Breaking Schools’ Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students’ Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement

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Tuesday, July 19, 2011 at 10:27 AM

In an unprecedented study of nearly 1 million Texas public secondary school students followed for more than six years, nearly 60 percent were suspended or expelled, according to a report released by The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center [2] in partnership with the Public Policy Research Institute of Texas A&M University.

Download the full report in PDF: "Breaking Schools’ Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students’ Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement [3]"


Executive Summary:

This report describes the results of an extraordinary analysis of millions of school and juvenile justice records in Texas. It was conducted to improve policymakers’ understanding of who is suspended and expelled from public secondary schools, and the impact of those removals on students’ academic performance and juvenile justice system involvement.

Like other states, school suspensions—and, to a lesser degree, expulsions—have become relatively common in Texas. For this reason and because Texas has the second largest public school system in the nation (where nonwhite children make up nearly two-thirds of the student population), this study’s findings have significance for—and relevance to—states across the country.

Several aspects of the study make it groundbreaking. First, the research team did not rely on a sample of students, but instead examined individual school records and school campus data pertaining to all seventh-grade public school students in Texas in 2000, 2001, and 2002. Second, the analysis of each grade’s student records covered at least a six-year period, creating a statewide longitudinal study. Third, access to the state juvenile justice database allowed the researchers to learn about the school disciplinary history of youth who had juvenile records. Fourth, the study group size and rich datasets from the education and juvenile justice systems made it possible to conduct multivariate analyses. Using this approach, the researchers could control for more than 80 variables, effectively isolating the impact that independent factors had on the likelihood of a student’s being suspended and expelled, and on the relationship between these disciplinary actions and a student’s academic performance or juvenile justice involvement.
Key findings in the report include the following:

1. Nearly six in ten public school students studied were suspended or expelled at least once between their seventh- and twelfth-grade school years.

   - About 54 percent of students experienced in-school suspension, which could be as brief as one period or as long as several consecutive days. Thirty-one percent of students experienced out-of-school suspension, which averaged two days per incident.
   - Of the nearly 1 million students studied, about 15 percent were assigned at least once to disciplinary alternative education programs (27 days, on average) between seventh and twelfth grade; about 8 percent were placed at least once in juvenile justice alternative education programs (73 days on average).
   - Only 3 percent of the disciplinary actions were for conduct for which state law mandates suspensions and expulsions; the remainder of disciplinary actions was made at the discretion of school officials, primarily in response to violations of local schools’ conduct codes.
   - Students who were involved in the school disciplinary system averaged eight suspensions and/or expulsions during their middle or high school years; among this group, the median number of suspensions and expulsions was four. Fifteen percent of students studied were disciplined 11 or more separate times.

2. African-American students and those with particular educational disabilities were disproportionately likely to be removed from the classroom for disciplinary reasons.

   - The great majority of African-American male students had at least one discretionary violation (83 percent), compared to 74 percent for Hispanic male students, and 59 percent for white male students. The same pattern was found, though at lower levels of involvement, for females—with 70 percent of African-American female pupils having at least one discretionary violation, compared to 58 percent of Hispanic female pupils and 37 percent of white female pupils.
   - Whereas white, Hispanic, and African-American students experienced discretionary actions at significantly different rates, students in these racial groups were removed from school for mandatory violations at comparable rates.
   - Multivariate analyses, which enabled researchers to control for 83 different variables in isolating the effect of race alone on disciplinary actions, found that African-American students had a 31 percent higher likelihood of a school discretionary action, compared to otherwise identical white and Hispanic students.
   - Nearly three-quarters of the students who qualified for special education services during the study period were suspended or expelled at least once. The level of school disciplinary involvement, however, varied significantly according to the specific type of disability. For example, students coded as having an “emotional disturbance” were especially likely to be suspended or expelled. In contrast, students with autism or mental retardation—where a host of other factors was controlled for—were considerably less likely than otherwise identical students without disabilities to experience a discretionary or mandatory school disciplinary action.

3. Students who were suspended and/or expelled, particularly those who were repeatedly disciplined, were more likely to be held back a grade or to drop out than were students not involved in the disciplinary system.

   - Of all students who were suspended or expelled 31 percent repeated their grade at least once. In contrast, only 5 percent of students with no disciplinary involvement were held back.
   - About 10 percent of students suspended or expelled between seventh and twelfth grade dropped out. About 59 percent of those students disciplined 11 times or more did not graduate from high school during the study period.\(^1\)
A student who was suspended or expelled for a discretionary violation was twice as likely to repeat his or her grade compared to a student with the same characteristics, attending a similar school, who had not been suspended or expelled.

4. When a student was suspended or expelled, his or her likelihood of being involved in the juvenile justice system the subsequent year increased significantly.

- More than one in seven students was in contact with the juvenile justice system (i.e., contact with a county's juvenile probation department) at least once between seventh and twelfth grade.²
- Nearly half of those students who were disciplined 11 or more times were in contact with the juvenile justice system. In contrast, 2 percent of the students who had no school disciplinary actions were in contact with the juvenile justice system.
- When controlling for campus and individual student characteristics, the data revealed that a student who was suspended or expelled for a discretionary violation was nearly three times as likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system the following year.

5. Suspension and expulsion rates among schools—even those schools with similar student compositions and campus characteristics—varied significantly.

- Half of the 1,504 high schools analyzed had disciplinary rates consistent with what researchers had projected, based on the characteristics/risk factors of the student population and the school campus.² The other half of the high schools, however, had actual disciplinary rates that varied greatly from what was projected: 339 (or 22.5 percent) had disciplinary rates that were significantly higher than what researchers had projected, and 409 of the schools (or 27.2 percent) had disciplinary rates that were significantly lower than what had been projected.

The findings summarized above demonstrate why it is important for policymakers everywhere to examine the school disciplinary systems in their jurisdictions. This will not be without challenges for many states and will likely include significant investments in state-of-the-art information systems. Having quality data available is only the first step. To produce the unprecedented level of analyses found in this report, policymakers will need to follow the example set by Texas leaders across the political spectrum that showed courage and commitment by digging deep into an issue that has received relatively little public scrutiny.

An important take-away from this study is that individual schools within a state, working with the same resources and within the same statutory framework, have the power to affect their school disciplinary rates. In communities across the country, educators, juvenile justice system officials, service providers, students and parents, and advocates are also taking steps to implement innovative approaches that yield different disciplinary results. Nationally, a growing number of advocacy organizations and membership associations are drawing increased attention for their efforts to come up with more effective and fair approaches to school discipline. And a growing body of research is supporting and expanding upon these efforts. An essential next step is to convene experts, policymakers and advocates from education, juvenile justice, health, and child welfare systems to build on the important work of these stakeholders and to begin developing a consensus around approaches that will improve outcomes for students and teachers.

1. Students were followed for one to three years beyond the year they were projected to graduate when they were in seventh grade. Whether a student graduated during the study period is distinct from whether a student dropped out. A student who did not graduate may have dropped out. Or, he or she repeated a grade at least once and was still involved in the Texas public school system in some capacity when the study period concluded. Another scenario, which applied to a small subset of students, is that they left the Texas public school system, transferring out of state or into private schools or home-schooling. There is no reason to believe that the effect of prior discipline on graduation rates differs for students who left the Texas public school system than for those who remained.

2. Few of these contacts with the juvenile justice system were the direct result of misconduct at school. According to the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission, in 2009 – 2010, of the 85,548 formal referrals to juvenile probation in Texas from all sources, only about 6 percent (just 5,349) came directly from schools. In that same year, more than one million students in the grades studied were disciplined by school officials, but the referrals from schools directly to juvenile probation represented less than 1 percent of all the disciplined students.

3. Researchers isolated the degree to which different student and campus characteristics influenced disciplinary rates in a school, and using that information, predicted rates of suspension and expulsion at the 1,504 high schools. They compared that predicted rate of discipline with the school’s actual rate of discipline.

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