

Do Out-of-School Suspensions Prevent Future Exclusionary Discipline?

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Background

Out-of-school suspensions (hereafter referred to as suspensions) are used frequently and for many purposes throughout schools in the United States (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba et al., 2014). A common assumption is that students who receive a suspension will be less likely to engage in problem behavior in the future. Although those who utilize this “get-tough” approach to student misbehavior may assume that exclusionary discipline serves as a deterrent to future problem behavior, research has not supported this theory (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). In fact, receipt of even one suspension is associated with higher likelihood of academic failure, school dropout, and involvement in the juvenile justice system (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013; Hemphill, Toumbourou, Herrenkohl, McMorris, & Catalano, 2006). Even with the knowledge that repeated suspension diminishes student outcomes and can actually become a reinforcer for problem behavior there is still a common perception that, for the majority of students, suspension serves as an effective “wake-up call”. If true, it may be expected that a sizable proportion of students who receive a suspension early in the school year would not re-

ceive a later suspension or office discipline referral (ODR). This pattern would indicate that the suspension “worked” as an effective consequence and a deterrent for future problem behavior.

This evaluation brief examines the use of suspensions in 1,840 public middle schools in the United States and assesses the extent to which they are effective at reducing future problem behavior for students who receive them. The question of whether, and to what extent, a suspension serves as a deterrent for future exclusionary discipline incidents was evaluated for those students who received one or more suspensions at the beginning of the school year (August, September, or October).

The Following Questions were Analyzed

1. What are the patterns of out-of-school suspension use in middle schools in the United States?
2. What is the likelihood that a student who receives a suspension early in the school year does not receive another suspension or office discipline referral (ODR) later in the school year?

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Methods

Data Source

The data for this brief was gathered using archival records from the School-wide Information System (SWIS; May et al., 2013) in the 2009-10 academic year. SWIS is a data collection system that allows schools to track incidents of problem behavior as well as any administrative decisions that were made (e.g., parent contact, individual instruction, out-of-school suspension). Schools use SWIS to guide data-based decision making and evaluate the school environment based on student behavior (Eliason, Horner & May, 2013). This dataset included 1,840 middle schools (serving Grades 6 through 8) with 991,184 students. The analysis evaluated information about major and minor office discipline referrals (ODRs) and the use of suspension with individual students.

Office Discipline Referrals

Office discipline referrals (ODRs) are used to track incidents of problem behavior. SWIS categorizes these behavioral violations into two categories: minor ODRs and major ODRs. Both minor and major ODRs were included in this study. Todd, Horner, and Tobin (2010) define minor ODRs as non-serious, low-intensity behaviors. Major ODRs signify student behavior that is more serious and/or intense than a minor behavior infraction (Gion, McIntosh & Horner, 2014).

Out-of-School Suspension

Out-of-school suspension is an exclusionary discipline practice in which a student is removed from the school for part of a day or multiple days (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003). In SWIS, suspensions are measured by counting each incident as well as the number of days suspended from school. In this brief, each suspension incident was counted. Because of the negative long-term outcomes associated with this disciplinary response, it is critical to

examine whether suspensions can work as intended to deter future problem behavior.

Results

Question 1

What are the patterns of suspension use in middle schools in the United States?

Of the students in the dataset ($n = 991,184$), 6.6% ($n = 65,099$) received at least one suspension in the 2009-10 school year. The number of suspension incidents per individual student ranged from 0 to 38. Of students receiving at least one suspension, the average number of incidents was 1.85 and the median number was 1.00. Of these students, 61.4% received only one for the school year, indicating that for nearly two-fifths of students (38.6%), one suspension did not deter future behavior resulting in an out-of-school exclusionary event.

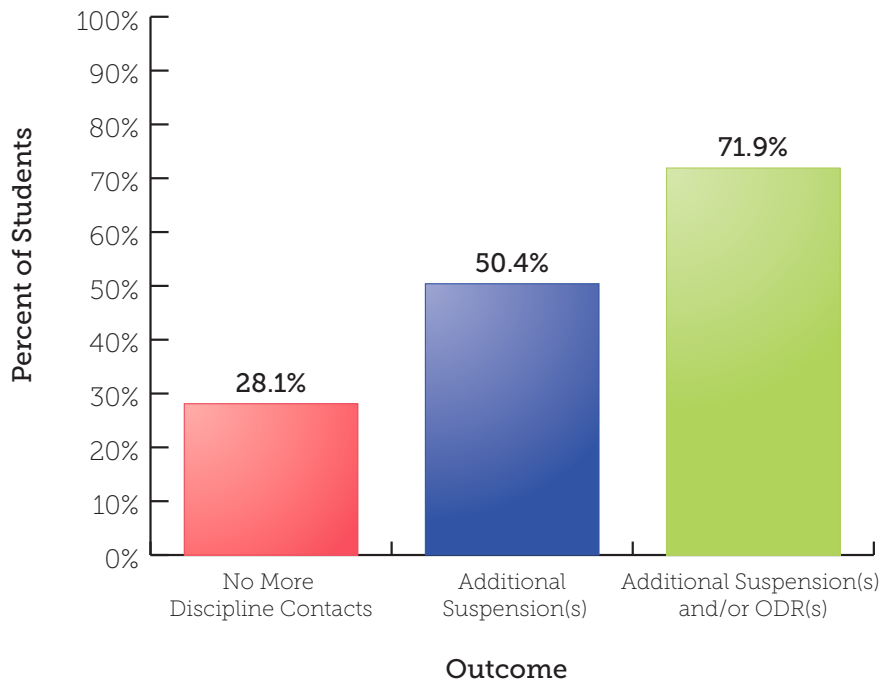
Question 2

What is the likelihood that a student who received a suspension early in the school year would not receive another suspension or an office discipline referral (ODR) later in the school year?

This question was analyzed by evaluating all students who received a suspension in August, September, and/or October ($n = 16,180$), after excluding those who were expelled for their first offense ($n = 54$). Data summarized in Figure 1 show that, of this group, only 28.1% had no discipline contact for the remainder of the school year, and just over half (50.4%) received another suspension later in the school year. In other words, a suspension in August, September, or October provided less than chance likelihood that the student would receive at least one more suspension at some point in the year. Further, 71.9% of the students who received a suspension in August, September, and/or October received another suspension and/or an ODR later in the school year.

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Figure 1. Percent Of Students Receiving Discipline Contact After Suspension Early in School Year (n = 16,180).



Discussion

To examine whether the use of suspension is effective as a deterrent for future problem behavior, this brief evaluated both the patterns of suspension use in schools and the likelihood that students who received a suspension in August, September, or October would: (a) receive another suspension later in the school year, and (b) receive another suspension and/or an ODR later in the school year. The results indicate that although only 6.6% of students received a suspension in the school year, more than half of those students who were suspended at the beginning of the school year received at least one more suspension that year, and the likelihood of receiving another suspension and/or an ODR was 71.9%. These findings indicate that suspensions early in the school year are not an effective deterrent to future problem behavior.

Although out-of-school suspensions can result in dropout and function as a reinforcer for problem behavior (Tobin, Sugai, & Colvin, 1996), the number of exclusionary discipline incidents has nearly doubled since the 1970s (Cregor & Hewitt, 2011). To reduce high rates of suspension, schools can take two key steps: (a) implement evidence-based preventive approaches to problem behavior and (b) develop instructional alternatives to suspension when problem behavior occurs. Suspension often results from deficits in social skills that will not improve without additional instruction. To avoid students simply being suspended again, it is critical that the alternatives serve as instructional opportunities to learn and practice more socially appropriate social skills.

Preventive Practices

Research has demonstrated that adopting prevention-based practices can reduce student problem behavior, improve academic achievement, and contribute to the establishment of a safe environment for staff and students (Lewis, Powers, Kelk, & Newcomer, 2002; McIntosh, Chard, Boland, & Horner, 2006; Todd, Horner, Sugai, & Sprague, 1999). Implementing a preventive framework such as School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) reduces the number of serious problem behavior incidents and contributes to a more positive and supportive school climate (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010). SWPBIS is a three-tiered framework for implementing systems, data, and practices to ensure effectiveness and promote sustainability in valued outcomes (Sugai & Horner, 2002). SWPBIS promotes teaching, modeling, and acknowledging positive behavior and developing a comprehensive school-wide system for addressing problem behaviors, thereby increasing the consistency, safety, positivity, and predictability of the school environment.

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Alternatives to Suspension

To address problem behavior effectively while reducing the rates of exclusionary discipline, it is critical for schools to develop a responsive disciplinary system based on a continuum of responses to student misbehavior. Peterson (2005) proposed ten alternatives to out-of-school suspension that focus on the re-integration of students into the academic setting: (a) problem solving/contracting, (b) restitution, (c) mini-courses or skill modules, (d) parent involvement/supervision, (e) counseling, (f) community service, (g) behavior monitoring, (h) coordinated behavior plans, (i) alternative programming, and (j) in-school suspension.

Although exclusionary discipline practices continue to be used in response to a variety of student problem behaviors, research indicates that suspension is unlikely to change student conduct. Preventive practices help establish an environment where students are more likely to display appropriate, positive behavior and less likely to engage in problem behavior. When students do exhibit problem behavior, using instructional responses that are directed at teaching key social skills and re-integrating students into the academic setting, rather than removing them from it, can promote change in student behavior while reducing both the need for and the use of suspensions.

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