

DIVISION 6: HIGH SCHOOL ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY PROMPT

THEME: ENCOURAGING OUR YOUTH TO BE AGENTS OF CHANGE

SCENARIO

Imagine a classmate makes a mistake—a serious one. What should happen next? Should their life be derailed forever, or should they get a real chance to learn, grow, and become a better person? This isn't a hypothetical. It's a real and urgent question at the heart of a national debate about justice for young people, and the answers will shape the world you and your peers inherit. For decades, the NAACP has fought to reform a juvenile justice system that too often creates a “**school-to-prison pipeline**,” especially for youth of color.

The statistics are stark, and behind each number is a human life. Nationally, Black youth are 4.6 times more likely to be incarcerated than their white peers for similar offenses. Here in Kentucky, the disparity is even more pronounced: Black youth make up just 11% of the state's youth population but account for a staggering 52% of all cases transferred to the adult court system. The NAACP argues that this approach is not only unjust but also ineffective, as youth tried in adult courts are 34% more likely to re-offend, making our communities less safe.

This national crisis has deep roots in our own community, where local leaders have long wrestled with the best way to respond.

- Long before the term “school-to-prison pipeline” was coined, **Oscar Cross**, Paducah's first African American juvenile officer, saw young people heading for trouble and chose a philosophy of prevention. In 1949, he founded the **Boys Club of Paducah**, believing that the best way to prevent kids from entering the justice system was to invest in their potential from the start.
- **Shirley Bunch**, a lifelong NAACP member and the first Black female deputy in the McCracken County Police Department, dedicated herself to mentorship. She knew that for kids navigating the harsh realities of segregation, what they often needed most was a trusted adult who believed in them and could offer personal guidance.

Today, Kentucky is at a crossroads. Reforms like **Senate Bill 200** have tried to reduce youth incarceration by using more diversion programs—community-based alternatives like counseling and job training that are proven to lower re-offending rates. Yet, the racial disparities persist, fueling a debate over the fundamental purpose of justice.

Three main philosophies have emerged:

- **A Focus on Accountability and Public Safety.** This view argues that the system's primary role is to protect the public by holding individuals responsible, regardless of age. Supporters worry that reforms are too lenient and believe that for serious crimes, adult courts and punishments are necessary deterrents. This perspective prioritizes consequences as the central pillar of justice.
- **A Focus on Rehabilitation and Restorative Justice.** This view, strongly endorsed by the NAACP, insists that the juvenile system must be fundamentally different from the adult one. It points to brain science, which shows that young people are still developing and have a greater capacity for change. Advocates support expanding diversion and providing robust mental health, education, and substance abuse services to address the root causes of behavior, believing that restoring young people to their communities is the surest path to long-term public safety.

- **A Focus on Prevention and Upstream Investment.** This view, which embodies Oscar Cross’s life’s work, contends that by the time a young person enters the justice system, society has already failed them. Supporters argue that the only real solution is to invest heavily in “upstream” community solutions that prevent delinquency in the first place, such as fully funded schools, after-school programs, youth mentorship, and job training. Their goal is to fix a broken system by making it as unnecessary as possible.

YOUR TASK

Lawmakers on the Kentucky General Assembly’s Juvenile Justice Oversight Council are reviewing the state’s policies, and they believe you—the students most affected by these decisions—have a critical perspective they need to hear.

Write a formal argumentative essay to the members of the Juvenile Justice Oversight Council. In your essay, **argue for the philosophical approach you believe Kentucky should prioritize to create a more just, fair, and effective juvenile justice system: a focus on accountability, a focus on rehabilitation, or a focus on prevention.**