

The Providence Journal – “Punishment and discipline”

Letter to the Editor, by Josiah D. Rich, MD

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Punishment and discipline

Julia Steiny’s July 18 column, “Students should know the behavioral rules of the road,” touched upon a fundamental problem in our society — the difference between discipline and punishment. We somehow mistakenly believe that punishment improves behavior. This is especially false when the underlying problem is a brain disorder, such as mental illness or addiction. Our prisons and jails are overflowing with people undergoing punishment for having these diseases, at tremendous expense to taxpayers.

They do not need punishment; they need treatment, which is much cheaper, more effective and ultimately safer for society. Julia Steiny is right, we need to stop mindless punishment and think about what we are trying to achieve and how to best do that. Examining this problem in the schools is a great start. We can’t afford not to.

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