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Harsher Discipline Often Dispensed to Minority, Disabled Students

An Education Department study correlates school penalties and entry into the juvenile-justice system.

By Rosa Ramirez - December 17, 2012

Students of color and those with disabilities receive harsher punishment in schools, punishments that are often a precursor to their entry into the juvenile justice system, *The Washington Post* reports.

Each year, more than 3 million children are expelled or suspended from schools, according to Civil Rights Data Collection figures released last spring by the Education Department. During analysis of 72,000 schools in the 2009-10 academic year, at least 240,000 students were referred to law enforcement.

“For many young people, our schools are increasingly a gateway to the criminal-justice system,” said Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee’s Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights Subcommittee, at the hearing. “What is especially concerning of this phenomenon is that it deprives our kids of their fundamental right to an education.”

Removing children from the classroom puts them further behind academically, he said.

“The vast majority [of expulsions or reprimands] are not related to guns, drugs, or violence,” said Deborah Delisle, assistant secretary at the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education at the Education Department, said during a hearing last week. Rather, these students are disciplined for violating school ordinances, such as nonattendance, disobedience, or classroom disorderliness.

For years, advocates and some scholars have argued that zero-tolerance policies in schools has led to funneling a disproportionate number of blacks and Latinos into the criminal-justice system.

School police programs gained support in the 1990s after highly publicized shootings at Heath High School in West Paducah, Ky., and Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo. At the same time, increased awareness of bullying led many schools to adopt zero-tolerance policies that increased suspensions, expulsions, and in-school arrests as a way to manage student behavior.

What years ago would have resulted in a visit to the principal’s office has now become a trip to the courthouse, Durbin noted. “Sadly, there are schools that look more like

prisons than places for children to grow,” he said, evidencing metal detectors and police roaming the halls.

Nonetheless, the recent shooting in Connecticut likely will spark further discussions on whether even more school campuses should have metal detectors and police officers on campuses and playgrounds.

The hearing came two months after the Justice Department filed a lawsuit against Mississippi, alleging that it operates a “school-to-prison pipeline,” which disproportionately affected minorities.

Nationally, minorities are three times more likely to be suspended and four times more likely to be expelled from school than their white counterparts. More than 70 percent of students arrested in schools are black and Latinos. Students with disabilities are suspended more than twice as frequently as those without disabilities.

Andrew Coulson, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Reform, pointed to a study that suggests minority-discipline rates are not the result of racism.

He cited research that found that black and white children were sent to the principal’s office and suspended at the same rates. A school’s differentiation in punishment was more associated with demographics than race.

Schools whose student body is majority black are more likely to suspend children for an offense – and kick them out for longer periods. White students at those schools received the same punishment.

Conversely, schools with mostly white kids dispensed less severe penalties. Black students in those schools were suspended at the same rate as their white counterparts.