



RESEARCH NOTE

Research Services

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Topic: Model Disciplinary Policies

Focus: The topic of what constitutes appropriate discipline has been debated by parents, educators, and researchers for years.

Purpose: This Research Note is in response to a request from the Office of Alternative Education to review and report on “model disciplinary policies” as used in school districts around the nation. The primary source of information used to prepare this Research Note came from a professional group identified by Alternative Education.

The Advancement Project, a civil rights law, policy, and communications think tank, believes school districts should reform discipline policies and practices that result in excessive suspensions, expulsions, and arrests of students. Based on a lack of credible evidence that harsh punitive measures are an effective way to change students’ behavior, many school districts have revised their discipline policies to emphasize the development of positive behaviors.

The Advancement Project issued a report that identified 10 elements of model discipline policies and provided examples of actual school district discipline policies. Links to these districts’ discipline policies and codes of conduct are included in the report, available at <http://www.stopschoolstojails.org/content/model-discipline-policies>. A summary of the Advancement Project’s report is provided below.

Ten Elements of Model Discipline Policies

- **Non-punitive approach, emphasizing prevention and effective intervention.** The most successful discipline policies are those that take a non-punitive approach to addressing student misbehavior, rather than resorting to suspensions, expulsions, and arrests, and promote the development of positive behaviors. Examples include:
 - Los Angeles Unified School District’s discipline policy emphasizes the reinforcement of appropriate student behavior, the use of effective classroom management and positive behavior support strategies, and the teaching of social-emotional skills.
 - Minneapolis Public Schools’ discipline policy states that schools should maximize the amount of time students spend learning and minimize the amount of time students are removed from their classrooms due to misbehavior.
 - New Orleans Recovery School District’s discipline policy requires schools to utilize a wide variety of corrective strategies to keep students in the classroom.
- **Limitations on the use of suspensions and expulsions.** Effective policies use developmentally appropriate disciplinary techniques that limit the amount of time spent outside of class. Examples include:
 - Denver Public Schools’ discipline policy states that students can only be expelled for the most serious misbehavior and can only be suspended for serious infractions or if misbehavior is repeated.

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- Baltimore City Public Schools' discipline code divides inappropriate behaviors into four levels and specifies the behaviors for which suspension and expulsion are an option.
- Boston Public Schools limits suspensions to three days for students ages 15 and younger.
- **Limitations on the use of law enforcement.** Effective discipline policies limit the involvement of law enforcement to only the most serious offenses. Over-reliance on school police or lack of clarity as to their role in schools has resulted in an increasing number of minor infractions being addressed by law enforcement instead of school personnel. Examples include:
 - Denver Public Schools limits police involvement to serious offenses. For all other offenses, school officials are prohibited from referring students to the police.
 - San Francisco Unified School District's discipline policy limits police involvement to situations when it is necessary to protect student and staff safety; required by law; or appropriate to address criminal behavior of persons other than students. Police involvement should not be requested when situations can be safely handled by the district's internal disciplinary resources.
- **Emphasis on elimination of racial disparities.** Overly harsh school discipline policies disproportionately impact students of color. Unbiased discipline enforcement requires that schools acknowledge racial disparities and include corrective measures in their policies. Examples include:
 - Denver Public Schools' policy states that schools and staff must build cultural competence and strive to eliminate racism and other forms of discrimination.
 - Minneapolis Public Schools' policy includes language similar to that of Denver Public Schools. In addition, the policy requires that schools implement strategies known to be effective with students from African American, Native American, Latino, Hmong, Somali, and other cultural communities.
- **Emphasis on protections for students with disabilities.** Students with disabilities have also been disproportionately impacted by overly harsh discipline policies. Policies for disabled students should be clearly specified. Examples include:
 - New Orleans Recovery School District outlines procedures required for suspending and expelling students with disabilities in a clear and accessible format.
 - Boston Public Schools provides a detailed explanation of protections afforded to students with disabilities.
- **Strong due process protections.** Most school discipline policies provide only a minimum of protection for the due process rights of parents and students. Policies should include strong safeguards such as parental notification, disciplinary hearings, and appeals processes. Examples include:
 - Boston Public Schools' policy provides an extensive description of parent and student rights regarding suspension or expulsion.
 - Denver Public Schools' policy outlines the protections afforded to students and their parents during suspension or expulsion proceedings.
- **No academic penalties during removal from school.** When students are removed from school, they often fall behind academically. Some districts emphasize that suspended students must be provided with academic work and be allowed to make up tests and assignments upon their return. Examples include:
 - Baltimore City Public Schools' policy states that school staff must provide suspended students with missed assignments and the opportunity to make up those assignments without penalty.

- Chicago Public Schools specifies that students must be assigned homework during suspensions and must be given the opportunity to make up any tests or quizzes.
- Miami-Dade County Public Schools students have the right to make up class work within three days of returning to school if they are suspended.
- **Limitations on suspensions for off-campus misconduct.** The Advancement Project recommends that districts prohibit the use of suspensions for off-campus misconduct except when it seriously threatens the safety of students or staff. Examples include:
 - Denver Public Schools' discipline policy states that students may not be suspended for off-campus misconduct unless it significantly disrupts the school environment or endangers the safety of other students and staff.
 - Montgomery County Public Schools' discipline policy states that students cannot be disciplined for misbehavior that occurs off-campus unless there is a reasonable belief that the health and/or safety of others in the school is in danger.
- **Parental outreach.** Many schools and districts fail to clearly communicate their discipline policies to parents and students. Copies of discipline policies should be provided to parents and students at the beginning of each school year, translated into languages parents can understand. Accessibility to policies helps to ensure that parents are informed and aware of school policies, rules, and procedures. Examples include:
 - Seattle Public Schools' Code of Prohibited Conduct is offered in 12 languages.
 - New York City Department of Education's Discipline Code is offered in 9 languages.
- **Data collection and monitoring.** School districts and individual schools should collect data on disciplinary infractions in order to identify problems, monitor progress, and design solutions related to the discipline process. Examples include:
 - Denver Public Schools' policy requires schools and the district to evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of the school discipline plan using data disaggregated by ethnicity and gender.
 - Minneapolis Public Schools staff are required to record and review all out of class behavior referrals. Staff are expected to use data to identify problems and successes and to inform practice.
 - San Francisco Unified School District requires schools to analyze data related to disciplinary referrals on a quarterly basis.