

Educational Policies that Impact Youth

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With the increasing attention on school violence, school districts around the country have adopted zero tolerance policies aimed at preventing school violence and promoting effective school learning climates. There seems to be little doubt that schools need the discretion to implement policies that protect its students and maintain a productive learning environment. However, the debate regarding how to keep schools and students safe and productive remains controversial.

The Indiana data on suspension and expulsion present a mixed picture. Negative outcomes associated with suspension and expulsion, such as minority disproportionality and a negative relationship with ISTEP scores, are of concern. Yet the fact that the high rates of out-of-school suspension and expulsion may be limited to a relatively small percentage of Indiana's schools suggests that many of Indiana's schools are using proactive alternatives that maintain safety without removing students from the opportunity to learn.

What types of effective programs and strategies are currently being implemented in Indiana schools that promote school safety and a climate that is conducive to learning? Interviews conducted with Indiana principals offered innovative programs for maintaining both school discipline and maximizing educational opportunity. These principals maintained high academic and behavioral expectations and were not afraid to remove a student if safety demanded it. But they also:

- *clarified expectations regarding office referrals and train staff in classroom management strategies,*
- *actively taught appropriate behavior through school philosophy and preventive programs,*
- *communicated and collaborated with parents,*
- *sought to reconnect alienated students through mentoring and anger management, and*
- *developed creative options in the school and community to keep even those students who are suspended and expelled engaged in learning,*

The following summary offers recommendations from the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy and the Indiana Youth Services Association. They have produced a series of policy briefs on the issues of zero tolerance policies, expulsions and out of school suspensions in Indiana, and innovative programs that some Indiana schools have adopted in an attempt to balance school discipline and educational opportunity. For further information, please see the Center's website, <http://ceep.indiana.edu/ChildrenLeftBehind/>.

Children Left Behind: Series Summary and Recommendations

By Russell Skiba, M. Karega Rausch, and Shana Ritter

To create a dialogue between the education and juvenile justice communities on effective methods of school discipline, the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy and the Indiana Youth Services Association have collaborated on a series of three briefing papers on the topic, released concurrently with this summary.

The complete series and supplemental Children Left Behind materials may be found on the project website:

[ceep.indiana.edu/
ChildrenLeftBehind](http://ceep.indiana.edu/ChildrenLeftBehind)

In the face of serious incidents of violence in our schools in the last decade, the prevention of school disruption and violence has become a central and pressing concern. Beyond the prevention of deadly violence, we know that teachers cannot teach and students cannot learn in a school climate characterized by disruption. Clearly, schools have the right and responsibility to use all effective means at their disposal to maintain the integrity, productivity, and safety of the learning climate.

Yet schools also face a mandate under No Child Left Behind to maximize the opportunity to learn for all students. Students who are removed from school are students at increased risk for delinquency in the community. Further, NCLB also emphasizes accountability of educational practice. Schools are increasingly under a mandate to use only those educational practices that have demonstrated solid evidence of effectiveness.

Given that removing students from school through suspension and expulsion is one of the most common disciplinary practices in schools today, we are faced with what appears to be a profound contradiction. Educators seemed to be forced into a difficult choice pitting the needs of many students to a safe educational environment against the rights of some children to educational opportunity.

The Children Left Behind Project is a collaboration of the Indiana Youth Services Association and the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy, whose purpose is to share data on the use and effect of school suspension and expulsion with policymakers, educators, and community members in the state. Our goals are to create a meaningful dialogue about suspension, expulsion, and their alternatives, and in particular to improve communication between education and juvenile justice. A series of three briefing papers explored these apparent contradictions, addressing three questions about out-of-school suspension and expulsion:

- *Does the literature support the need for and effectiveness of zero tolerance suspensions and expulsions? (Briefing Paper 1)*
- *What is the status of suspension and expulsion in Indiana? (Briefing Paper 2)*

- *Are there alternatives that can maintain safe and productive school climates while preserving students' opportunity to learn? (Briefing Paper 3)*

Briefing Paper 1. Zero Tolerance: The Assumptions and the Facts

The use of zero tolerance in schools is predicated upon a number of assumptions about school violence and the types of responses necessary to address it. In this paper, we examined available national data to assess how well these assumptions hold up.¹ That review shows that:

- Violence and disruption are extremely important concerns that must be addressed, but there is no evidence that violence in America's public schools is out-of-control, nor that school violence is worsening.
- The inconsistency with which zero tolerance is implemented makes it highly unlikely that it could function effectively to improve school safety.
- Higher rates of out-of-school suspension are associated with poorer school climate, higher dropout rates, and lower achievement, making it difficult to argue that zero tolerance is an important tool for creating effective school climates.
- Despite claims that zero tolerance sends an important deterrent message to students, there is no credible evidence that either out-of-school suspension or expulsion are effective methods for changing student behavior.
- Minority disproportionality in suspension and expulsion has been consistently documented and seems to be increasing with the use of zero tolerance.
- A wide range of alternatives to zero tolerance has emerged and is available to promote a productive learning climate and address disruptive behavior.

We must all be concerned about the safety of students and the ability of teachers to teach them in a climate free of disruption. Schools have the right and responsibility to use effective tools that enable them to reach that goal. Yet, No Child Left Behind mandates that we use only those educational interventions that provide evidence of effectiveness. The national data raise serious questions about whether the philosophy of zero tolerance in general, or the use of school suspension and expulsion in particular, can be considered to be effective interventions for maintaining school safety.

Briefing Paper 2. Unplanned Outcomes: Suspensions and Expulsions in Indiana

National-level data may be insufficient to describe the status of school discipline in Indiana. Thus, the second briefing paper specifically presented data and perspectives on discipline from Indiana schools and Indiana principals. A number of findings emerged:

- Rates of expulsion appear to be decreasing, but out-of-school suspension is increasing.
- Over 90% of out-of-school suspensions were accounted for by infractions in the categories Disruptive Behavior and Other.
- Schools in urban locales have significantly higher rates of out-of-school suspension. Secondary schools have higher rates of both out-of-school suspension and expulsion than elementary schools.
- Rates of out-of-school suspension are not distributed evenly across schools: The top 10% of schools in terms of rate of suspensions account for over 50% of Indiana’s out-of-school suspensions.
- African Americans are four times as likely to be suspended out of school and about two and a half times as likely to be expelled as White students. Hispanics are about twice as likely to be suspended or expelled as White students (see Figure 1).
- In the most recent available national data, Indiana ranks first in the nation in its rate of school expulsion, and ninth in out-of-school suspensions. This finding cannot be accounted for by the length of expulsion as defined in Indiana statute.
- Indiana principals are sharply divided over the use of out-of-school suspension and expulsion. Attitudes about the willingness to use suspension and expulsion are related to attitudes towards parents and students with disabilities, and are also associated with school rates of suspension.
- Regardless of demographic factors, schools with higher rates of out-of-school suspension have lower average passing rates on ISTEP+ (see Figure 2).

In summary, the Indiana data on suspension and expulsion present a mixed picture. On the one hand, the negative outcomes associated with suspension and expulsion, such as minority disproportionality and a negative relationship with ISTEP scores, are of concern. Yet the fact that the extensive use of out-of-school suspension and expulsion may be limited to a relatively small percentage of Indiana’s schools suggests that many of Indiana’s schools are using proactive alternatives that maintain safety without removing students from the opportunity to learn.

Figure 1. Discipline Rates by Race

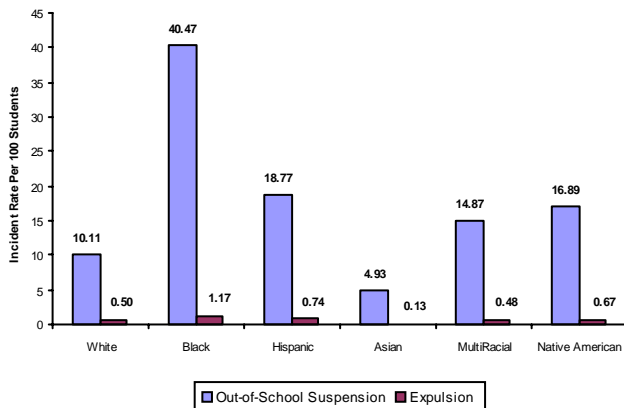
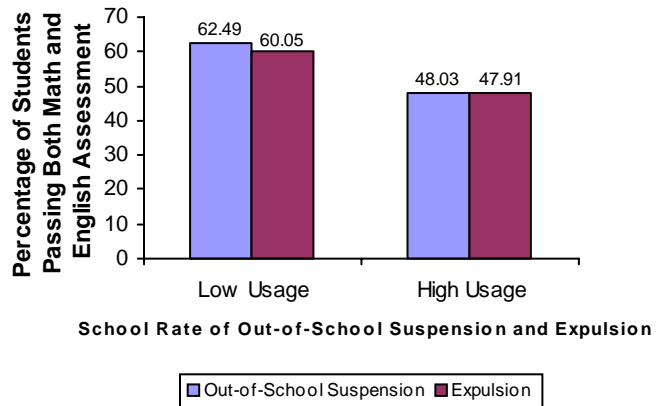


Figure 2. Percent Passing ISTEP by School Disciplinary Use



Briefing Paper 3. “Discipline is Always Teaching”: Effective Alternatives

A number of programs and interventions have been identified as effective or promising for reducing the threat of youth violence and promoting safe school climates. But the presence of available research does not guarantee that those approaches can be used effectively at the local level. For the third briefing paper, we spoke with Indiana principals about innovative programs both for maintaining school discipline and maximizing educational opportunity. We found no hint of compromise in the approach used by these principals. They maintain high academic and behavioral expectations and are not afraid to remove a student if safety demands it. But they also:

- Clarify expectations regarding office referrals and train staff in classroom management strategies.
- Actively teach appropriate behavior through school philosophy and preventive programs.
- Communicate and collaborate with parents.
- Seek to reconnect alienated students through mentoring and anger management.
- Develop creative options in the school and community to keep even those students who are suspended or expelled engaged in learning.

Such efforts are not free; they may require significant commitments of time and resources. Recent efforts to pass a statewide bullying bill suggest, however, that Indiana is prepared to make a commitment to support the state’s schools in promoting school climates that are safe and conducive to learning for all children.

Students removed from an educational environment and placed unsupervised in the community are children at grave risk.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The only system that touches every Indiana child is education. When the critical relationship between the child and school is disrupted, the probability of adverse outcomes is multiplied. Criminologists have found that one of the strongest predictors of juvenile delinquency is poor school attachment.² Many of the interventions that have been found to be most effective in reducing youth violence and delinquency work because they re-integrate children and youth with their schools and communities. In contrast, out-of-school suspension and expulsion actively and purposely break that bond.

The primary focus of the Children Left Behind Project has been to document the use and effects of school exclusion for students in Indiana's schools. Beyond the schoolhouse doors, however, removing students from the opportunity for an education also creates a host of negative effects for the community. Emerging findings from the study of what has come to be called the school-to-prison pipeline have found that the increasing tendency to criminalize school behavior is associated with increased school dropout, higher levels of incarceration, and minority overrepresentation in juvenile detention.³

These results show that it is possible to maintain a safe and productive school climate without removing a large number of students from the opportunity to learn.

Students removed from an educational environment and placed unsupervised in communities for days, weeks, or months at a time are children at grave risk. Psychologists have shown that a critical moment in the development of delinquency comes in the middle school years when a child who has become alienated from school begins to connect instead with gangs or antisocial youth in the community.⁴ Removing students from school for disciplinary infractions gives them the time, and in many communities the opportunity, to spend time with and learn from negative role models. Many communities are coming to the realization that suspension and expulsion simply shift the location of the problem—from disruptions in the school to crime in the streets.

Over the course of the past year, the Indiana Juvenile Law Study Commission has met to examine the strengths and weaknesses of Indiana's juvenile justice system and the laws that drive that system. The Commission has heard from a spectrum of leaders in the juvenile justice system. They were unanimously concerned about the increasing numbers of children that appear before their benches who share one thing in common: Whether because of disciplinary practices, truancy, or dropout, these youth were somewhere other than in the classroom.

The findings of this project suggest that there can be a different way. National reports have identified a variety of proactive strategies, resources, and interventions that can reduce the threat of school violence and improve student outcomes. Here in Indiana, innovative programs described by principals and Youth Service Bureaus suggest that schools can maintain orderly environments with high expectations, while at the same time making an active commitment to the continuing education of all children. Together these results show that it is possible to maintain a safe and productive school climate without removing a large number of students from the opportunity to learn, and suggest a number of recommendations:

1. **Reserve zero tolerance disciplinary removals for only the most serious and severe of disruptive behaviors, and define those behaviors explicitly.**
2. **Replace one-size-fits-all disciplinary strategies with graduated systems of discipline, wherein consequences are geared to the seriousness of the infraction.**
3. **Improve data collection strategies on school discipline at the state level and assist educators in using disciplinary data to better understand and address safety and disciplinary concerns at their school.**
4. **Improve collaboration and communication among schools, parents, juvenile justice, and mental health to develop an array of alternatives for challenging youth.**
5. **Implement preventive measures that can improve school climate and reconnect alienated students.**
6. **Expand the array of options available to schools for dealing with disruptive or violent behavior and, in particular, ensure that teachers have the resources they need to solve disciplinary problems at the classroom level.**
7. **Evaluate school discipline or school violence prevention strategies to ensure that all disciplinary interventions, programs, or strategies are truly having an effect on student behavior and school safety.**

As our knowledge increases, it becomes apparent that there is no inherent contradiction between school safety and educational opportunity for all children. The good news is that effective strategies have been validated at the national level that can help schools reach both goals. The better news is that courageous and innovative Indiana educators have begun to demonstrate success in creating safe and effective learning climates for all of Indiana's children. Our schools and our children deserve nothing less than full support for those efforts.

Endnotes

1. In the interest of space and readability, citations for data represented in summaries of the three briefing papers are not presented here, but may be found in the three briefing papers (ceep.indiana.edu/ChildrenLeftBehind).
2. Hawkins, J.D., Guo, J., Hill, K.G., Battin-Person, S., & Abbott, R.D. (2001). Long-term effects of the Seattle Social Development Intervention on school bonding trajectories. *Applied Developmental Science, 5*, 225-236.
3. Wald, J., & Losen, D. (2003). Defining and redirecting a school-to-prison pipeline. *New Directions in Youth Development, 99*, 9-15.
4. Patterson, G. R. (1992). Developmental changes in antisocial behavior. In R.D. Peters, R.J. McMahon, & V.L. Quinsey (Eds.), *Aggression and violence throughout the life span* (pp. 52-82). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

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Dr. Skiba is an Associate Professor in the Counseling and Educational Psychology Department at Indiana University Bloomington. He is currently Co-Director of the Safe and Responsive Schools Project, a U.S. Department of Education Projects of National Significance grant working with eleven schools in two states to develop comprehensive and preventive approaches to ensuring school safety.

He has presented on school violence prevention for professional associations and school districts throughout the country, and recently received the Operation PUSH/Rainbow Coalition Push for Excellence award for his research in minority disproportionality in school suspension. He has been called upon as an expert on zero tolerance by both the United States Senate and the United States Commission on Civil Rights, and has been cited as an expert on school violence and minority disproportionality in a number of national media, including the Los Angeles Times, USA Today, Chicago Sun-Times, Philadelphia Inquirer, Washington Post, and ABC's news program, Nightline.

Relevant Publications

- Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., & Peterson, R. (in press). The color of discipline: Sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment. *Urban Review*.
- Skiba, R. J., & Knesting, K. (2002). Zero tolerance, zero evidence: An analysis of school disciplinary practice. In R.J. Skiba & G.G. Noam (Eds.), *New directions for youth development* (no. 92: Zero tolerance: Can suspension and expulsion keep schools safe?). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Skiba, R. J. (2001). When is disproportionality discrimination? The overrepresentation of black students in school suspension. In W. Ayers, B. Dohrn, & R. Ayers (Eds.), *Zero tolerance: Resisting the drive for punishment in our schools* (pp. 176-187). New York: New Press.
- Peterson, R. L., & Skiba, R. J. (2001). Creating school climates that prevent violence. *Clearing House*, 74(3), 155-63.
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- Skiba, R. J., & Leone, P. E. (2001). Zero tolerance and school security measures: A failed experiment. In T. Johnson, J. E. Boyden, & W. J. Pittz (Eds.), *Racial profiling and punishment in U. S. public schools: How zero tolerance policies and high stakes testing subvert academic excellence and racial equity* (pp. 34-38). Oakland, CA: Applied Research Center.