School Suspension in North Carolina:
Key facts and statistics from the 2008-2009 academic year

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This document provides:

- Definitions of key terms used to describe aspects of school suspension.
- An overview and explanation of suspension statistics of particular interest to policymakers.


Definitions

- **Short-term suspensions** are for less serious offenses and can last up to ten days.
- **Long-term suspensions** last from a minimum of 11 days to a maximum of the days remaining in the school year.
- **In-school suspensions** are usually short-term suspensions served in an in-school suspension classroom.
- **Out-of-school suspensions** are suspensions that are served at a location other than school.
- **Alternative learning programs** are “services for students at risk of truancy, academic failure, behavior problems, and/or dropping out of school” that are determined to better meet the needs of certain students than “regular” school.

2008-09 academic year suspensions

A note on suspension figures: A “suspension” in the DPI consolidated report refers to each suspension regardless of how many times individual students are suspended. A single student can be suspended multiple times. Suspension rates can therefore be easily misinterpreted because 100 students suspended once would look the same as 50 students suspended twice each. Consider the following examples:

School A has 200 students. If 100 of the students were suspended once, for a total of 100 suspensions, the suspension rate would be 50 percent (100 suspensions/200 students in the school) and 50 percent of the students received a suspension (100 students suspended/200 students in the school). In this case, the suspension rate and the percent of students suspended are the same.

School B also has 200 students. If 50 of the students were suspended twice for a total of 100 suspensions, the suspension rate for that school would be 50 percent (100 suspensions/200 students in the school) as with school A. In this scenario, however, only 25 percent (50 suspended students/200 students at the school) of the students received a suspension.

Consider another scenario:

There are 4 white girls in a class of students. One of them is suspended 4 times. While only 25 percent of the girls were suspended (1 suspended girl/4 girls total), the suspension rate for white girls in that class is 100 percent (4 suspensions total/4 girls total). In current reporting terminology, this is stated as 100 suspensions per 100 students.

These examples highlight how easy it is to misconstrue school suspension data and how important it is to look not only at the overall number of suspensions and average suspensions per student (or type of student) but to also look at where multiple suspensions for the same student occur, at the likely causes and explanations of suspension increases and decreases, and so on. Reporting the 100 percent rate without noting that one student was responsible for all of these 100 suspensions could lead to misperceptions about a school’s student body. It also could conceal important information about the suspended students’ circumstances. Not having this information would in turn lessen the likelihood that such circumstances are properly addressed.
Thus, in order to get a more accurate picture of suspension patterns, and how suspension affects students, reported information would ideally detail not only the number of suspensions, but also the number of students who are suspended.

Refer to the associated Family Impact Seminar document highlighting policy options for suggestions about how North Carolina policymakers might expand and improve definitions for reporting purposes. Such enhancements could help paint a more thorough picture of who is suspended, for what consequences and with what outcomes.

**Short-term suspensions**

- There were 293,453 short-term, out-of-school suspensions assigned to K through 12 students, with roughly half of those to high school students.
- These short-term suspensions were given to 151,291 different students for an average of 1.94 short-term suspensions per suspended student.
- Approximately one of ten K-12 students overall (and one of six high school students) received at least one out-of-school, short-term suspension.
- The average duration of a single short-term suspension was 2.98 days.
- The average total duration of short-term suspensions for students who received at least one such suspension was 5.79 days.

**Suspensions by student characteristic**

- Male students received 211,841 short-term suspensions or 72 percent of all short-term suspensions.
- Male students are over twice as likely as female students to be suspended.
- Female students received 81,612 or 28 percent of short-term suspensions.
- Black students had the highest rate of short-term suspension, followed by American Indian students. That is, a higher proportion of black students were suspended than students of any other race.
- Black students received the most – that is the highest number of – short-term suspensions, followed by white students and Hispanic students.
• Ninth graders received by far the largest number of short-term suspensions with over 70,000. The next highest number of suspensions for a single grade was 8th grade with slightly under 40,000 suspensions.

• Exceptional children received 65,089 short-term suspensions, with most given to students with serious emotional disabilities, intellectual disabilities, mild specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairment, or other health impairment.

Note: the total number of short-term suspensions among the categories above may be more than the total number of short-term suspensions since some students fall into more than one category (such as a white male with a serious emotional disability).
Figure S3. Short-Term Suspension Rates by Ethnicity.

- As in previous years, Black students had the highest rate of short-term suspension in 2007-08, followed by American Indian students.
- Short-term suspension rates decreased in 2008-09 for Asian, black, and white students.
- Short-term suspension rates increased by American Indian and Multi-Racial students.
Short-Term Suspensions by Grade

Note: Data includes charter schools for 2006-07, 2007-08, and 2008-09. Grade level was not reported for 1,283 short-term suspensions given in 2004-05: 3,766 in 2005-06, 3,140 in 2006-07, 7,177 in 2007-08 and 1,022 in 2008-09.
Long-term suspensions

- There were 3,592 long-term suspensions given to 2,407 different students
- The average duration of each long-term suspension was 70 school days
- There were 31 percent fewer long-term suspensions than in previous years

It is important to consider that dramatic reduction in long-term suspensions statewide and in certain districts, is not likely due primarily to significant positive changes in student behavior. Among the possibilities for such sudden declines are: new district policy; new interpretation of existing district policy, change in how certain offenses are classified/recorded; and a higher number of students placed in alternative schools or programs.
Figure S11. Rates of Long-Term Suspension by Ethnicity, LTS per 100,000.

- Black students had the highest rate of long-term suspension in 2008-09, 513 LTS per 100,000 students. This rate was a decrease of 22.3% from 2006-07.
As was the case with short-term suspensions, far more long-term suspensions were given to 9th graders than to students at any other grade level.
Type of offense committed

There are 17 criminal acts that schools are required to report, such as homicide, rape, sexual offense and burning of a school building. Consequences for these acts vary widely among districts and schools. While these 17 acts must be reported, committing such acts does not always result in suspension.

In suspension reports, acts not listed among these 17 are referred to as “other.” Not surprisingly, 97 percent of short-term suspensions were for an offense labeled “other”, meaning that 97 percent were not one of the 17 offenses for which reporting is required. “Other” offenses range from dress code violations to use of vulgar language to truancy. This is pictured in Figure 1 below.
• Of the 17 reportable offenses, the two most common were:
  1. Possession of a controlled substance in violation of law – over 4,800 acts in this category or 43 percent of all criminal acts requiring reporting.
  2. Possession of a weapon excluding firearms and powerful explosives – 3637 acts in this category or 32 percent of all criminal acts requiring reporting.
• Of the 17 reportable offenses, the breakdown by school level was:
  o Pre-kindergarten to Grade 5: 1,200 total reportable offenses of which the two most common were:
    ▪ Possession of a weapon not a firearm, 824
    ▪ Assault on school personnel, 272
- Grade 6 to Grade 8: 2,890 total reportable offenses of which the two most common were:
  - Possession of a weapon not a firearm, 1,215
  - Possession of a controlled substance, 957
- Grade 9 to Grade 12: 6,269 total reportable offenses of which the two most common were:
  - Possession of a controlled substance, 3,514
  - Possession of a weapon not a firearm, 1,371

**Alternative learning programs**

All school systems in NC are required to have at least one alternative learning program. Alternative learning programs encompass a broad range of programs, some of which serve students with issues other than discipline. Alternative learning programs may be actual alternative schools, programs within a “regular” school, or programs outside of school. Who these programs serve is determined by local policy. Some suspended students are placed in alternative learning programs.

While North Carolina law requires every district to have an ALP or alternative school available, districts are not required to provide this option to every long-term suspended student. Districts *may* but are not required to allow long-term suspended students to attend an alternative learning program (ALP) or alternative school.

- 12,508 students were placed in alternative schools and programs. This number includes students placed for any reason, including suspension.
- The characteristics of students placed in ALPs mirror the makeup of suspended students in that there are a higher percentage of blacks, males, and 9th graders than there are females, students of other ethnicities, and students in other grades.
- For reporting purposes, students are not considered suspended while attending an ALP or alternative school. If a student is suspended before attending the alternative placement, both the student’s suspension and ALP placement count
for reporting purposes. The ALP placement, however, is not counted as a long-
term suspension, even if the ALP is not the equivalent of full-time school.

While school suspension data is understandably of great interest, it is important to consider the reasons why they might fluctuate from year to year or from district to district. As noted above, decreases or increases in the number or type of suspension might stem not only from changes in student behavior but also from how offenses are classified, interpretation of policy, change in policy, and so on.