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## **Ga. ACLU To Host “School-To-Prison Pipeline” Forums**

Written by [Chandra R. Thomas](#) on Sep 26, 2010

The [American Civil Liberties Union](#) calls the “**School-To-Prison Pipeline**” (STPP) one of the most important civil rights challenges facing our nation today ([view the Advancement Project’s STPP report](#)). The term refers to what the organization cites as a national trend of criminalizing, rather than educating, the nation’s children. It is carried out, the ACLU says, through zero-tolerance discipline, school-based arrests, disciplinary alternative schools and secured detention to marginalize disadvantaged youth and deny them access to a quality education.

In an effort to raise public awareness and map out prevention strategies, the [ACLU of Georgia](#) is teaming up with several other non-profit organizations to hold a series of five regional community symposiums. The overall objective, organizers say, is to bring together students, parents, community groups, elected representatives and faith-based organizations. All of the information compiled will be included in a statewide action plan that would highlight community-based solutions as well as proven local and national strategies for change. **ACLU of Georgia Legal Director Chara Jackson** spoke to **JJIE’s Chandra Thomas** about the focus of the forums being held next month across the state — from Atlanta to Valdosta.



Chara Jackson is Legal Director for the ACLU of Georgia.

### **Is the STPP a juvenile justice issue?**

What we’re talking about is that instead of getting a quality education, kids are getting arrested for bringing a Tweety Bird keychain to school. Is that really a weapon? There are incidents where a kid mistakenly brings a butter knife to school, turns it into the principal and still gets in trouble for possessing a weapon. There’s been an explosion of such incidents in schools. They are getting arrested and put into the juvenile justice system. These children do not belong in jail. Nowadays kids can be arrested for doing things at school that they would not be arrested for if they had done it on the sidewalk. It is routine now for kids to be expelled or arrested for things that I know when I was a kid you ended up having to sit down and having a talk with the principal about.

### **In your own words, what exactly is the STPP?**

It’s a phenomenon people began to notice happening about a decade ago. It’s essentially things that move children out of the school system and into the criminal justice system. Some people call it school push out. This is being carried out through zero tolerance policies. Now there are school-based arrest for things that used to land you in the principal’s office. It also includes the growth of alternative schools. In the last five to six years there’s been a lot of growth in the number of kids being sent to alternative schools for disciplinary actions. Many of the students (sent to alternative schools) get caught up on that track and don’t get a quality education.

### **What’s wrong with transferring children with behavioral problems to an alternative school? What *should* happen to disruptive students instead?**

Research has shown that [moving kids to] a different environment does not necessarily correct those problems. We think it is possible to address the disciplinary problems at regular schools or other intervention methods that do not sacrifice their education. The school-to-prison pipeline also includes high stakes testing such as what is required by No Child Left Behind. These are policies where educational success is determined solely on testing. It also puts schools in the position of having to move children who don't test well out of the school rather than to help them out. We also know that that the school-to-prison Pipeline disproportionately affects minority and learning disabled students.

### **What is the ACLU of Georgia doing to address these concerns?**

Five years ago we issued a report on best practices in regards to the school-to-prison pipeline. We helped create 15 parent-led groups who said "this is a problem and we'd like to find common solutions." They meet every other month to discuss changes and make suggestions to the school board. We try to teach parents how to navigate the school handbook. It's really about a sense of school engagement.

### **What will these regional symposiums taking place next month entail?**

We've joined with several other sponsors including, **ACET (Atlanta Community Engagement Team)**, **the Georgia State Conference of NAACP**, **Gwinnett STOPP** (Gwinnett Parent Coalition to Dismantle the School-To-Prison-Pipeline) and the **Interfaith Children's Movement** to put these on. We'll have panel discussions, presentations by parents and elected officials and an "ask the attorney" panel. We've also invited local community vendors and resource providers, like leadership and advocacy programs to set up tables. We want the community to have an opportunity to see what the various organizations have to offer. We're also trying to cover "100 Stories In 100 Days," a story collection project. We're asking people to share what has happened to them good or bad (in the educational system). We want to hear about what's working, what's not working and where do we go from here. We're kicking off the symposium series at our ACLU of Georgia annual meeting at the State Bar of Georgia on October 2. The meeting is open to the public — anyone who shares our interest in civil liberties is invited to attend. We only ask that people register in advance. It'll be a whole day of workshops as well as a keynote speaker.

### **Is there a cost associated with attending the symposiums?**

There is a small fee, of \$10 for lunch. If someone is economically-challenged and unable to pay they should contact us beforehand to make arrangements. We also ask that everyone register to attend.

### **What's does your organization hope will happen after the symposiums?**

We want policy changes, including on the local level and with school boards. We also feel that there are many ways for parents to be active and involved. It's also a way to bring about community change. We want to provide information for parents on how to better navigate the system. These forums will be community centered. We're going to have representatives from the sponsoring organizations and elected officials have been invited to all of them. We'll have attorneys from the community. We're not the experts, we need input from everyone to create a plan that works. On a national level the ACLU is addressing the pipeline 52 different ways – we have 52 different affiliates and each one is taking a different approach. Ours (in Georgia) is focused more on community organizing, public education, legislative advocacy and impact litigation.

### **How will the information exchanged at the symposiums be used for community benefit?**

We want parents to know that this is something that is happening and that there are resources available to help them. A lot of parents think this is only happening to their child. We want people to know that they can address the situation. There's something they can do about. We're going to compile all of the information we learn into a statewide plan. We want everyone who participates in the symposium to get a copy of the statewide plan. We will have a distribution plan for that and make it available on our website. We want to ensure that it is very accessible to everyone.

*The **Dismantling The School-To-Prison-Pipeline Symposium Series** schedule is as follows:*

**October 9th** – Metro Atlanta (Congressional Districts – 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13)

**October 16** – Savannah (Congressional Districts – 1, 12)

**October 23rd** – Macon (Congressional Districts – 2, 8, 12)

**October 30th** – Valdosta (Congressional Districts – 1, 2, 🤔)

**November 6th** – Dalton (Congressional Districts – 9, 10, 11)

Venue details will be provided upon registration. Click here to [register now](#).

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Got a juvenile justice story idea? Contact JJIE.org staff writer Chandra R. Thomas at [cthom141@kennesaw.edu](mailto:cthom141@kennesaw.edu). Thomas, a former Rosalynn Carter Mental Health Journalism Fellow and Kiplinger Public Affairs Journalism Fellow, is an award-winning multimedia journalist who has worked for Atlanta Magazine and Fox 5 News in Atlanta.



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