Exclusionary Discipline in Schools: Does Reducing Suspensions Help?

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Overview

Two decades after the broad adoption of zero tolerance school discipline policies, schools, districts, and policymakers are increasingly concerned that exclusionary discipline practices like suspensions may be too broadly applied and disproportionately target disadvantaged student groups. In the 2011-2012 school year, 6% of all students received an out-of-school suspension, primarily at the high school level (US Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection, 2016). Since the 1970s, suspension rates have grown steadily for all students, with rates more than doubling for non-white students (Losen et al., 2011). While data is incomplete, evidence suggests that student behavior problems have not increased appreciably, suggesting the increase in suspensions has been primarily driven by school policies and practices rather than increases in incidents of student misbehavior (Fabelo et al., 2011; McFarland, 2001; Skiba, Shure & Williams, 2012). Widespread adoption of zero-tolerance policies, which proscribe significant consequences for relatively minor offense, likely accounts for much of the increase in suspensions (Hirschfield, 2008; Noguera, 2003).

Advocates for these exclusionary approaches argue they provide consistent punishment for violating school rules, deterring potential violations, as well as removing the most disruptive students in order to ensure a safe learning environment for other students (Noguera, 2003; Skiba & Peterson, 1999). However, proponents of reducing suspension make arguments of several forms. First, suspending students removes them from the typical educational environment, interfering with learning, weakening ties to school, and increasing distrust of school authorities. Second, suspension as punishment does not address any of the underlying causes of behavior, and may be applied without sufficient attention to children's specific developmental needs or circumstances. Finally, the large differences in suspension rates by race, gender, and special education status raise significant equity concerns.

Local and national education leaders have broadly encouraged schools to reduce their use of exclusionary discipline like suspensions (e.g. American Psychological Association, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). School districts, including the Chicago Public Schools, have responded by modifying or removing zero-tolerance policies and implementing practices intended to reduce the use of suspension and expulsion (Morton, 2014; Watanbe, 2014). In a recent survey, more than half of participating districts had recently revised school policies to reflect a less punitive approach (American Association of School Superintendents, 2013).

A substantial body of descriptive work documents large correlations between suspension and a variety of negative future outcomes, both for suspended students and for students who are never suspended but attend schools with high suspension rates (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2015; Davis and Jordan, 1994; Dawson, 1991; Fabelo et al., 2011). Furthermore, numerous recent studies document substantial inequality in the ways suspension policy impacts students by race/ethnicity, gender, LGBT orientation, special needs, home language, and socioeconomic status. (Fabelo et al., 2011; Himmelstein & Brückner, 2010; Losen & Gillepsie, 2012; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Losen, Hewitt, & Toldson, 2014; Osher et al., 2010; Porowski, O'Conner, & Aikaterini, 2014; Stevens et al., 2015). However, while the correlational evidence is suggestive, the existing literature has made little progress in producing causally

credible estimates of the impact of suspension policy due to the endogeneity of punishment, risk of reverse causation, and data limitations. This paper seeks to expand our understanding of the causal impact of suspension policy on individual students and schools overall.

In this paper, we seek to answer the following questions in a causal framework:

- How do changes in a school's approach to discipline influence student outcomes (e.g., academic performance as measured by test scores and grades, attendance) and student perceptions of school climate (e.g., perceptions of safety, bullying, quality of relationships)?
    - Does this vary by student gender and race? By student's propensity to experience suspension?
    - Does this vary by school context, including racial composition of the student population and the school's prior suspension rate?

Data and Analytic Strategy

We use student-level data from Chicago Public Schools high schools, including enrollment and demographic records, test score data, course grades, and attendance. We also incorporate student-level disciplinary infraction and suspension records. Because discipline data is only consistently available for non-charter schools, this analysis cannot be applied to students in charter schools. We also have annual student survey reports of school climate.

Chicago is a good policy climate to test the relationship between exclusionary discipline practices at the school level and student outcomes. Starting in the 2009-10 school year, the district put substantial financial and staff resources toward reducing suspensions in school while increasing the use of more restorative practices, trying to address the root of misbehavior. Since that time, various changes to the student code of conduct have codified these intentions to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline practices. Schools responded, resulting in a substantial downward trend in overall suspensions and days suspended, as well as a reduced probability of being suspended for minor infractions. Exploiting the policy-induced change in schools' suspending behaviors, we use a school fixed effects model to examine how year-to-year changes in the use of exclusionary discipline influence academic performance, attendance, GPA, and student reports of school climate. Our full model also includes student fixed effects. Specifically, we estimate the following model:

$$Y_{ist} = \alpha_1 + \alpha_2 D_{st} + X'_{st}\beta_1 + \tilde{X}_{ist}\beta_2 + \phi_i + \eta_s + \gamma_g + \pi_t + \varepsilon_{ist},$$

where Y_{ist} is the outcome in the current year, D_{st} is a measure of suspension practice in school s and year t, and X_{st} the set of time-varying school characteristics. We also include time-varying student characteristics in X^{ist}. ϕ_i, η_s, γ_g, and π_t are student, school, grade level, and year fixed effects, respectively.

Preliminary Findings

We find that reducing the punitive discipline culture in a school resulted in small test score and GPA increases for students who were at moderate- or high-risk of suspension. These

impacts were larger for boys than for girls. These same students at moderate- or high-risk of suspension were also slightly more positive about some aspects their school environment as captured on student surveys: small but statistically significant improvements in emotional health, academic personalism, and peer relationships. Notably girls were more likely to report less bullying.