

School Characteristics Related to the Use of Suspension

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Considerable evidence suggests that a history of suspension from school accelerates youths' progress along a pathway to delinquency and life-long failure. Suspension has been related to school failure, dropout, delinquency, and criminal behavior. Students who are suspended tend to receive lower grades, are more likely to have learning or emotional disabilities, or to have academic skill deficits (Costenbader & Markson, 1998). These students are three times more likely to drop out of school (Skiba & Peterson, 1999), and over 80% of incarcerated adults have dropped out of school (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001). Vicki Reed, the director of Placement Services for the Kentucky Department of Juvenile Justice, reported that it is unusual to find a youthful offender among the state's population of incarcerated youth who has not been suspended from school (personal communication, Oct. 11, 2002). While a number of state and federal initiatives have focused on reducing the use of suspension, it is one of the most common disciplinary consequences used in schools for student problem behaviors and rates of its use continue to rise.

It may seem obvious that suspension should be reserved for extreme behavior problems that pose physical danger to others, yet researchers have found that minor offenses, such as disobedience, disrespect, attendance problems, and classroom disruption commonly result in suspension (Skiba &

Peterson, 1999). Ironically, as much as suspension is used (e.g., in the 2001-2002 school year, Kentucky schools reported 81,688 instances of suspension; McCoy-Simandle & May, 2002), it is not effective in reducing the behavior problems it is intended to address. For example, research indicates that students who exhibit the most challenging behavior have been suspended multiple times, yet suspension does not appear to reduce future undesired behavior (McCord, Widom, Bamba, & Crowell, 2000). Research also indicates that suspension is used disproportionately with students who are: (a) male, (b) from low socioeconomic families, (c) of a minority ethnic background, and (d) identified as having a disability or low academic competence (Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997). The purpose of this research was to determine which school characteristics show the strongest relationship to school suspension, and how schools reporting high suspension rates differ from schools reporting low suspension rates. We examined suspension rates in Kentucky's 161 middle schools, using both quantitative and qualitative procedures. Our findings included a number of school characteristics that are differentially related to school suspension. These results suggest some changes that schools can make to reduce their rates of student suspension.

Our research was conducted in three stages. At Stage 1, we performed correlational analyses of data from two academic years (2000-2001 and 2001-2002) obtained from the annual reports by the Kentucky Department of Education and the Kentucky Center for School Safety. Stage 2 analyses compared 20 middle schools with the highest suspension rates (HSS, mean =

62.94) to 20 middle schools with the lowest suspension rates (LSS, mean = 2.47) on a number of variables that we identified (from the literature and Stage 1 analyses) as being related to rates of student suspension. In Stage 3, we selected four schools from each Stage 2 group as case examples for closer examination. Teams of three trained observers made one-day visits to the schools and gathered information using administrator surveys, staff interviews, and on-site observations. During site visits, observers surveyed the school campus, independently noting the interactions of students and adults, the routines, and the physical condition of the schools. They interviewed school personnel and spent time in common areas, such as the cafeteria, library, and gymnasium, and in sixth-grade classrooms, where they noted the physical arrangements, transition routines, instructional activities, and teacher and student interactions and behaviors.

Stage 1 analyses identified several school-level characteristics that were differentially related to suspension rate. The number of documented board of education violations (i.e., infractions of school district rules), low socioeconomic status (as measured by the percentage of students enrolled in the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program-FRLP), the number of reported law violations on school grounds, student grade retention rate, and dropout rate were significantly associated with higher rates of student suspension. On the other hand, average daily student attendance rate, academic achievement scores (as measured by the California Test of Basic Skills-CTBS), and majority ethnicity (as measured by the percent of Caucasian students) were associated with lower suspension rates.

School size, as measured by the number of students enrolled, and the gender breakdown of the student body was not significantly related to suspension rate.

This analysis identified school characteristics to be further examined in Stage 2.

Stage 2 analyses revealed statistically significant differences between the HSS and LSS on most of these variables, in directions that were predicted from Stage 1 correlations. The LSS reported higher rates of attendance, academic achievement, and percent of Caucasian students than did the HSS. High suspending schools reported higher dropout rates, more board of education and law violations, and more students from low socioeconomic backgrounds than LSS. Retention rates were not significantly different between the two groups. In addition, we examined other characteristics that are provided in the Kentucky web-based school report cards (i.e., the mean amount of spending per student, teacher to student ratio, and average years of experience of the teachers). The only significant difference between schools in the HSS and LSS groups was on the average amount of money spent per student per year. Surprisingly, this figure was higher for HSS than for LSS. On the other hand, considering the loss of Average Daily Attendance (ADA) funds, it is not surprising that suspension is costly for schools. When a student is absent in Kentucky, the school loses \$19.00 per day in ADA funds. Given that 202,972 instructional days were lost due to student suspensions during the 2001-2002 school year (McCoy-Simandle & May, 2002), the lost revenue could have totaled as much as \$3,856,468.

The findings from Stage 3 of our research included the identification of several patterns and themes that support and embellish the information gained

from our previous analyses. Governance and leadership emerged as an important variable that distinguished HSS from LSS. Staff from the HSS did not communicate overall confidence and positive attitudes about their administrators, as opposed to staff from the LSS group. The observers gave the HSS low ratings on leadership and the sense of a team atmosphere between administration and staff. In fact, the administrator's approach to student discipline appeared to be more important than school demographic or student background data in predicting a school's use of suspension. These findings suggest that governance and leadership of a school strongly influence student outcomes, either positively or negatively.

Another pattern that emerged in Stage 3 analysis was differences in staff behaviors between HSS and LSS. Observers noted many more authoritative behaviors (e.g., talking down to and scolding students) in the HSS. Conversely, more interactions between staff and students at the LSS were inferred as caring and respectful. The characteristics and behaviors of the teaching staff also contribute to predicting a school's use of suspension and thus, impact student outcomes.

We found two patterns in relation to school structure and programming. First, there was an overall difference in the ambience of the HSS and the LSS. The LSS were cleaner, brighter, and had a more relaxed decor (e.g., restaurant style cafeterias, artistic displays) that mirror life outside of school, as opposed to the HSS, which tended to have more institutional environments. The second pattern was a difference in behavioral programs. The LSS were consistent in

their focus on positive, proactive disciplinary measures rather than reactive, punitive strategies. For example, observers described the LSS schools as orderly, yet relaxed. Conversely, observers described a discernable tension in the HSS resulting from uncoordinated attempts to maintain order through punitive and exclusionary disciplinary practices.

Our findings suggest that, although student characteristics (e.g., poverty) affect student outcomes, certain school characteristics can impact student outcomes either positively or negatively. Overall, our findings indicate that schools having economically poor, diverse student populations also had lower academic scores, lower attendance rates, less parent involvement, and more board of education and law violations. However, our results suggest that, to counter the negative impact of student and family demographic factors, positive influences involving the following school characteristics need to be intensified. These include: (a) school governance and leadership (e.g., administrator experience, philosophies and disciplinary style); (b) staff characteristics and behaviors (e.g., teaching style, behaviors, and attitudes); and (c) school structure and programming (e.g., physical condition, rules, policies, disciplinary procedures, and academic focus).

Summary

The results of this study indicate that several school characteristics appear to be differentially related to suspension rate. It is noteworthy that findings were consistent across different stages of this study. For example, student infractions of school rules (i.e., board of education violations) were positively related to

suspension rate as evidenced by the correlation analysis in Stage 1, the MANOVA in Stage 2, and the administrator surveys in Stage 3. Lower socioeconomic background of students, (i.e., the percentage of students enrolled in the FRLP) was related to higher suspension rates, as was dropout rate across the first two stages of analyses. The negative relationships between suspension and attendance rates, academic achievement (i.e., CTBS scores), and percentage of students of Caucasian ethnic background were confirmed by both Stages 1 and 2 results. An interesting finding in the Stage 2 analysis was that the amount of spending per student was positively related to suspension rate.

We also obtained consistent results across the various assessment strategies used in Stage 3. Family involvement was negatively related to suspension rate, as evidenced by both administrator and school staff responses. The need to reduce suspension rates in HSS was corroborated by both administrator and staff opinions. The administrators and staff from the HSS also agreed on several resources needed to reduce student behavioral problems. These included: (a) alternative education, (b) more teachers to reduce class sizes, (c) more counselors, and (c) better parent involvement. Interestingly, HSS administrators expressed a need for more professional development training for teachers. On the other hand, HSS staff expressed the need for better and more active administrators. This suggests a disconnect between administration and staff that also was noted by the observers.

Recommendations

There is no single, quick fix for school improvement. Therefore, school personnel should use strategies that address the full range of school characteristics (i.e., student and family issues, governance and leadership, staff behaviors and characteristics, and structure and programs).

- For example, personnel at both the HSS and the LSS voiced the need for greater parent involvement. One of the LSS has developed several strategies for increasing parent involvement, including school-sponsored family picnics and “Good News” postcards that are regularly sent to parents reporting positive student behaviors.
- The observers noted that the staff they interviewed were aware of their school’s problems and voiced realistic solutions. Thus, administrators who work together with their teachers may find sufficient knowledge and expertise within the school walls to address their problems.
- The need for quality professional development was a theme echoed by both staff and administrators at both HSS and LSS in this study. Schools wishing to reduce their suspension rates should focus on staff training in the areas that were cited, including (a) behavior management, (b) engaging instruction, and (c) diversity and culture.
- Another theme that was repeated by administrators and staff was the need for school-wide behavior planning and consistency regarding behavioral expectations and consequences. A wealth of information and resources are available to school personnel through the Technical Assistance Center on

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (<http://www.pbis.org/>). School-wide positive behavior support is gaining recognition as a successful approach to student discipline across the country, with schools reporting 20-60% reductions in office discipline referrals and suspensions. For change to be realized on a school level, the approach must be implemented school-wide, and it must be sustained.

In summary, our study demonstrates that a number of school characteristics are differentially related to rates of student suspension. Hopefully, our findings shed some light on the suspension phenomenon and will facilitate the identification of alternatives to the use of school exclusion as a disciplinary procedure. We believe that keeping students engaged in school and attempting to make schools more supportive, inviting environments for students and adults will contribute to the prevention of delinquency.

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