


# DOJ lawsuit a ‘wake-up call’ to end Mississippi’s school-to-prison pipeline

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A U.S. Department of Justice lawsuit filed this week is an important “wake-up call” for Mississippi leaders to end a school-to-prison pipeline that harms children, mostly those of color, by pushing them into the juvenile justice system as a means of enforcing school discipline, the SPLC said today.

The lawsuit, filed against the state Wednesday, outlines how children in east Mississippi have been incarcerated for minor classroom infractions, such as dress code violations. It describes how these children aren’t afforded “even the minimum procedural safeguards required by the Constitution.” These policies, according to the lawsuit, largely affect black students and children with disabilities.

“The lawsuit filed by the Department of Justice provides a glimpse of light at the end of a very dark tunnel for many youth and families across Mississippi,” said Jody Owens, managing attorney for the SPLC’s Mississippi office. “We hope that this lawsuit will serve

as a wake-up call for leaders and lawmakers across the state to end this vicious school-to-prison pipeline and instead pursue policies and practices that better serve our children.”

The SPLC has worked for years to end policies that cut short the futures of young people across the Deep South. In Mississippi, the SPLC’s legal action shut down an abusive prison for girls, and it played a key role in the passage of the state’s Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2005 and the Mississippi Juvenile Delinquency Prevention Act of 2006.

Yet Mississippi students still encounter policies throughout the state that can push them into the juvenile justice system for infractions that don’t even amount to crimes. The DOJ lawsuit filed in the U.S. District Court in Jackson describes how policies in Lauderdale County and the city of Meridian punish children “so arbitrarily and severely as to shock the conscience, and deprive these children of liberty and educational opportunities on an ongoing basis.”

When the Meridian Public School District refers students to the police department for arrest, they are routinely arrested without a determination of probable cause, according to the lawsuit. Students on probation also run the risk of incarceration because a suspension from school can be considered a probation violation, which results in incarceration at the juvenile detention center.

This means students can be incarcerated for suspensions due to “dress code infractions such as wearing the wrong color socks or undershirt, or having a shirt untucked; tardies; flatulence in class; using vulgar language; yelling at teachers; and going to the bathroom or leaving the classroom without permission,” according to the lawsuit.

The defendants include the city of Meridian, Lauderdale County, two county juvenile court judges, the state of Mississippi, and its Department of Human Services and Division of Youth Services.

“For far too long, young people across the state have been pushed out of school and into the criminal justice system where they have languished – often suffering horrific abuses,” Owens said. “This cycle has cut short the futures and lives of many of the state’s young people already.”