For some children in the United States, school is not only a place of learning but can be the gateway to the criminal justice system. In some schools, students break from the rules can be brought into criminal court, and others are arrested and expelled. That, in and of itself, can be detrimental to their future. The criminal justice system sows seeds of adversity among youth. The more we can disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline, the better for our children.

The pipeline holds consequences for both students and teachers. Research shows that students who are treated as criminals in school, whether suspended or expelled, are more likely to have mental health issues and to struggle with academic performance. Teachers also are more likely to feel burnout and to have higher levels of stress.

It’s important to consider in what ways we punish behaviors that may serve to protect children in other environments.

- Dr. Rachel Vaughn-Coaxum

Under the Pittsburgh study, through our transformational model, school communities are often recognized for their fullcourt potential, with many entering our Leaders in Training program (LIT) to maximize their gifts. Through this aspect of the work, children not only benefit for the services they receive but also are trained to use restorative practices and to alleviate conflicts in ways that help those peers thrive, as well. Teachers also play a major role in this school climate transformation. In class- room work each week, teachers and other school community members allow students to further re- late to each other while giving teachers the opportunity to learn more about their students’ lives and to share their own. Moreover, the emotional intensive support—the input from the school counselor, the school psychologist, and other professionals present in the classroom—may put children in situations that have actually been a necessary ad- verse experience for students in less stable environments.

Academic achievement increased in math, science and language arts, and students reported feeling safer. That said, they had more of what they seek: students surveyed described the teachers they received, 91% said it felt comfortable contacting a teacher, and 92% said they would like the restorative justice practice to continue.

The results of this study are promising, but there is much work to be done. As educators, we must continue to work together to ensure that all students have access to the support they need to thrive in school and in life.