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Improving School Discipline Data Collection and Reporting

A Status Report for the 2013–2014 School Year

A statewide analysis was conducted on school disciplinary incidents reported during the 2013–2014 school year, the second full year under the revised Policy 4373. Findings from the analysis are provided to help inform districts and schools about supports they may need to improve school climate, including more positive approaches to student discipline.

Method of study. Using 2013–2014 data entered into the West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS), we conducted two sets of analyses—one focused on discipline referrals (DRs) to examine the number, seriousness, and types of behaviors and interventions used by schools; and a second to address questions about student subgroup representation in the discipline data.

Findings. The analysis used 209,602 discipline referrals entered into WVEIS, which represents a rate of 746 discipline referrals per 1,000 students. Thirty schools submitted no DRs, another 178 reported very low numbers relative to their enrollments, suggesting underreporting. About 44% of DRs were made for students in high school, 39% for middle school, and 18% for elementary school. About two thirds of DRs were for Level 1 minimally disruptive behaviors, followed by 26% for Level 2 and 9% for Level 3 behaviors. Referrals for the most severe and illegal behaviors (Level 4) were rare and accounted for less than 1% of all DRs. Detentions, in-school suspensions, and out-of-school suspensions (39%, 18%, and 17%, respectively) accounted for about three quarters of all disciplinary actions taken by schools. Most other types of interventions occurred at relatively low rates. For minimally disruptive Level 1 behaviors, about 48% of disciplinary actions were some type of detention. However, 24% consisted of in-school or out-of-school suspensions (17% and 7%, respectively). Most students (79%) had no DRs made for them. Of students for whom DRs had been made, most were referred for only a single offense. Students with multiple referrals, representing 12% of the total student population accounted for 88% of all DRs. Nearly 1,000 students were reported for 20 or more offenses; the highest number for a single student was 76. Black students and students with disabilities were present in the discipline data at rates higher than their representation in the overall student population. Risk ratio calculations indicate Black students to be about two or more times more likely to experience suspensions, a rate lower than for the majority of other states. Students with disabilities also are at higher risk.

Limitations of study. Evidence of nonreporting and underreporting was present involving a substantial number of schools, which may have had an impact on the validity of these findings.

Recommendations include (a) encourage thoroughness in reporting discipline behaviors as required by Policy 4373; (b) provide training/technical assistance specific to positive discipline approaches and alternatives to suspension; (c) build district and school staff capacity to provide appropriate behavioral interventions in the context of a multi-tiered framework of support; and (d) further investigate subgroup disparities and deliver professional development and technical assistance specific to minimizing them.

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>.

Of all students in West Virginia included in the analysis, most (79%) had no referrals for inappropriate behaviors.

The most serious offenses (Level 4) accounted for less than 1% of all discipline referrals.

There continues to be evidence of nonreporting and underreporting involving a substantial number of schools

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.

Black students and students with disabilities are overrepresented 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.