Discipline without Derailing:
A Study on School Discipline Practices in a Large Urban Texas School District
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Problem Statement
Over the past several years, a number of high-profile studies, including the Council of State Governments Justice Center’s Breaking Schools’ Rules, have highlighted the ways in which disciplinary removals from school have a negative impact on students’ academic and behavioral outcomes. These studies provide evidence that suspensions and expulsions actually increase a student’s risk of dropping out and entering the juvenile justice system. There has been little research, however, about alternatives to suspension and expulsion in cases when it may be advantageous for youths to receive alternative disciplinary interventions that keep them in school. Such “non-exclusionary actions” (e.g., peer mediation, after-school detentions, and parent-teacher conferences) are different from “exclusionary actions” (e.g., suspension and expulsion) that remove students from the school.

The difficulty with comparing the impact of exclusionary and non-exclusionary disciplinary actions on student outcomes is largely due to a lack of available data related to non-exclusionary actions. Typically, if a state requires collection of school discipline data at all, it does so only for exclusionary actions. Although districts and campuses may informally keep track of disciplinary actions beyond suspensions and expulsions, very few of them systematically collect data specifically related to non-exclusionary disciplinary interventions. This situation has historically made it difficult to rigorously compare the impact of exclusionary and non-exclusionary actions on student outcomes.

Discipline Without Derailing presents a rare opportunity to compare the impact of these disciplinary actions, as it examines data from an urban Texas school district that requires collection of both exclusionary and non-exclusionary data indicators. Using multivariate regression analysis on a data set comprised of nearly 270,000 disciplinary records from 2008-09 to 2010-11, Discipline Without Derailing compared the academic and behavioral outcomes of students who received exclusionary disciplinary actions to similar students who received non-exclusionary responses for the same discretionary offense. For the purpose of this study, academic outcomes were measured using a variable called “progress,” which indicated if a student moved to the next grade level or, if in 12th grade, graduated within the school year. Behavioral outcomes were measured by assessing students’ number of future offenses. The study also looked at the extent to which the relationship between a disciplinary action and a student’s behavioral and academic outcomes was influenced by the offense a student committed (e.g., is a suspension more or less detrimental for a student who violates the dress code than for a student who gets into fight?).

Findings
1. Students who receive exclusionary actions for disciplinary offenses have, on average, worse outcomes than students who receive non-exclusionary actions. The study’s findings suggest that when controlling for offense and student characteristics a student was generally worse off when excluded for a disciplinary infraction than when not excluded. For example, a student who received a non-exclusionary response to a disciplinary violation was nearly 8 percent more likely than a student who received an out-of-school suspension (OSS) to progress to the next grade or graduate within a school year. A student who received an in-school suspension (ISS) for an offense was about 5 percent more likely to progress than a similar student who received an OSS. The only exception was for non-truancy attendance violations, for which students were predicted

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1 Discretionary offenses are behavioral infractions for which there is no legislative mandate to remove a student from a school. Responses to such offenses are at the discretion of school administrators.
to have significantly fewer future offenses when they received an exclusionary response. More research is needed to understand this finding.

2. **An exclusionary action has a greater negative impact on student outcomes if the action occurs in response to a student’s first offense of a school year.** A student who received an exclusionary response for a first offense during a school year was predicted to have 58 percent more future offenses than average.\(^2\) When a student received an exclusionary response for offenses other than a first offense, there was no significant impact on his or her risk of future offenses.

3. **Exclusionary actions have a greater negative impact for some offenses than others.** A student who received an exclusionary response for abusive conduct toward an adult (e.g., acting rudely, being physically aggressive, or making threats) or a low-level code of conduct violation (e.g., violating the dress code, behaving disruptively, or misusing the Internet) was approximately 7 percent less likely than average to progress to the next grade level or to graduate within a school year.\(^3\) Additionally, a student excluded for such offenses was predicted to have between one and two more future offenses than a non-excluded peer that looked statistically similar. An exclusionary response for a behavior characterized as abusive towards another student (e.g., being physically aggressive or making threats), however, did not significantly affect a student’s academic or behavioral outcomes.

**Policy Implications**

**Limit the use of exclusionary responses for students’ first offense of a school year.** Given that an exclusionary response to a student’s first offense significantly increases his or her risk of future offenses, districts should restrict the use of exclusionary actions for a student’s first discretionary offense of a school year. Alternative non-exclusionary interventions should be built into disciplinary procedures for first offenses, with the understanding that exclusion may be appropriate when a student poses an immediate threat to himself or herself or to others in the school.

**Initiate or expand implementation of non-exclusionary disciplinary approaches to improve school climate and decrease student misbehavior.** Districts and campuses should consider implementing approaches to school discipline that identify the needs of youth at risk of behavioral problems and connect them with appropriate supports and services before major disciplinary issues arise. Tiered approaches like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and response to intervention (RtI) establish structures to do just that. Support for social emotional learning and restorative justice programs are also associated with decreased rates of student offenses. Additionally, districts should develop methods to improve overall school climate, which has been shown to increase student engagement and decrease student behavioral issues. (See the Council of State Governments Justice Center’s *The School Discipline Consensus Report* for recommendations and strategies related school climate and behavioral health.)

**Collect and report data, and use it to inform disciplinary decision making.** At a minimum, districts and states should collect and publically report data related to both in-school and out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and removals to alternative educational settings that is disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, disability, English Language Learner (ELL) status, and grade level. (See *The School Discipline Consensus Report* for recommendations and strategies on how to expand basic disciplinary data collection.) Once the collection of basic indicators is systematized, districts should incorporate the collection of non-exclusionary disciplinary actions into their data systems. Tracking non-

\(^2\) The average number of future offenses for a student after her or his first offense was one.

\(^3\) The average graduation or progress rate for students in the study was 75 percent.
exclusionary indicators will allow districts and campuses to analyze the differential impact of exclusionary and non-exclusionary actions on student outcomes.

\[\text{The research presented in this bulletin was part of a larger dissertation study by Rebecca Cohen, entitled } Discipline Without Derailing: An Investigation of Exclusionary Discipline Practices in Schools. For a copy of the full study please contact Rebecca at rebecca.cohen@csg.org]