



The Center for Civil Rights Remedies

at The Civil Rights Project | *Proyecto Derechos Civiles*

For Immediate Release

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HIGH SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION RATES DRIVEN BY INEFFECTIVE SCHOOL POLICIES AND PRACTICES, NOT “BAD KIDS”

Research Collaborative Identifies Promising Initiatives To Address Discipline Gaps by Race, Gender, Disability and Sexual Orientation

WASHINGTON, D.C., March 13, 2014 – A group of 26 nationally recognized experts from the social science, education and legal fields – assembled three years ago with the backing of two large philanthropies – has compiled and analyzed a huge body of recent research that challenges virtually every notion behind the frequent use of disciplinary policies that remove students from the classroom.

The group, known as the Discipline Disparities Research-to-Practice Collaborative, found clear evidence that students of color, particularly African-Americans, and students with disabilities are suspended at hugely disproportionate rates compared to white students, perpetuating racial and educational inequality across the country. LGBT students also are over-represented in suspension.

The Collaborative further determined there is no evidence to support the premise that “bad kids” should be removed from the classroom in order to ensure that “good kids” can learn.

“Far from making our schools safer or improving student behavior, the steadily increasing use of suspension and expulsion puts students – especially students of color

and other targeted groups – at an increased risk of academic disengagement, dropout and contact with juvenile justice,” said Russell J. Skiba, the Collaborative’s project director and a professor at Indiana University.

“And we are never going to close the achievement gap until we close this discipline gap,” added Daniel J. Losen, a member of the Collaborative and the director of the Center for Civil Rights Remedies at UCLA. “All schools see a wide range of adolescent misbehavior, but school responses vary dramatically. Some schools see an educational mission in teaching appropriate behavior and are successful at improving behavior without resorting to suspension and expulsion.”

Citing data from the U.S. Department of Education, the Collaborative said more than 3 million students in grades K-12 were suspended during the 2009-10 academic year, reflecting a steady rise since the 1970’s when the suspension rate was half that level. According to the Collaborative, the increase has occurred because school leaders either are so overwhelmed with money and testing demands that they gravitate toward what they perceive as “easy” discipline solutions, or else they really believe that their school environment will improve if they can just get rid of trouble-makers.

“Discipline has become a management strategy for schools pressured by financial constraints, high concentrations of struggling students, substantial numbers of transient teachers/long-term substitutes and severe accountability mandates,” the Collaborative wrote. But there are promising alternatives that when embraced by school leaders and teachers, can effectively reduce both the need for discipline and its disparate effects, the group added.

Prevention programs that build “trusting, supportive relationships between students and educators” can be applied school-wide to reduce the likelihood of conflict. And when misbehavior does occur, it can be addressed through constructive and equitable “restorative justice” policies that reduce unnecessary discipline. These strategies focus on problem-solving instead of just handing out penalties.

“Student accountability is achieved when students take responsibility for their actions, recognize the impact of their actions on others and offer ways to repair the harm,” the experts added.

The Discipline Disparities Collaborative was launched in 2011 through The Equity Project at Indiana University with funding from the Atlantic Philanthropies and the Open Society Foundations. The Collaborative has met frequently since then around the

country to compile and review recent discipline research. It also is funding other researchers to study unexplored aspects of the school discipline problem.

In releasing its findings, the Collaborative published three briefing papers, each addressed to a different audience: policy recommendations for district, state and federal officials; effective discipline alternatives for school personnel, and a description for researchers of recent studies and urgent, unanswered questions that should be addressed. Among the findings:

- There is no research support for the theory that schools must be able to remove the “bad” students so the “good” students can learn. “In fact, when schools serving similar populations were compared, those schools with relatively low suspension rates had higher, not lower, test scores.”
- Disparities in school suspension are worsening, meaning that some students are being pushed out of school more than others. For example, a study published this year found that three out of every four black middle school boys with disabilities in Chicago had received an out-of-school suspension.
- Given the extreme differences in suspension rates across different groups, the researchers concluded that unintended teacher bias is a real possibility. “Several studies indicate ... that racial disparities are not sufficiently explained by the theory that black or other minority students are simply misbehaving more.”
- New longitudinal studies at the state and national levels indicate that suspension is associated with a heightened risk of dropping out of school. Researchers “found that even being suspended out-of-school once was associated with a two-fold increase in the risk of dropout.” The increased risk of dropping out, in turn, increases the risk of juvenile delinquency.
- There is a dramatic disconnect between educational and juvenile justice systems. Their practices are, at times, even contradictory. For example, in many communities students who have been expelled are by definition violating juvenile delinquency laws and subject to arrest.
- Putting police in schools more often than not leads to the criminalization “of what might otherwise be considered adolescent misbehaviors.” The best available evidence “suggests that police presence in schools, particularly armed police, should be a very last resort in school discipline strategies.”

In addition to the main briefing papers, the Collaborative today published a set of three supporting papers providing research documentation addressing certain key issues:

- A focused review of the evidence does not support the commonly held belief that racial disparities in school discipline are due to more serious or severe behavior on the part of black students.
- A review is provided of efforts to explore “implicit bias,” the subtle and often unconscious beliefs and stereotypes concerning race and difference that may contribute to disparities in school discipline.
- A review is provided of common myths regarding the over-representation of students of color in school discipline and the facts that call these common beliefs into question.

The Collaborative expressed the hope that its work assembling the most recent and extensive evidence available would help persuade the education community and policymakers that harsh discipline policies don’t work.

“High rates of exclusionary discipline stifle educational opportunity and undermine our national goals for closing academic achievement and opportunity gaps for all children. Instead of helping students, the excessive use of exclusionary discipline is an educationally unsound policy that harms millions of school children every year.”

Today’s release of the Collaborative’s work follows the issuance in January of new federal guidance on school discipline policies and practices, outlining the civil rights obligations that all school systems face in administering discipline. It also provides a foundation for President Obama’s call to address school discipline issues as part of his “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative to help boys of color succeed in life.

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