Comparative Disciplinary Rates as a Tool for Reducing Exclusionary Discipline and Eliminating the School to Prison Pipeline

Deborah F. Fowler
Texas Appleseed, dfowler.texasappleseed@gmail.com

Michael F. Vitris
Texas Appleseed, mvitris@texasappleseed.net

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Booth and colleagues' study comparing student suspension and expulsion rates by individual schools in Texas makes a compelling case: improving educators' access to meaningful disciplinary data can help them pinpoint the most effective strategies to reduce those numbers. The authors began by compiling a dataset that tracked every student in 7th grade in Texas during 2001-03, recording their suspensions and expulsions from school for at least six years. Individual student academic and discipline records, along with teacher and campus characteristics for 3,900 middle and high schools in Texas, were used to calculate a rate of *exclusionary discipline* (suspension/expulsion) for each campus. The study reveals that approximately 50% of campuses disciplined their students at rates consistent with schools with similar characteristics and student demographics, 23% of campuses disciplined students at rates higher than expected, and 27% reported lower discipline rates than schools with similar campus and student profiles.

These findings contribute to the national dialogue sparked by recent research exposing poor outcomes associated with exclusionary discipline. Students who are suspended and/or expelled, particularly those who are repeatedly disciplined, are more likely to be held back a grade or to drop out than students who are not involved in the school disciplinary system.[1] Furthermore, a suspended or expelled student is at a significantly increased risk of being involved in the juvenile justice system.[1] Where it can be safely and thoughtfully done, reducing reliance on suspension and expulsion presents an opportunity to improve student and campus outcomes.

Too often, however, administrators point to poverty rates or neighborhood demographics to explain high numbers of student suspensions and expulsions, insisting that they simply "come with the territory." Booth and colleague's study illustrates that, even when controlling for campus characteristics like socioeconomic status or student demographics, schools with similar characteristics and demographics are reporting *significant differences* in their numbers of student suspensions and expulsions. That is good news, since it rebuts the presumption that schools are "doomed to their demographics" when it comes to discipline. Instead, the data suggests that we have something important to learn from the schools that are not finding it necessary to resort to exclusionary discipline as often.

However, it is only good news if state education agencies make good use of available disciplinary data—giving educators the clear data picture they need to identify and explore better disciplinary practices. Evidence-based discipline strategies like School-Wide Positive Behavioral

Interventions and Supports (SW PBIS) and Social Emotional Learning have one thing in common: both use data to inform implementation of best disciplinary practices. Careful data analysis can help ensure that discipline is being used effectively to address students' behavioral needs, and to evaluate whether a school's disciplinary approach is working. Without the ability to compare their school's student discipline rates to similar campuses, educators are left operating in the dark when it comes to measuring and seeking to improve their own school performance.

Texas should be commended for the work it already has done to collect and compile district-level discipline data. Texas collects far more data and makes it more readily available than most states. However, Booth and colleague's study raises the important role of statewide collection and *sharing* of campus-level data. Only by sharing the rich data we already have can we give educators the tools they need to better understand what accounts for differences in discipline rates and to strategize ways to replicate what works.

All of this comes with one caveat: we cannot simply assume that campuses that have "lower than expected" disciplinary rates are employing model disciplinary policies. In some cases, lower rates may be explained, not by the particular discipline program the school employs, but by other factors. But in order to better understand what is really impacting school disciplinary rates, it is critical to shed new light on the data we do have. Educators must be given access to the data they need to engage in an informed discussion—and help find new solutions to these challenges.

References

1. Council of State Governments Justice Center. *Breaking School's Rules: a statewide study of how school discipline relates to students' success and juvenile justice involvement.* New York, NY: Council of State Governments Justice Center; 2011.