



# SPECIAL REPORT: SCHOOL SCAM

JUSTICE FOR TRAYVON

HOLLYWOOD 'WHITEOUT'  
JAMES BALDWIN REVISITED

EAST SAINT LOUIS:  
BLACK & BLUE

# CRISIS

A RECORD OF THE DARKER RACES

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CHAD DOWLING, BELOW: BETTMANN/GETTY IMAGES

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"Jimmy's voice, as much as Dr King's or Malcolm X's, helped shepherd and guide us toward Black liberation."



**Crisis Statement of Principles** At *The Crisis*, we remain committed: To battle tirelessly for the rights of humanity and the highest ideals of democracy ■ To tell the world the facts ■ To expose injustice and propose solutions ■ To speak for ourselves ■ To speak the truth to power ■ To serve as a trustworthy record of the darker races ■ To serve as a reliable antidote to ignorance ■ To shape and strengthen our collective consciousness ■ To serve humbly and forthrightly as memory and conscience, as spirit and heart.



# SCHOOL

# CRAM

How children of color get stuck in low-performing public alternative schools

by Chandra Thomas Whitfield

**M**ORNINGS ALWAYS began the same for Johnathan Hicks. He'd line up, remove his shoes, belt and money from his pockets and then hand over his coat to get stored in the "contraband room." Then a security officer would wave a handheld metal detector across his body. His white shirt signaled that he was "a minimal risk" to others, while those around him who wore either blue or yellow shirts were considered more dangerous.

This probably sounds like the intake process at a local jail – not the start of a 9-year-old boy's school day. Well, it was three years ago when the diminutive Savannah, Ga. third-grader was, as his mother puts it, "sentenced" to Scott Alternative Learning Center. The K-12 alternative school for children with disciplinary and academic problems was his only option when at the end of his third-grade year he snuck what he thought was a BB gun onto his elementary school's bus. Some kids passed it around that winter morning. Campus police officers were dispatched to the school and Johnathan was expelled well before the lunch bell rang that day.

That the gun – a throwaway item from his stepdad's flea market gig left in a box on his parent's nightstand – was unloaded and inoperable; or that he'd



Name

School

Grade

- 9 3/4
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never gotten into trouble at school before was not a consideration. And that other kids on the bus confirmed to school officials that he'd never pointed it at anyone or made threats of any kind wasn't either. The fact that he'd had perfect attendance and was a straight A student who'd won several science fair awards was irrelevant too. Zero tolerance means just that: *zero tolerance*.

Johnathan's mother, Aishia Hicks-Groover, contested the charges at a hearing, known as a tribunal, in hopes that her son's pristine school record would have some impact. She even offered to home-school him for the remainder of that school year—but school board members and the principal wouldn't budge. He'd have to attend Scott for a minimum of one school year before a transfer back to a traditional school would even be considered.

"It was basically a prison in training; it's where they dump the kids that nobody cares about," recalls Hicks-Groover, of the school where few school supplies are allowed to be brought in or out. She would know. She works full-time as a corrections officer at an adult prison about 10 minutes away from the school.

Scott and the elementary school from which Johnathan had been removed could not be more different. Hicks-Groover, a mother of five, chose to awaken extra early on school days to drive her son to campus after observing his considerably older schoolmates allegedly smoking marijuana and fighting at the bus stop. "They had him riding on the same school bus with the older kids," remembers Hicks-Groover. "He was only in third grade; there is absolutely no reason why someone his age should be on the same school bus with 11th-and-12th-graders. And there were even younger kids at this school too."

She says for three months straight her son, who had previously loved learning, sobbed, dreading school. "He was still trying to be a good kid, but it's hard to be good when you're around bad eight hours a day," she says. "I'd tell him, 'I want my son back; the one who was a good student and didn't talk back.'"

Johnathan says every day he regretted his mistake. "I didn't feel free; I didn't like it there," remembers Johnathan, now 12. "I kept thinking about what I did and how I wasn't supposed to do that. I was sad and mad. When you do something bad, bad things happen to you."

His mother says he was terrified daily of what awaited him at the school, like many alternative schools nationwide, considered mostly a "dumping ground" for problem children. "I even had a counselor at the school tell me once 'your

son doesn't really belong here, but most of these [other] kids are lifers,'" she says. "Instead of labeling kids 'lifers' I think schools like this should be helping kids turn their lives around. Society just throws them away at such an early age."

**A**S A YOUNG African-American boy, Johnathan fits the demographic of the majority of students who get sent to public alternative schools each year. In many other ways, however, he was not like most kids who land there after getting kicked out of traditional settings mostly for disciplinary or academic problems. For one, he was a high-performing student from a two-parent household. Secondly, contrary to common perception, serious offenses, like bringing weapons to school, account for a minuscule amount of suspensions and expulsions. A National Education Policy Center (NEPC) report released late last year found that such infractions make up about 5 percent of incidents.

"When you think of an alternative school student most people automatically assume that they got there by busting somebody in the head," says Leticia Smith-Evans, assistant counsel at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF). "If there's one myth that needs to be dispelled that is it. Most kids get sent to these schools for minor stuff or 'infractions' and that alternative school student label can follow a student for life."

Black and Latino students, the NEPC report finds, also tend to be punished more harshly than their White counterparts for the same "classroom disturbances," which are often classified as such solely at the discretion of teachers and school administrators.

"These are kids who are already struggling so why do we continue to throw obstacles in their path?" asks Jennifer Falk, former education chairwoman for the Georgia State Conference of the NAACP. "I've worked with hundreds of families and I am telling you that when you dig into it we're not talking drug offenses, we're not talking hitting teachers, we're not talking selling drugs. This is a kid who pisses off a teacher or administrator; it's not the kid you're scared of."

RICHARD BURNHARDT/AP



THEY OFTEN HAVE OPTIMISTIC SOUNDING NAMES LIKE CAPSTONE, CROSSROADS AND LEARNING ENTERPRISE, BUT MANY ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS ARE LOCATED IN CRUMBLING OLDER BUILDINGS THAT INCREASINGLY RESEMBLE PRISONS; COMPLETE WITH METAL DETECTORS, POLICE OFFICERS, SURVEILLANCE CAMERAS, CHAIN-LINK FENCES AND SURPRISE SEARCHES.



*Aisha Hicks-Groover and her son Johnathan discovered that alternative schools can do far more harm than good.*

### SAVAGE INEQUALITIES

Several studies also reveal that poor students and those with learning disabilities also tend to be disproportionately disciplined. Many end up at low-performing alternative schools, where their educational success is diminished. Adds Smith-Evans, "Numerous studies show that even when you control for economic status, students are disproportionately disciplined based on race," along with those with disabilities, limited English proficiency and those who identify as LGBT.

Especially worrisome to many critics is the long-term negative consequences that a substandard education often imposes on a student's life. Even President Obama, at a July 2011 roundtable, called education "the single most important factor" in determining whether kids can compete for the best jobs. Many alternative school students often end up in the criminal justice system.

"High school dropouts are 63 times more likely to be incarcerated than college graduates," says Rob Rhodes, director of projects at the Georgia Appleseed Center for Law & Justice, a nonpartisan, nonprofit, public interest law center. "For example, 68.4 percent of Georgia prisoners have less than a high school education."

They often have optimistic sounding names like Capstone, Crossroads and Learning Enterprise, but many alternative

schools are located in crumbling older buildings that increasingly resemble prisons; complete with metal detectors, police officers, surveillance cameras, chain-link fences and surprise searches. In fact, until recently the use of "seclusion rooms," basically, solitary confinement cells, was legal in Georgia public schools. It took a 2010 state board ruling aimed at protecting "all children in schools from misuse of restraint and seclusion" for that to change. That same year, the House of Representatives approved legislation that would limit the use of restraints and confinement in schools nationwide, after reports surfaced of children being pinned to the floor, handcuffed and locked in closets. (The Senate version hasn't been voted on. It was introduced again in December 2011.)

Marlyn Tillman, co-founder of the Georgia-based Gwinnett Parent Coalition To Dismantle The School To Prison Pipeline organization has researched these schools for several years. She says deplorable conditions are numerous. For example, she learned of one instance where students met for a couple hours of instruction each morning in a mall food court before retreating to clean out offices and pick up trash as "community service." And she found "maybe one or two" schools supported by county sheriff's departments where students rode to school on the same vans also used to transport jail inmates.



"During a meeting with Gwinnett County [Ga.] public school officials," recalls an exasperated Tillman. "We complained about alternative school resources and a high ranking school district official incredulously asked 'well, you don't expect them to have the same stuff as the regular school students do you?.' We've got to stop this outdated punishment approach to alternative education."

Unfortunately, national data on these schools is fairly limited. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) released the most recent extensive national study on public alternative schools and programs, the first of its kind, in 2002. It found that during the 2000-2001 school year there were 10,900 public alternative schools and programs serving approximately 612,900 'at-risk' students nationwide. The NCES report noted that alternative schools are located mostly:

- In urban districts
- Districts with 10,000 or more students
- Districts in the Southeast
- Districts with a high population of students of color
- Districts with high poverty concentrations

Overall, special education students comprised 12 percent of enrollment.

"The South tends to get the most attention [for having low-performing, alternative schools], but people should know that this is a problem in many parts of the country," insists Smith-Evans of LDF.

Many alternative students also often have limited English proficiency. These schools, consequently, can often function as "warehouses" for academically underprepared children from poor and working-class families.

Many pundits argue that alternative students are lumped together, while receiving treatment as second-class citizens rather than a meaningful and equitable education. "In this warehousing and cooling-out environment, a 'blaming the victim' ideology is pervasive while the school's systematic problems remain unquestioned," writes Kansas State University researcher Jeong-Hee Kim.

"We know that adolescents care more about what adolescents think more than therapists or teachers, so peer influence is a factor," contends Joel Rosch, a senior research scholar at Duke University's Center for Child and Family Policy. As a result, if you put kids with anti-social tendencies together, they will reinforce those tendencies rather than pay attention to teachers and therapists. As a result, Rosch adds, "the children are generally going to get worse."

Hicks-Groover says her son witnessed fights, drug use and other disturbing behavior while at Scott. She claims another student punched Johnathan in the face in class after Johnathan asked him to be quiet while a teacher was talking. The fact that her son was not being challenged academically only exacerbated her frustration. "Johnathan said he didn't see any books; they just got runoff sheets," Hicks-Groover



Marlyn Tillman has researched alternative schools for several years.

says. "There were no spelling tests, no quizzes, nothing. He says they'd do work for two or three hours then the rest of the time they had free time to play."

Johnathan completed his time at Scott in the Spring of 2010 and has since returned to a traditional middle school where, his mother says, he had to relearn what was acceptable behavior.

#### THE DISCIPLINE FACTOR

Equally disturbing, the school rules and zero tolerance policies that often land students in alternative schools are often applied subjectively. Studies backing up that assertion are plentiful. For example, the results of an unprecedented study that followed all seventh graders in the state of Texas for more than six years (nearly one million) found that only three percent of the disciplinary actions that resulted in suspensions and expulsions were for conduct in which state law mandated such action; the rest were made at the discretion of school officials primarily in response to violations of local schools' conduct codes, researchers said.

**E**XAMPLES OF EXTREME discipline have included students being suspended or expelled for using cell phones in class, scribbling on desks or not wearing parts of their school uniform. Such offenses could

**THE CONNECTION BETWEEN IN-SCHOOL DISCIPLINARY ACTION AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM IS AMONG THE LONG-TERM REPERCUSSIONS THAT WORRY MANY CRITICS.**

warrant a warning from the teacher, but several studies find that many of the most vulnerable students tend to get kicked out altogether. Last December, a 9-year-old Black boy in North Carolina was suspended for "sexual harassment" for reportedly calling a substitute teacher "cute." The school had cited other incidents where he'd allegedly used derogatory words factored into the three-day suspension. His mother says she had not previously been notified.

Results from the Texas study nearly mirror that of one released last year by the Georgia Appleseed Center for Law & Justice. It found that some Georgia districts impose out-of-school-suspension (OSS) at a rate 10 to 20 times higher than others. The "Effective Student Discipline: Keeping Kids in Class" report includes analysis of seven years of Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) data. It found that although African-American students made up 38 percent of the 2008-09 student body, they were more than three times as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension (OSS). And the 53 percent of students who were eligible for free or reduced lunches made up 73 percent of OSS.

The Georgia stats and the findings from a 2010 Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) analysis of four decades of U.S. Department of Education (DOE) data from 18 urban school districts are consistent. The SPLC report "Suspended Education: Urban Middle Schools in Crisis," found that Black boys were nearly three times as likely as White boys to be suspended in many of the nation's middle schools. Black girls were suspended at more than four times the rate of White girls for similar offenses. The analysis also found that school authorities also suspended Latino and Native American middle school students at higher rates than Whites, though not at the disproportionate rates for Black children.

"Statistics show that Black girls have the fastest growing rate of suspension," notes Smith-Evans of LDF.

### IMPACT ON EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

The Texas study, dubbed "Breaking Schools' Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement" also points out the impact that harsh disciplinary actions and alternative school transfers tend to have on educational outcomes. It asserts, for example, that when students are suspended or expelled, the likelihood that they will repeat a grade, not graduate, and/or become involved in the juvenile justice system significantly increases. "The more kids get excluded from class it has an impact on their ability to graduate," says Rob Rhodes, lead researcher on the Georgia Appleseed study. "Our report showed that school districts with higher than average out-of-school suspension rates tended to have graduation rates that are consistently lower than the state average and significantly lower than the graduation rates of school districts with low OSS rates in the seven-year period studied. It's important to note that the fact that there's a correlation doesn't mean its causation."

"Research shows that as discipline rates go up, achievement rates go down," adds Tillman. "That's because you haven't created an environment where kids feel safe to learn."

The NEPC report also found that removing disruptive students from a classroom sometimes causes the "good kids" who remain to also become disruptive.

The connection between in-school disciplinary action and

the criminal justice system is among the long-term repercussions that worry many critics. "It's important to understand the link between diversity, discipline and academic achievement...being kicked-out leads to becoming a dropout," asserts Kevin Welner, director of the University of Colorado-based NEPC.

Some national leaders are taking note. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and Attorney General Eric Holder have rolled out a federal program aimed at curbing the trend of suspended students ending up in the criminal justice system. The "Supportive School Discipline Initiative," will, among other objectives, "develop guidance to ensure that school discipline policies and practices comply with the nation's civil rights laws to promote positive disciplinary options to both keep kids in school and improve the climate for learning." DOE leaders, in conjunction with the Departments of Justice, say they will collaborate with nonprofit and philanthropic organizations to execute the initiative.

"Ensuring that our educational system is a doorway to opportunity—and not a point of entry to our criminal justice system—is a critical, and achievable, goal," Holder said during the program's July launch. "By bringing together government, law enforcement, academic, and community leaders, I'm confident that we can make certain that school discipline policies are enforced fairly and do not become obstacles to future growth, progress, and achievement."

### ALTERNATIVE TO ALTERNATIVES

By and large, most alternative school pundits push for more policies that allow more kids to remain in traditional school with more widespread use of alternative discipline practices, such as the Restorative Practices and Positive Behavioral Interventions And Supports (PBIS) models; both stress positive reinforcement and conflict prevention. But even the staunchest of critics agree that with the appropriate application of resources some alternative school environments can work. "It's hard; schools are under a lot of pressure, but they're not made to throw away kids and put them in warehouses," asserts Falk, formerly of the Georgia NAACP. "If you want to try [different approaches to alternative education] great, but make sure your measurement tools are in place and make sure you are being transparent. And you better take it very seriously." A 2006, American Institutes for Research study on effective alternative education programs concluded that troubled students tend to flourish in alternative learning environments "where they believe that their teachers, staff, and administrators care about and respect them, value their opinion, establish fair rules that they support ... and take a non-authoritarian approach to teaching." Such research supports the view that if you have to use alternative education, a smaller, supportive atmosphere is more likely to keep students in school and motivate them to attain educational goals.

"It's important that we not paint all alternative programs with one broad brush," Rosch, of Duke, warns. "In some cases, a smaller alternative setting where adults can work hard to prevent negative peer influences, can be a good thing; it can give some kids a second chance."

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