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Spare the rod, teach the child

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Schools learn lessons, just like students.

In the DeKalb County School District, we think the way we discipline young people might earn a higher grade.

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* recently reported on the numbers of students suspended from high schools in our metro area. DeKalb County had five of the top 10 schools with the most suspensions. While we might not agree completely with the data that was recently released from the state, this issue has been on my radar since I arrived in July.

We're not really proud of that. Suspension should not routinely be the first consequence when a student runs into an issue of discipline. *A de facto* suspension policy for discipline violations teaches students a lot about punishment ... but not so much about problem-solving, self-control, or compassion for others.

Let's be clear. Respect and discipline must be central to the experience of education, and all through life. We in the DeKalb school district want young people to be fully accountable for behavior.

But we also understand that dismissing a young person for bad behavior in school often simply pushes that bad behavior out into the world. Is this the role of an educational system, sending classroom problems out the door to become street corner problems? Absolutely not.

We believe we should make every possible effort to keep more of our young men where they belong – in the classroom. For many, that's the most structured, safest place to help them gain the social skills they need to succeed in life.

I mention young men for a reason. Our current disciplinary system disproportionately punishes male students of color. More black young men ... and a higher percentage of black young men ... receive discipline than any other group in public schools.

Do they deserve more discipline? Yes. Any time this subject comes up, the conversation becomes philosophical. People in favor of strict, zero-tolerance guidelines point out, often with good intention and deep sincerity, that teachers, administrators, and other students should never have to put up with bad classroom behavior.

We agree. But we're realists too. We understand that dealing with discipline may require nuance and new approaches in a complex district like ours, with 135 schools and 102,000 students from 180 nations and with 144 languages. Our teachers walk into classrooms every day dedicated to students who have experienced traumatic circumstances (death, abuse, homelessness), and who are gravely at risk educationally.

The life chances of the average child of color lags behind by almost every measure ... and it's especially bad for boys and young men.

A kid out of school has a higher chance of ending up in the criminal justice system ... not to mention the higher chance of being a victim of a violent crime. Without schooling, fewer young men of color participate in the labor force, compared to young white men. This means higher unemployment and poverty rates in adulthood ... and a perpetual cycle of hopelessness

In DeKalb, we want appropriate penalties for inappropriate behavior ... but the last thing we want is play any part in the destruction of a young adult life before it even begins.

We see growing support at the state and federal level for new approaches. Governor Nathan Deal and President Obama agree that we should reform criminal justice laws to reduce prison populations and give former inmates opportunities to rebuild their lives ... especially after incarceration for non-violent crimes.

In the same way, we feel DeKalb must change the discipline culture in our school district. As a start, we're training our people to look at restorative practices to help remediate behavior.

Restorative approaches offer better alternatives than punitive disciplinary systems and procedures. In a punitive system, discipline really doesn't link wrongdoers and those they harm. It fails to make any real connections between punishment and the actual offense. Authorities ask: *What rule's been broken? Who's to blame? What's the punishment?*

The restorative approach asks questions that open a path to progress: *What happened? Who's been affected? How? How do we put things right? How do we move forward?*

Increasingly, we see schools with restorative approaches more effective at shaping positive classroom cultures. They establish lasting changes in relationships and better connections among members of a school community. Victims speak, and wrongdoers face them ... and face accountability. The entire climate of care improves.

In DeKalb, our restorative system of discipline will focus on the whole child ... not just the bad a child does.

A newly created Student Support and Intervention Division will guide our efforts to address the diverse needs of students and families. Understanding that behavioral problems can result from issues in the home – issues in which entire families may need help – we'll work to provide intensified wrap-around support for this 'whole child.' This support may include counseling, social work, psychological services, and community connections. As part of our effort, 12

schools will implement Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports during the 2016-17 school year, with more to join in 2017-18.

We're evaluating The Student Code of Conduct, which defines inappropriate behavior and consequences. We want to graft restorative practices ... and more reasonable penalties ... into this key piece of DeKalb DNA.

We're getting better data on students, helping us spot trends ... and then put right resources in the right places.

Finally, we're intensifying our focus on wrap-around support for young men of color as part of My Brother's Keeper, an initiative expanded by President Obama during this year's MLK Day commemorations. My Brother's Keeper seeks to identify and expand the most successful initiatives in national education. To address opportunity gaps, businesses have pledged \$200 million nationally to this effort.

We embrace President Obama's reasoning for the initiative.

"We need to give every child, no matter what they look like, where they live, the chance to reach full potential," Obama said.

"If we help these wonderful young men become better husbands and fathers, and well-educated, hardworking, good citizens, then not only will they contribute to the growth and prosperity of this country, but they will pass on those lessons on to their children, on to their grandchildren, will start a different cycle."

Kids – even troubled kids – have a better shot at life after school by learning to deal with life in school.

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