

Do Expulsion and Suspension Work in Public Schools?

June 12, 2017

by [Grace Chen](#)

We examine a recent study on the effectiveness of expulsion and suspension as school disciplinary measures, and alternatives some schools are implementing to keep students in line.



School districts across the country have recently brought disciplinary measures by schools into focus, in an effort to determine the best way to address discipline problems in schools today. While the large majority of school districts still favor methods like suspension and expulsion for a wide range of infractions, evidence continues to show these methods are not the most effective option. Should suspension and expulsion be used in public schools today? And if these methods are not appropriate, what are the alternatives? Check out ways some experts and school officials are approaching the issue of discipline in public schools.

The Cost of Discipline

One survey recently conducted on discipline in public schools weighed the cost of such procedures. The non-profit organization Texas Appleseed recently released its findings after surveying 11 school districts in Texas to determine how much is spent on disciplinary programs and school security. According to the Statesman, the survey found that those school districts, which make up about one-fourth of all Texas schools, spend around \$227 million annually on disciplinary procedures and security. This number includes spending on expulsions, suspensions, policing and alternative schools.

The survey comes at a time when Texas schools are facing significant funding cuts from the state. It was also released in anticipation of a senate meeting involving how to deal with problematic students in public schools. The survey was meant to open discussion on the most effective, and most budget-friendly, ways to deal with students who present discipline challenges to schools today.

“We recognize that many Texas school districts are struggling as a result of the \$5.4 billion cut in state funding for public education approved last year to help address a state budget shortfall,” Deborah Fowler, director of Texas Appleseed, told the Statesman. “We are releasing this report,

not to point a finger at spending in the surveyed school districts, but to open a dialogue with schools about different approaches to student discipline that are more effective and less costly to implement.”

Based on the figures released by Texas Appleseed, it does appear that discipline through suspension and expulsion can be a costly venture. But does the effectiveness of the discipline make it worth the expense?

The Academic Benefit

To determine whether suspension and expulsion are effective means of discipline, one only needs to look at a recent report by the San Mateo County Times. According to this publication, the California Department of Education issued 765,000 out-of-school suspensions during the 2009-2010 school year alone – enough students to fill every professional stadium in the state. However, out-of-school suspensions have been tied to low completion rates, low academic performance and a higher incidence of juvenile justice involvement.

In addition, the students that are subject to this sort of discipline tend to fall into very specific demographics in terms of race, gender and even disability. These students are less likely to graduate from high school and more apt to get into trouble with the law. However, some argue that if the disciplinary measures are sufficient in improving performance throughout the rest of the student population, the collateral damage in losing some of the students who pose a discipline problem may be worthwhile.

Unfortunately, that does not appear to be the case either. The states that have the highest suspension rates also tend to have the lowest scores on aptitude tests in reading, math and writing. These discrepancies appear to be consistent even among schools that have similar demographics otherwise. It does not appear that suspension of students has an academic benefit for any of the students in that school.

The Alternative

Fortunately, there are alternatives to suspension and expulsion as a means of disciplining students today. The National Association of School Psychologists reports that replacing these traditional methods with positive disciplinary measures tend to create a safer, more productive student environment. The organization cites statistics that show schools that implement discipline policies that focus on producing positive behavior reduces student alienation and

promotes healthy relationships between students and adults at the school. This may be particularly true for students with disabilities – one of the groups that is often targeted for suspension via the traditional disciplinary model.

The proof is in the pudding at Plum High School in Pennsylvania. Trib Live reports that this school has implemented a positive-behavior system in an effort to discourage unacceptable behavior by rewarding positive actions. Plum has instituted the Principal's 180 Club, which enters students caught doing good deeds into a raffle where they can win prizes. The first student winner got a gift card to the Cheesecake Factory for correcting math problems in class. Other students could win gift cards for iTunes and items with their school logo.

Plum High School has become a part of a trend toward positive reinforcement in schools. Trib Live reports that U.S. schools have seen a 28-percent increase in such programs in the past year, with around 18,277 now included in the number of schools focusing on positive rather than negative behavior.

“The more schools hear about it and the more schools see the benefit of implementing this type of positive-behavior framework, they're encouraged to sign on,” Kelly M. Vaillancourt, director of government relations at the National Association of School Psychologists, told Trib Live.

Vaillancourt added that the most effective programs of this kind also boasted strong parental support. Another key element to a successful program is clear guidelines involving the expectations for students and ongoing focus on positive behavior in the classroom setting. When it comes to keeping students in school and on a successful track, these positive programs are showing much more promise than traditional disciplinary measures involving suspending and expelling students for negative behavior.