

Evaluation Brief:
Out-of-School Suspension for Minor Misbehavior

Bert M. Eliason, Robert H. Horner, Seth L. May
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Research Statement and Rationale

This evaluation brief examines the practice of using out-of-school suspension as a consequence for behavior coded as “minor” on office discipline referral forms. During the 2011-2012 school year, nearly 20% of the schools using the School-wide Information System data base reported using out-of-school suspension as the main consequence for at least one student behavior incident coded as a minor misbehavior. Cumulatively, these instances resulted in over ten-thousand suspensions from school. Though most schools in this group had between one and five of these incidents, nearly thirty percent of the schools reported out-of-school suspension as a consequence for minor behavior more than five times and several schools used out-of-school suspension more than one hundred times. This report looks at the statistics surrounding these occurrences, discusses possible rationales, and outlines a strategy PBIS Coaches and SWIS Facilitators can use to determine whether schools are involved in this practice. If they are, we suggest these schools improve data entry procedures or reconsider the use of school suspension for behavior that is described as minor.

Data Source

The data for this brief comes from the School-wide Information System (SWIS) and includes major and minor office discipline referrals (ODRs) entered into the SWIS data system during the 2011-2012 school year, and specifically, those ODRs coded as minor where the consequence was out-of school suspension.

SWIS Data

A common practice in schools adopting School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) is to use a data-based decision-making process to track progress toward enhanced school environment through improved student behavior. During the 2011-2012 school year, 6,212 schools used SWIS to track that progress. Vincent, Horner and May (2009) describe SWIS as “...a web-based ODR data collection system that allows schools to record the occurrence of a number of behavioral violations and subsequent administrative decisions. Two levels of behavioral violations exist in SWIS: minor violations and major violations. Minor violations include low-intensity defiance, low-intensity disruption, inappropriate language, and inappropriate physical contact. Major violations include abusive language, insubordination, sustained disruption, and fighting.” Colvin and Lazar (1997) defined this difference by noting that a record of behavior handled immediately and quickly by staff in the context in which the behavior occurs was probably minor. Behavior that needed to be handled by an office administrator (e.g., principal, vice-principal, dean of students) was probably a major behavior.

Out-of-School Suspension

Exclusion from school is the most drastic consequence a school administrator can use to address inappropriate student behavior. Since school suspension has been linked to the increased likelihood of academic failure, dropping out, and poor employment outcomes (Balfanz, R., 2008; Dynarski, et al. 2008; Roderick, M., 1993), it is important that schools determine if there are alternatives to this practice. Additionally, it seems likely that if a behavior is accurately described as minor, exclusion from school may not be the best consequence an administrator might choose.

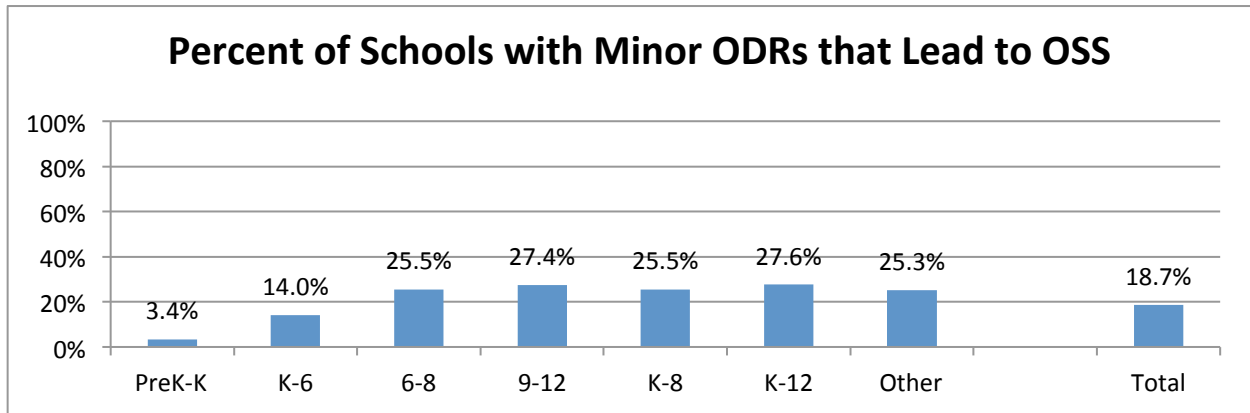
Data Presentation

Table 1 presents a descriptive summary of major and minor referral activity for the 6,212 schools entering referral data into SWIS during the 2011-2012 school year. During that year, 336,395 ODRs resulted in Out-of-School Suspension (OSS). Pertinent to this conversation, 10,576 (3.1%) were entered as minor referrals, which resulted in students missing a total of 18,079.5 days of school. Though most schools only entered one minor ODR with OSS as a consequence (mean = 9.13, range = 1 – 316), it seems incongruent that minor referral activity would incur such an extreme consequence. In Figure 1, we see that this was not an infrequent occurrence as 1,159 (18.7%) of the schools using SWIS had at least one occurrence where a minor ODR resulted in an OSS.

Table 1. Data Related to Schools Using SWIS (2011-2012)

Level	SWIS Schools	Total ODRs	Minor ODRs	Total OSS	Minor ODRs w/ OSS	Schools w/ Minor ODRs w/ OSS	Mean Minor ODRs w/ OSS per Level	Range Minor ODRs w/ OSS per Level
PreK-K	29	10,107	4,200	159	9	1	9.00	9 - 9
K-6	3,768	1,784,448	899,201	87,713	2,440	528	4.62	1 - 110
6-8	1,096	1,197,411	516,480	116,137	3,769	280	13.46	1 - 116
9-12	624	795,263	197,264	86,489	3,044	171	17.80	1 - 316
K-8	361	263,483	96,927	22,103	761	92	8.27	1 - 87
K-12	152	155,922	48,542	8,448	164	42	3.90	1 - 17
Other	182	207,369	58,889	15,346	389	46	8.46	1 - 73
Totals	6,212	4,414,003	1,821,503	336,395	10,576	1159	9.13	1 - 316

Figure 1. Schools Entering Minor Referrals with Out-of-School Suspension as Main Consequence



Discussion

Without truly understanding the context of the incidents where a minor referral ended with OSS as a consequence, it is difficult to ascertain the rationale behind each of these scenarios. We did find a number of reasons that might explain why the majority of these seemingly discrepant conditions exist. Some of the referrals were attributable to mistakes in coding or data entry, and others seem likely due to school policy, procedure, and practice. These characteristics are described more fully below.

Miscoded

Some of the referrals were likely miscoded. Referrals where students were suspended for striking a teacher, threatening a peer, or throwing furniture at others may have been entered as minor, but should have been entered as a major referral for inappropriate and unsafe behavior.

Data Entry Error

Some referrals contained data entry errors. In SWIS, when a referral is determined to have a suspension as a consequence, the system prompts the data entry person to indicate the number of days suspended in increments of half days (e.g., 0.5 days, 3.0 days, 4.5 days). Table 2 shows that a total of 623 (5.9%) of the minor referrals with OSS had “zero” entered as the amount of time the student was suspended. If a student is suspended for zero time, are they truly suspended? Selecting suspension as the consequence when there was no actual suspension might be a miscoding error in that the behavioral consequence should have been something other than suspension. Yet, if suspension truly was the assigned consequence, entering zero days suspended may have been the result of data entry error.

Table 2. Minor Referrals with Suspension Indicating 0 Days Suspended

Level	Minor ODR = OSS	Suspended 0 Days	Percent Suspended 0 Days
Pre K-K	9	0	0.0%
K-6	2,440	82	3.4%
6-8	3,769	263	7.0%

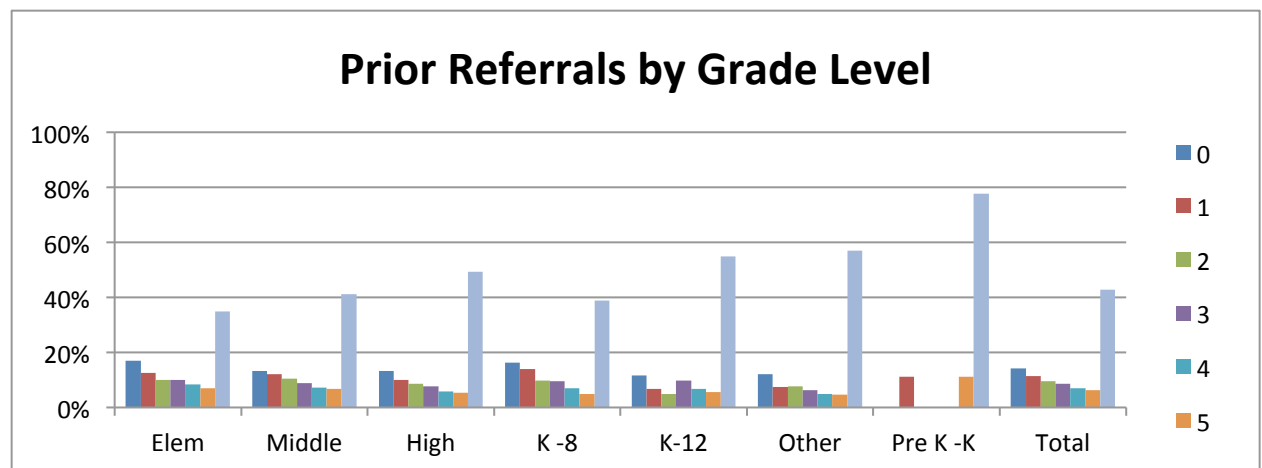
9-12	3,044	176	5.8%
K-8	761	11	1.4%
K-12	164	8	4.9%
Other	389	83	21.3%
Totals	10,576	623	5.9%

Policy - Repeated Misbehavior

Some of the minor referrals culminated in an OSS because the student had multiple minor ODRs prior to the referral that resulted in suspension. Some referrals reflected behavior where students committed relatively minor infractions (e.g., minor defiance, minor disruption, minor tardy), but were suspended because they had numerous ODRs prior to the incident that triggered the temporary exclusion from school. Many SWPBIS schools have a policy where multiple minors equal a major referral (e.g., the student receives a third minor referral, and that referral, because it is for offense number three, becomes a major referral). Schools usually enter such minors as a major due to the repetitive nature of the behavior. The student’s behavioral file then has a record of the school’s position regarding the more problematic repetition of the ongoing behavior. Sometimes these referrals are inadvertently entered as minor since the triggering behavior was minor, but by the school’s policy of multiple minors equals a major, the incident should have been coded as a major.

Table 3 demonstrates the number of referrals students at various grade levels received prior to the minor referral that lead to an out-of-school suspension. If a preponderance of these minor referrals were related to policies where a third or fourth minor results in a major, we should see an increase in Table 3 at referrals number three or four. Instead we see that the greatest amount of suspensions at each grade level were for students who had either zero referrals (14.3%) or only one referral (11.5%) prior to the referral that lead to the OSS. This means students were suspended from school for either their first or second referral, even though the behavior in that referral was described as minor. Additionally, there is no significant increase at referrals number three (8.7%) or number four (7.0%). The data actually shows less than 16% of these referrals are the result of the “three strikes and you are out” policies.

Table 3. Referrals Prior to ODR that Lead to OSS



Procedure – Regular Practice

While some schools may have mistakenly entered ODRs that resulted in OSS as a minor, other schools seemingly made a regular practice of suspending students for multiple inappropriate behaviors while still coding the referral as minor. In Table 3, 42.7% of the minor referrals that resulted in OSS were for students who had more than five prior referrals (median = 4, range = 0 – 160). This seems to suggest some administrators may implement as practice the suspension of students who receive multiple referrals, even when the referral being addressed is for a minor misbehavior.

Table 4 shows the percentage of schools at each level that entered *n* minor referrals with OSS as a consequence. More than one-third (36.6%) only entered only one such referral during the 2011-2012 school year. These situations are likely one-time miscoding or data entry errors. Nearly three-fourths (70.5%) entered no more than five such referrals, and 81.8% of the schools are entering no more than ten per year. Schools in the above ranges are making such entries from about once per year to about once per month. While it is conceivable that data entry errors related to ODRs with OSS could occur annually, it probably grows less likely that the cause is data entry error when the situation is occurring monthly.

Table 4. Percentage of Schools with Minor Referrals that Resulted in Suspension

Level	Number of Schools	Percentage of Schools with <i>n</i> Minor Referrals Resulting in OSS			
		1	1-5	1-10	>10
Pre K-K	1	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%
K-6	521	44.9%	79.7%	89.8%	10.2%
6-8	285	30.5%	63.5%	74.0%	26.0%
9-12	171	28.7%	59.1%	71.9%	28.1%
K-8	102	29.4%	65.7%	79.4%	20.6%
K-12	47	29.8%	68.1%	83.0%	17.0%
Others	46	32.6%	65.2%	80.4%	19.6%
Average		36.6%	70.5%	81.8%	18.2%

In Table 4, it is concerning that nearly one-fifth (18.2%) of the schools entered minor referrals that resulted in out-of-school suspension even more frequently than once per month and in some cases did so on a regular basis. The third column of Table 5 shows the number of schools at each grade level that entered more than 20 such referrals in the 2011-2012 school year. Entering more than 20 minor referrals with OSS would mean that on average for those 109 schools this practice is occurring more frequently than every two weeks.

The columns in Table 5 labeled Ex. 1 through Ex. 4 show the number of minor referrals greater than 20 resulting in out-of-school suspension that the top four schools at each grade level recorded. We have evidence of one elementary, six middle, and seven high schools using this practice more than 100 times in one year. Although these 14 schools are outliers of the 6,212 entering data into the SWIS system, at this rate, the procedure is a practice that the school is instituting on a regular basis and in some cases, on an average of multiple times daily.

Table 5. Schools with Minor ODRs that Resulted in OSS (2011-2012)

Level	Total Schools	Schools with >20 ODRs with OSS	Top Four Schools having >20 ODRs with OSS			
			Ex. 1	Ex. 2	Ex. 3	Ex. 4
Pre K-K	1	0	0	0	0	0
K-6	521	23	49	50	64	110
6-8	285	45	120	167	190	291
9-12	171	26	196	238	292	316
K-8	102	10	28	31	32	87
K-12	47	0	0	0	0	0
Others	46	5	29	33	60	73

Recommendations

Many of the instances where minor ODRs with OSS as a consequence may be attributable to mistakes in process or at data entry, and there are possible contextual explanations for the use of out-of-school suspension for some behaviors that were correctly coded as minor. Still, considering the gravity and possible impacts linked to the use of out-of-school suspension, the above data beg at least two questions:

1. If a behavior is truly considered minor, should schools be using school suspension as a consequence?
2. If the behavior is significant enough to warrant suspension as a consequence, should the student's behavioral record of that incident be reflect a minor misbehavior?

SWIS facilitators, PBIS coordinators, administrators, school teams, and district leadership may want to determine if a school has a record for student behavior indicating the student was suspended from school while the referral entry was coded as minor. In the Appendix, we have included instructions for using the SWIS Custom Report tool to determine whether and how often schools are involved in this practice.

If investigators find this scenario is happening, and it is occurring more frequently than a few times per year, schools might want to talk about consistent and careful procedures for data entry and establish a regular pattern for checking to see whether the situation continues. If the scenario is happening on a regular basis or has become common practice, schools should clearly review and reconsider a) the strategy of using school suspension for minor misbehavior, or b) the practice of entering the record of a significant behavioral incident as a minor behavioral referral.

References

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Appendix

Appendix A: Using SWIS Custom Reports Tool to Determine Whether Schools are Reporting School Suspension on Referrals Coded as Minor

Schools can check to see if they are entering minor referrals into the SWIS data system with out-of-school suspension as the main consequence by following the directions below.

Directions

Log in to SWIS account for the school

SWIS will open to the Main Menu

From *Reports*, select *Custom Report*

From *Referral Type* select *Minors Only*

Do not select from *Student* or *Staff*

Select a *Report Date Range* by filling in the calendar dates

Select a *Time Range* by filling in all times a referral may have been written

Select a *Grade* range by filling in to show all the grades in the school

Click on *Advanced Options*

From *Student Gender* choose *Both Male & Female*

From *Student IEP's* choose *All Students*

From *Administrative Decision* select *Out-of-School Suspension*

Click on *Generate Report*

SWIS will generate a report listing all the referrals the school has entered that were coded as minor, but have out-of-school suspension as the main consequence. The list can be sorted by any of the headers at the top of each column.