

North Carolina School Suspension Policy Options

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Growing concern about school suspensions

North Carolina has the 4th highest number and the 3rd highest rate of K-12 school suspensions in the United States. Interest and concern about the use of suspensions are understandably strong and growing and questions abound.

- Do school districts use the best possible tools to address student behavior problems?
- Do state law and district policy promote evidence-based responses to students with problem behaviors?
- Are the laws and policies structured and, more importantly, implemented as effectively as possible?
- Is policy change needed in this critical area that has implications for so many other areas of child, family, and education policy?

Why does school suspension matter?

School suspension policy – and more importantly, its implementation – is critical for a host of reasons. Research shows that being suspended may have impacts on multiple aspects of students' experiences with schooling, development and overall success.

Approaches to disciplinary problems may have consequences for:

- Truancy
- School dropout and ultimate academic achievement
- Future behavior problems
- Social development
- Future legal problems

*The North Carolina Family Impact Seminar is a series of educational briefings for state policymakers. Each seminar features relevant research and non-partisan, solution-oriented policy options. More information is available at <http://www.childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/engagemnt/ncfis.php>

- Later access to employment opportunities
- School Climate

As in many other states, North Carolina law concerning school suspension leaves substantial discretion to the local education authorities. School districts in turn typically assign broad discretion to individual school principals. Current policy specifics for North Carolina, and many other states and districts, are presented in other documents prepared for the 2010 NC Family Impact Seminar. The role of this document is to highlight possible policy options in the context of broad local control in the area of K-12 school suspension.

As North Carolina policymakers consider how to address the high number of school suspensions, they will face a number of key challenges. Among them are:

- Balancing the needs of students, schools, and communities broadly (e.g., safety and positive learning environments) with approaches to discipline that take into account what evidence says will have the greatest positive outcomes with regard to improved behavior.
- Resource limitations.
- Balancing statewide standards with the desire to maintain local control.

Given the above considerations, following are a number of policy options. They take into account current circumstances and conditions in North Carolina but many are likely applicable to other states as well.

Policy options

- In some instances where current law requires suspension, give school districts the latitude to allow principals to take into account specific conditions surrounding discipline cases (e.g., the individual needs of the student, the context in which the offense was committed, family circumstance). Doing so gives principals more flexibility in choosing appropriate disciplinary actions rather than requiring them to immediately dispense preset cookie-cutter sanctions that may not match the needs of the student and situation.
- Implementing programs effectively is challenging and requires resources. North Carolina could select a limited number of evidence-based prevention programs, encourage schools to adopt one of them, and then provide continuing support

and monitoring to ensure that they are implemented properly. The state already provides support for the implementation of an evidence-based program called Positive Behavior Instruction and Support. The state also has a system to monitor how well the program is being implemented. Where this program has been implemented with fidelity, suspension rates and other discipline problems appear to have declined faster than in other schools. More schools could be encouraged to adopt this program with appropriate resources. Those implementing it properly could be recognized or rewarded. See related report at <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/docs/positivebehavior/data/evaluation/pbs08-09.pdf>.

- Instead of defaulting to suspension, direct districts to default to research-based alternatives to suspension such as in school suspension, community service and other programs outlined in the brief on alternatives to suspension that accompanies this document.
- When students have to be removed from a school setting, local schools systems could work with community partners to ensure that students are connected to the local “systems of care.” Whenever possible, school systems could work to strengthen these local collaborative efforts. North Carolina has an experimental program, the Child and Family Support Team initiative, which connects students at risk of failure or out-of-home placement with local systems of care. Analyzing this program could help identify the best ways to connect students to local services.
- In conjunction with the previous options, eliminate the option of suspending students “to the street.” While current NC law states that every district must have alternative education programs, the law does not require that all suspended students be assigned to such a program. Some states, notably Missouri and Texas, obligate local school districts to provide alternative placements for most suspended students.

Missouri law regarding alternative education

Any suspension shall not relieve the state or the suspended student’s parents/guardians of their responsibilities to educate student. School districts are encouraged to provide an in-school suspension system and to search for other acceptable discipline alternatives prior to using suspension of more than ten days or expelling a student from the school. Each school district...constituting the domicile of any child for whom alternative education programs are provided or procured shall pay toward the per pupil costs for alternative education programs for such a child...one district must pay another/issue vouchers, or else state funding withheld...

- Understandably, districts may not have enough alternative education programs (ALPs) to accommodate all students who must be removed from the classroom due to disciplinary problems. ALPs, however, need not be the only option. Examples include mandatory community service related to the infraction or volunteer work that eliminates the possibility of suspended students becoming idle and at increasing risk of engaging in problem behavior. North Carolina has a number of community service and restorative justice programs (such as Project Challenge, which is in a number of counties across North Carolina). School systems could explore working more closely with these programs to create alternatives to suspension.
- Eliminate suspension as a consequence for truancy at least until students age out of compulsory school attendance, which occurs at age of 16. Otherwise, suspending truant students may, in effect, force the students to continue their truant behavior.
- In assigning consequences for disciplinary infractions, require consideration of the age of the offender. Currently, NC does not require districts to take into account the age or grade of the offending student and in some districts very young children are on long-term suspension. Many districts do so by choice and this is an area where additional policy guidance is likely warranted. This practice should be monitored carefully.
- In addition to the policy options offered for consideration, the state would do well to carefully monitor educational achievement and other outcomes among students who receive different types of consequences for similar infractions in order to see what kinds of policies produce the best outcomes for students and schools. To do so effectively likely would require a more refined approach to reporting suspensions, as highlighted below.

Possibilities for enhanced reporting of suspensions

As we have noted elsewhere in this briefing, the way suspension rates are currently defined can be confusing and easy to misinterpret. They are also different from the way other kinds of child serving agencies report information about rates, whether it be health, crime, child abuse, mental health or substance abuse. For instance, under the current system, high rates of suspension might be the result of many different students being suspended OR they might be the result of only a few students being repeatedly suspended.

To improve clarity and consistency in reporting, as well as to enhance our understanding of the nature of suspensions, we recommend that districts consider using the following terms and definitions to more clearly define the most relevant aspects of suspension.

Here are some terms and definitions that are more consistent with the way information is reported by child serving agencies.

- **Frequency** is the raw number of times that a suspension occurs within a specific time frame; this is a single number (not a percentage or fraction) referring to the number of times suspension is used, not the number of students who were suspended.
- **Incidence** is the number of **NEW** students suspended within a specified time period (e.g., academic school year, past 10 years); this includes only students with new suspensions (no prior suspensions); it tells us how common new suspensions are among students who have never been suspended within a specified timeframe.
- **Prevalence** is the total number of students who are suspended out of the entire population of interest (e.g., students in a classroom, school, or school district) within a specified time period (e.g., academic school year, past 10 years); this number includes both new and old frequencies of suspension; it tells us how common suspensions are within a population of interest and during a specific timeframe.
- **Rate** is a ratio between two numbers (e.g., number of suspensions per female student); regarding suspensions it is typically expressed as a percentage or a fraction; rates can be calculated for a wide variety of information and therefore require precise descriptions. We could calculate both the rate at which students were suspended (e.g., gender-specific rate or age-specific rate) or the rate of suspensions per day or month by school or district. One should always specify the two numbers being compared.

Example:

Suspension **frequency** means the number of times that a suspension occurred within a certain time period (e.g., the academic school year). For instance, one school might report a suspension frequency of 287,100 suspensions during the 2009 academic year. A single student who is suspended multiple times during 2009 would be counted multiple times using this definition of suspension frequency. The term **rate** would apply when comparing the frequency of suspensions to some student or school characteristic.

Consider for example, a suspension frequency of 100 for a school with 500 students during the 2009 academic year. If 100 students were each suspended one time, the 2009 **prevalence rate** of suspension would be 20 percent (i.e., 100 students who were suspended out of 500 total students).

Now, consider the same timeframe (the 2009 academic year) and same school of 500 students. If 50 of the 100 suspended students in 2009 have never been suspended before, the 2009 **incidence rate** would be 11 percent = $50/450$. This calculation is based on the following information:

- 100 students were suspended in 2009
 - 50 of these students had never been suspended before 2009 and had their first suspension during 2009.
 - 50 of these students had been suspended before and had a subsequent suspension during 2009.
- 500 students comprise the entire school
 - 450 of these students have no past suspensions nor any suspension during 2009.

Using this kind of system consistently would paint a more accurate picture of suspension in North Carolina and would allow clearer comparisons among schools and school systems as well as among school systems and other child serving systems.

Given the variation in rates of suspension among both schools within the same district and among different districts, local policy at the district and school levels clearly play a major role in how many students are being suspended and for what infractions. A state-directed, enhanced focus on which suspension policies and alternatives to suspension produce the best results for students affected directly, their peers, and schools, could go a long way toward identifying improvements to state-wide standards for addressing student infractions without jeopardizing local discretion.