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COMMENTARY

School Suspensions' Positive Link to Drop-Out and Negative Link to Achievement

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3.45 million U.S. students and 279,383 California students received one or more out-of-schoolsuspensions during the 2011–2012 and 2013–2014 school years, respectively (California Department of Education Data Reporting System, 2015; U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2014). These figures create concern, considering studies that have linked school suspension to undesirable student outcomes including poorer academic achievement and increased school dropout. Although individual studies have made an important contribution to the field, ideally policy should be informed by trends emerging across studies. Meta-analysis is a research approach that has the potential to provide such evidence by aggregating results across studies in order to make overarching conclusions about the findings.

In a meta-analysis for this study, we designed and implemented procedures to: (1) identify the publications to be included in the meta-analysis, (2) develop and refine criteria for coding information on salient aspects of each included publication, (3) compute effect-sizes to consistently quantify the relationships in each study between suspensions and dropout and/or between suspension and achievement, and (4) conduct statistical analyses to describe characteristics of the included studies, aggregate the effect-sizes across studies, and detect moderator effects.

Fifty-three cases from 34 publications were included in the meta-analysis. The majority of publications were dissertations or peer-reviewed articles. While over 60% of the cases focused on out-of-school suspension, in-school suspension and other forms of suspension were also included. Our analyses revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between each type of suspension and academic achievement. This relationship was stronger for out-of-school suspension than for in-school suspension. For dropout, the number of studies was too small to analyze the relationship for each suspension type; however, the relationship between out-of-school suspension and dropout was positive and statistically significant. Finally, several variables were found to moderate the relationship between suspension and both achievement and dropout. This means that factors such as gender, race, socio-economic status, publication type, and level of analysis affected the strength of the relationship between suspension and the outcomes.

Due to characteristics of the data and analyses, causal conclusions cannot be drawn (e.g., it could be that suspension contributes to poor achievement, but it also could be that poor academic achievement contributes to student misbehavior that results in suspension). However, it is plausible that suspension may contribute to low achievement and dropout, perhaps due to factors such as exclusion from valuable academic instruction, minimal adult monitoring while suspended, and disengagement from school.

Even more troubling from an equity perspective, schools that serve low income, urban, and some ethnic minority students have been found to have higher rates of school suspension and therefore these populations might be disproportionately affected by any negative impacts of suspension.

Although they must be interpreted tentatively, our findings suggest that schools may want to reconsider the use of high levels of suspension, particularly for minor or non-violent offenses (e.g., tardies). California may be "ahead of the curve" in this regard, considering the state's Assembly Bill 420 that place limits on the ability to suspend students for "willful defiance," which includes minor disruptive behavior. Going beyond this law, however, it is also important to advocate for (a) evidence-based prevention and early intervention efforts to enhance student prosocial behavior, (b) effective alternatives to suspension to address disciplinary issues, (c) high-quality professional development and coaching opportunities for educators and staff, and (d) regular review and disaggregation of school discipline data for the purpose of informing decision-making.

The full study is in Noltemeyer, A.L., Ward, R.M., & Mcloughlin, C.S. (2015). Relationship between school suspension and student outcomes: A meta-analysis. School Psychology Review, 44(2), 224–240.

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