Variations in School Suspension by District

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State, District, and School Suspension Decisions

Comparing suspension policies across states (Other States Suspension Policies), it is evident that school districts in NC have considerable discretion in defining policies of student conduct, as well as the corresponding disciplinary consequences. In North Carolina, suspension policy ranges from guidance to regulation, and is determined at three levels of authority. The levels of guidance and authority are listed below, and described in detail in Appendix 1 (NCDPI, 2010).1

- **State Regulations**: all districts are required to suspend for one year a student who carries a weapon onto school property, or who is involved in a bomb threat or similar felonious offense. The district superintendent is required to remove a student to an alternative educational setting, if available, or suspend a student for up to one year for serious assault on school personnel. These and any suspensions of greater than 10 days are considered long-term suspensions.

- **LEA Guidance**: A local board of education, usually upon recommendation of the district superintendent and/or the principal, has the authority to suspend students for up to one year (365 days) for serious offenses that do not fall within the categories covered by state regulations. The superintendent has the authority to remove a student to an alternative educational setting, if available, or suspend a student for up to one year for assault on school personnel and for serious assault on a student.

- **School Guidance**: Most suspensions are largely at the discretion of the school principal, under the comprehensive rubric of a student “willfully violating policies of conduct established by the local board of education.” The vast majority of suspensions are short-term (10 days or fewer) but the principal

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has authority to suspend for longer than ten days within this rubric, with approval of the district superintendent.

**Differences in district policies**

The summary chart of disciplinary policies for selected NC districts in Appendix 2 clearly indicates that there is significant variation in the detail and content of the policies set by local boards of education. The district guidelines for short-term suspensions vary from almost no or no detail (i.e., Ashe and Durham), to a description of specific acts and the consequences they incur within each grade level (i.e., Cumberland and Forsyth). At an even greater level of detail, Hyde County also specifies the level of punishment recommended for a student’s first versus second offense. Although definitions and consequences of long-term suspension and alternative school placements also vary, these are more stable across districts since they involve some parameters set by the state (such as the minimum age of 13 for alternative learning program placement).

**Differences in Suspension Measures by District**

- **Changes over time.** Figure 1A illustrates the trends in short-term and long-term suspension for some of the larger school districts in 2008-09. These lines represent the number of suspensions, so their levels reflects the number of students enrolled in each district—larger districts would be expected to have a higher number of suspensions, as the figure depicts. Considering the entire period depicted, there is relatively little change, with the largest reduction in Durham (16 percent) and the largest increase in Wake (19 percent). Nonetheless, Wake currently has the lowest rate of short-term suspension within this group of districts (27 percent), compared with Guilford (30 percent), Durham (40 percent), and Forsyth (49 percent). These rates refer to the number of suspensions per 100 students enrolled in each district, and do not take into account multiple suspensions per student.
Unlike the trends in short-term suspensions, there is considerable district variation in the distribution of long-term suspensions over time (Figure 1B). Wake has experienced a significant increase in the number of long-term suspensions over this period, while Guilford has had a large downturn. Durham and Forsyth long-term suspension levels have remained quite stable over this eight-year period.

Source: NCDPI, 2010
Variation in number of suspensions: The annual report on school violence compiled by the NC Department of Public Instruction (SASA 2010) provides for each LEA a ratio of the number of suspensions per 100 enrolled students. This is a rate of suspensions that includes multiple suspensions for a single student. The rate of short-term suspensions varies across districts, from a low of 4.1 suspensions per 100 students in Avery, to a high of 111 suspensions per 100 students in Robeson.

Variations in Reported Infraction and Suspension Rates

Unlike the rates of number of suspensions, the rates depicted in Figure 2 represent the number of students who were reported for a disciplinary infraction and the number of students who received at least one short-term suspension, as

*Source: NCDPI, 2010*
proportions of each district’s total student enrollment in 2008. Of these districts, Wake had the lowest rate of short-term suspensions (87 per thousand) and infractions (102 per thousand), whereas Forsyth had the highest rate of both categories (129 and 274, respectively).

There are significant differences across districts in the ratio of students committing infractions to students being suspended. In Wake County, 84 percent of reported infractions resulted in suspension, whereas in Forsyth only 47 percent resulted in suspension. These differences may represent district policy differences regarding the severity of punishment for disciplinary infractions, but they also are due in part to differences in district practices for reporting disciplinary infractions that are not among the 17 legally reportable offenses.

![Figure 2: Infraction and Suspension Rates, selected Districts](image)

*Source: Special tabulations, NCERDC*

- **Variations in Suspensions by Student Characteristics**

  **Gender**

  Figure 3 illustrates the differences in short-term suspension rates for male and female students. The rates refer to the number of female students who were suspended at least once, per 1000 students enrolled in 2008. The difference in suspension rates by gender is quite similar across school districts, with males students suspended at around twice the rate as female students. The largest difference is found in Mecklenburg County, with 17 percent of male students
receiving a short-term suspension, as compared with 9 percent of female students.

Figure 3A: Short Term Suspensions By Gender
Rates by 1,000

Source: Special tabulations, NCERDC

Long-term suspension rates in 2008 varied considerably by gender, with Wake County having the largest difference between males and females and the highest rates for both. Across counties, the long-term suspension rates were quite low; for female students, the rates ranged from .3 percent in Wake to .02 percent in Mecklenburg. Among male students, the rates varied from 1.2 percent in Wake to .08 percent in Mecklenburg.
Figure 3B: Long-Term Suspensions by Gender
Rates by 1,000

Source: Special tabulations, NCERDC

- Variations by Race/Ethnicity

Figure 4A depicts the proportion of students who received a short-term suspension in 2008, by district and some race/ethnic categories. Each rate refers to the number of students in each race/ethnic category who were suspended, relative to the total number of students of that race/ethnic category who were enrolled in the school district. Of these districts, Guilford had the lowest proportion of black students who were suspended (14 percent), and was among the districts with the highest proportion of white students suspended (4.5 percent). Students of all race/ethnic categories were suspended at higher rates in Forsyth, comparing across these districts.
Long-term suspension rates did not vary much by race across most of these districts, with the exception of Wake, in which students of all races and ethnicities were suspended at higher rates.
In sum, these data highlight a number of school suspension trends across North Carolina school districts in recent years. As the data reflect, there is substantial variation among districts with regard to the number and rate of suspension as well as the district-level policies that determine what type of suspension students receive and for how long.

As state and local policymakers and school officials consider modifications to suspension policy, it is important not only to look at a combination of state-wide and district-level data, but also to pay close attention to the factors that determine what the data report.
APPENDIX: Suspension Policy in North Carolina

Source: 2010 School Attendance and Student Accounting Manual, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and State Board of Education

J. Suspensions and Expulsions:

1. The principal of a school has the authority to suspend for a period of ten days or less any student who willfully violates policies of conduct established by the local board of education, provided that a student suspended is provided an opportunity to take any quarterly, semester, or grading period examinations missed during the suspension period. (G.S. 115C-391) The suspension days assigned by the principal must be within the current school year.

2. The principal of a school, with prior approval of the superintendent, has the authority to suspend for periods of time in excess of ten days, but not exceeding the time remaining in the school year, any student who willfully violates the policies of conduct established by the local board of education. (G.S. 115C-391)

3. A local board of education may, upon recommendation of the principal and superintendent, expel any student 14 years of age or older whose continued presence in school constitutes a clear threat to the safety of other students or employees. (G.S. 115C-391)

4. A local board of education or superintendent shall suspend for 365 calendar days any student who (1) brings onto educational property or to a school-sponsored curricular or extracurricular activity off educational property, or (2) possesses on educational property or at a school-sponsored curricular or extracurricular activity off educational property, a weapon, as defined in G.S. 14-269.2(b),(b1),(g), and effective December 1, 1999, G.S. 14-269.2(h). The local board of education, upon recommendation by the superintendent, may modify this suspension requirement on a case-by-case basis. (G.S. 115C-391)

5. A local board of education shall suspend for 365 calendar days any student who, by any means of communication to any person or group of persons, makes a report, knowing or having reason to know the report is false, that there is located on educational property or at a school-sponsored curricular or extracurricular activity off educational property any device designed to destroy or damage property by explosion, blasting, or burning, or who, with intent to perpetrate a hoax, conceals, places, or displays any device, machine, instrument, or artifact on
educational property or at a school-sponsored curricular or extracurricular activity off educational property, so as to cause any person reasonably to believe the same to be a bomb or other device capable of causing injury to persons or property. The local board, upon recommendation by the superintendent, may modify the suspension requirement on a case-by-case basis. (G.S. 115C-391)

6. A local board of education or superintendent may suspend for up to 365 days any student who: by any means of communication to any person or group of persons, makes a report, knowing or having reason to know the report is false, that there is located on educational property or at a school-sponsored curricular or extracurricular activity off educational property any device, substance, or material designed to cause harmful or life-threatening illness or injury to another person; with intent to perpetrate a hoax, conceals, places, disseminates, or displays on educational property or at a school-sponsored curricular or extracurricular activity off educational property any device, machine, instrument, artifact, letter, package, material, or substance, so as to cause any person reasonably to believe the same to be a substance or material capable of causing harmful or life-threatening illness or injury to another person; threatens to commit on educational property or at a school-sponsored curricular or extracurricular activity off educational property an act of terror that is likely to cause serious injury or death, when that threat is intended to cause a significant disruption to the instructional day or a school-sponsored activity or causes that disruption; makes a report, knowing or having reason to know the report is false, that there is about to occur or is occurring on educational property or at a school-sponsored curricular or extracurricular activity off educational property an act of terror that is likely to cause serious injury or death, when that report is intended to cause a significant disruption to the instructional day or a school-sponsored activity or causes that disruption; or conspires to commit any of the acts described in G.S. 115C-391 (d4).

7. The superintendent shall, upon recommendation of the principal, remove to an alternative educational setting, any student who is at least 13 and who physically assaults and seriously injures a teacher or other school personnel. If no appropriate alternative educational setting is available, then the superintendent shall, upon recommendation of the principal, suspend for no less than 300 days, but not more than 365 days, any student who is at least 13 and who physically assaults and seriously injures a teacher or other school personnel. (G.S. 115C-391)
8. The superintendent may, upon recommendation of the principal, remove to an alternative educational setting any student who is at least 13 and who physically assaults a teacher or other adult who is not a student, physically assaults another student if the assault is witnessed by school personnel, or physically assaults and seriously injures another student. If no appropriate alternative educational setting is available, then the superintendent may, upon recommendation of the principal, suspend this student for up to 365 days. (G.S. 115C-391)

9. Notwithstanding the provisions of 115C-391, the policies and procedures for the discipline of students with disabilities shall be consistent with federal laws and regulations. (G.S. 115C-391(g))

10. A student must be recorded present in school when participating in any disciplinary techniques grouped under the term “in-school suspension.”

11. When a student is expelled while under suspension, his/her withdrawal (W2) should be posted on the day the expulsion takes effect. The absences incurred during the suspension remain on the student’s record.

12. Whenever a student is assigned a long term suspension to include the remainder of the school year or a short term suspension is converted to a long term suspension to include the remainder of the school year, a W2 withdrawal code should be posted to that student’s record on the date of assignment or conversion. If there are Code 3 absences present they should remain.

13. When students are suspended from school because they lack proper immunizations, their absences are to be coded as suspensions.