July 2001. We chose to limit the analysis to the first two cohorts because they have all (except one student) exited from the program and have experienced "all" of what the program had to offer them.

<sup>4</sup>Included in custodial sentences are placement in juvenile justice facilities, or incarceration in the local Onondaga County Correctional Facility or state prison.

**Table 3: Criminal Justice Status 60 Days Post-Enrollment or Eligibility, By Group**

	SfS Participants	SfS Completers	Comparison Group
Criminal Conviction	6.2%	4.4%	6.7%
Felony-level Conviction	3.1%	1.1%	3.6%
Custodial Sentences	2.2%	1.1%	3.6%

The program began to administer a survey at program enrollment and at closing to measure changes in participant attitudes towards violence, adults and community connections. Table 4 shows the results of this survey for the 28 students for which we have a complete data set. In general, the data show improvements in each area measured: anger/fighting and fatalism declined while caring/cooperative behaviors and adult attachments increased. The anger and fighting scale consisted of six questions that asked about the frequency with which the student engaged in a particular activity (hitting back, walking away from a fight, threatening to hit another student, getting into a physical fight when angry, being mean when angry, and taking anger out on an innocent person) during the past thirty days. The fatalism scale consisted of five items assessing the degree to which students have a sense of mastery over their futures. Students were asked to indicate, on a four-point scale, the degree to which their personal success or failure was their own fault; they would be able to get a good job if they had the right education; they generally had much of a chance in life; getting into trouble was under their control; and they could “pretty much decide” what would happen to them in their life. The caring and cooperation scale also asked about the frequency of seven behaviors: helping another student to stay out of a fight; providing positive feedback to other students; cooperating with others; talking to another student to address conflict; protecting someone from a bully; giving someone a compliment; and helping another student solve a problem. The indicators of adult attachments also revealed positive trends across a number of categories. In general, they were substantially more likely to report having admiration for adults in their lives; to report being able to seek out advice from adults; and to report being able to seek out adults when they were in trouble after having participated in the program.

**Table 4: Behavioral and Attitudinal Scale Scores at Intake and Closing (N=28)**

Scale Type		Mean Score	Std. Deviation	Sig. (1-tailed)
Anger	Intake	7.50	2.57	**0.01
	Closing	6.32	2.18	
Fighting	Intake	11.21	2.60	0.14
	Closing	10.68	2.65	

Anger/Fighting Combined	Intake	16.18	3.91	**0.03
	Closing	14.75	3.83	
Caring and Cooperation	Intake	17.50	4.18	*0.06
	Closing	18.90	4.40	
Fatalism	Intake	2.36	0.39	0.12
	Closing	2.28	0.33	
Self Control	Intake	18.11	2.97	0.45
	Closing	17.79	4.30	
Self Efficacy	Intake	23.16	2.68	0.37
	Closing	23.36	2.95	

\*P<0.10; \*\*P<0.05

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The Strategies for Success program shows promise for the reduction of school suspensions and improving outcomes for youth who would otherwise be slotted in what is increasingly understood as the “prison track” (Allen, Almeida & Steinberg 2003). In almost all outcome areas, the results are positive. Students who participated in the program, and most specifically students who successfully completed the program, demonstrate lower suspension rates, reduced placements in alternative schools, improved attendance, better grades and lower rates of justice involvement than the comparison group.

Our findings lead to several conclusions and recommendations. The first is that comprehensive programming that provides social supports that extend from school to community and family results in positive outcomes for students. The second conclusion is that the methods used to avert resuspension to alternative school are readily adaptable to prevent the use of out-of-school suspensions. This would require school policies that significantly curtail the use of out-of-school suspensions, and better training of staff on issues that form the context of the lives of urban youth, and behavioral management techniques that more effectively address the negative behaviors that arise as a result of dire family and community conditions. School boards and district personnel need a deeper understanding of the consequences of school suspension particularly for African American young men.

The third conclusion is that the school to prison pipeline can be disrupted by investing in interventions for very high risk students. The youth who participated in and/or completed the SfS program had less criminal justice system involvement, faced less serious charges, and if involved, received less severe justice system sanctions. This finding underscores the role that schools can play in helping marginalized youth, particularly young men of color, avoid criminal

justice system involvement. The role of schools as a crime prevention/incarceration prevention strategy is worthy of further study and discussion.

The fourth conclusion is less hopeful. Despite the positive results of the SfS program, the population of students remains educationally at risk. The attendance rates of even the SfS completers remain below the district-wide average, and their grade point averages remain very low. Thus, it is important to consider how to provide long term academic support for these students and how to ensure that mainstream schools have training, resources, and programming to reduce both suspensions and re-suspensions.

The Syracuse City School District, like other urban districts, must balance the need to provide an environment conducive to learning and avoid the marginalization of the very students for whom education is the only ticket out of a lifetime of poverty and social problems. Alternative schools are increasingly used to place “troublesome” students, yet they are typically without sufficient resources to effectively address the myriad of complex student needs that underlie behavior. Moreover, in an environment that neglects urban schools, it becomes increasingly difficult to devise a more effective district-wide response to vulnerable and troubled youth.

Programs like Strategies for Success, no matter how well designed and implemented, confront a larger socio-political environment that has left urban education grappling with budget uncertainty and chronic under-funding that shortchanges the neediest of students. However, the value in continuing efforts to improve outcomes for these students extends beyond their education, to their prospects of future employment and ability to avoid a life of incarceration. The public school system must find ways to keep young people in the school yards, and out of the prison yards.

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