

MINIMIZING DISCIPLINE, MAXIMIZING INSTRUCTION: AN EXPLORATORY EXAMINATION OF PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE POLICIES AND STUDENT ABSENTEEISM

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ABSTRACT

Extracting students from learning environments through suspensions and expulsion is damaging to student academics (Gregory, Skiba, Noguera, 2010). Aside from problematic discipline offenses that are subjective, like noncompliance and disrespect, districts also implement suspensions and expulsions for counterproductive offenses like skipping and tardiness. When students are suspended from school for offenses such as skipping and tardiness, school discipline is counterproductive. This article highlights research on absenteeism and the problems of using suspensions for student absences, tardiness, and truancy. When school environments are not threatened, educators must reconsider the effectiveness of removing the student from the learning environment as a form of punishment. This article will specifically focus on two discipline policies that are in need of national attention - skipping and tardiness. Using data gathered from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) and local achievement data from an urban school district in North Carolina, the remainder of this article will provide final recommendations and implications for administrators and policy makers.

KEYWORDS

Discipline policy, out-of-school suspension, skipping, truancy, absenteeism

1. INTRODUCTION

Guilford County is currently North Carolina's third largest school district, serving more than 71,000 students (Guilford County, 2012). In the district's 2012 annual strategic plan, they boldly state their aim to promote academic excellence for all students. In attempts to revisit some punitive discipline policies, the district's *Safe Schools and Character Development* committee targets district disciplinary infractions that spike suspension rates. Specifically, the district found two specific policies in need of revision – noncompliance and discourteous acts, which resulted in fifty-seven (57) percent of the school out-of-school suspensions (Guilford County Schools, 2011). Although revisiting of these policies is admirable, there are national implications for wide scale discipline reform, not only in Guilford County, but across the United States. For example, discipline policies like *skipping* and *tardiness* are often penalized with out-of-school suspensions in U.S. public schools (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). These infractions have counterproductive penalties, which undermine students academically. The remainder of this article will examine the impact of skipping, tardiness, and student absenteeism on student achievement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research consistently shows that out of school suspensions are damaging to student academic performance. In fact, some researchers have linked suspension rates to crime, high school

dropouts, and incarceration (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). When students are excluded from school through disciplinary measures, instructional time is lost. Although the safety of the school environment is of paramount importance, out-of-school suspensions are also being used for minor infractions in districts nationwide. Often, students who are suspended have not actually been physically violent or threatening at school (Leone, Mayer, Malmgren, & Meisel, 2000), thus many times students are punished using extreme measures. For districts to continue to use exclusionary discipline methods for infractions like “skipping” and “tardiness,” the results are presumably counterproductive. Researchers have studied substantially on “absenteeism,” which often directly reflects more on pedagogy – or external factors – versus a student’s unwillingness to learn (Arcia, 2006; Gromp, 2004; Skiba & Losen, 2010). With school suspension and expulsion rates continuing to increase nationally, disciplinary procedures for infractions such as *skipping* need to be revisited.

“Skipping” is often a punishable offense within local public schools nationwide. When students violate their school’s skipping policy, the ultimate consequence usually results in suspension – either in school or out of school (Spaulding, Irvin, Horner, May, Emeldi, Tobin, & Sugai, 2010). Undeniably, when schools punish skipping violations with additional time away from instruction, the consequence is counterproductive. In a 2009 study, Martinez found that school suspensions to be virtually pointless for students (Martinez, 2009). In fact, the study further demonstrates that for students who are repeatedly suspended, their behavior actually worsens over time (*ibid.*). When these findings are applied to “skipping,” suspensions will only reinforce student behavior. For a child who has already “skipped” school, using discipline measures that result in additional days away from the school environment might serve as a reward.

In a California study, over 178 truant students were collected and arrested by the Richmond Police Department over the course of three years. The results revealed that the school truancy offenders were overwhelmingly Black and Latino students, averaging fifteen years of age (White, Fyfe, & Campbell, 2001). The results of this study are vitally important when examining current school discipline policies. This study highlights that few of the students arrested for truancy had any prior legal history. However, while many of the students had no prior arrests, almost ninety (90) percent were caught because of an unexcused absence from school and eighty-eight (88) percent were at least one-grade level behind (White et al., 2001). To continue to punish these students for “skipping” with additional time away from the learning environment (e.g. – with ISS or OSS suspensions), the damages to students are growing. Also, with almost ninety percent of the students being caught from an unexcused school absence, it is important to consider why students were absent from school.

2.1. Inside Absenteeism, Tardiness, and Skipping

Nationally, student absenteeism exists; but using suspension for these violations is problematic. Educators, administrators, and policy makers must become aware that there are often many reasons why a student might be absent from school. In a Midwest study, eighty-four (84) percent of the thirty-eight respondents answered that they have skipped class because of health related problems, or simply not feeling well (Grump, 2004). Fifty (50) percent of respondents indicated they would skip class for weather related reasons. In a 2011 study, 5.5% of a national sample of high school students reported being absent from school at least one day within a thirty-day period because of “feeling unsafe at school or traveling to or from school” (Basch, 2011). That same year, researchers Ozkanal and Arikan sampled an older sample of students, which found that this issue of “absenteeism” can result from a personal decision based on motivation to attend school. A further explanation of absenteeism revealed that absence from school also might be caused by “family, school, personal problems, peer, and gender related issues” (Ozkanal & Arikan, 2011; Kadi, 2000). These studies seemingly provide a broader spectrum of reasons why students may be absent from class. While skipping class is not excusable, educators and administrators should be aware of the ranging reasons why students may be absent from school. When evaluating the usefulness of suspensions for these violations, is further extraction from class beneficial?

2.2. The Damages of School Suspensions on Academics

Arcia (2006) conducted a study that compared two groups based on school suspension history. Both groups were similar in race, gender, grade level, family poverty, and limited English proficiency, but the groups differed on suspension numbers. One group had received at least one suspension, while the other group received no suspensions. In the first year of the study, the suspended students were reported three grade levels behind the non-suspended students, or the comparison group. In the second year of the study, the students differed substantially. During this year, the suspended students were now five grade levels behind the comparison group (Arcia, 2006; Gregory, Skiba, Noguera, 2010). As previously mentioned, school suspensions are extremely damaging to student academics. However, Arcia's research highlights the compounding effects of suspensions on students' academic futures. When issuing discipline for policy violations, the ultimate goal should be to eliminate time away from instruction.

When students miss class by skipping, instructional time is missed. Thus, it is seemingly counterproductive to address this discipline with additional days of time outside the classroom. For example, when a district has discipline policies that punish skipping violations with two (2) days out-of-school suspension (OSS) for students, as with the Guilford County school district in North Carolina, this ultimately results to three total days away from school (GCPS Code of Conduct, 2011). There are several negative effects of these policies. This can potentially put students behind in their coursework, which also directly affects state NCLB standardized testing, which further damages student's academics and grade promotion.

Rules for "skipping" and "tardiness" are needed rules. However, there is a critical need to explore alternative methods of discipline for these infractions. Urban stakeholders must explore other options that maximize student instructional time that is oftentimes missed through suspension policies. These policies for infractions like skipping and tardiness, are in dire need of revision to increase, not decrease instructional time. Alternative policies that don't remove students from the academic environment can be used instead of the current policies.

3. DATA

In 2006, approximately 3.3 million students were suspended and 100,000 students were expelled from school in the United States (Planty et al., 2009; Noltemeyer, A.L. & Mcloughlin, C.S., 2010). Infractions that are quietly adding to these national suspension rates are infractions such as: skipping, tardiness, and other forms of student absenteeism. In an empirical study, surveying 1,150 students, twenty-four percent (24%) of high school student office discipline referrals were for tardiness (Spaulding, Irvin, Horner, May, Emeldi, Tobin, & Sugai, 2010). While tardiness is one form of absenteeism, skipping is a much more pervasive problem, especially for older students. Table 1 demonstrates the national percentage of students' ages 12-18 that skipped school during the 2005 school year. From this data, it is important to highlight that 8.6 percent of American students reported to have skipped school. Of that number, 64.7 percent of those missed between one and two days, 20.7 percent reported to miss three and four days, 8.7 percent reported to miss between five and nine days, while six percent reported to miss ten or more days of school. Furthermore, high school students report much higher numbers of skipping than elementary or middle school. From this data, it is evident that preventative and intervention measures are needed to prevent students from skipping school.

Table 1. Percentage of students ages 12-18 who skipped school in the 4 weeks prior to the survey and how often these students engaged in truancy during this time period, by selected student and school characteristics: 2005

Student or school characteristic	Skipped any classes		If yes, number of days at least one class skipped			
	Yes	No	1-2 days	3-4 days	5-9 days	10 or more days
Total	8.6	91.1	64.7	20.7	8.7	6.0
Sex						
Male	9.5	90.1	63.7	22.6	7.1	6.6
Female	7.7	92.1	65.8	18.4	10.5	5.3
Race/ethnicity ¹						
White, non-Hispanic	8.0	91.6	62.3	21.2	9.3	7.3
Black, non-Hispanic	9.8	89.7	69.0	25.4	‡	‡
Hispanic	9.6	90.4	61.8	19.1	13.1	5.9
Other, non-Hispanic	8.8	91.0	83.1	‡	‡	#
Grade						
6th	3.6	95.7	86.1	‡	#	#
7th	3.8	96.1	80.8	‡	#	#
8th	3.9	95.9	76.4	‡	‡	#
9th	6.2	93.6	62.1	21.9	‡	12.1
10th	10.8	89.0	68.7	22.8	7.7	‡
11th	14.4	85.0	63.1	21.9	7.2	7.8
12th	18.7	80.9	56.9	21.6	12.5	9.0
Household income						
Less than \$7,500	7.0	93.0	‡	68.1	‡	#
\$7,500–14,999	9.5	90.1	70.0	16.2	‡	#
\$15,000–24,999	9.6	90.2	72.6	18.0	‡	#
\$25,000–34,999	9.0	90.9	66.8	12.9	13.5	‡
\$35,000–49,999	8.5	91.0	71.2	11.5	7.9	‡
\$50,000 or more	8.2	91.5	62.6	23.1	7.1	7.2
Urbanicity ²						
Urban	11.5	88.2	59.9	26.3	6.3	7.4
Suburban	7.8	91.9	66.3	18.4	9.9	5.4
Rural	6.7	92.8	71.1	14.1	‡	‡
Self-report of grades at school ³						
Mostly A's	4.8	94.9	64.6	20.1	9.2	6.1
Mostly B's	8.1	91.6	67.8	18.4	8.7	5.1
Mostly C's	14.3	85.4	66.1	21.2	5.9	6.8
Mostly D's	20.0	80.0	46.1	31.7	22.2	#
Mostly F's	22.7	75.3	39.2	‡	‡	‡
Student report of violent victimization at school ⁴						
Yes	5.4	94.6	65.3	‡	#	#
No	8.7	91.0	64.6	20.6	8.7	6.0
Student report of theft victimization at school ⁴						

Yes	13.1	86.5	63.3	17.7	!	14.4	!	‡
No	8.5	91.2	64.7	20.8		8.4		6.1
Sector								
Public	8.9	90.7	63.9	21.3		9.1		5.8
Private	4.8	95.2	81.2		‡	#		‡

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, School Crime Supplement (SCS) to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), 2005.

In addition to the national data above, Guilford County is one case study example of urban districts with unrevised discipline policies. For example, when reviewing the district's student and teacher handbook, there were thirty-three total high school discipline policies total that result in out-of-school suspension, each of these easily total to the forty-three (43) percent of district suspensions. Some of these infractions include: bus misbehavior, cell phone use, and threatening behavior. Two particular infractions that are especially alarming for their discipline consequences include the aforementioned skipping and tardiness. Both of these infractions result in student suspension, whether in-school or out-of-school. As stated, one day missed from class due to skipping can ultimately result in three total missed days from instructional time, which is the majority of an entire school week. There are several negative effects of this policy. This can potentially put students behind in their coursework, which also directly impacts state NCLB standardized testing, grade promotion, and graduation rates (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010).

Literature consistently shows that suspensions negatively impact student achievement, thus policies for infractions such as these are in dire need of revision. There are already direct academic implications for the violations of these infractions. There are several alternatives that can be used instead of the current policies.

4. DISCUSSION

Although the safety of the school environment is of paramount importance for all district officials, educators, and teachers, using school extraction for consequences such as skipping, are in dire need of amendment. Often, these minor infractions do not impact school safety. Moreover, as demonstrated in the Richmond, California study, many of the students found skipping school are already one academic grade level behind (White et al., 2001). This along with research that confirms that student skipping is often a result of extraneous circumstances further suggests the need for investigation, not punishment through suspension. It is of utmost importance for districts to revisit and revise discipline policies that maximize instructional time and minimize punitive discipline.

Guilford County currently has three variations of absenteeism written in their 2010 – 2011 student code of conduct. The first, skipping in the form of not coming to school, results in in-school-suspension (ISS). The second, leaving school once present, results in two days out-of-school suspension (OSS). The third, unexcused tardiness, results in two days in-school-suspension (ISS) (Guilford County Schools, 2011). Whether OSS or ISS, skipping and tardiness ultimately result in student extractions. This method removes students from their needed instructional time, either in school isolation (ISS) or at home through a traditional suspension (OSS). When assessing the infraction types, further school extraction is extremely problematic and harmful.

Along with national research, which confirms that student skipping is often a result of extraneous circumstances that rarely reflect student non-compliance, it is of utmost importance for districts to

revisit and revise discipline policies that maximize instructional time and minimize punitive discipline.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS/ADMINISTRATORS

School suspensions are not currently solving absenteeism. More specifically, they are actually damaging to student academics. Instead of using school extraction for punitive offenses, preventative measures and intervention are needed to ensure that there are not additional underlining reasons why students are avoiding class. Whereas these recommendations will require more budgetary commitment from the district, such as additional staffing, they will serve as preventative measures for districts to ultimately lower school suspension rates in the area of student skipping.

One method to improve student absenteeism is to design school budgets to include additional counselors or school nurses. Since literature has also demonstrated that many students skip class because of health related issues, there is a need for all schools to be equipped with the adequate amount of support staff that can assist student needs (Grump, 2004). The aforementioned study showed eighty-four (84) percent of students attested to skipping class because of health related issues (Grump, 2004). Teachers and administrators becoming aware of this is extremely important when evaluating school discipline measures. For those students who do not have a health-related reason for skipping class, there is a possibility that emotional or mental counseling is needed. Family distress, emotional disturbance, bullying, etc. are all reasons why students may opt to skip classes. Counselors serve an imperative role for targeting these student needs. Both of these are human resources and budgetary concerns, but it is critical for district officials and administrators to consider.

Although the above policies provide options for students that are physically or mentally unable to attend classes, there are still some students who may willingly skip class out of defiance. This can be handled in several ways other than school suspension. One projected method of combatting student absenteeism is to implement a mentor system that is mandatory for students. Research has consistently shown that mentors directly improve student morale, efficacy, and behavior at school (Ingersol & Strong, 2011). Another option is to implement *Positive Behavior Support* (PBIS) in school classrooms and environments. Professional developments would be needed to effectively train and educate staff on how to implement this PBIS system, but research has shown that positive behavior support helps minimize student defiance (Norcross & Wampold, 2011). For a minor infraction like skipping, the student's defiance could directly benefit from more positive classroom cultures (Ingersol & Strong, 2011; Norcross & Wampold, 2011). In short, below are some easily adaptable changes policy makers and administrators can implement to prevent student skipping and truancy.

5.1. District Policy Makers

- Encourage all school district to revisit their student discipline policies annually to eliminate infractions that punitively extract students out of the classroom environment.
- Coordinate school scheduling around local bus systems, which will help prevent tardiness. This involves forming relationships with local Departments of Transits to ensure that buses circulate to common neighborhoods frequently and rotate to the school grounds at comparable times to school buses. This will directly help those students who catch the city bus to school.

5.2. Administrators

- Develop relationships with local police departments – more specifically, their truancy division – to bring students back to the school environment if they walk off campus.

- Focus on “critical grades.” In a 2005 Michigan study, researchers found 8th, 9th, and 10th grade students are often targeted for school extraction (Palmquist, 2005).
- Implement *Positive Behavior Support* (PBIS), mentoring, or other positive support systems in the school to ensure proper prevention.
- Revise individual school discipline policies to reflect current research, which warns to not extract students from the learning environment for seemingly punitive behaviors.
- Encourage the school nurse and counselors to document and keep a “watchful eye” on any alarming behaviors, family circumstances, or bullying that might prevent students from wanting to attend class.
- Conduct culturally responsive professional developments that will adequately train teachers on appropriate ways to address school curriculum and discipline. This is especially important for students who skip because they “don’t like the class.” Whereas this behavior is never encouraged, there might be additional classroom concerns, which indicate culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy.

6. CONCLUSION

Skipping is widely-known infraction in many school discipline handbooks across the United States. However, counterproductive consequences such as school suspension, should not be used to combat student absenteeism, skipping, or tardiness. In-school-suspensions (ISS) and out-of-school suspensions (OSS) are antithetical to solving school truancy. Thus, it is important for policy makers, administrators, and educators to revisit school discipline policies in their nearby districts or counties. It is important that students who violate any form of attendance policies receive adequate remediation, not further removal from instructional time. Data from this study specifically examined the discipline handbook of Guilford County Schools, a moderate-sized district in North Carolina. However, the implications from this study are essential for wide-scale reform.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank all of her former middle school students, who demonstrated the critical importance of alternative schooling and discipline reform.

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