



July 30, 2011

## One Way to Guarantee More Trouble

Nearly six in 10 public school students in Texas were suspended or expelled at least once between seventh and 12th grade. That was the astounding finding of an analysis tracking nearly one million students in 3,900 Texas schools.

Schools are right to expel students who pose a threat to others. But suspensions for less serious, nonthreatening behavior have become routine in recent decades, with disastrous consequences. Children who are removed from school are at far greater risk of being held back, dropping out or ending up in the juvenile justice system.

The Texas study, conducted by the Council of State Governments Justice Center, raises alarms that should prompt every state to re-examine disciplinary policies.

For starters, schools should be required to deal with minor infractions at school, reserving suspension for serious offenses. Only 3 percent of the disciplinary actions taken in Texas were for serious criminal conduct that requires mandatory suspension or expulsion under state law. The remaining 97 percent were made at the discretion of school officials for misbehavior like fighting, misdemeanor drug or alcohol use, or disruptive classroom behavior.

The breakdown of who was punished is also chilling. African-American students and those with some disabilities were disproportionately likely to be removed from the classroom. A staggering 83 percent of black males had at least one discretionary violation, compared with 74 percent of Hispanic males and 59 percent of white male students. Minority students were more commonly given harsher out-of-school suspensions, rather than in-school suspensions, for their first disciplinary violation.

Such findings might have been dismissed in the past by those who believed that minority students were more likely to be “bad kids.” National studies have shown that African-American students are no more likely than others to commit offenses that require removal.

The study also makes clear the cost of such policies. Students who experienced one discretionary suspension or expulsion were twice as likely to be held back that year and nearly three times as likely to end up in the juvenile justice system in the subsequent year, compared

with students with similar characteristics.

Interestingly, there is significant variation among schools in discipline rates, including those that serve the same high-risk populations. The study showed that it was possible for schools to discipline at lower rates without suffering academically. While the study does not describe how the low-suspension schools manage student behavior, some are likely to have systems in place to work with troubled children and their families instead of instantly showing them the door. The rest of the state needs to adopt this strategy and schools must work to eliminate racial disparities.

This problem is not unique to Texas. California and Florida have even higher out-of-school suspension or expulsion rates than Texas, according to the study. The Office for Civil Rights at the federal Department of Education has opened investigations into the disciplinary treatment of minority students in a dozen school districts around the country. Texas deserves praise for examining this problem squarely. It and many other states now need to find solutions.