In the United States, the promise of equal educational opportunities for all children, regardless of race or class, has long been part of our belief in the 'American Dream.' Anyone can raise themselves out of poverty if they work hard enough, or so we are told. In reality, the stigma of poverty, disability, or skin color may simply be too much to overcome. In many schools, poor, black, and disabled children are suspended and expelled at higher rates than white, middle-class students, even when they commit similar infractions. This 'school-to-prison pipeline' tracks problem students out of educational institutions and into juvenile facilities or prisons. Increasingly, schools are relying on zero tolerance policies for minor infractions and a police presence that turns internal disciplinary matters into imprisonable offenses. These policies lead to higher drop-out rates and youth who never get out of the criminal justice system. Ironically, it costs over $50,000 per year to incarcerate a minor, while poor schools struggle to spend $10,000 per year to educate that same student. Poverty also increases the likelihood of imprisonment as an adult. Studies have shown that joblessness - not race or culture - explains the high rates of violent crime in poor black communities. Once arrested, 80 percent of criminal defendants cannot afford to pay for an attorney. While in prison, fathers (and mothers) can no longer provide for their families or participate in the local economy. When released, lack of education and job skills, along with the stigma of being an ex-offender, prevent many from obtaining employment - renewing the cycle of joblessness and criminal behavior yet again.

Statistics:
- In Ohio, economically disadvantaged students are 4.4 times more likely to be suspended from school than those who are not low-income.
- In 2008, for every $1 spent on public defenders, taxpayers spent $14 on prosecution, police, and corrections.
- Ex-offenders earn about 30-40 percent less income each year than similar men who have never been incarcerated.

Questions to Consider:
- Do you believe everyone in this country has the same opportunities to succeed?
- How are disadvantaged children steered toward a ‘school-to-prison pipeline’?
- What is the cost of imprisonment, whether in dollars spent or in productivity lost?
- How does imprisonment continue the cycle of poverty and of further incarceration?
- How could restorative justice build stronger communities instead of weakening them?

Resources:
- *Downsizing Prisons* by Michael Jacobson
- *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander
- *Prison Nation* by Tara Herivel & Paul Wright
- “Education or Incarceration,” by Nancy Heitzeg (2009)