
2013

Suspensions and Expulsions Contribute to School Dropouts

Adie Simmons

Director, Washington State Office of the Education Ombudsman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Simmons, Adie (2013) "Suspensions and Expulsions Contribute to School Dropouts," *Journal of Educational Controversy*. Vol. 7 : No. 1 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec/vol7/iss1/14>

This Special Section 2 is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Controversy by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wvu.edu.

ARTICLE

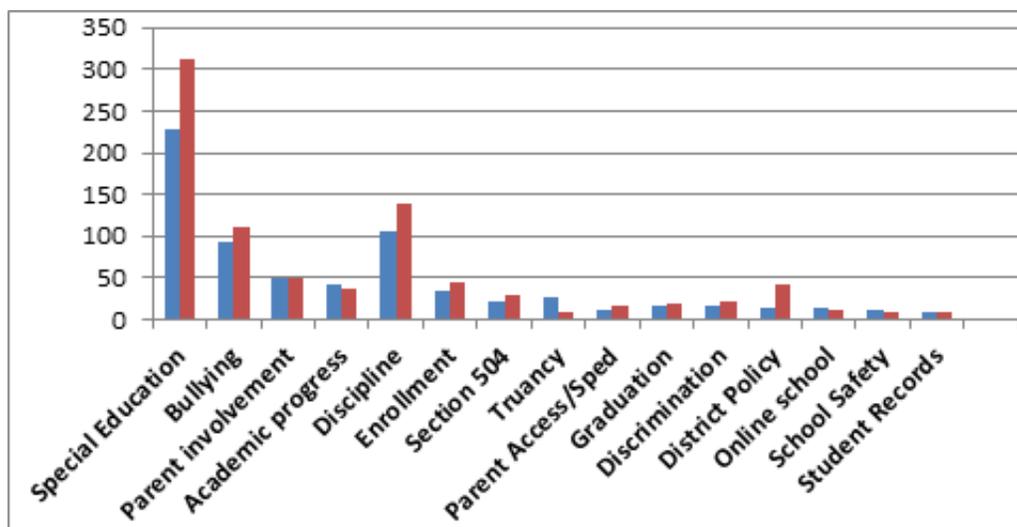
Editor: The Washington State Office of the Education Ombudsman is the first of its kind in the nation. As an agency that is part of the Governor’s office, it is able to be an objective arbiter on conflicts that arise between parents and their children and the public schools. We asked the director, Adie Simmons, to share with us the relationship she sees between the issues her office deals with and the school-to-prison pipeline. In a compelling argument below, she describes the ways laws on suspensions and expulsion in our state often lead to drop outs, a contributory factor in the school-to-prison pipeline, and the ways her office tries to address the problem.

Suspensions and Expulsions Contribute to School Dropouts

Adie Simmons

Director, Washington State Office of the Education Ombudsman

The Office of the Education Ombudsman (OEO), a state agency charged with resolving complaints from parents and students about public schools, frequently intervenes in discipline-related cases, and student suspension and expulsions make for the second most frequent types of complaints OEO handles.



This chart compares the numbers of complaints received by OEO in school year’s 2010-2011 and 2011-2012.

The Blue graph shows School year 10-11 data and the red graph school year 11-12 data.

The number of suspensions and expulsion cases brought to OEO’s attention grew by 13% in the 2011-2012 school year, as compared to the previous school year. For the most part, OEO’s interventions worked to reduce the length of the suspension for students or helped expelled students re-enter the system by enrolling in another school district or alternative program. In other cases, OEO helped long-term suspended students get temporary instruction. However, these favorable outcomes were not the norm. Under current state legislation, reversals and amendments to suspensions and expulsions are hard, if not impossible, to obtain and many of the students OEO worked with ended up unable re-enter any school district. In addition, sadly, many of those whom OEO helped to be enrolled back into school found themselves significantly behind academically and dropped out of school shortly after.

Students and their families complained about arbitrary school administrative decisions and a discipline system that excludes them from school with limited or no options to continue their education. Under current legislation, an expelled student is no longer entitled to an education. An expulsion is essentially permanent unless it is reversed or amended by a school official or the school board. In many cases parents of expelled students OEO worked could not afford to enroll their students in private schools or GED programs in community to continue their education. Under current state laws, however, youth who commit a crime and become part of the juvenile justice system, become entitled to receive instruction while in juvenile detention.

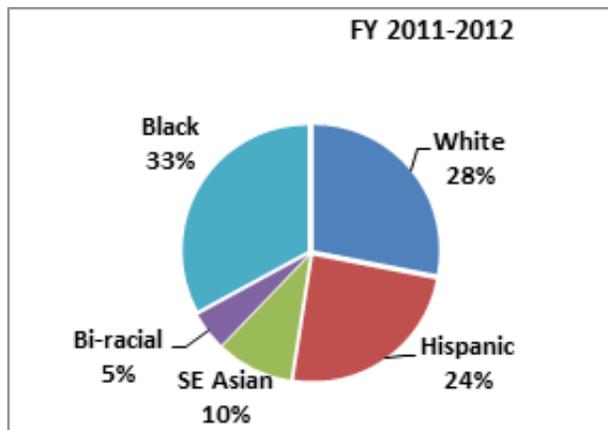
Long-term suspensions and expulsions are currently imposed on students at all levels of schooling, including students enrolled in early elementary school grades, and reversals and amendments are hard to impossible to obtain. While the

majority of disciplinary cases OEO worked on pertained to middle- and high-school students, we also saw a concerning trend in the number of expulsions of elementary school students – even as young as six years old.

OEO understands that state discipline policies were designed to keep students safe in school, and we agree with that premise. However, the one-size-fits-all approach and the discretionary nature of decisions made by school administrators open the door to unfair practices.

Race/ethnicity of State disciplined students

OEO's state-wide data from Fiscal year 2011 – 2012 mirrors national data regarding suspended and expelled students in that the majority of them were students of color.



This chart illustrates the race/ethnicity of students involved in expulsions and suspensions served by OEO in the 2011-2012 school year

Washington State cannot afford more school drop-outs

Nearly 35,000 students did not graduate from Washington's high schools in 2011-12. Most of these students were male and a large percentage of them were students of color. A number of them also later enrolled in Community College for remediation classes leading to a GED adding to community college enrollment numbers and class sizes.

High-school drop-outs heavily impact Washington State's economy. Studies have shown that the lost lifetime earnings in Washington for the 2011-2012 number of drop-outs alone, total more than \$8.8 billion. Washington households would have over \$1 billion more in accumulated wealth if all heads of households had graduated from high school. If Washington's high schools graduated all students ready for college, the state would save almost \$125.4 million a year in community college remediation costs and lost earnings, and if the male high school graduation rate increased by just 5 percent, Washington's economy would see a combination of savings and revenue of about \$111 million in reduced crime spending and increased earnings each year.

A contributing factor to the high number of non-graduates in Washington is the lack of required educational services available to students who are no longer attending school. Current state law does not require school districts to provide educational alternatives for students who have been long-term suspended or expelled. While there are currently some alternative or re-entry education programs available for drop-outs, they are becoming scarce due to budget cuts, particularly in rural areas, leaving parents and students with no options. Online learning is also a promising alternative that is not fully developed yet and not connected to the drop-out issue.

Washington laws

Washington's public schools are not legally obligated to continue to educate students who have been long-term suspended or expelled. Expelled students can re-enter the system through alternative programs, if available in their district or by applying for enrollment in another school district. Enrollment acceptance in a school district other than where the student lives is left to the discretion of that district's administrators. Depending on various factors, including the cause of the expulsion, the student might not be accepted in other school districts. However, if the student commits a crime and

becomes part of the juvenile justice system, the student is legally entitled to receive instruction while in juvenile detention.

While there are some legal protections for students who have been suspended long-term, they are not always honored. For example, the Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 392-400-260 (2012) addresses long-term suspensions. Section 4 states that no students in Kindergarten through grade four shall be subject to long-term suspension during any single semester and no loss of academic grades or credit shall be imposed by reason of suspension. Section 5 states that no students in grade five and above shall have a long-term suspension imposed in a manner which causes the student to lose academic grades or credit in excess of one semester. OEO has worked on numerous cases where this WAC was not being adhered to by the school district.

WAC 392-400-275 (2012) states that a student may be expelled, but there is no wording in this WAC about alternative education except in section 4, which states that the school district shall notify the appropriate local and state authorities, including juvenile authorities, in order that such authorities may address the student's education needs. OEO has repeatedly found, however, that this is not being followed. Some school districts no longer notify authorities of any expulsion. But even when authorities are notified, the requirement to notify parents about disciplinary action in language they can understand is not always followed, which adds to the detrimental consequences for language-diverse students and families, who require documents to be translated.

Paradigm shift

We believe the time has come for Washington State to take an in-depth look at state laws that guide school district policies, and school practices regarding student discipline. It is time to review, revise, and update disciplinary laws and create a disciplinary blueprint for public schools that moves away from punitive, exclusionary practices to focus on uninterrupted student learning.

We understand that many disciplinary approaches are born from concerns about school safety, and this is a valid and important point. As a collective of educators, parents, students, law enforcement and communities we should be able to develop common sense, comprehensive school discipline legislation that balances the safety of school environments with the constitutional rights of all students to receive an education. National school discipline best practices show that successful systemic models include the buy-in of all stakeholders, a data collection system of early identification of students at risk, school provision of social-emotional and academic supports for identified students, a well-organized system of alternative educational opportunities, and increased focus on family engagement in education.

This should become a particular priority if we are serious about closing the achievement gap and reducing the number of drop-outs in our state. We can't afford anything less.

References

Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 392-400-260. (2012). Long-tme suspensions, conditions and limitations. <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=392-400-260>

Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 392-400-275. (2012). Expulsion, conditions and limitations. <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=392-400-275>