

Testimony on The Effects of School Suspensions

School suspensions currently constitute a significant problem in our education system. During the 2011-2012 school year Vermont public schools suspended or expelled 3,982 students out of school for at least one day, and suspended 3,861 students in school for at least one day. That's five percent of our student population. Due to the fact that many students are suspended for more than one day at a time, or multiple times throughout the school year, it is estimated that Vermont students lost at least 8,000 days of classes in the 2011-2012 school year. It is worth noting that this data is incomplete, given that some schools reported no suspensions and others didn't report any data—it can be safely assumed that numbers are higher than reported. Furthermore, while we don't know how many of these 8,000 days were supplemented by alternative education plans we do know that all 8,000 of them should have been.

Limited data exists for the state of Vermont in regards to the effects of school suspensions on students; although, we do have data from other states. A study conducted by the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University, done in conjunction with the 2010 NC Family Impact Seminar, concluded that while suspensions were effective tools of discipline, there were significant negative impacts associated. Higher rates of suspensions were associated with higher rates of future antisocial behavior and involvement with the juvenile justice system as well as higher rates of hostile and negative student relations. Schools' prior suspension rates also effectively predicted future increases in suspension rates, showing that schools rarely decline in how often they suspend students. Although suspensions may be an effective method of disciplining a student, they carry with them negative side effects that seem to perpetuate the very behavior they are designed to curtail.

The negative impacts of these suspensions are compounded by the demographics they target. Nearly 14 percent of Vermont's students qualified for an IEP, an educational program designed to ensure schools provide necessary support to students with disabilities that adversely affect their education. Statewide, students with IEPs are three times more likely to be suspended than their non-IEP peers, and in some countries the disparity is worse, where students with IEPs are up to seven times more likely to be suspended. Furthermore, a significant racial disparity is displayed by suspensions. My findings are as follows:

- 11 percent of students with IEPs receive in school suspension (ISS) as of 2012
- 4.1 percent of students without IEPs received ISS as of 2012
- 12.2 percent of students with IEPs received out of school suspension (OSS) as of 2012

- 4.1 percent of students without IEPs received OSS as of 2012
- Students with IEPs make of 13.7 percent of the student body as of 2012
- Students with IEPs make up 29.7 percent of ISS as of 2012
- Students with IEPs make up 31.9 percent of OSS as of 2012
- If having an IEP played no role in whether or not a student received a suspension we would expect students with IEPs to make up between 13.45 and 13.95 percent of suspensions
- If having an IEP played no role in whether a student received a suspension this disparity would have a zero percent chance of occurring naturally.
- There are 16,926 students in Chittenden County attending public schools at which at least 20 students identify as African-American. Of those sixteen thousand, 5.7 percent (964) identify as African-American as of 2012.
- African-American students make up 15.4 percent of ISS, and 13.1 percent of OSS as of 2012.
- If being African-American played no role in whether or not a student received a suspension, we would expect them to make up between 5.3 and 6.1 percent of suspensions.
- If being African-American played no role in whether or not a student received a suspension, this disparity would have a zero percent chance of occurring naturally
- There are 3,422 students attending public schools in Addison County at which at least twenty students identify as Native American. Of those three thousand, 12.4 percent (425) do.
- Native Americans make up 19.7 percent of students who receive an ISS and 29.9 percent of students who receive and OSS.
- If being Native American played no role in whether a student received a suspension, we would expect them to make up between 12.3 and 12.4 percent of suspensions.
- If being Native American played no role in whether a student received a suspension this disparity would have a zero percent chance of occurring naturally.

Given that suspensions can be an effective method of discipline in regards to removing a hostile student from classes, providing relief to frustrated faculty, and raising parental awareness of a student's misconduct, I am not advocating for the use of suspensions to be restricted in schools. However, given that suspensions have negative effects such as: future antisocial behavior, involvement in the juvenile justice system and higher rates of hostile student relations. Moreover, given that suspensions resulted in 8000 days of schools lost in Vermont in the 2011-2012 school year, and had a disproportionate impact on minorities and students with disabilities, the negative side effects of suspensions should be mitigated.

My recommendation in this regard is that the Vermont General Assembly pass legislation to require lesson plans for all school suspensions. The current language on lesson plans for suspensions reads as:

Principals, superintendents, and school boards are authorized and encouraged to provide alternative education services or programs to students during any period of suspension or expulsion authorized under this section. (16 V.S.A. § 1162 C)

This language should be amended to read as:

Principals, superintendents, and school boards shall provide alternative education services or programs to students during any period of suspension or expulsion authorized under this section. (16 V.S.A. § 1162 C)

- (1) such education services shall provide the opportunity for students to make academic progress while suspended and offer them lesson plans and a reasonable amount of time to make up work that was missed.
- (2) in the case of long term suspensions such education services shall provide reentry plans for students that include reasonable schedules and strategies for how students will receive instruction.

Every child has a right to public education, that we cannot deny. By enacting this legislation, you would be maintaining the schools ability to discipline their students, while upholding the promise of education for all students.

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