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Report Documents Successful Local School Strategies for Improving Student Behavior and Discipline

Use of out-of-school suspensions on decline in most towns

As Connecticut schools prepare to implement a state law aimed at reducing out-of-school suspensions that goes into effect in July, a new research report points to promising practices that Connecticut schools and districts have used to reduce their reliance on out-of-school suspensions as a means of disciplining students. The report documents numerous strategies that schools have found effective in improving school discipline while avoiding out-of-school suspensions, including supports for positive behavior, teaching social skills, mentoring, classroom management training for teachers, peer mediation, fostering student engagement, academic supports, detentions, restitution, parent meetings, and other interventions based on a review of disciplinary data and trends.

Connecticut's school suspension law, which goes into effect on July 1, limits out-of-school suspensions to two situations. First, schools may out-of-school suspend a student who poses such a danger to persons or property, or such a disruption to the educational process, that the school administration determines that excluding the student from school is warranted. Second, schools may decide that an out-of-school suspension is appropriate based on evidence of past disciplinary problems that have led to suspensions or an expulsion and evidence of efforts by the administration to address the behavior through means other than out-of-school suspension or expulsion, including positive behavioral support strategies. This report highlights many of the most promising positive behavioral strategies available to schools.

Connecticut's suspension law was passed in response to concerns that out-of-school suspensions were too widespread; could be counterproductive; and increased the risk of juvenile delinquency, dropout, and poor academic achievement. In 2006-2007, nearly two-thirds of out-of-school suspensions were for "school policy violations," such as skipping school and showing disrespect. Attendance violations, including truancy, were the second leading reason for suspensions. Thus, many students who voluntarily skipped school were being "punished" by being involuntarily excluded from school through a suspension. In 2006-2007 and again in 2007-2008, schoolchildren in Connecticut missed over 250,000 school days due to out-of-school suspensions; in 2005-2006, kindergarteners alone lost approximately 2,000 days.

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The new report found, based on data from the State Department of Education, that out-of-school suspensions in Connecticut have begun to decline. The percentage of students who received an out-of-school suspension dropped from 7.1 percent in 2006-2007 to 5.4 percent in 2008-2009. Three out of four school districts (73%) reported decreases, and only one in ten (10%) reported increases. The largest decreases were reported in Bridgeport, Bloomfield, East Windsor, New Britain, Thompson, and Windsor. Connecticut Voices attributed this decline in part to the growing attention that the issue of out-of-school suspensions has received as a result of the law, which was originally passed in 2007. Implementation of the law was delayed twice, but this year, state and legislators and the Governor retained the effective date of July 1, 2010.

The law allows for many other forms of intervention to improve students' behavior. A few of the dozens of examples from the report include the following:

- *School-wide Behavior Supports:* The **Bridgeport Public Schools** achieved the largest decline in school suspensions between 2006-2007 and 2008-2009 (22% of students to 14%) by implementing "School-wide Positive Behavioral Supports." This is a research-based framework that emphasizes communicating clear expectations, decision making based on data, active teaching of social skills, positive reinforcements for good behavior, and a number of supports and techniques designed to respond proactively – rather than punitively – to the needs of students who struggle academically and behaviorally. For example, The Columbus School (PreK-6) in Bridgeport reduced its out-of-school suspension rates by 30 percent in one year, through School-wide Positive Behavioral Supports and other interventions.
- *Looking at the Data:* **Rogers Park Middle School** in **Danbury** reduced its use of out-of-school suspensions (from 1039 school days in 2006-2007 to only 396 school days in 2008-2009) through various proactive means based on an analysis of their disciplinary data. For example, they "fine tuned" the school schedule to reduce unstructured time, which improved student behavior. Schools in the **Montville School District** were able to prevent infractions by adding more supervision at targeted times and locations, determined by a review of patterns in their disciplinary data.
- *Active Teaching of Social Skills:* The **West Hartford School District** has reduced out-of-school suspension rates through several proactive interventions, including lessons designed to teach social skills and address the behavioral challenges that data indicate are most prevalent.
- *Mentoring:* Adult Mentoring programs have helped reduce out-of-school suspension rates in several schools, including **Middletown High School** and **Conard High School** in **West Hartford**. **Cheshire High School** has successfully adopted a peer mentoring program to improve school climate and student discipline.
- *Cool Down Options:* Teachers and administrators at **Middletown's Snow School** (PreK-5) instituted "sensory breaks" or "cool-down periods" for students particularly at-risk for behavioral difficulties, which often prevents misbehavior from escalating.

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- *Reflective Essays, Apologies, and Responsible Thinking Classrooms: The Fox Elementary School in Hartford*, saw a 30 percent reduction in out-of-school suspensions after adopting a “Responsible Thinking Classroom” program designed to encourage and teach children to think through their behavior.
- *Community Service*: Administrators at **Middletown High School** added school service as a disciplinary option after noticing that students often skipped detention, resulting in out-of-school suspensions. At **Ansonia** Middle School, out-of-school suspensions dropped significantly after adoption of a community service program.

Connecticut Voices for Children plans to share the report with education officials throughout the state. Voices notes that the report does not suggest a “one-size fits all” approach to school discipline, but rather seeks to provide a “menu” or “toolbox” of potential strategies that educators can consider, adopt, or modify based on the unique culture, resources, and needs of their school communities.

“Many schools across the state have done an impressive job of improving student behavior while keeping children and youth in school and focused on learning,” said Alexandra Dufresne, Senior Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices for Children and co-author of the report. “We hope that educators throughout the state will benefit from the experiences of their colleagues.”

“We are encouraged that so many Connecticut schools are pursuing proactive, common-sense and data-driven strategies that improve student discipline. Disciplinary techniques that keep children in school will pay off for students and help to keep them out of the juvenile justice system,” said Abby Anderson, Executive Director of the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance.

"Bridgeport has made great strides reducing out-of-school suspensions in the last three years. In light of deep budget cuts anticipated next year, it will be critical to sustain the gains the district has made," said Mary Pat Healy, Executive Director of the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition.

The report, “Teaching Discipline: a Toolkit for Educators on Positive Alternatives to Out-of-School Suspensions,” is available on the CT Voices Web site at www.ctkidslink.org.

[Note to reporters: Appendix A includes district data on the percentage of students receiving out of school suspensions and how these rates changed between the 2006-2007 and 2008-2009 school years. Appendix C includes an index of the schools featured in the report.]

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