

Improving school discipline data collection and reporting:

A status report for the 2012–2013 school year.



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West Virginia was one of three states selected to participate in a project funded by the National Association of State Boards of Education, Center for Safe and Healthy Schools, which focused on examining and reforming state disciplinary policies from a state-level perspective. As its project, and as part of an ongoing effort initiated in 2011 with the revision of Policy 4373 (Expected Behaviors in Safe and Supportive Schools), the West Virginia Board of Education (WVBE) tasked the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) with conducting a statewide analysis of disciplinary incidents that had been reported during the 2012-2013 school year—the first full academic year following the effective date of the revised policy. Prior to this time, a comprehensive report of disciplinary incidents had not been produced that would help the WVBE determine the kinds of support districts and schools may need for school climate improvement, including more positive approaches to student discipline.

This project provides such a statewide analysis of disciplinary incidents submitted to the West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS). Additionally, no comprehensive reports had previously been provided to counties showing rates for specific behaviors in comparison to the rest of the state. Such county-level reports are being prepared separately to be delivered directly to school districts. With such information, it is expected that county staff will be better prepared to chart their successes and make more informed judgments about the kinds of additional interventions and supports that may be most beneficial to their respective schools and students.

Methods

For one set of analyses in our study, the unit of analysis was the discipline referral (DR). We examined the number, magnitude, seriousness, and types of behaviors engaged in for DRs entered into the WVEIS during the 2012-2013 school year. Analysis consisted of determining the frequency and prevalence rates (i.e., occurrences per 1,000 students) of discipline behaviors statewide and by district. We then summarized the results by levels of severity of behaviors as described in WVBE Policy 4373. These include in ascending severity minimally disruptive behaviors, disruptive and

potentially harmful behaviors, imminently dangerous, illegal and/or aggressive behaviors, and Safe Schools Act behaviors. We also summarized results relative to seven predefined categories of behaviors, including disrespectful/inappropriate conduct, tardiness or truancy, failure to obey rules/authority, legal concerns, aggressive conduct, illegal drugs/substances, and weapons. Further, we examined the types and distribution of interventions and consequences used by schools in response to inappropriate behaviors.

For questions related to student demographic characteristics and subgroup representation the student was the unit of analysis. We performed subgroup cross-tabulations to describe the demographic characteristics of students present in the discipline data. Analyses by severity and category of behaviors, and by intervention and consequences used by schools also were performed. Finally risk ratios were calculated for student subgroups for selected exclusionary discipline actions to assess the magnitude of potential subgroup disparities.

Results

Analysis of discipline referrals

The following are key findings from a descriptive analysis of discipline referral data reported during the 2012–2013 school year.

The 2012–2013 school year served as a year of transition as districts and schools gradually moved from a former reporting system to a newly designed discipline management system. During the transition both the former and newly designed systems were in use. The effect of the transition on the completeness or accuracy of data summarized in this report is not clear.

Overall there were 225,320 discipline referrals entered into the WVEIS for inappropriate student behaviors. Omitting DRs that (a) specified unidentifiable behaviors, (b) were submitted by Institutional Programs and the West Virginia Schools for the Deaf and Blind, and (c) involved students as nonoffenders or targets of incidents left 220,656 DRs for analysis in this report.

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The meaning of raw number counts of DRs and prevalence rates is difficult to discern. They may reflect the magnitude of discipline problems, or they may reflect diligence on the part of districts and schools in recording and reporting discipline behaviors. The latter practice is encouraged by the WVBE and WVDE, and is required under Policy 4373.

Although suspensions are viewed in Policy 4373 as temporary solutions, they were among the most frequently used interventions or consequences used by districts and schools, even for minimally disruptive behaviors.

About 45% of discipline referrals were made for students at the high school program level, followed by middle school (39%), and elementary school (17%). By specific grade levels, about 15% of referrals were made for 9th grade students followed by about 12% to 14% for students at each of the 7th, 8th, and 10th grades. Referrals made for students in each of the elementary grades accounted for fewer than 5% per grade.

About 63% of discipline referrals were for Level 1 minimally disruptive behaviors, followed by Level 2 disruptive and potentially dangerous behaviors at 27%. Level 3 imminently dangerous, illegal or aggressive behaviors accounted for about 10% of DRs. Level 4 Safe Schools Act behaviors, as expected, were rare and accounted for less than 1% of all DRs.

Despite an expectation that the severity of behaviors would increase by school program level, the opposite tended to be true. About 54% of referrals at the elementary level were for Level 1 minimally disruptive behaviors compared to 68% at the high school level. About 23% to 30% of referrals were for Level 2 behaviors, with a lower percentage at the high school program level. Level 3 behaviors accounted for only 7% of high school referrals compared to 17% at elementary school. Middle school referrals tended to split the difference between elementary and high school levels.

About 40% of DRs were for disrespectful/inappropriate conduct, in practice somewhat of a catch-all category, followed by failure to obey rules/authority (26%), tardiness or truancy (19%), and aggressive conduct (11%). DRs in remaining categories accounted for less than 5% of the total.

At the elementary level 95% of referrals fell into the disrespectful/inappropriate conduct, failure to obey rules/authority, and aggressive conduct categories (52%, 22%, and 21%, respectively). At the middle school level a similar distribution was observed in slightly different rates; disrespectful/inappropriate conduct (47%), failure to obey rules/authority (27%) and aggressive conduct (13%). At

high school, referrals for aggressive conduct diminished, but were replaced by referrals for attendance-related behaviors. At the high school level 90% of referrals again fell into disrespectful/inappropriate conduct (28%), tardiness or truancy (35%), and failure to obey rules/authority (26%).

Nearly 18% of actions taken by schools were not identifiable and thus were deemed undetermined. Of the remaining actions about 63% were detentions, in-school suspensions, or out-of-school suspensions (26%, 19%, and 17%, respectively). Most other types of interventions or consequences reported occurred at relatively low rates.

About 33% of interventions or consequences for minimally disruptive Level 1 behaviors were some type of detention. However, nearly 27% consisted of in-school suspensions or out-of-school suspensions (19% and 7.3%, respectively).

There were 12 actions related to expulsions associated with Level 1 behaviors. Although these accounted for less than 0.1% of all intervention at this level, a recommendation to expel or full expulsion may be disproportionate.

Of all students in West Virginia included in the analysis, most (78%) had no referrals for inappropriate behaviors. Also the most serious offenses (Level 4) accounted for less than 1% of all discipline referrals.

The severity of interventions or consequences increases with the severity of behaviors, such that more than 85% of Level 4 behaviors were met with out-of-school suspensions (76%) or expulsions (10%).

Detention and in-school suspensions tended to be more heavily favored for behaviors in the disrespectful/inappropriate conduct, tardiness or truancy, and failure to obey rules/authority categories.

Out-of-school suspensions dominated for behaviors categorized under legal concerns, aggressive conduct, illegal drugs/substances, or weapons. Expulsions tended to increase for these behaviors as well.

Analysis of characteristics of students

The following are key findings from a descriptive analysis of the characteristics of students for which discipline referrals were reported during the 2012–2013 school year.

Of all students in West Virginia included in the analysis, most (78%) were absent from the discipline data indicating no referrals were made for them for inappropriate behaviors. There were 62,727 individual students represented in the discipline data. These students accounted for 22.3% of all public school students, but many were referred for only a

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single offense. Also, about 66% of these students were male.

There were 35,851 students with multiple DRs, accounting for 12.8% of the statewide student population. Students with multiple DRs also accounted for 88% of all discipline behaviors entered into the WVEIS.

The maximum number of DRs recorded for any single student was 71, and more than 13,776 (22%) of the students represented in discipline referral data were reported for five or more offenses. Also, more than 1,000 students were reported for 20 or more offenses. Collectively, these students could benefit from more intensive behavioral supports beyond traditional and oft-used punitive disciplinary actions.

The West Virginia student population is relatively homogenous with regard to racial and ethnic diversity. In the 2012–2013 school year about 91% of students self-identified as White, about 5% as Black, and fewer than 3% as multiple or other races. Only about 1.3% self-identified as Hispanic. Of students represented in the 2012–2013 discipline data 89% were White, slightly lower than the subgroup’s representation in the statewide student population.

Of the remaining students about 8% were Black, indicating representation in the discipline data at a rate higher than their representation in the student population as a whole. All other race categories and Hispanic students appeared at rates comparable to their representation in the student population.

Black students and students with disabilities are over-represented in the discipline referral data—indicating the need to investigate subgroup representation in more detail, and to build capacity to address disparities in discipline practices.

When looking at racial or ethnic representation by severity and type of behavior the disproportionate representation of Black students persisted. From both perspectives, Black students were represented at about twice their proportion in the student population. The same was true when looking at corresponding interventions and consequences.

During 2012–2013, 14.9% of the statewide population of students was identified as students with disabilities. Of students represented in the discipline data nearly 18% were among those identified with a disability—a slightly greater rate than the subgroup’s representation in the statewide student population.

Over-representation of students with disabilities appeared to remain when looking at the severity of behaviors, among many categories of inappropriate behaviors, as well as among the interventions and consequences used in response

to those behaviors.

To examine the magnitude of potential disproportionate subgroup representation in the discipline data, risk ratios were calculated for selected exclusionary consequences (single and multiple occurrences of in-school and out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions) following the methodology described by the National Clearinghouse on Supportive School Discipline (NCSSD 2013). Risk ratios indicated Black students to be two times more likely to experience single suspensions, and 2.5 times more likely to experience multiple suspensions. Black, multiple race, and Hispanic students were at increased risk to experience expulsion related actions. Risk ratios also indicated students with disabilities experience a greater likelihood for multiple in-school suspensions, for single and multiple out-of-school suspensions, and expulsion related actions.

Discussion and Recommendations

The findings of this report are intended to provide a basis for a data-driven approach to the policy review and the provision of relevant training and technical assistance, in accordance with the WVBE Policy 4373 Expected Behaviors in Safe and Supportive Schools.

During the 2012–2013 transition year for the new discipline management system (DMS), it was difficult to accurately assess the raw numbers and rates at which districts and schools reported discipline referrals. Also, there were schools for which no discipline referrals were submitted at all. Accordingly, we recommend that the WVBE and WVDE continue to encourage diligence among districts and schools in using the newly designed DMS to accurately and completely report discipline behaviors, and to use the resultant data as part of a systematic and evidence-based school improvement effort.

Discipline referral reporting followed an expected trend—the majority of discipline referrals were for less severe, minimally disruptive behaviors, primarily considered to be classroom management issues. The most severe and dangerous behaviors—purported violations of Safe Schools Act behaviors—were by comparison rare events accounting for less than 1% of all discipline referrals reported. There were, however, areas for which particular attention may be warranted, especially with regard to detention, suspensions, and expulsions as appropriate courses of action. Policy 4373 calls for schools to use these interventions sparingly, and in the case of suspensions and expulsions, to exhaust all other possibilities to keep students in school. Further, the policy states, “Out-of-school suspension is not a recommended optional consequence or intervention for Level 1 behaviors”

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(WVBE Policy 4373, p. 68), and that the purpose of suspension, whether in-school or out-of-school, is ... to protect the student body, school personnel and property, the educational environment, and the orderly process of the school. Suspension is considered a temporary solution to inappropriate behavior until the problem that caused the suspension is corrected (WVBE Policy 4373, p. 69).

During the 2012–2013 transition year for the new system, there were some inconsistencies in reporting, including schools that reported no discipline referrals at all.

Nonetheless our findings show detention, in-school suspension, and out-of-school suspension were among the most frequently used interventions or consequences in 2012–2013, even for minimally disruptive behaviors. Consequently, we recommend that the WVDE and regional education service agencies (RESAs) develop and deliver professional development and technical assistance specific to alternatives to suspension and to supporting schools in implementing a positive discipline approach.

The rate of students (78%) for whom no discipline referrals were made aligns well with West Virginia’s Support for Personalized Learning (SPL) framework at the universal or core level. SPL calls for interventions to be provided according to a three-tiered model in which about 80% of students do well with academic and behavioral supports available to all students, another 15% of students need additional but intermittent targeted supports, and about 5% need more ongoing intensive supports. In this context, the number of discipline referrals could be used as a criterion for behavioral support, wherein students with one or two discipline referrals would be identified for targeted supports, and those with more frequent or more severe behaviors may be identified for intensive supports. Examples of targeted and intensive behavior supports include

- Whole group interventions in the general education classroom,
- Small group interventions and instruction to address specific behaviors,
- Self-management support,
- Social skills instruction,
- Parent training and collaboration,

- Individual behavior plans or contracts,
- Referrals for mental health or other services,
- Convening an IEP or 504 team,
- Schedule or classroom change, and
- Mentoring programs.

Accordingly, we recommend that districts and schools take advantage of SPL-related professional development, build staff capacity to provide appropriate behavioral interventions in the context of the three-tiered framework, and integrate SPL as part of a school-wide approach to promote appropriate behavior.

Finally, our findings show that subgroup representation in the discipline referral data are in some cases disproportionate to the student population as a whole. Risk ratio calculations echoed this finding, revealing that Black students were at increased risk to experience exclusionary discipline actions compared to White students, and students with disabilities were at increased risk compared to students with no disabilities. These findings however are not unique to West Virginia. National data on racial/ethnic disparity in discipline practices in 2009-2010 show that all states experience disparities, and in fact the magnitude of disparities in West Virginia tended to be fairly modest by comparison—typically the state ranked in the lower half of states for which risk ratios were provided. Other recent research suggests that subgroup disparity in discipline practices—the discipline gap—is related to subgroup achievement gap and is a topic in need of more attention. Furthermore, a compelling body of evidence linking exclusionary discipline practices to school dropout and diminished academic outcomes suggests a need to address subgroup disparities in discipline practices. Consequently, we recommend that the WVBE and WVDE investigate this issue in more detail, and that the WVDE and RESAs develop and deliver professional development and technical assistance specific to minimizing subgroup disparity in discipline practices.

Limitations

As reported, 2012–2013 was a year of transition as West Virginia deployed a newly designed discipline management system. It is not clear the effect this transition had on the completeness or accuracy of data summarized in this report.

The full report is available on the WVDE Office of Research website: <http://wvde.state.wv.us/research/reports2013.html>.
