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Focus: *Student Discipline*

This edition of the WSSDA Research Blast covers Student Discipline. Several perspectives on school discipline are reviewed below. These include:

- Exclusionary discipline
- Proportionality of punishment for misbehavior
- The effect of extreme discipline on student achievement and graduation rates.

Four articles follow the summary.

Drawing the line on student discipline

A common struggle

Every school makes tough decisions about student discipline. While every incident of misconduct is unique, schools can usually rely on established policies to address minor issues. Recently though, many school districts around the country have come under fire for discretionary discipline decisions. Most of these involve the use of suspension or expulsion.

The 2013 Washington Legislature passed a [bill](#) that puts greater limits on suspensions and expulsions. This new law also created the Student Discipline Task Force and requires submission of discipline data to the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Similar measures in places like Denver have received strong responses from teachers, who say that limiting suspension alone is not a workable solution. Much like the new law in Washington, the Denver school district plans to make greater use of data, train school employees in verbal de-escalation techniques, and invest in mental-health services for students with chronic discipline problems. However, the message from many teachers remains consistent. They want more options for students with behavioral needs, but they also want students who physically threaten teachers to be removed from classrooms.

Striking a balance

Advocates of school discipline reform tend to focus on proportionality. This means making sure that punishment matches misconduct. For example, most people would agree that a five-year-old child should not be escorted home in the back of a police car for wearing the wrong colored shoes to school. Similarly, an assault on a teacher should not be met with a simple detention.

Discipline practices can vary greatly between schools within the same state or school district. This leads to very different education outcomes for similar groups of students. This is why many reformists want common state discipline frameworks that offer more guidance and consistent standards. They argue that a clear framework will lead to fairer and more even treatment. The framework needs to outline when students should receive in-school punishment, suspension, or expulsion from school, and when they should be arrested or incarcerated.

Full agreement on proper discipline strategies is still an elusive proposition. However, as schools around the country collect more data, trends in student discipline and suspension have become clear. Study after study confirms that students of color, low income students and special education students are disciplined at consistently higher rates. Research also finds that these students are much less likely to receive any educational services while on suspension or during other exclusionary discipline.

Gaps also exist in terms of gender. A [report](#) from the National Education Policy Center finds that in Colorado, male discipline rates are more than twice as high as female rates.

Removal from regular classes means that already-disadvantaged students are likely to fall further and further behind. Because of this, many advocates are looking at school discipline reform to address growing gaps in student achievement and opportunity.

Looking for long-term solutions

Decisions in student discipline can greatly impact overall student achievement and community safety. While certain lines need to be drawn, reliance on harsh or excessive discipline practices can trigger a cycle of recidivism and crime. This increases the likelihood that young people will be removed from school and eventually dropout. Likewise, simply changing discipline policies to curb student suspensions provides no guarantee that student achievement or graduation rates will improve.

According to the research below, schools need to embrace a holistic approach that includes:

- Detailed tracking of discipline data
- Special training for police and teachers
- Alternative education opportunities for disciplined students; and
- Plans to reintegrate and reengage disciplined students when they return to school.

Some of these practices are now required by Washington law, but schools and school districts will need time and assistance to implement them.

Restorative justice practices offer another branch of strategies to address student behavioral issues. In youth court programs, a group of peers review the problems of fellow students and then decide if there is a better alternative to suspension for resolving disputes. [Positive Behavior Interventions and Support](#) (PBIS) is an option to prevent misconduct before it starts by making school environments more supportive.

The literature on school discipline tends to focus on what schools, school districts and states could be doing better, but also acknowledges the costs. Policy changes that require schools to provide additional services for students need to be backed up with appropriate funding.

Student discipline

In the spirit of this discussion, we have gathered four recent pieces of research.

- “Reclaiming Students: The Educational and Economic Costs of Exclusionary Discipline in Washington State” is a report from Washington Appleseed and Team Child. The authors outline discipline laws and policies in the state of Washington. They demonstrate how these affect students and the state as a whole, sometimes to their detriment.
- “Handcuffs on Success: The Extreme School Discipline Crisis in Mississippi Public Schools” examines how excessive discipline policies can rob students of educational opportunities, erode general student achievement, and compromise public safety. The paper focuses on proportionality, and argues that disciplinary measures should be matched appropriately with degrees of student misconduct.
- “Arresting Development: Student Arrests in Connecticut” takes a close look at the offenses and behaviors that lead to student arrests. It concludes that many student arrests during the study year could have been avoided or handled differently, and that children who are most likely to be arrested are those that already come to school with disadvantages. The report also suggests that high arrest rates in many schools are driven more by practice or policy, and less by differences among students.
- “Addressing the Out-of-School Suspension Crisis: A Policy Guide for School Board Members” is a very accessible and actionable report by the NSBA and other partners. The report provides some alarming national figures on suspension rates, along with strategies and examples to help school districts identify and address the issue.

Reclaiming Students: The Educational and Economic Costs of Exclusionary Discipline in Washington State

Washington Appleseed and Team Child

This in-depth but accessible report is the most thorough and up-to-date overview of school discipline in Washington State. The report introduces readers to state laws governing discipline, including the rights and obligations of school districts. This report was written before the past legislative session. Thus, it does not reflect recent policy changes, but probably helped to drive some of them.

The report outlines the current condition of discipline practices and how they can impact Washington's schools and students. It singles out long-term exclusionary discipline in particular, which is often a tipping point that leads toward dropping out, delinquency, and lifelong poverty. This research from schools in Washington found that:

1. Exclusionary discipline lessens academic success and a student's relationship with the educational system.
2. The vast majority of disciplined students did not receive educational services during their exclusion.
3. Exclusionary discipline practices disproportionately affect students of color and youth living in poverty.
4. Reliance on exclusionary discipline practices varies significantly from district to district, even among districts with similar demographic characteristics; and
5. Discipline data yields only a partial picture of the number of students impacted by exclusionary practices each year in Washington public schools.

The authors recommend less use of out-of-school exclusions, prohibiting indefinite exclusions, and providing school districts with the resources to re-engage excluded students in education. They also back the recommendations of the Education Opportunity Gap and Oversight and Accountability Committee.

http://www.teamchild.org/docs/uploads/Reclaiming_Students_-_a_report_by_WA_Appleseed_TeamChild.pdf

Handcuffs on Success: The Extreme School Discipline Crisis in Mississippi Public Schools

By the Advancement Project

This paper looks at zero tolerance policies, along with the criminalization and incarceration of students in Mississippi. The authors highlight some of the most extreme disciplinary practices in the state. These include incidents and policies that contribute to the state's "school to prison pipeline." The main focus of the report is on proportionality, matching student misconduct with appropriate discipline.

The paper argues that overuse and misuse of disciplinary measures is a large contributor to the state's low graduation rate (44th in the nation) and low student achievement. The authors also argue that excessive out-of-school suspension, expulsion, and referrals to law enforcement escalate rule breaking.

Taken to the extreme, many "get tough" policies can have the opposite of the intended effect and seriously erode public safety. According to the paper, disproportionate police involvement in school discipline undermines public safety by diverting attention from other more serious criminal behaviors. It also unnecessarily increases antagonism and resentment from students

towards law enforcement. This cycle reinforces itself because as students become more disengaged, they are likelier to misbehave in the future, and thus more likely to be funneled back into the criminal justice system.

<http://www.advancementproject.org/resources/entry/handcuffs-on-success>

Arresting Development: Student Arrests in Connecticut

By the Connecticut Voice for Children

This report looks at student arrests in schools in Connecticut. The research suggests that unnecessary or excessive use of police to enforce school rules harms students and is very costly to the state. While authors of the report show that overall student arrests are down in Connecticut from the high in 2007-2008, they find that many of the most recent arrests were likely avoidable, and could have been handled by schools.

The report finds that students of color, students in poor districts, and students with identified special education needs were the most likely to be arrested. The research also highlights a great deal of variability between similar school districts around the state. This suggests that individual school practices have a large impact on student arrest rates.

The report identifies 10 action items that can help lower the rate of unnecessary student arrests, including collecting data on student arrests as well as promoting police and educator training.

An executive summary and the full report can be found at:

<http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/arresting-development-student-arrests-connecticut>

Addressing the Out-of-School Suspension Crisis: A Policy Guide for School Board Members

By the National School Boards Association, National Opportunity to Learn Campaign, and Opportunity Action

This report looks at student discipline, particularly out-of-school suspension, at the national level. The authors provide some background, along with some gripping national figures:

- According to one report, 3.3 million students were issued out-of-school suspension in the 2009-2010 school year.
- One in four African American children with disabilities enrolled in grades K-12 was suspended at least once in 2009-2010; and
- Approximately 839 districts out of 6,779 surveyed suspended more than 10 percent of the enrolled student body at least once.

The report finds that schools with high suspension rates score lower on state accountability tests than other schools, even after adjusting for demographic differences. The authors provide questions for school board members and other local policymakers, action steps to help prevent out-of-school suspensions, and real world examples of community strategies to address these issues.

The report can be found at:

<http://www.nsba.org/Board-Leadership/Surveys/Out-of-School-Suspension-Policy-Guide/Out-of-School-Suspension-Report.pdf>

A WSSDA policy brief that explores these themes was released this past June. The brief by WSSDA intern Deborah Massachi can be found at:

<http://www.wssda.org/Portals/0/Resources/A-Z%20%28misc%29/Policy%20Brief%20June%202013.pdf>