Out-of-School Suspension: Consequences and Alternatives

Prepared for RMC Health
By Patricia A. Lauer, Ph.D., QualQuest, LLC
January 13, 2014

In recent years, school suspension has become a common disciplinary practice in U.S. schools. Each day that school is in session, 18,000 public school students are suspended from school, and 560 students are expelled (Losen, 2013). The widespread use of suspensions is creating concerns about the number of students that are excluded from school for discipline reasons. This paper describes the extent to which out-of-school suspensions are occurring, research on the effects of suspension, and alternatives to the use of suspension as a disciplinary practice.

Out-of-School Suspensions in U.S. Schools

Out-of-school suspension and expulsion are considered exclusionary discipline policies because students are removed from school and excluded from their normal education environments. The use of exclusionary discipline has greatly increased since 1970, a result that some attribute to "zero tolerance" policies. Zero tolerance is a concept that originated within the U.S. criminal justice system and resulted in stiffer penalties imposed for criminal acts. In schools, zero tolerance refers to mandated predetermined punishments for specific offenses (James & Freeze, 2006). Originally, zero tolerance and exclusionary discipline were applied mainly to the most serious acts of student misbehavior, such as violence and gun possession. However, now many schools are applying zero tolerance to suspend students for less serious infractions, such as tobacco use and classroom disruption (James & Freeze, 2006). In fact, across the country, most suspensions are for minor disciplinary incidents, with only a small percentage for more dangerous behaviors, such as weapon possession (Losen, 2013). In a study of school disciplinary actions in Texas, only 3% were for behaviors for which the state law mandates suspensions and expulsions, with 97% made at school officials' discretion (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011).

Several researchers have written about racial inequities in school suspensions. According to Losen (2013), suspension rates for black students more than doubled from 1972 to 2006, while the increase for white students was far less. Furthermore, the racial difference in suspensions more than tripled during the same time period. "Approximately one out of every seven Black students enrolled was suspended at least once compared to about one out of every 20 White students" (p. 389). As an example, Losen pointed to national data on middle school suspensions in which 28% of black males and 18% of black females were suspended compared to 10% and 4% of white male and female students.

Statistics indicate that the racial disparity in exclusionary discipline is not attributable to black students engaging in worse behaviors compared to white students. Rather, black students receive harsher consequences compared to white students for the same transgressions (Browne-Dianis, 2011). For example, a study of school suspensions in the state of Missouri found that black students received out-of-school suspensions for weapons possession 95% of the time compared to 85% for white students, and black students were suspended 55% of the time for tobacco violations compared to 37% for white students (Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, Valentine, 2009). Kinsler (2011) examined racial disparity in discipline practices in North Carolina schools and found no relationship of disparities to teacher or

principal race. Rather, differences in discipline were associated with cross-school variation, a result also demonstrated in a study of Texas schools (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011).

In addition to the racial disparity in school suspensions, there is also a disparity related to students with disabilities (Losen, 2013; Advancement Project, 2010). For example, in New York City, special education students in 2012 were almost four times more likely to be suspended than students not receiving special education services (New York State Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children, 2013).

Effects of Zero Tolerance Policies and Out-of-School School Suspensions

In 2010, a task force of the American Psychological Association (APA) published a review of evidence related to zero tolerance policies. The APA found little to connect zero tolerance policies to safer schools, and they instead documented negative consequences. Schools with higher suspension rates have lower ratings of school climate and lower academic achievement compared to schools with lower suspension rates. Suspension does not deter future misbehavior but rather is associated with increased rates of misconduct by those who are suspended. In fact, a high percentage of students who are suspended are repeat offenders (Brown, 2007).

Exclusionary discipline results in serious academic and social consequences for students. Suspended students do not usually have the opportunity to make up lost work, and most have their grades automatically reduced (Brown, 2007). Arcia (2006) studied the reading achievement of a matched group of suspended and non-suspended middle school students in an urban school district. Over three years, suspended students gained less academically than those in the comparison group, and increases in suspensions were associated with decreases in reading achievement. The author commented that "any discipline that has the potential to hamper achievement should be the option of last resort, used so infrequently as to appear as an almost negligible percentage" (p. 368).

There is some evidence that students who are eventually suspended start out with lower academic achievement prior to suspension compared to their peers (Arcia, 2006). The association of lower academic performance with "troublemakers" has led some to suggest that frequent suspension of students for minor offenses is a way to push out students who perform poorly on accountability tests (Losen, 2013). A report by the Advancement Project (2010) noted that the increase in exclusionary discipline polices coincided with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act and test-driven accountability policies in schools. The report suggested "a direct relationship between the consequences attached to test results and the severity of school disciplinary practices" (p. 28).

Several studies have shown associations between suspension and school dropout (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Suh & Suh, 2007). For example, a study of schools in Virginia found that those schools with high suspension rates also had high dropout rates, even after controlling for the influence of student demographics, such as socioeconomic status (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011). "Schools that typically suspended approximately 22% of their students over the course of the school year had a

dropout rate (3.52) that was 56% greater than the dropout rate (2.26) for schools that suspended only 9% of their students" (p. 184). Losen and Martinez also (2013) commented on the suspension-dropout connection:

> Given the recent research showing that being suspended even once in ninth grade is associated with a twofold increase in the likelihood of dropping out, from 16% for those not suspended to 32% for those suspended just once (Balfanz, 2013), the high number of students suspended, as presented in this report, should be of grave concern to all parents, educators, taxpayers, and policymakers (p. 1).

There are also negative social-emotional consequences for students who are suspended. Suspension may increase students' negative feelings toward adults in the school and the perception that the adults do not care about them (Brown, 2007). Suspension can lead to profiling a student as a "troublemaker". (Lee et al., 2011). Suspensions are also associated with juvenile justice involvement. The Council of State Governments Justice Center (2011) found that in Texas, a student who was suspended or expelled for discretionary reasons (i.e., less serious non-mandatory offenses) was almost three times as likely to be involved with the juvenile justice system the following years, a finding referred to as the "school to prison pipeline." In addition, Nicholson-Crotty et al. (2009), found in their study of Missouri counties that the racial disparities in out-of-school suspensions were associated with similar disparities in juvenile court referrals. The Advancement Project (2010) cited the presence of law enforcement personnel in schools as transforming the daily school experience into a "minefield of potential crimes" (p. 16). Students can be suspended and also ticketed for a variety of minor offenses, requiring them to go to court and miss additional class.

Alternatives to Out-of-School Suspensions

Based on evidence that zero-tolerance policies and associated exclusionary discipline practices do not create safer schools and have negative consequences, educators and researchers are looking at alternative discipline policies. Tobin (2011) described a system known as Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS). This approach involves teaching behavioral expectations to all in the school, reinforcing appropriate student behaviors, applying consistent consequences for inappropriate behaviors, monitoring student behavior, and using data to make decisions about the supports that students need. According to Tobin, implementation of SWPBS is associated with lower discipline referrals. In addition, the use of positive strategies in the classroom, such as praise and positive reinforcement, are correlated with reductions in racial disparities in disciplinary actions. There is also some evidence that SWPBS has a positive influence on academic achievement (Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006). A study by Bradshaw, Mitchell, and Leaf (2010) documented decreases in suspensions and reductions in office discipline referrals in elementary schools that implemented an approach that alters school environments by producing positive changes in staff behaviors through improved discipline systems and procedures.

Brown and Beckett (2006) discussed a graduated approach to discipline in which primary interventions are used to teach all students pro-social behaviors, secondary interventions deliver special programs for student groups at risk of creating problems, and tertiary interventions provide individualized supports for students with chronic behavior issues. This and similar approaches to discipline are designed to avoid knee-jerk reactions that result in student suspensions, often for minor infractions, in schools with zero tolerance policies (Martinez, 2009). Rather, a graduated and well-documented discipline code is needed that explicitly describes expected student behaviors (Fenning, Theodos, Benner, & Bohanon-Edmonson, 2006). The APA (2010) recommended replacing "one-size-fits-all disciplinary strategies with graduated systems of discipline, wherein consequences are geared to the seriousness of the infraction" (p. 858). They urged schools to carefully define all infractions and their consequences and to train staff on how to handle each offense. The APA also recommended that schools evaluate their discipline practices and policies to ensure that they are having beneficial impacts.

Stetson and Collin (2010) described another way to view student discipline:

> It is important to recognize inappropriate behavior not only as a discipline issue but also as an opportunity for teaching and learning. . . . The ultimate goals of alternatives to out-of-school suspensions are to provide time to teach new strategies for solving complex problems and to provide time for student reflection. (p. 42)

The authors cite community service as an example alternative. Another example is Second Chance, an on-line, alternative to suspension program for Colorado youth who violate tobacco policy at school or a tobacco law in the community. Second Chance was developed by RMC Health (2013) in cooperation with the Colorado State Tobacco Education & Prevention Partnership through Amendment 35 voter-approved tobacco tax funds. Although the number of students disciplined for tobacco infractions is usually less than for other offenses, the percentage of students given out-of-school suspension for tobacco violations is high, for example, 53% in Colorado (Pleger & Wiley, 2012) and as high as 55% in Missouri (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009). Participation in Second Chance replaces exclusion from school and the associated negative effects with an opportunity for education and reflection related to tobacco use. Through the online Second Chance program, youth learn about school and community tobacco-free policies, the benefits of being tobacco-free, and skills they can use to resist health risk behaviors. Students learn and reflect on the material presented in the program and thus avoid suspension. This result is especially pertinent given recent evidence that school suspension is a predictor of future tobacco use in early adolescence (Hemphill, Heerde, Herrenkohl, Toumbourou, & Catalano, 2012).

Conclusions

The adoption of zero-tolerance discipline policies in U.S. schools has led to widespread use of out-of-school suspension of students who commit discipline infractions. The majority of these infractions are minor and discretionary, which means that administrators are not mandated to suspend students for the offense. In addition, there is disparity in suspensions with black students and special education students being suspended more than white students and those who are not disabled.

Exclusionary discipline policies have not led to safer schools nor have they deterred problem student behaviors. Rather suspensions have increased since the adoption of zero tolerance policies. The consequences of suspension are especially harmful for students. Suspension is associated with lower academic achievement, higher dropout rates, and increased involvement with juvenile justice.

There is evidence that alternatives to suspension that include positive disciplinary strategies can decrease the incidence of problem student behaviors. In addition, creating clear discipline codes that specify graduated consequences for infractions can decrease the high incidence of student suspensions. Using discipline incidents as opportunities for learning and reflection is a far more positive approach to student change than mandating exclusion from school and the opportunity for an education.

The conclusions presented in this paper are supported by recent Federal policy and guidance (http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html). The U.S. Department of Education (2014a) published a guidance document that describes emerging research and actions that can help states and local districts improve school climate and school discipline. Recommended actions are based on three principles: (1) create positive school environments as a way to prevent infractions; (2) establish clear codes of conduct and consequences; and (3) build staff capacity to apply discipline in an equitable manner and to evaluate discipline policies and practices. An appendix to the guidance document provides a directory of resources on positive approaches to school discipline (U.S. Department of Education, 2014b).

References

Advancement Project. (2010). *Test, punish, and push out: How "Zero Tolerance" and high-stakes testing funnel youth into the school-to-prison pipeline.* Retrieved from http://b.3cdn.net/advancement/d05cb2181a4545db07_r2im6caqe.pdf

Arcia, E. (2006). Achievement and enrollment status of suspended students: Outcomes in a large, multicultural school district. *Education and Urban Society*, *38*(3), 359-369.

Balfanz, R., Byrnes, V., & Fox, J. (2013). *Sent home and put off-track: The antecedents, disproportionalities, and consequences of being suspended in the ninth grade.* Paper presented at the Closing the School Discipline Gap: Research to Practice, Washington, DC.

Bradshaw, C. P., Mitchell, M. M., & Leaf, P. J. (2010). Examining the effects of schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports on student outcomes: Results from a randomized controlled effectiveness trial in elementary schools. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, *12*(3), 133-148.

Brown, L. H., & Beckett, K. S. (2006). The role of the school district in student discipline: Building consensus in Cincinnati. *Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Public Education*, *38*(3), 235-256.

Brown, T. M. (2007). Lost and turned out: academic, social, and emotional experiences of students excluded from school. *Urban Education*, *42*(5), 432-455.

Browne-Dianis, J. (2011). Stepping back from zero tolerance. *Educational Leadership*, *69*(1), 24-28.

Christle, C. A., Jolivette, K., & Nelson, C. M. (2007). School characteristics related to high school dropout rates. *Remedial and Special Education, 28*, 325-339.

Council of State Governments Justice Center. (2011). Breaking school rules: A statewide study of how school discipline relates to students' success and juvenile justice involvement. Retrieved from http://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Breaking_Schools_Rules_Report_Final.pdf

Fenning, P., Theodos, J., Benner, C., & Bohanon-Edmonson, H. (2004). Integrating proactive discipline practices into codes of conduct. *Journal of School Violence*, *3*(1), 45-61.

Hemphill, S. A., Heerde, J. A., Herrenkohl, T. I., Toumbourou, J. W., & Catalano, R. F. (2012). The impact of school suspension on student tobacco use: A longitudinal study in Victoria, Australia, and Washington state, United States. *Health Education & Behavior*, *39*(1), 45-56.

James, S., & Freeze, R. (2006). One step forward, two steps back: Immanent critique of the practice of Zero Tolerance in inclusive schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *10*(6), 581-594.

Kinsler, J. (2011). Understanding the black-white school discipline gap. *Economics of Education Review*, *30*(6), 1370-1383.

Lassen, S. R., Steele, M. M., & Sailor, W. (2006). The relationship of school-wide Positive Behavior Support to academic achievement in an urban middle school. *Psychology in the Schools*, *43*(6), 701-712.

Lee, T., Cornell, D., Gregory, A., & Fan, X. (2011). High Suspension schools and dropout rates for black and white students. *Education and Treatment of Children*, *34*(2), 167-192.

Losen, D. J. (2013). Discipline policies, successful schools, racial justice, and the law. *Family Court Review*, *51*(3), 388-400.

Losen, D. J., & Martinez, T. E. (2013). Out of school and off track: The overuse of suspensions in American middle and high schools. *The Center for Civil Rights Remedies, The Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles, University of California, Los Angeles*. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED541731.pdf

Martinez, S. (2009). A system gone berserk: How are Zero-Tolerance policies really affecting schools? *Preventing School Failure*, *53*(3), 153-158.

New York City School-Justice Partnership Task Force (2013*). Keeping kids in school and out of court: Report and recommendations.* New York State Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children. Retrieved http://www.nycourts.gov/ip/justiceforchildren/PDF/NYC-School-JusticeTaskForceReportAndRecommendations.pdf

Nicholson-Crotty, S., Birchmeier, Z., & Valentine, D. (2009). Exploring the impact of school discipline on racial disproportion in the juvenile justice system. *Social Science Quarterly*, *90*(4), 1003-1018.

Pfleger, R. & Wiley, K. (2012). *Colorado disciplinary practices, 2008-2010: Disciplinary actions, student behaviors, race, and gender.* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved from http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/colorado-disciplinary-practices

RMC Health. (2013). *Second Chance*. Retrieved from http://www.rmc.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Second-Chance-Flier-June-2013.pdf

Stetson, F. H., & Collins, B. J. (2010). Rethinking suspensions. *Principal Leadership*, *11*(2), 40-44.

Suh, S., & Suh, J. (2007). Risk factors and levels of risk for high school dropouts. *Professional School Counseling, 10*, 297-306.

Tobin, T. J., & Vincent, C. G. (2011). Strategies for preventing disproportionate exclusions of African American students. *Preventing School Failure*, *55*(4), 192-201.

U.S. Department of Education. (2014a). *Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline*, Washington, D.C. Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html

U.S. Department of Education. (2014b). *Directory of Federal School Climate and Discipline Resources*, Washington, D.C. Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html