

This article originally appeared in the October 2015 issue of *Principal Leadership* magazine.



A Publication of the National Association of Secondary School Principals

SCHOOL SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION

Every day a secondary school principal in the United States faces a vexing issue—suspending or expelling a student. For this roundtable, we convened a group of thought leaders representing a variety of perspectives on this issue: Larry Dieringer, executive director of Engaging Schools, a national nonprofit that collaborates with educators; Matt Cregor, JD, leader of education advocacy at the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights and Economic Justice in Boston, MA; and Matthew Willis, principal of William C. Hinkley High School in Aurora, CO. *Principal Leadership* Senior Editor Michael Levin-Epstein moderated the discussion.

Levin-Epstein: The White House recently hosted a summit on school discipline, which focused, in part, on suspension and expulsion. Why do you think the White House decided to have this conference?

Cregor: I think this is less a response to one particular issue or incident and more the proper percolating up of an issue that's warranted our attention for quite some time. The suspension rates that we see today are double those of the 1970s, and as those rates grew, the racial- and disability-related disparities only continued to widen therein. We've seen significant attention to this issue from the federal government, starting from slightly before the Obama administration took office, but it's certainly been a priority for the Departments of Justice and Education, which released guidance interpreting our federal civil rights laws in the school discipline context only a year-and-a-half ago.

Dieringer: Building on that, there's been a lot more data available in the last four or five years, confirming what I think people have known intuitively. I think the first of a series of major reports was a study in Texas by the Council of State Governments Justice Center called "Breaking Schools' Rules." In the UCLA's Center for Civil Rights Remedies more recent publication "Are We Closing the School Discipline Gap?" they tell us that nearly 3.5 million public school students were suspended out of school at least once during 2011–12; 1.5 million were suspended at least twice. If you assume the average suspension is at least 3.5 days, and that may be conservative, then public school students lost an estimated 18 million days of instruction in just one school year because of exclusionary discipline. Then you look at data that confirms in various places that African-American students are more than three times as likely to be suspended than their white peers, and special education students were more than twice as likely [to be suspended]. If you put those two identity factors together and make the students male, then the rates are even higher. There are two parts of one problem, exclusionary discipline is one part, and disproportional discipline is

another, and they are completely intertwined.

Cregor: I think another thing we can build off Larry's point is that we didn't need any researchers to tell us what our grandmothers could: that if you're not in school, you're not learning, or, you're learning the wrong lessons. That said, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Psychological Association (APA), and as Larry referenced, the Council of State Governments have all continued to reinforce for us how suspension predicts grade retention, drop-outs, and involvement in the criminal or juvenile justice system. We know the harm done to suspended students' futures. What the more recent research has shown us is that the harms are not just individual, but schoolwide. The greater the reliance on suspension, the more likely there will be lower test scores, unhealthy and unorganized school climates, and disgruntled teachers. Our reliance on suspension is not working—it is not curbing the behavior we are trying to address. As we are now seeing the positive impact of other ways to discipline, this really is a national conversation that benefits all of us.

Dieringer: I'm thinking of some research the APA did. There's no data that shows out-of-school suspension (OSS) or expulsion reduces rates of disruption or improves school climate. The data is beginning to suggest just the opposite, that disciplinary removal has negative effects, ultimately, on student outcomes and learning climates. I think the one piece of good news is that it does seem that in some places OSS rates are coming down, and that's a positive. It's a significant step in the right direction, [but] it's not the only need.

Willis: With all the tensions throughout the nation between police and African-American males, this is a perfect time to bring up the issues of school discipline. We must address the disparities in disciplinary rates of minority children and the correlation between these disciplinary rates and incarceration. Punitive-focused forms of school discipline do not address the disruptions to the learning environment, nor do they improve the educational outcomes of students. Dr. Pedro Noguera [of UCLA] points out that many of our disciplinary issues are a result of students' gaps in understanding, and since they cannot engage in the learning and no one will address their gaps, students act out. This cycle ends up creating more gaps for students and prevents them from attaining real opportunities in society.

Levin-Epstein: **Why do you think that the suspension and expulsions are increasing?**

Cregor: Our friends at the Advancement Project looked at national suspension rates over the last 40 years and saw some of the biggest jumps occur after implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). If that's more than just a correlation, those are some likely reasons why. One is increased pressure on teachers and administrators to produce strong standardized test scores without perhaps the proper support to do so. And second, as a result of that, students have less time for nontested subjects, like music or art, or time for gym or recess.

Dieringer: I would agree. Along with that predominant focus on preparing students to do well on standardized tests, that's where all the accountability was placed. I would suggest there was less attention given to the other side of the coin, to the healthy development of

young people (the healthy social and emotional development), and the intersection of behavior of academics and learning. Couple that with a mindset that's probably been shaped to a significant extent by the zero-tolerance movement that began back in the 90s. Zero tolerance was first introduced as a response primarily to serious threats of violence and weapons and drugs. It has, over the years, expanded to be a way of thinking about the response to undesirable behavior—whether that's in the classroom or the school as a whole. Removal from the classroom and ultimately from the school became easier in this kind of context. It fit with the zero-tolerance paradigm.

Willis: Students are students, and I would say conversely that they are as well or better behaved today than 30 years ago. We have increasingly become more entrenched in a punitive system, and this system is exemplified with a judicial system that cannot act alone, and Congress has enacted laws like “the three strikes law” with severe consequences. These forms of punitive systems have not changed the outcomes for systems, and they do not release the harm caused to the victim or the perpetrator. We need a better system of accountability, and I think restorative justice and restorative practices show the most promise in changing the system from one of punishment and shame to one of accountability. The problem is that the system of punishment is very efficient. When someone breaks the rules, you look in the book and dole out the consequences that have been prescribed. Real accountability is not about doling out punishment but about discovering the issues around the incident and holding all the parties accountable for their actions, including reparation and healing the emotional harm caused. The current system is flawed, and the numbers speak to the problems of continuing this system.

Levin-Epstein: What lessons learned do you have for secondary school principals as keys to success in this area?

Dieringer: I'll start by offering one caveat: It's important to see the reduction of exclusionary sanctions, particularly OSS, as a step toward something. What it should be a step toward is a schooling or education that really maximizes supports and opportunities for each and every student. So really, each student has opportunities to learn and to be successful. We hear some stories of reductions of OSS that move OSS to in-school suspension (ISS), where ISS isn't really being structured or implemented in a very productive way. It's really being boiled down to a holding tank of sorts.

Cregor: I couldn't agree more. If I were to offer any advice to principals and administrators, it's really to look for the partners and the partnerships to do this work. In Los Angeles, as Larry mentioned, the district banned suspensions for willful defiance. Among the factors responsible for the change was a parent organizing group called CADRE [Community Asset Development Redefining Education], and they've been active on these issues for over a decade. Nine years ago, CADRE parents were instrumental in securing a change to LA's discipline foundation policy that included, among other things, districtwide implementation of Positive Behavior Supports (PBS).

When it was clear that most schools weren't implementing what was now district policy, those parents went to the schools to audit their implementation—interviewing

administrators, parents, and students in the process. After their review, the parents and their allies published a report that praised the schools that were implementing these practices and called public attention to those who weren't. A principal and a district that knows how to partner with parents like those in CADRE can help make real changes based on real needs out of what may have otherwise felt like a top-down directive. That's a powerful thing.

Willis: First and foremost, there needs to be a real commitment from the administration of a school to change the climate, because no system works without their support. Leadership needs to recognize and admit that change is needed. Once we can accept that our current system is broken, then we can explore alternatives. Personally, I think restorative justice is the best form of accountability.

Levin-Epstein: What advice do you have for administrators dealing with the issue of the disproportionate treatment of minority students?

Dieringer: What was recently released by the federal government is a guide on addressing the root causes of disparities in school discipline—an educator's action planning guide. There are a few guidelines that I think would be helpful for a principal. One is to facilitate a process that involves working with at least one core team with lots of different constituents on it on an initiative spanning at least a year, and often longer, to really dig into shifting gears and resetting school discipline, an important part of which would be tackling the disproportionality issue.

Cregor: First, we live in a country that has failed to develop a common vocabulary and a common ability to discuss issues of race and racism. Second, we place great expectations upon our schools and our educators to cure all societal ills. There's a tremendous disconnect between those two realities. Our educators need just as much support as the rest of us in order to have meaningful and productive conversations about race. When we look at the racial disparities in discipline, the numbers are clear: For our white students, they are disproportionately likely to be suspended for objective offenses—things that you absolutely know when you see, like alcohol possession. Our students of color are far more likely to be suspended for things like disrespect and defiance—behavior that is far more subjective.

Dieringer: Ideally, a principal develops skillfulness at these more difficult conversations so the principal can actually model opening up conversations and facilitating respectful conversations amongst the staff and with families; and it's not easy.

Resources

[NASSP Board Position Statement on School Discipline](#)

www.nassp.org/Content.aspx?topic=School_Discipline

[Articles and Presentations](#)

American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health. (2013). "Policy statement: Out-

of-school suspension and expulsion.”

www.ncsl.org/documents/fsl/aap-out-of-school-suspension-and-expulsion.pdf

Knoster, T. (2015). “The Nuts and Bolts of Preventative Classroom Management: PBS in the Classroom.” Presentation at the 12th International Conference on Positive Behavior Support. Boston, MA.

www.pbis.org/common/cms/files/pbisresources/G1Knoster.pdf

Government Reports

U.S. Department of Education. (2014). Guiding principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline.

<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/guiding-principles.pdf>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001). Youth violence: A Report of the Surgeon General. Washington, D.C.: Office of the Surgeon General.

www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK44294

Laws

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 20 U.S.C. Section 1400 (2004).

Websites

Engaging Schools

www.engagingschools.org/services/schoolwide-discipline-and-student-support

The Dignity in Schools Campaign. Model Code on Education and Dignity.

www.dignityinschools.org/our-work/model-school-code

Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Economic Justice. Not Measuring Up: The State of School Discipline in Massachusetts.

www.lawyerscom.org/not-measuring-up

Copyright 2015 National Association of Secondary School Principals.
www.nassp.org. Reprinted with permission.