

The Effects of Policy Against Suspension for Students

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Title/Topic:

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Research Question:

Due to restricting suspension policies, are schools effectively implementing alternative behavior consequences and what are the corresponding outcomes?

Background Rationale:

Under Ohio House Bill 491, school districts are presented with a severe policy limiting the suspension of students in any grades of pre-kindergarten through three. These limitations include the duration of and reason for suspension. Students below grade four may not be given an out of school suspension, for any other reason than bringing a firearm or knife onto school grounds, or producing a different act in which the safety of themselves, classmates, or other school personnel is risked. In response to many of these incidents, administrators are only able to remove the young student for the remainder of the day or for the following full school day. However, in most cases the bill suggests that in response to potentially suspendable offenses, administrators should consult with the mental health professional under contract with the school district and not remove the student from school or extracurricular activities.

This policy, in theory, helps to rehabilitate young students and further develop their social emotional needs in hopes of decreasing future suspendable behaviors. However, many educators feel that it enables young students' aggressive behaviors and limits their ability to discipline and manage the overall success of their classrooms.

With the intent of the policy and the bias of educators aside, it leads those in the field to question the effectiveness of the bill. Have school districts seen a positive effect with this policy in place? What alternative behavior responses have been implemented? What are the cost/requirements to make these effective?

Literature Review:

Policies against suspension for young students, encourage holding them accountable in ways that allow students to understand the impacts of their behavior, produce opportunities for them to make amends, and support them in changing their behavior in the future. Ohio schools are being forced to pursue these avenues when disciplining students PreK-Third. Although these measures come with good intent, they often lack proper training and resources for school personnel.

However, in school districts with suspension restricting policies, and holistic support and training for alternative restorative practices, positive changes have been seen. A California middle school decreased its suspension rate by 87% and expulsions to zero after implementing restorative practices. A three-year evaluation of restorative practices in Minnesota Public Schools found high satisfaction rates, sharply increased attendance rates, and decreased suspensions, expulsions, and serious behavioral incidents. The number of students identified as being on track to graduate also increased (Thompson Eisenburg, 2016).

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Legislation like Ohio House Bill 491, promotes school districts to contract with outside mental health agencies and in many instances encourages these companies to hold space on the schools' campus. This push is to help ensure students of low socioeconomic neighborhoods are provided with necessary mental health services. However, it also aids as another tool to "discipline" and discourage unwanted behavior in younger students. A study in which forty one elementary schools with expanded school mental health (ESMH) programs were compared to 41 schools without ESMH programs, demonstrated results that suggest that the presence of ESMH clinicians will not necessarily impact suspension rates in an elementary school (Bruns et al., 2005). Targeted and well-implemented approaches to address behaviors that lead to suspension, or school- and system-level policies to provide alternatives to suspensions, will likely be a better route to achieving this outcome.

Design/Tools/Process:

To explore the immediate effects of this policy within my school, I decided to explore our own suspension data. I scoured our data over the past four years to look for trends in alternative consequences and overall changes in the school's suspension rates. I was most curious to see what alternative behavior responses were most commonly being used, as the majority of our staff has not received training on restorative practices.

Data Analysis:

As of March 2023, my school, Leverette Elementary had totaled 701 behavior referrals. This is just below the 875 that were written in the 2021-2022 school year. The majority of the referrals for both school years were categorized as "disruptive behavior" with "failure to follow directions" and "minor physical altercation/fight" falling into the second and third most categorized offenses. Recognizing that the majority of incidents that resulted in student behavior referrals being written, were due to disruptive behavior and failure to follow directions peaked my curiosity as to what the best responsive consequence would be for these actions. However, without specific details on the behaviors it is hard to tell, but one could assume that the corresponding consequence should not be out of school suspension.

Over the past four school years, Leverette Elementary used suspension as a behavior consequence more than approximately 650 times. It should be noted that this is a significant downward tick, as students were not in the school building for large parts of both the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years. Compared to this grand number, only 84 times for elementary students, and 140 times for junior high students, was "alternative to suspension" (in-school suspension) selected as the consequence. Within this one school building, it is very clear to see that there are no positive trends/effects of limiting suspension when schools do not receive adequate funding and training to adapt to other rehabilitating behavior practices.

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Behavior Referral Responses:

Action	Year	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	Totals
Alternative to Suspension (In-School - Elementary Only)					84	84
Alternative to Suspension Placement				140		140
Conference with Parents/Guardians				13		13
Conflict Mediation				10		10
Counselor Referral				7		7
Detained for Period				115		115
Loss of Privileges				96	104	200
Mediation				2		2
Suspension		134	28	280	208	650
Time Out in Office				49	116	165
Totals		148	28	872	701	1,749

Implications/Recommendations:

Although the research and evidence is abundantly clear that suspension is not the most effective consequence for students of any age, schools require more than just a law that limits this possibility. Positive change will not be seen until school districts are given ample funds to train and update school wide policies on behavior reform. Teachers and other school personnel must be trained on how to effectively implement responsive teaching techniques in efforts to decrease and discourage unwanted student behaviors. As for the mental health agencies being pushed into schools, districts should also be able to advocate that these personnel are correctly trained on the same responsive practices. They should also be sure their staffing numbers adequately fit the needs of the school.

In conclusion, I believe that Ohio House Bill 491, just like many things, has good intent. However, it lacks to get past the superficiality of alternative behavior plans. It must be readapted to provide more funding and training in these practices before there will be a positive state wide trend in behaviors and suspension rates.

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