



Strengthening schools by building community partnerships with law enforcement, behavioral health services, and family supports

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“By diverting youth from juvenile justice involvement and connecting them to resources that address the underlying issues that contribute to challenging behaviors, there is a triple benefit of better outcomes for youth, better outcomes for schools, and significant cost savings.”

– Judith Meyers



Figure 1. Boxwood Commons Lockers From [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Connecticut’s School-Based Diversion Initiative Reduces Youth Incarceration

The Connecticut School-Based Diversion Initiative (SBDI), co-designed and coordinated by the Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut (CHDI), aims to reduce juvenile justice involvement among youth with emotional or behavioral health challenges. While juvenile arrests are generally declining nationwide, arrests of youth occurring *in schools* has been a growing concern. Many of these arrests are for minor and nonviolent offenses that result in exclusionary discipline in the form of suspension, expulsion, or arrest. *Research indicates that youth with mental health needs and youth of color experience disproportionately higher rates of exclusionary discipline.*

Highlights

A diversion initiative has been implemented in 37 schools across 13 Connecticut school districts.

Participating schools have reduced court referrals by 45% and have increased referrals for behavioral health mobile crisis services by 94%.

Many schools have sustained or improved these outcomes over time.

ON HOW A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORMED THE PROJECT

It is important for youth to be held accountable for inappropriate behavior, but the pathway of arrest and court involvement often does more harm than good. Trauma-informed school and community-based approaches are often much more effective at responding to underlying behavioral health challenges. A Community Psychology approach can help prevent disruptive behavior in schools through a systems-level process for intervening with appropriate services and supports.

- Schools are one of the primary referral sources to the mental health and juvenile justice systems.
- Many children who are arrested in schools have unmet behavioral health needs.¹
- Court processing for disruptive behavior does little to address the underlying causes of behavioral concerns. In fact, this may result in negative developmental outcomes.²
- Diversion programs to reduce school-based arrests and juvenile court involvement link youth to alternative behavioral health services. These supports address underlying needs and reduce risk for future law enforcement contact.

Project Goals

SBDI is a school-level intervention designed to prevent youth from entering the juvenile justice system by helping schools:

- reduce use of in-school arrests, out-of-school suspensions, and other exclusionary discipline;
- build knowledge and skills among key school professionals to recognize and manage behavioral health crises in the school and access needed community resources; and
- link youth who are at-risk of arrest to appropriate school and community-based services and supports.

What Does This Mean For?

Practice—Many schools do not adequately recognize the connection between student misbehavior and unmet mental health needs. Recent juvenile justice reforms recognize that youth often experience better long-term outcomes from diversion than from arrest and juvenile detention.

Social Action—This program contributes to statewide juvenile justice reform efforts and disrupts the school-to-prison pipeline by helping schools understand discipline through a behavioral health lens rather than punishment.

**Free Toolkit available for schools at www.chdi.org/sbditoolkit
Additional information on our websites at www.chdi.org and www.ctsbdi.org**



¹ Shufelt, J.S. & Coccozza, J.C. (2006). *Youth with Mental Health Disorders in the Juvenile Justice System: Results from a Multi-State, Multi-System Prevalence Study*. Delmar, NY: National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice.

² Sweeten, G. (2006). Who Will Graduate? Disruption of High School Education by Arrest and Court Involvement. *Justice Quarterly*, 23 (4), 462-480.

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