

# Suspension and Expulsion Policies and Practices and Related Student Mental Health Issues in California Schools

Executive Summary



 The  
California  
Endowment

**EDC**

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Education Development Center, Inc.  
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## INTRODUCTION

One out of every five expelled students in the United States attends a California school. Expulsion and suspension can have profoundly negative impacts on students, including increased behavioral problems, higher risk of violence and substance abuse, and greater likelihood of academic failure. With funding from The California Endowment, Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) carried out the following activities:

- **A review of the literature** on suspension and expulsion in California, nationally, and internationally.
- **An analysis of suspension and expulsion policies and practices in California.** Data from the following sources were collected and analyzed:
  - An online survey and focus groups with key informants from 18 school districts
  - Suspension, expulsion, dropout, and truancy data from the 18 districts
  - County plans for providing educational services to expelled students
  - In-depth interviews with multidisciplinary teams in three districts
- **Development of recommendations for practitioners and policymakers.**

This Executive Summary presents the results of these activities.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

EDC conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on suspension and expulsion to capture the current state of these issues in California, the United States, and throughout the world. The following key findings emerged from the literature review:

1. Schools have expanded their use of suspension and expulsion policies and practices; some populations of students are disproportionately affected.
2. California has high rates of suspension and expulsion; a significant proportion of the state's suspensions and expulsions are unrelated to school safety issues.
3. Elevated suspension and expulsion rates appear to be a symptom that a school district is struggling and in trouble.
4. Suspension and expulsion can exacerbate students' behavioral issues.
5. The relationship between suspension and expulsion and students' mental health is poorly understood.

Throughout the literature, researchers and policymakers alike recommend the following strategies:

- **Create a positive school environment** that defines behavioral expectations, reinforces good behavior, and assists students who need extra support.
- Provide school staff with **cultural competency training and guidance for handling behavioral problems in a consistent manner.**
- **Employ more flexibility** when applying disciplinary policies.
- Ensure that suspended and expelled students **continue receiving education.**
- **Provide students with access to mental health providers** before and after they are suspended or expelled.
- **Collect data** to better understand the effectiveness of existing policies and practices.

## ONLINE SURVEY

EDC administered the online *Survey of California School District Suspension and Expulsion Programs, Policies, and Practices* to learn from those directly involved at the district level. The following 18 districts completed the survey:

- Alhambra Unified School District
- Capistrano Unified School District
- Carpinteria Unified School District
- Central Union School District
- East Whittier City School District
- Grossmont Union High School District
- Lamont School District
- Lennox School District
- Los Angeles Unified School District
- Montebello Unified School District
- Newport Mesa Unified School District
- Ontario Montclair School District
- Pajaro Valley Unified School District
- Paradise Unified School District
- Sacramento City Unified School District
- San Diego Unified School District
- San Francisco Unified School District
- Woodland Joint Unified School District

All 18 districts are current or former Safe Schools/Healthy Students (SS/HS) grantees. The SS/HS Initiative is a federal grant-making program designed to build the capacity of schools and their community partners to prevent violence and substance abuse among our nation's youth, schools, and communities. The following are the most significant findings of the survey:

1. In more than half of the districts there are differences in how suspension and expulsion policies are implemented from school to school.
2. In almost half of the districts, when a student is *suspended*, he or she is not offered a mental health screening or assessment.
3. In almost two thirds of the districts, when a student is *expelled*, it is district *policy* to refer him or her to a school- or community-based mental health service provider. In two thirds of the districts, it is the district's *practice* to refer expelled students to a school- or community-based mental health service provider.
4. In most of the districts, when a school refers a student to a community-based mental health service provider, the provider updates school staff on the student's progress.

### FOCUS GROUPS WITH SS/HS PROJECT DIRECTORS

We conducted two focus groups with California SS/HS project directors to gather additional information about districts' challenges and successes. The following themes emerged from the focus groups:

**Behaviors that Precede Suspension and Expulsion:** It is critical for school staff to intervene when they observe behaviors that are known to precede suspension or expulsion (e.g., excessive tardiness, truancy, students "acting out").

**Following Students During Suspension and Expulsion:** Although many districts track expelled students, most do not have the resources to monitor the much greater numbers of suspended students.

**Standardized Test Scores:** Schools focused on raising standardized test scores may be more willing to expel challenging students because they often perform poorly on tests.

**Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards:** There is a need to develop statewide, mandated SEL standards to promote students' academic success, improve positive behaviors, and decrease negative behaviors.

**Disproportionality in Suspension and Expulsion:** Schools must address the fact that students of color are disproportionately affected by suspensions and expulsions.

**Transition Staff and Systems:** Districts need transition counselors and tracking systems to support students in alternative education programs.

**Culturally Competent Parent Engagement:** Districts lack staff to reach out to and follow up with parents—in particular, staff who can do so in a culturally competent manner.

## ANALYSIS OF SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION DATA AND PLANS

EDC reviewed expulsion, suspension, dropout, and truancy data for the 18 districts and county department of education plans that specify how districts will educate expelled students. The limitations of the county plans and the additional analyses that would be required to make use of the statewide data resulted in both sources being of limited utility.

## IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH MULTIDISCIPLINARY COMMUNITY TEAMS

We conducted in-depth interviews about suspension and expulsion issues with educators and mental health, juvenile justice, and law enforcement professionals in three school districts that completed the online survey: Capistrano, Carpinteria, and Pajaro Valley. The concept of prevention and creating a safety net to protect youth permeated all of the group interviews. Educators and their community partners expressed frustration

that lack of funding prevents them from sustaining effective prevention and intervention programs for youth.

Some of the promising and best practices being implemented in the districts to prevent and reduce suspension and expulsion include forging strong collaborations involving schools and community organizations, and integrating staff from community agencies—especially mental health providers—on school campuses. Each of the teams readily identified its multidisciplinary, collaborative efforts as the single best thing the community does to prevent suspension and expulsion.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS

The project's Advisory Board comprises California stakeholders in the fields of education, mental health, and juvenile justice. Utilizing the findings from the literature search, online survey, focus groups, and interviews, EDC worked with the Advisory Board to develop the following recommendations. Underlying all of the recommendations is the understanding that **communities must focus more resources on prevention and providing services in early childhood to prevent problems from emerging later on.**

- 1. Schools and mental health, juvenile justice, and law enforcement agencies must collaborate to improve outcomes for youth, especially those at risk for suspension or expulsion.** Close collaboration is essential between schools and community agencies to prevent and intervene to decrease risk behaviors.
- 2. Schools and mental health, juvenile justice, and law enforcement agencies must employ improved information-sharing and data-collection systems to identify, serve, and communicate about at-risk students.** Schools and community agencies need to implement these systems to provide appropriate services to at-risk students as early as possible.

3. **State standards are needed to guide schools' practices related to promoting mental health, identifying students who need mental health services, and assisting students to access services.** Development of such standards must involve stakeholders at all levels.
4. **School districts should focus on implementing, adapting, and evaluating evidence-based interventions (EBIs) to decrease suspension and expulsion.** Increased use of EBIs enhances a community's ability to address the risk factors that contribute to suspension and expulsion.
5. **School districts must have policies that require programs and services for at-risk youth.** Without policies that mandate services for at-risk youth, many worthy programs are not sustained over time.
6. **School districts must consistently apply suspension and expulsion policies so that existing racial and ethnic disparities are not perpetuated.** School disciplinary policies must be implemented consistently and equitably.
7. **School districts must identify effective strategies to engage and collaborate with parents.** Engaging parents serves as a preventive measure to avert disciplinary problems and as a vital source of support during disciplinary actions.
8. **School districts and their community partners should provide support to enable expelled students to rejoin the school community.** Case managers trained to work with at-risk youth are typically best able to provide expelled students with "bridges back to school."