

Washington State Board of Education
600 Washington St SE
Olympia, Washington 98504

November 14, 2013

Re: Public Comment Urging the State Board of Education to Proactively Look at the Linkage between School Discipline and Student Achievement

Members of the State Board of Education:

The League of Education Voters, the ACLU of Washington and the undersigned organizations urge the State Board of Education to include the measurement of school discipline data, now collected by the state, as a primary indicator of student achievement and, where possible, include it in the Revised Accountability Index and as a state education health indicator. As we did via public comment and letter submission in November of 2012, we again urge the State Board of Education to take proactive steps towards the improvement of school discipline rates as they apply to student achievement.

As discussed below, the suspension and expulsion of students from school is a systemic barrier to their academic success, particularly the suspension and expulsion of students of color, students from low-income families, students with disabilities and homeless and foster youth. The evidence suggests that if Washington state reduces the number of students suspended and expelled from our public schools, significant and measurable progress will be made towards decreasing the educational opportunity gap, increasing student achievement, and raising graduation rates.

The state legislature made gains toward closing these gaps during the 2013 legislative session by addressing aspects of school discipline policies. As a result of the legislation passed, Washington state students can no longer be expelled or suspended longer than one calendar year or be on emergency expulsion status for more than 10 days. Students and administrators will now create reengagement plans to aid in a student's return to school. Finally, Washington state will now collect and make publicly available disaggregated student discipline data. The first round of this data will be released by the Office of the Superintendent for Public Instruction (OSPI) in November, highlighting districts doing well and those that are facing challenges.

Given the impact of school discipline on student achievement, no measure of school success or standard of accountability can be complete without an indicator for student discipline rates.

The School Discipline Problem

Over the past 20 years, both nationally and in Washington state the rate of student discipline has doubled and the severity of punishments have also increased substantially. This is despite growing evidence that violence in schools has not increased.¹

In Washington state, tens of thousands of students are excluded (suspended or expelled) from school each year.² While some are barred from school for just a few days, a substantial proportion of these students are excluded from school on a long-term basis. OSPI reports that each year there are approximately 45,000 incidents of suspension or expulsion. That's enough students to fill every seat in Safeco Field. Additionally, because only certain types of behavior are reported, the OSPI data greatly underestimates the actual number of

¹ R. Skiba, *Zero Tolerance: The Assumptions and the Facts*, Indiana Youth Services Association, 2004; M. Planty et al., *The Condition of Education 2009* (NCES 2009-081), National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC, 2009.

² Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, *2011-12 Behavior Report—Suspensions and Expulsions*, January 22, 2013, accessed November 1, 2013, <http://www.k12.wa.us/safetycenter/behavior>; *2011-12 Weapons Report—Suspensions and Expulsions*, January 22, 2013, accessed November 1, 2013, <http://www.k12.wa.us/safetycenter/weapons>.

students facing exclusionary discipline.

The impact of these exclusionary discipline practices fall more harshly on students of color, low-income students, homeless and foster youth, and students with disabilities. These students are more likely to be suspended and expelled than their white and wealthier peers, and they are typically excluded from school for a longer period of time than their white peers for the same behavior.³ While we lack good statewide data, the largest school district in Washington (Seattle) reports that African American high school students are three times more likely to be suspended than white students.⁴

With this many students missing so much instructional time, in particular students of color, it is no surprise that school discipline is having a significant impact on student achievement and success.

School Discipline is a Systemic Barrier to Student Achievement

Overwhelming evidence exists to demonstrate that suspensions and expulsions result in reduced academic achievement, lower graduation rates, psychological and social disengagement from school, and increased contact with the juvenile justice system.

Every time a student is excluded from school for six or more days, their risk of dropping out increases significantly.⁵ The Road Map Project in South King County found that a student who misses school for as few as six days begins to show “early warning indicators” of dropping out.⁶ Similarly, a study in Baltimore showed that 87% of students who dropped out had been absent for 20 days or more.⁷

Incidents of exclusionary discipline practices are also heavily correlated with students failing and having to repeat a grade, which costs the state and districts money. For instance, *Breaking Schools' Rules* found that in Texas, of all students who were suspended or expelled, a full 31 percent repeated their grade—in contrast to 5% of students with no such discipline.⁸

The correlation is undeniable—students who are suspended or expelled, for even a short period of time, are much more likely to experience academic failure, school dropout, and contact with the juvenile justice system.

Moreover, suspensions and expulsions are not effective forms of discipline. While educators, parents, and policymakers all agree on the importance of maintaining a safe and positive learning environment, a growing body of evidence demonstrates that suspensions and expulsions do not deter students from committing more rule infractions. In fact, research finds that the opposite occurs.⁹ As students get into trouble and begin to self-identify as a “bad student,” they tend to become repeat disciplinary problems and are

³ “Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools? An Evidentiary Review and Recommendations,” American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, December 2008, accessed December 19, 2011, <http://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/zero-tolerance.pdf>.

⁴ “Seattle Public Schools Data Profile,” Seattle Public Schools, December 2012, accessed November 1, 2013, www.seattleschools.org/data.

⁵ The Road Map Project is a community-wide effort aimed at improving education to drive dramatic improvement in student achievement from cradle to college and career in South King County and South Seattle. See www.roadmapproject.org.

⁶ “The Road Map Project: Baseline Technical Report,” Road Map Project, February 27, 2012, accessed November 1, 2013, http://www.roadmapproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Baseline_Technical_Report_v1-2.pdf, page 32.

⁷ Martha Abele Mac Iver, “Gradual Disengagement: A Portrait of the 2008–2009 Dropouts in the Baltimore City Schools,” Baltimore Education Research Consortium, August 2010, accessed November 1, 2013, <http://baltimore-berc.org/pdfs/Gradual%20Disengagement%20Brief.pdf>.

⁸ Tony Fabelo et al., “Breaking School Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students’ Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement,” *Council of State Governments Justice Center, The Public Policy Research Institute, Texas A&M University*, July 2011.

⁹ Russell J. Skiba. “Zero Tolerance, Zero Evidence: An Analysis of School Disciplinary Practices,” *Indiana Education Policy Center* (August 2000).

increasingly associated with negative outcomes such as low grades, high absenteeism, decreased graduation, and increased contact with the juvenile justice system.¹⁰

Schools that Reduce Suspensions and Expulsions Significantly Improve Student Achievement and Increase Graduation Rates

A number of school districts across the country have worked to reduce or eliminate discipline practices that exclude students from school. Those schools have shown significant improvement in student academic achievement and graduation rates.

In Walla Walla, WA, school leaders reformed their discipline practices with impressive results. Within that school district, Lincoln High School reduced the number of days students were suspended or expelled by 75%. The result has been a graduation rate six times greater than before the change in policy.¹¹

Similarly, in 2008–09, Baltimore City Public Schools revised its discipline policies and placed added emphasis on the use of prevention and intervention strategies and discouraged the use of out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and arrests for most student misbehavior. Since the new discipline policies went into effect, suspensions have dropped from one in five students being out-of-school suspended to one in eight students. In addition, the dropout rate fell from 7.9 percent (2008) to 4.2 percent (2011).¹²

By transitioning to a discipline system organized around prevention, intervention, and keeping students in school, these districts demonstrate the profound impact that changes in student discipline can have on student achievement and success. And, in each of these instances, the ability to measure and be held accountable for student discipline practices was integral in assessing the school's achievements.

The State Board of Education Should Take Steps to Improve Student Achievement through School Discipline Policies

Due to the undeniable link between student discipline and student achievement, we urge the Board to take steps to improve student achievement through transforming school discipline policies

Our suggestions include:

- Include school discipline data as a measurement in the Revised Accountability Index.
- Include school discipline data as a state education health indicator.
- Issue recommendations of positive discipline alternatives for districts with troubling discipline data.

By measuring and marking school improvement in student discipline practices, our state will take a major step toward removing this barrier to student success and closing the opportunity gap.

Sincerely,

League of Education Voters
ACLU of Washington
Equity in Education Coalition
NW PBIS

Office of the Education Ombudsman
OneAmerica
TeamChild
Washington Appleseed

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Washington State Report Card, Lincoln High School, Walla Walla School District," *OSPI*, accessed June 5, 2012, <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us>.

¹² Nirvi Shah, "Baltimore Leader Helps District Cut Suspensions," *Education Week*, February 4, 2013, accessed November 1, 2013, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/02/06/201tf-brice.h32.html>.