



Evidence Points to the Need for Discipline Reform in D.C. Schools

Testimony Before the D.C. Council

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony at this important hearing.

I am offering testimony today on behalf of the Center for American Progress, an independent nonpartisan policy institute dedicated to bold, progressive ideas, leadership, and action. CAP supports the goals of the Student Fair Access to School Act—in particular, increasing data collection and reporting on the use of exclusionary discipline and limiting the use of subjective exclusionary discipline for infractions that are not a threat to student or school safety. These goals are supported by two critical pieces of evidence—first, rigorous, generalizable evidence that exclusionary discipline practices are damaging and ineffective and that alternative discipline practices are beneficial and effective.

The second type of critical evidence is just as important as the nationally recognized, generalizable findings—and that is evidence from the District of Columbia itself. Recent reporting from Office of the State Superintendent of Education¹ (OSSE) shows that despite decreases in the rate of suspensions, we still have a problem. We know now that African American students are increasingly disproportionately affected by exclusionary discipline over the past two school years and that suspensions and expulsions are increasingly being used for nonemergency or violent infractions.

It is this combination of rigorous, generalizable data and local data indicating a persistent problem that clearly indicates something needs to change.

National research shows that schools have overdisciplined African American and Latino students—as well as students with disabilities and English language learners—for at least 40 years.² Every other year since 1968, the Office of Civil Rights has conducted the Civil Rights Data Collection.³ Because of these data, in 2014, the U.S. Department of Education reiterated the legal limitations⁴ of exclusionary discipline and reminded school districts of their responsibility to serve all students. The department also highlighted research-based practices that improve student behavior and school climate in order to help educators eliminate arbitrary treatment of students and create more positive school environments.

Additional research shows that it is not just students experiencing exclusionary discipline that are harmed: The learning of nonsuspended students is also negatively affected with higher rates of suspension—in particular, suspensions for nonviolent infractions.

I want to state those last findings again, because this sometimes-overlooked piece of evidence directly refutes many discipline reform critics' claims that the current state of exclusionary discipline protects the remaining students in the classroom. It doesn't. Exclusionary discipline is harming all students, classrooms, and schools in which it is used. It is a failed approach.

The OSSE's recent report⁵ reflects and adds on to these national results. African American students are now eight times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than white students, up from about 7 percent last year. And, students with disabilities are nearly twice as likely to receive at least one out-of-school suspension; at-risk students 1 1/2 times more likely. Finally, despite investments in alternative practices, we also now know that there has been an increase in the use of exclusionary discipline for nonemergency or violent behaviors.

Ultimately, students who are suspended and expelled are more likely⁶ to withdraw from school, face academic decline, drop out, and become involved with the criminal justice system. By not treating the whole child and using ineffective and damaging discipline practices, we are denying these students a fundamental right to education and intervening only to further damage their life trajectory. This goals of this bill, in conjunction with continued alternative discipline resources codified in the budget process, represents a critical step in addressing the systemic bias in the use of exclusionary discipline, promoting the use of more effective practices, and ensuring a safe and healthy environment for all students in the District of Columbia's public schools.

I've been grateful to listen to many of the speakers today and would like to reiterate a message from Kristen Harper at Child Trends, who called for additional qualitative data to bolster the quantitative collections in progress. This call for observational data is a strong suggestion and would offer help in interpreting trends as well as provide an additional validity check on the quantitative data collected.

Thank you again for your work on these issues and for the opportunity to share our perspective.

Erin Roth is a senior policy analyst for K-12 Education at the Center for American Progress.

Endnotes

- 1 D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education, "State of Discipline: 2016-17 School Year" (2018), available at https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/2016-17%20School%20Year%20Discipline%20Report.pdf.
- 2 Children's Defense Fund, "School Suspensions: Are They Helping Children?" (1975), available at http://diglib.lib.utk.edu/cdf/data/0116_000050_000205/0116_000050_000205.pdf.
- 3 U.S. Department of Education, "Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC)," available at <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/frontpage/faq/crdc.html> (last accessed March 2018).
- 4 U.S. Department of Education, "U.S. Department of Education Releases Guidance on Civil Rights of Students with Disabilities," Press release, December 28, 2016, available at <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-releases-guidance-civil-rights-students-disabilities>.
- 5 D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education, "State of Discipline."
- 6 Jeffrey H. Lamont, "Out-of-School Suspension and Expulsion" (Itasca, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013), available at <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/131/3/e1000.full.pdf>.