

# POLICY ISSUE BRIEF: SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

## Issue at a Glance

Time out of school has huge implications for student achievement and future success. According to a 2022 report by the Learning Policy Institute, students who are suspended from school are more likely to drop out before earning a high school diploma. One study cited in the report found that in California, suspensions were responsible for lowering graduation rates by nearly 7%. Certain discipline measures also funnel youth into the juvenile justice system and increase their risk for future incarceration. While schools have reported an overall decrease in the number of suspensions and expulsions since the 2011–12 school year, the latest available U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR) data indicates that huge disparities remain in school discipline among the nation's middle level and high schools. Although they represent only 8% of the student population, Black male students accounted for 25% of students who received an out-of-school suspension. Black female students also represented 8% of the student population and accounted for 14% of students who received out-of-school suspensions. In addition, students with disabilities represented only 12% of students enrolled but 26% of students who received an out-of-school suspension.

In addition, research reveals that the use of exclusionary discipline policies and practices, involving in- and out-of-school suspension and expulsion, could lead to long-term harmful outcomes for students who are frequently excluded from learning environments. Exclusionary discipline increases the risk of academic failure, school dropout, and socioemotional and mental health problems. Importantly, research also indicates that students with disabilities are disproportionately subject to exclusionary policies.

Many suspensions are still the result of minor infractions of school rules, such as violating dress codes, truancy, excessive tardiness, cell phone use, loitering, or classroom disruption. Some schools and districts are taking focused action to reduce or eliminate suspensions and considering multiple factors as they review their policies including whether or not schools have discipline disparities, conducting careful selection and ongoing training of principals, providing support for teacher and leadership training, reviewing the school discipline code of conduct, and providing the specific behavioral supports and services that students with disabilities need. Forty-five states and the District of Columbia have also passed laws limiting the use and/or duration of suspension or expulsion or have laws that encourage alternatives to disciplinary exclusion.

One approach gaining popularity in schools is restorative justice, which can encompass dialogue techniques between teachers and students or more formal restorative conferencing that involves students, staff, and often family members. Research has demonstrated a positive impact on school climate, expanded student engagement in learning, improved student achievement and graduation rates, and increased student chances for lifelong success when these practices are implemented. To develop changes to school discipline policy, principals and assistant principals need significant assistance and resources from states and districts.

The National Center for Special Education Research (NCSE) funds research projects that address school discipline for students with or at risk for disability, either directly or indirectly through interventions aimed at improving behavior. Intervention models to improve the social, emotional, and academic behavior of students at risk for emotional behavior disorder (EBD) include [Check-in/Check-out](#), [Tools for Getting Along](#), [Project ReAct Strategies](#), and [Prevent-Teach-Reinforce \(PTR\) virtual coaching model](#).

## National Principals Association Position

- The principal's primary responsibility is to foster a safe, orderly, enriching environment where each student comes to school ready and eager to learn.
- School leaders protect the civil rights of each student and foster human connectedness and belonging.
- School communities are places where individualized learning and growth opportunities thrive.
- School leaders are committed to providing fair, equitable opportunities where each student is valued, treated justly, and receives an individualized high-quality education.
- National Principals Association supports the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) which state that effective leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
- Any strategy to reduce suspensions and expulsions must be part of a comprehensive schoolwide effort to improve the quality of classroom instruction accompanied by efforts to create conditions where students are meaningfully engaged in the school community and come to school ready to learn.
- Schools have a responsibility to model and teach students methods of exerting authority and modifying behavior that are constructive, humane, and provide opportunities for growth.
- School discipline should be reasonable, timely, fair, age-appropriate, and an appropriate response to a student's violation of the district code of conduct.
- National Principals Association has also adopted policy issue briefs on [Racial Justice and Educational Equity](#), [School Resource Officers](#), [Culturally Responsive Schools](#), [Trauma-Informed Schools](#), [Educator Diversity](#), [Corporal Punishment](#) and [School Safety](#).

## Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

- Develop guidance on nondiscriminatory administration of school discipline that includes technical assistance and best practices on enforcement, alternative strategies, and key resources to support states, districts, and schools in transitioning to more effective and equitable discipline and climate practices.
- Provide adequate funding for the U.S. Department of Education (ED) Office for Civil Rights (OCR), whose mission is enforcing laws such as Title VI, Title IX, and Section 504; to ensure equal access to education and promote educational excellence throughout the nation through vigorous enforcement of civil rights.
- Ensure that OCR remains within ED and oppose any legislative action or administration Interagency Agreement (IAA) to move OCR from ED as a transfer may lack oversight and institutional knowledge required, as well as further violate appropriation laws.

- Require states that do not already do so to publicly report disaggregated data annually by school level and grade, race, ethnicity, income status, and gender that includes the number of students suspended, the number of incidents, the reasons for out-of-school suspensions, and the number of days out of school.
- Conduct research on effective alternatives to disciplinary exclusion, including strategies for reducing disciplinary disproportionality by race and gender, sexual orientation or gender identity, and disability.
- Provide funding to assist schools in recruiting and retaining school counselors, social workers, and psychologists to support school-based interventions and the coordination of services.
- Enact legislation to abolish corporal punishment in all states and to eliminate the use of seclusion and restraints.
- Authorize a competitive grant program to assist states and districts in implementing an early warning data system to identify struggling students and create a system of evidence-based and linguistically and culturally relevant interventions.

## Recommendations for State Policymakers

- Collect and publicly report accurate discipline data in annual state and district report cards, including days of lost instruction due to out-of-school suspensions, referrals to law enforcement, and school-related arrests.
- Adopt legislation to encourage alternatives to suspension or expulsion, including restorative justice, community service, conflict resolution, counseling, peer mediation, and positive behavioral interventions and supports.
- Ensure that educator evaluation systems measure a principal's ability to develop and maintain a positive school culture that includes not only the tone of a school, but also school safety, enthusiasm of students and faculty, and the level of connectedness with the community.

## Recommendations for Districts Leaders

- Continue to consult the joint guidance on nondiscriminatory administration of school discipline released in January 2014 by the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education.
- Evaluate the district code of conduct and all schools' discipline data to ensure that out-of-school suspension and expulsion are not overused or disproportionately administered to certain student subgroups.
- Engage principals, teachers, parents, and students in the development and scheduled periodic reviews of the code of conduct.
- Ensure that suspension and expulsions are measures of last resort in the code of conduct and use them only if it is necessary to ensure the safety of other students and staff.
- Include suspensions and expulsions as part of an early warning data system to target supportive interventions for at-risk students.
- Implement multitiered systems of support that encompass prevention, wellness promotion, and interventions that are based on student need and promote close school-community collaboration.

- Examine each school's distinct challenges and any contributing factors before selecting which evidence-based interventions to use and how progress will be measured.
- Focus on prevention and effective interventions as responses to disciplinary issues, including positive behavioral interventions and supports, social and emotional learning, peer juries, restorative justice processes, diversion, mentoring, mental health counseling, restitution, and community service programs.
- Offer school leaders professional learning opportunities so they can understand, model, and offer feedback on restorative practices.
- Provide adequate funding and training for school leaders and other educators on alternatives to out-of-school suspension such as after-school tutoring and additional coaching from teachers, after-school detention, Saturday school, parent conferences, in-school suspension, and alternative programs, which will ensure students spend more time in school, have increased adult attention and supervision, and reach academic success.
- Develop policies and an academic reentry plan to ensure that students who have been suspended are in the optimal classroom setting for success, have opportunities to make academic progress while excluded, and are offered a reasonable amount of time to make up homework, tests, quizzes, projects, or other required work that was missed.
- Provide principals, teachers, school resource officers, and other staff with ongoing, job-embedded professional learning on child and adolescent development, implicit bias, culturally responsive classroom management, conflict resolution, and de-escalation approaches that decrease classroom disruptions and the need for disciplinary sanctions.
- Develop due process procedures for appeal of schools' disciplinary actions and ensure that they are clearly communicated and applied equally to all students.
- Establish clear guidelines for school personnel and school resource officers regarding the role of each in responding to disciplinary infractions and ensure that police involvement is limited to situations when it is necessary to protect students and staff.
- Ensure that school resource officers receive specialized training to help them become a part of the school community and contribute to a safe, orderly, and inviting school environment.

## Recommendations for School Leaders

- Prioritize a focus on preventing discipline and behavioral problems.
- Ensure that out-of-school suspension is used only if it is necessary to ensure the safety of other students and staff.
- Administer a culture survey of students, parents, and school personnel on a regular schedule that provides detailed feedback aligned with building culture and leading learning—factors that lead to a safe, caring, and high-performing culture.
- Create safe, supportive, and equitable learning environments that promote all students' social and emotional development.
- Review discipline data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, and disability to identify concerns and monitor progress of school discipline reforms and their impact on conditions of learning.
- If disparities in discipline data are identified, commit the school to a plan of action to ameliorate the root cause of these disparities.

- Involve students and school personnel in establishing expectations for student and staff conduct and the consequences for noncompliance.
- Engage families and community partners in fostering the academic, intellectual, social, and emotional success of each student.
- Provide students and their families with access to the discipline policies and student code of conduct in an easily understandable, age-appropriate format that makes clear the sanctions imposed for specific offenses.