



School-to-prison pipeline: School suspension hurting students' chances

Posted on December 19, 2012 By [John Benson Education](#)

Is there a relationship between [school suspensions](#), ethnicity and juvenile delinquency? Is there a better way to deal with student misbehavior?

Assistant Majority Leader [Dick Durbin \(D-IL\)](#), [Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Human Rights](#), held the first-ever Congressional hearing last week on the school-to-prison pipeline. The impetus behind the inquiry is the alarming increase in young people being sent to the juvenile delinquency system as a result of school discipline issues.

According to [one leading study](#), students who were suspended for disciplinary reasons are two times more likely to repeat a grade and three times more likely to be involved with the juvenile justice system. In addition, more than 70 percent of students in school-related referrals to law enforcement are African-American or Latino.

In fact, [The Washington Post reports](#) that statistics show minority students often receive tougher punishment from school administration, and in many cases, behavior that can be handled in a different manner, ends up in suspensions or referrals to juvenile system. According to Civil Rights Data Collection numbers, more than 3 million students are suspended every year, and from these, about 240,000 students are sent to law enforcement officers.

One of the speakers at the recent hearing was the Center of Educational Freedom Director at the Cato Institute Andrew Coulson, who told VOXXI he was present to provide evidence on successful alternatives to out-of-school suspensions.

“There are strong correlations between out-of-school suspensions and students being arrested, dropping out of school and performing badly in school,” Coulson said. “When students are expelled, they’re not getting instruction. It’s not helping their own education and clearly if we want to help the kids who are misbehaving and actually increase the chances that they will finish school and stay out of prison, we have to find better discipline methods.”

Through his research, Coulson discovered American Indian Model Schools in Oakland, Calif. Despite being located in one of America's most dangerous cities, where one elementary school recently expelled 97 students in a year, the charter school's students – virtually all low-income and minority kids – are among the highest achieving students in the state.



There is an alarming increase in young people being sent to the juvenile delinquency system as a result of school discipline issues.

More so, the school's low income Hispanic and African American students outperform the statewide average for wealthier non-Hispanic whites and Asians in California. What caught Coulson's eye was the charter district enforces a non-expulsion or out-of-school suspension policy.

"Basically what the American Indian Model Schools does is they give kids more school if they act up," Coulson said. "So it's counterproductive for them from their standpoint to act out. For instance, kids who act out are often behind academically so they have Saturday morning classes and they help kids catch up. It's a huge disincentive for misbehavior."

Other disciplinary actions for misbehaving students include an in-school suspension involving the student attending a lower grade class, writing apology letters and crafting essays why their behavior was inappropriate.

While on the surface it would seem curtailing out-of-school suspensions in public schools would offer positive results, Coulson points to research by Rochester University Professor Joshua Kinsler that such a move would disproportionately hurt achievement of African-American students while widening the white-black achievement gap. Basically, Kinsler showed that the location of the school – not race or ethnicity– plays a significant factor in the handing out of discipline.



According to one leading study, students who were suspended for disciplinary reasons are two times more likely to repeat a grade and three times more likely to be involved with the juvenile justice system.

(Shutterstock photos)

“Predominantly African-American schools tend to issue harsher discipline than predominantly white schools, but within a predominantly black school, whites and blacks tend to get the same length of suspensions for the same offense,” Coulson said. “Conversely, in predominantly white schools, everyone tends to get more lenient discipline meted out regardless of their race. Kinsler found that if you homogenized the discipline that’s handed out across all schools, it tends to have very little effect on predominantly white schools and it tends to make discipline at predominantly black schools much more lenient. This leads to more misbehavior and inferior learning environment in class.”

Coulson said gleaned from the research was the fact there is no easy mandated solution. Instead, the answer lies in creating incentives for teachers and administrators to adopt similar policies to the American Indian Model Schools that will lead to schools dealing directly with students needing discipline rather than suspending them off campus or expelling them altogether.

The sentiment in the congressional hearing on the subject was productive and could lead to changes down the road.

“I just hope that they take away from these hearings the reality that there is no easy federal mandate solution to this problem,” Coulson said. “That you really have to create an environment, which is in the interest of school employees and school officials to create a safe, disciplined school.”

Read more: <http://www.voxxi.com/school-to-prison-school-suspension/#ixzz2FcHerquy>