

# Is School Suspension Beneficial or Disadvantageous to Students?

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Several efforts are underway in Rochester and around the nation to address school discipline with a specific concern for what has been described as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” The Center for Public Safety Initiatives (CPSI) is involved in these local efforts and is preparing a series of background papers to examine the issue of school discipline, school climate, and how such practices affect students’ involvement in the criminal justice system and educational outcomes. This paper begins by examining the literature on effects of suspension on students’ academic and behavioral outcomes, especially for urban and minority students. It also examines some alternative strategies to traditional suspension and their potential effects.

School suspensions are implemented to discipline students that have broken the school code, hoping that suspensions reduce the negative behavior; however school suspensions have become a controversial topic (Kaeser, 1979). It is often argued that misbehaved students are unresponsive to education, which causes them to be disruptive in classrooms, effecting the teacher and the other students. Therefore, those misbehaved students are suspended for the sake of dedicated students and teachers (Costenbader & Markson, 1998). All children have the right and access to public education, and compulsory attendance laws highlight the importance of attendance in schools. Nonetheless, misbehaved students are commonly punished by suspension, even though teachers and principals admit suspension does not help with the students’ misbehavior, and there are no educational benefits to suspension (Kaeser, 1979). According to Sautner (2001), the most common reasons that students are suspended are due to defiance of school authority, failure to report to after-school detention or Saturday suspension, class disruption, truancy, fighting, use of profanity, damage to school property, dress code violations, theft, and leaving campus during school hours without permission.

Studies are showing that school suspensions are harmful to students because suspension removes students from the education that they need (Kaeser, 1979). Many educators and mental

health professionals have looked down upon school suspensions, including in-school suspensions, because it interrupts the student's education. Many believe that school suspensions are negative to the students' education and even to the students' self-esteem. Also, when misbehaved students are suspended, suspension would only be effective at changing students' ongoing behavior if those students are placed in a more interesting and reinforcing environment than the one they were removed from (Costenbader & Markson, 1989). In traditional suspension, they are simply sent home, where they may be little to no supervision if parents are at work during the school day.

Researchers are realizing there are many factors as to why students are misbehaving in class and therefore being suspended. Factors correlated with misbehavior and suspension, include family income, family relationships, neighborhood, teacher quality, emotional disturbance disorders, social status, race, and gender. Keaser (1979) discussed the discriminatory treatment and educational opportunity problems facing schools. It was shown through educational statistics that minority students, compared with their share of the population, are suspended disproportionately more. Also, according to Pareses (1999), using the U.S. Department of Education statistics from 1992, 62% of students with emotional disturbances fail to earn their diploma or certification before the age of 21. Also, according to Nelson (1985), 25% of youth in the corrections system are identified as having emotional disturbances. Studies are suggesting that it is more than students misbehaving because they lack interest in education. Many other factors are pushing them towards those behaviors, and suspensions are not going to help solve the underlying issues.

If school suspensions are not improving the misbehaved student, what is it accomplishing or causing? According to Kaeser (1979), when a student is suspended from school, that student is automatically labeled as a troublemaker. Not only is that student aware of his or her label, but it

damages the student's reputation, leads to more school failure, and hurts the student's educational performance. One famous court case that highlights the negative and significant effects of suspension was *Goss vs. Lopez* (1975). The decision stated that students are due a process prior to suspension, understanding that suspensions are not only removing the student from the educational environment but also likely to cause the student future failures.

The labeling of students through school suspension is also seen in Gregory and Weinstein's (2008) study. They examined African American students and their teachers on the issue of defiance. The study was a repeated measure design using two different classrooms' experiences and two different teachers of the same students. The students reported that they got along with one of the teachers, who was called the "nominated teacher" in the report. Demographic, academic, and discipline factors were measured and examined. It was concluded that referring teachers (the teachers that refer students for suspension) perceived greater defiant behavior when rating the same African American students compared to nominated teachers. The results also indicated that compared to nominated teachers, the referring teachers believe that the same students are less engaged and do not pay attention in class. The same students in the two different classrooms were aware of the restrictive adult authority in the referred teacher's classroom compared to the nominated teacher. Compared to the nominated teacher's classroom, in the referring teacher's classroom, referring teachers stated that those students showed significantly more rule breaking behaviors. This truly shows how suspension causes students and teachers to perceive themselves in a different way just because those students get labeled with suspension. It also indicates that race is a factor in how teachers interpret the behavior of their students, which strongly contributes to discipline decisions.

When it comes to school suspensions, minorities are more likely to be suspended, and a further analysis shows that compared to other racial and ethnic groups, Black students, especially

Black males, are much more likely to be suspended from school. Many believe that the reasons for Black students to be so much more likely to be suspended are related to low income, family factors, their social network, and community factors. Therefore, with those many factors contributing to a student's misbehavior in school, suspending the student from school accomplishes nothing but removing that student from their educational setting. It was also found that if students received at a younger age disciplinary referrals, those students would also continue having disciplinary problems, and underachieving students viewed suspension as a way to avoid demands of classrooms (Arcia, 2007). The National School Board Association (1985) concluded that suspension is the "easy way out" with schools that do not want to effectively deal with misbehaved students. In general, students that get suspended are those who would benefit most from direct instruction. Among many students who are suspended, suspension does not seem like a punishment but more like a reward because students get to stay home. It was also concluded that suspension only results in putting more youth in the streets without employment or educational occupations of their time. School suspensions also label students as troublemakers throughout their academic school career, and since it is a common disciplinary option, many teachers do not change their classroom management techniques and find more effective techniques. Often, students are not usually suspended for seriously disruptive behavior but for minor infractions of school rules. Most research has found that school suspensions are not advancing the students but rather hurting them. School suspensions result in the student being alienated from school; they increase dropout rates, contribute to academic failure, and suspended students are more involved in risky behavior and even in serious crimes (Sautner, 2001).

Many studies have concluded that students in urban schools and minority students are most affected by school suspensions. School suspensions take away the "guaranteed" education access, and suspended students' are labeled for the remaining time as troublemakers. Most urban

schools are located near impoverished neighborhoods; therefore, there is always the possibility of suspending a student dealing with poverty and low support system, which at the end is harming students further. Many students have high achievement levels, and other students have low achievement levels when it comes to education, but school suspension does not benefit any type of student. Some students who are suspended are “kicked” out of an educational setting, leaving those students to spend their time in dangerous neighborhoods streets. In all the studies, researchers have agreed that suspensions are not helping, and alternative ways must be implemented to secure successful futures for the youth.

The school-wide intervention model developed by Sprague et al. (1999) has been proven to be effective in reducing school discipline problems. The intervention is built on a three-tiered discipline system of interventions. There is the universal, school-wide behavioral management tools like student codes of conduct and verbal warnings, another set of interventions for selected at-risk students, and targeted interventions for high-risk students. With this intervention model, schools have options so that they are not using one procedure to solve all the problems. This model uses referral data that helps plan the interventions. Studies have shown that 85% to 95% of all students respond appropriately to the Universal Strategies (the school-wide techniques), which include social skill interactions, positive and protective discipline techniques, teaching and modeling of behavior expectations, active supervision, positive reinforcement systems, and corrective consequences. Selected Strategies are more focused on small-group strategies for at-risk students, and it is usually reserved for 7% to 10% of the student body. These strategies focus on social skill instruction, self-management programs, adult mentors, and increased academic support. Finally, the Targeted Strategies focus on individualized interventions for 3% to 5% of students. This strategy includes functional behavioral assessments, such as intensive social skills instruction, individual behavior management plans, parent collaboration, and support form

additional service providers. Alternative techniques to suspensions can be as simple as school officials giving verbal warnings, minor detentions, having a formal interview with the student, having the student go through a community program, interviews with the student's parent, directed counseling, and removal of privileges, all of which have been shown to be generally more effective than school suspensions (Sautner, 2001).

These techniques could be criticized for not removing the student from interaction with well-behaved students. As such, suspensions are still commonly used for a number of reasons. According to Palmer (2013), school suspensions are commonly used because of many reasons, such as its familiarity, low-cost, convenience, and parents generally support it. Surveys have shown that parents believe suspensions are a great way to keep bad influences away from their kids. Researchers have even claimed that administrators also support suspensions, even though it is shown that students who are suspended at least three times are likely to drop out. As stated by Palmer (2013), in the 1960s and 1970s, school suspensions increased extremely due to desegregation. With school suspensions drastically increasing, education researchers questioned its effectiveness; however, in the mid-1990s, suspension once again increased because there was little to no reliable data on the efficacy of suspension, and politicians supported suspensions. Acts such as the 1994 Gun-Free School were implemented to expel students who brought guns to school. This evidently led to the "zero tolerance" movement and its even more extreme cases, such as students are suspended because for the offense of gum chewing (Palmer, 2013).

Even though studies have shown that school suspensions are not effective and are causing harm to students, alternatives to school suspensions are costly and require more effort, time, and staffing. However, as seen in this paper, alternatives to suspension are important because school suspensions are consistently shown to cause long-lasting effects that can hurt students academically.

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