

# Other Opinion

## Long-term suspensions, long-term failures

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RALEIGH

**S**chools across the nation have seen an explosion in the number of suspensions, mainly due to zero tolerance policies that rely heavily on harsh disciplinary practices. The zero tolerance approach to school discipline in North Carolina has resulted in the use of suspension/expulsion for a broad variety of violations, even for minor infractions.

POINT  
OF VIEW

In fact, as actual school crime rates are decreasing, suspensions are increasing dramatically, and North Carolina suspends students at a rate 45 percent higher than the national average. This suspension crisis threatens students' right to an education.

It is true that officials must remove violent students from classrooms in order to secure safe and orderly schools. Nevertheless, Wake County's designation of having the highest long-term suspension rate in the state suggests the practice may be overused, and research suggests it is counterproductive.

In 2007-2008, there were 5,225 long-term suspensions in North Carolina. Wake County alone gave 1,103 long-term suspensions, or 21 percent of all long-term suspensions for the entire state. These suspended students were by definition removed from school without any educational services, and many of those suspensions were for nonviolent offenses such as tardiness or rule violations.

In the words of former Deputy State Superintendent of Education Brad Sneed: We need to learn to solve problems and not put Band-Aids over them. Although suspensions can be a legitimate disciplinary tool, North Carolina has the obligation to educate all students, even disruptive ones. Too often, suspensions are used as a quick fix for student disciplinary problems that require a more supportive and involved response. Suspending a child from school does not address the cause of the student's misbehavior, nor does it teach the child how to behave differently in the future.

Excluding nonviolent students from school is a drastic approach that does not further the school's interest in safety. Studies have shown that suspending or expelling a student without an alternative education is ineffective at improving student behavior. According to the American Psychological Association, suspen-



**BY THE  
NUMBERS**

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sion is ineffective in reducing overall violence in schools and instead correlates with increased disciplinary problems and dropout rates in middle schools and high schools.

Many suspended students are disconnected from society and are vulnerable to life-long economic hardship and social failure. Health experts emphasize that students who are removed from the learning environment are more likely to engage in deviant behavior and identify with deviant peers. Punishing students by excluding them from school increases student shame, alienation and rejection while failing to seize the opportunity to teach students responsibility and the effect their behavior has on others, as well as trust and respect for authority figures.



**Our state's over-reliance on suspensions places barriers around the educational opportunities** of our most vulnerable: students of color, low-income students and students with special needs. Students who are suspended are disproportionately those who need educational opportunities the most. Students in districts with the lowest socioeconomic indicators are nearly four times as likely to be suspended as students in other school districts.

The extreme over-representation of students of color in the juvenile justice system is alarming and is a direct result of the overuse of long-term out-of-school suspensions in North Carolina. Black students in public schools are suspended or expelled at nearly three times the rate of white youths and are punished more severely for lesser offenses. Black students with learning disabilities are three times more likely than white students with learning disabilities to be removed from school.

Being suspended makes a student three times more likely to drop out, which leads to a lifetime of difficulty. The uneducated are primed for unemployment or marginal employment and all that often comes with it: impoverishment, criminal victimization and temptation, poorer health, shorter lives, political powerlessness and despair. One year's class of North Carolina dropouts costs the state over \$1.3 billion in prison, parole and welfare costs.

Effective alternatives to suspension, in addition to a fair process for schools recommending a long-term suspension, are the answer to North Carolina's dropout crisis. School districts that implement effective alternatives to suspension report a reduction in discipline referrals as well as improved academic engagement and performance. Furthermore, providing suspended or expelled students with alternative education is an effective way to develop positive behaviors, improve academic performance and reduce drop-outs.

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**\$1.3 billion** How much one year's class of dropouts costs the state in prison, parole and welfare money