

## **CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

To begin a dialogue between the education and juvenile justice communities on effective methods of school discipline, the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy and the Indiana Youth Services Association have collaborated to share data on out-of-school suspension, expulsion and their alternatives with educators and policymakers in Indiana. A number of facts emerged from the three papers in the Children Left Behind series:

### **Briefing Paper 1. Zero Tolerance: Assumptions vs. Facts**

The use of zero tolerance in schools is predicated upon a number of assumptions about school violence and the types of responses necessary to address it. In this paper, we examined available national data to assess how well these assumptions hold up. That review shows that:

- **Violence and disruption are extremely important concerns that must be addressed, but there is no evidence that violence in America’s public schools is out-of-control, nor that school violence is worsening.**
- **The inconsistency with which zero tolerance is implemented makes it highly unlikely that it could function effectively to improve school safety.**
- **Higher rates of out-of-school suspension are associated with poorer school climate, higher dropout rates, and lower achievement, making it difficult to argue that zero tolerance is an important tool for creating effective school climates.**
- **Despite claims that zero tolerance sends an important deterrent message to students, there is no credible evidence that out-of-school suspension or expulsion are effective methods for changing student behavior.**
- **Minority disproportionality in suspension and expulsion have been consistently documented, and seem to be increasing with the use of zero tolerance.**
- **A wide range of alternatives to zero tolerance have emerged and are available to promote a productive learning climate and address disruptive behavior.**

Schools have the right and responsibility to use effective tools that enable them to reach that goal. Yet No Child Left Behind mandates that we use only those educational interventions that provide evidence of effectiveness. The national data raises serious questions about whether the philosophy of zero tolerance in general, or the use of school suspension and expulsion in particular, can be considered to be effective interventions for maintaining school safety.

## **Briefing Paper 2. Unplanned Outcomes: Suspensions and Expulsions in Indiana.**

National level data may be insufficient to describe the status of school discipline in Indiana. Thus, the second briefing paper specifically presented data on discipline, and perspectives on discipline, from Indiana schools and Indiana principals. A number of findings emerged:

- **Rates of expulsion appear to be decreasing, but out-of-school suspension is increasing.**
- **Over 90% of out-of-school suspensions were accounted for by infractions in the categories Disruptive Behavior and Other.**
- **Schools in urban locales have significantly higher rates of out-of-school suspension. Secondary schools have higher rates of both out-of-school suspension and expulsions than elementary schools.**
- **Rates of out-of-school suspension are not distributed evenly across schools: The top 10% of schools in terms of rate of suspensions account for over 50% of Indiana's out-of-school suspensions.**
- **Rates of suspension and expulsion are not equally distributed by race. African American students are four times as likely to be suspended out of school and about two and a half times as likely to be expelled as white students. Hispanic students are about twice as likely to be suspended or expelled as white students.**
- **In the most recent available national data, Indiana ranks first in the nation in its rate of school expulsion, and eighth in out-of-school suspensions. This finding cannot be accounted for by the length of expulsion allowed in Indiana.**
- **Indiana principals are sharply divided over the use of out-of-school suspension and expulsion. Attitudes about the willingness to use suspension and expulsion are related to attitudes towards parents and students with disabilities, and are also associated with school rates of suspension.**
- **Regardless of demographic factors, schools with higher rates of out-of-school suspension have lower average passing rates on ISTEP.**

The Indiana data on suspension and expulsion present a mixed picture. Negative outcomes associated with suspension and expulsion, such as minority disproportionality and a negative relationship with ISTEP scores, are of concern. Yet the fact that the high rates of out-of-school suspension and expulsion may be limited to a relatively small percentage of Indiana's schools suggests that many of Indiana's schools are using proactive alternatives that maintain safety without removing students from the opportunity to learn.

## **Briefing Paper 3. Discipline is Always Teaching: Effective Alternatives**

In the third briefing paper, we spoke with Indiana principals about innovative programs for maintaining both school discipline and maximizing educational opportunity. We found no hint of compromise in the approach used by these principals. They maintained

high academic and behavioral expectations and were not afraid to remove a student if safety demanded it. But they also;

- **Clarify expectations regarding office referrals and train staff in classroom management strategies.**
- **Actively teach appropriate behavior through school philosophy and preventive programs**
- **Communicate and collaborate with parents.**
- **Seek to reconnect alienated students through mentoring and anger management.**
- **Develop creative options in the school and community to keep even those students who are suspended and expelled engaged in learning.**

Such efforts are not free, but require significant commitments of time and resources. Recent efforts to pass a statewide bullying bill suggest, however, that Indiana is prepared to make a commitment to support the state's schools in finding approaches that are effective in promoting school climates that are safe and conducive to learning for all children.

## **Recommendations**

Students removed from an educational environment and placed unsupervised in communities for days, weeks, or months at a time are children at grave risk. Many communities are coming to the realization that suspension and expulsion simply shift the location of the problem--from disruptions in the school to crime in the streets.

The findings of this study suggest that there can be a different way. Together these results show that it is possible to maintain a safe and productive school climate without removing a large number of students from the opportunity to learn. Innovative programs described by principals and Youth Service Bureaus suggest that schools can maintain orderly environments with high expectations, while at the same time making an active commitment to the continuing education of all children. These results suggest that zero tolerance, out-of-school suspension, and school expulsion can become a less central part of school discipline by actions in a number of areas:

- 1. Reserve zero tolerance disciplinary removals for only the most serious and severe of disruptive behaviors, and define those behaviors explicitly.**
- 2. Replace one-size-fits-all disciplinary strategies with graduated systems of discipline, wherein consequences are geared to the seriousness of the infraction.**
- 3. Improve data collection strategies on school discipline at the state level, and assist educators in using disciplinary data to better understand and address safety and disciplinary concerns at their schools.**
- 4. Improve collaboration and communication among schools, parents, juvenile justice, and mental health to develop an array of alternatives for challenging youth.**
- 5. Implement preventive measures that can improve school climate and reconnect alienated students.**

**6. Expand the array of options available to schools for dealing with disruptive or violent behavior. In particular, ensure that teachers receive training in classroom management strategies that provide them with the tools they need for handling misbehavior at the classroom level.**

**7. Evaluate all school discipline or school violence prevention strategies to ensure that all disciplinary interventions, programs, or strategies that are truly effective in addressing issues of student behavior and school safety.**

As our knowledge of available options for promoting a safe and effective school climate increases, it becomes apparent that there is no contradiction between the need to keep schools safe and the mandate to maximize educational opportunity for all children. The good news is that a variety of strategies have been validated at the national level that can help schools reach those goals. The better news is that courageous and innovative Indiana educators have begun to demonstrate success with those and other creative strategies. Our schools and our children deserve nothing less than full support for those efforts.