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Choosing Prisoners Over Pupils

By Andrew Block and Virginia Weisz

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A little over a month ago, this country celebrated the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the case that ushered in free and equal access to education for children regardless of race or ethnicity, and that signaled the Supreme Court's desire to truly leave no child behind. But the experience of a half-century since finds *Brown's* promise of improved educational opportunity as painfully out of reach as ever for our most disadvantaged children. Nowhere is this more brutally apparent than in the crisis afflicting high-poverty school systems, where African American males are now more likely to end up in jail or in prison than in college.

Politicians and policymakers rarely note, at least in public, the obvious connection between the failure of our educational system and the burgeoning minority prison population. But it is a connection that demands our urgent attention if we are to have any hope of transforming our communities into places where all of us enjoy full and fair opportunities to advance in, and contribute to, society rather than becoming institutionalized in correctional facilities.

Increasingly, states across the country are making correctional facilities a higher spending priority than public and secondary education, according to the Justice Policy Institute. In California, correctional officials reportedly look to the percentage of children who never make it past the fourth-grade reading level to help them gauge the number of future prison beds to fund. This report is all the more jarring when viewed against recent studies such as one from Virginia that found more than half of all incarcerated African American children fail to read, write or do math beyond the sixth-grade level. Nearly 40 percent of these children had learning disabilities, and fewer than 10 percent had regularly attended school in the year prior to their incarceration.

Virginia, which is 12th among the states in per capita income, ranks third among all the states in spending on corrections, and 43rd in state spending on public education. While the state government in Virginia spends upward of \$70,000 per year to incarcerate each child in a juvenile prison, it contributes only about \$3,400 to provide for the education of that same child.

According to reports released by the Virginia General Assembly's research division, 50 years after *Brown*, poverty and race are the single most accurate predictors of the quality and experience of teachers in the classroom, and the resulting student failure to succeed. Although the state government did raise education spending this year, the bulk of it will be devoted to merely addressing the rising cost of education, not to providing new programs for vulnerable children. State officials also made sure to allocate money for new prisons, ensuring that the commonwealth's out-of-balance spending priorities will remain a self-fulfilling prophecy on where these children will land.

Similarly, California ranks 48th in the nation on per-pupil spending and spends \$80,000 a year on each

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juvenile housed in the California Youth Authority (CYA). More than 70 percent of young people in juvenile court in 2002 were members of minority groups. While less than 16 percent of juveniles arrested for delinquent acts in California are African American, almost 25 percent of those detained in a secure facility are. CYA young people are at least three times as likely as those in the general population to require special education services.

The Los Angeles Times recently noted that California's budget for its corrections system has risen dramatically over the past 10 years, while recidivism rates have worsened during the same period. Not only do we spend more to imprison, we spend less to fund alternatives to prison that are more productive and less costly. For those who waste years of life in prison, we pay a price tag of many millions. With a significant fraction of that cost, we could educate and employ many of those same people. The question must be faced: Are we really leaving no children behind, or are we simply putting them out of sight and, sadly, out of mind?

Andrew Block is legal director of the JustChildren Program at the Legal Aid Justice Center in Charlottesville. Virginia Weisz is directing attorney of the Children's Rights Project of the Los Angeles Public Counsel.

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