It is imperative that students and teachers feel safe at school, yet evidence indicates strict student discipline policies may be counterproductive. Research from Russell Skiba and M. Karega Rausch questions how such policies might contribute to a negative school climate. School discipline policies are high stakes: the extensive use of suspension and expulsion is strongly associated with lower student achievement and engagement, greater truancy and dropout, all of which contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. African American and Latino students, particularly males, are those most often suspended and expelled, and are disproportionately suspended or expelled for willful defiance.

The top three reasons for suspension | 2012-13

1 Disruption and defiance
2 Student fights
3 Abusive language and vulgar acts

The history of zero tolerance policies

Many “Zero tolerance” policies were commonly adopted during the early 1990s. These policies called for students to be excluded from school for offenses such as fighting, brandishing a weapon, or possessing drugs at school. Today zero tolerance policies are much more broadly applied. Many such policies impose school exclusion for a wide range of less serious behaviors, such as willful defiance. Significant safety violations represent less than 5% of all school disciplinary infractions and minor offenses are often met with the same consequences.

Racial disparities and willful defiance

Willful defiance has become a highly subjective catchall term for minor offenses such as class disruptions, verbal threats, intimidation, and general harassment.

Suspensions as a percentage of enrollment over time

African American and Latino students, particularly males, are those most often suspended and expelled, and are disproportionately suspended or expelled for willful defiance.

Effects of alternative discipline policies

Research indicates zero tolerance policies have negative effects for students, teachers and schools. Districts have recently started changing their discipline practices, and data from the California Department of Education shows progress in the reduction of suspensions and expulsions statewide.
Board member action items

1. Review policies and practices around school discipline.
   › Governance teams can better understand how their discipline practices impact student engagement and achievement through reviewing district discipline policies.
   › Reviewing policies will also inform the development of school climate and safety outcomes.

2. Review the data on suspensions and expulsions within the district by asking the questions below.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CA suspensions &amp; expulsions</th>
<th>2011-12</th>
<th>2012-13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suspensions</td>
<td>709,596</td>
<td>609,471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unduplicated students</td>
<td>366,629</td>
<td>329,142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expulsions</td>
<td>9,759</td>
<td>8,562</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unduplicated students</td>
<td>9,553</td>
<td>8,264</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questions to ask

What does your discipline landscape look like?

› What are the suspension/expulsion rates in your district, and how have they changed over time?

› Are there differences in the suspension/expulsion rates across race, gender, income, or disability status?

› Are there demographic differences among victims of such discipline infractions?

› Does one school or classroom stand out? Why?

› Are there similar districts that have the same or lower suspension/expulsion rates? Why?

What do district policies and practices look like?

› What district policies and practices are in place regarding student discipline and suspensions/expulsions?

› Do those policies and practices reflect the current board’s beliefs and vision?

Best Practice

In 2013 the Los Angeles Unified School District adopted the School Climate Bill of Rights, prohibiting out-of-school suspensions for willful defiance, and called for a review and potentially new standards for the district’s police force.¹⁰

› Are there better strategies or approaches that reflect district beliefs that can be put into practice at the classroom, school site, and district level?

› What professional development is provided for administrators, uncertified and certified staff?

Visit the Discipline/Suspension & Expulsion Web page at www.csba.org/discipline for more information.

Endnotes


2. Skiba, R.J., Rausch, M.K. (2006). (See endnote 1)


7. California Department of Education. (2014). (See endnote 6)

