

LIFESTYLE

Kitsap discusses 'school-to-prison pipeline' | Kitsap Week

by **RICHARD D. OXLEY**, North Kitsap Herald Reporter
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It's a complicated issue, but it affects students across the nation. And it's something that Kitsap's Human Rights Council thinks people should be discussing.

"Human rights is an issue that affects our day-to-day," said Tracy Flood of the Kitsap Council for Human Rights.

"We are all humans first, and issues that affect our day-to-day are important. We deal with them in one way or another through tax dollars. Education is key."

Education is the focus — in more ways than one — of the annual Human Rights Conference in Kitsap on Dec. 5.

The conference takes place each year, hosted by the Kitsap Council for Human Rights. The council's role is to educate the public on various human rights issues.

This year's conference topic is the "school-to-prison pipeline," a term applied to a variety of issues that take young people out of the school system and into the criminal justice system.

In short, the school-to-prison pipeline could be anything that neglects a student's needs, from learning disabilities to poverty or abuse. These needs can translate into disciplinary action or neglect. That, in turn, puts students on a path from school-to-prison.

"Getting word out is so important," Flood said. "There is this track that happens and it affects so many."

"It can be discipline systems, how you deal with students with disabilities or trancies," she said. "It's the way they are disciplined and miss out on day-to-day classroom activity, and that puts them on the fast track to the prison system."

The issue has picked up attention across the nation. Organizations such as the ACLU and the Justice Policy Center have taken up the cause. Policies such as zero-tolerance discipline, excessive police presence for minor school misconduct, or high-stakes testing have been cited as key problems in school structures.

The thought is that by engaging in such practices and policies, certain populations of students — such as low income, minorities, students suffering from abuse, or

those with learning disabilities — are pushed into systems that lead to the criminal justice system.

Proponents of bringing awareness to the issue often promote that education, not incarceration, is a prime solution to the problem.

Closer to Washington state, public school proponents have closely watched the McCleary decision, a state Supreme Court ruling that is holding the Legislature accountable for underfunding schools. This underfunding is viewed as one contributor to the school-to-prison pipeline issue.

"Funding is key," Flood said. "Finances have affected schools."

Flood points to cuts in schools that take away time with teachers and cause classrooms to become overcrowded, making an unfavorable school environment.

For example, Flood said, students used to have equal time with different departments. Now, because of funding cuts, some are not as present as others.

"When I was in school, we had a PE teacher that was just as involved as the English teacher," she said. "Now, it's an option. It's one of those things that was cut. It's not as much of a priority as it used to be. It used to be Monday through Friday that you were in PE. Now, not so much."

Funding is so significant, that the keynote speaker this year is state Supreme Court Justice Debra L. Stephens. The court has ruled in recent years that the Legislature has been out of step with the state Constitution by underfunding public schools. The court is now holding the Legislature accountable. Other features of the conference will be expert and youth panels and vendors.

Human Rights Conference: The 'School-to-prison pipeline'

What: A conference on the issue of the "school to prison" pipeline, with discussion panels. Keynote speaker: State Supreme Court Justice Debra L. Stephens.

When: Dec. 5, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Where: The Kitsap Conference Center, 100 Washington Ave., Bremerton.

Cost: \$65 adults, \$50 youth younger than 18.

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