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A Descriptive Analysis of Harassment, Intimidation, or Bullying Student Behaviors 2013-2014

This report describes the occurrence of discipline referrals and corresponding interventions and consequences used by schools for harassment, intimidation, or bullying behaviors during the 2013-2014 school year.

Method of study. Using data entered into the West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS), we conducted two sets of analyses—one focusing on discipline referrals to examine the number, seriousness, and types of harassment, intimidation, or bullying behaviors and interventions used by schools; and a second addressing questions about the characteristics of students reported for these behaviors.

Findings. Of the 209,602 student discipline referrals reported in WVEIS, 3,533 (1.7%) were for harassment, intimidation, or bullying behaviors. Most of these referrals were at the middle school level (47%) followed by high school (29%) and elementary school (24%). Students referred for harassment, intimidation, or bullying behaviors also were referred for other categories of inappropriate behaviors, including disruptive/disrespectful conduct (49%), failure to obey rules/authority (26%), tardiness or truancy (12%), and aggressive conduct (10%). Disciplinary interventions or consequences used by schools in response to harassment, intimidation, or bullying behaviors included out-of-school suspensions (33%), followed by in-school suspensions (20%), detentions (13%), and administrator/teacher and student conferences (12%). All other interventions or consequences were used at lower rates.

Of the 2,957 students referred for disciplinary action for harassment, intimidation, or bullying behaviors, most (86%) were referred for a single offense. Three quarters of the students were male. White students were present at a slightly lower rate than their respective statewide representation (87% vs. 91%), while Black students were present at a higher rate (10% vs. 5%). Other races were present in roughly the same proportions as their representation in the overall student population. Nearly a quarter (24%) of students referred for these behaviors were identified as eligible for special education services. Risk ratio calculations indicate Black students were twice as likely to experience discipline referrals for these behaviors compared to White students, and multiple race students were 1.5 times more likely. Similarly, students with disabilities were twice as likely to be referred compared with students without disabilities.

Limitations of study. Findings are dependent on the completeness and accuracy of data submitted by schools and certified as accurate by districts. Evidence of non-reporting and under-reporting was present. Discipline referrals are reported at the discretion of local school staff. Although a prescribed coding scheme with behavior descriptions has been provided, it is subject to variation in interpretation and usage.

Recommendations include (a) address harassment, intimidation, or bullying behaviors with evidence-based interventions integrated into a school-wide approach aimed at improving behaviors and overall conditions for learning; (b) build staff capacity to provide appropriate behavioral interventions in the context of the multi-tiered framework as part of school-wide approaches to promote appropriate behavior; (c) minimize the use of out-of-school suspensions, and couple in-school suspensions with interventions to avoid depriving students of needed supports; and (d) investigate the issue of subgroup disparity in discipline practices, and deliver professional development and technical assistance to schools to help minimize disparities.

For more information, Andy Whisman, Office of Research (swhisman@k12.wv.us), or download the full report from the WVDE Office of Research website at <http://wvde.state.wv.us/research/reports2015.html>.

More than 3,500 discipline referrals were reported in 2013-2014 for harassment, intimidation, or bullying behaviors. This represents less than 2% of all discipline referrals. Most were at the middle school level (47%) followed by high school (29%) and elementary school (24%).

Consequences used by schools in response to these behaviors included out-of-school suspensions (33%), followed by in-school suspensions (20%), detentions (13%), and administrator/teacher and student conferences (12%). All other interventions or consequences were used at lower rates.