



Getting Back on Track: Alternatives for Suspended Students

Issue Brief

October 2015

Dawn X. Henderson, PhD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Center for Education Statistics¹ reported more than 3 million students receiving suspensions in 2006 and North Carolina accounted for 5% of those students. In the United States, males are about two times more likely to receive a suspension than females (32% vs. 17%); Black students are about three times more likely to be suspended than white students (49% vs. 18%). North Carolina follows behind other states in suspension disparities that exist between ethnic minority and white students. Figure 1 provides the percent distribution of annual suspensions between ethnic minority and white student groups from 2010-2011 to 2013-2014.

According to the NC Department of Public Instruction (2015), male, Black and American Indian, ninth graders, and special education students are disproportionately represented among suspended students². Figure 2 provides suspension rates per 10 students across each ethnic/racial group among male students. Black males were about 4 times more likely to receive a short-term suspension than white males; American Indian males were about 3.5 times more likely to receive a short-term suspension. Ninth grade students, on average, were 2.7 times more likely to receive a short-term suspension and 3.3 times more likely to receive a long-term suspension than other middle and high school grades.

Continuing to suspended students, without interventions, perpetuates a cycle of disadvantage among those who benefit the most from staying in school. On average, suspended students miss between 3 to 6 days in school for each suspension. Continued absence from school creates learning gaps. Students who previously encountered academic challenges may be further behind, contributing to significant learning deficits. Suspended students need alternatives that address their behavior through positive behavioral support and provide them with quality academic support. Alternative learning centers are one model in the state and may be one viable option to address the needs of North Carolina's students.

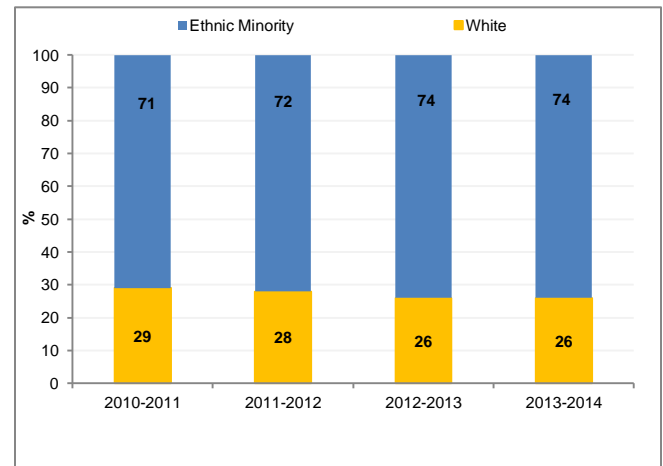
...I think kids that come to ALCs get in there [to] do work and develop a connection. -ALC Coordinator

ZERO TOLERANCE

The *Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994* pressured states to adopt policies against school violence and drug possession to receive federal education funding³. School districts across the United States adopted "zero tolerance" discipline policies that led to a

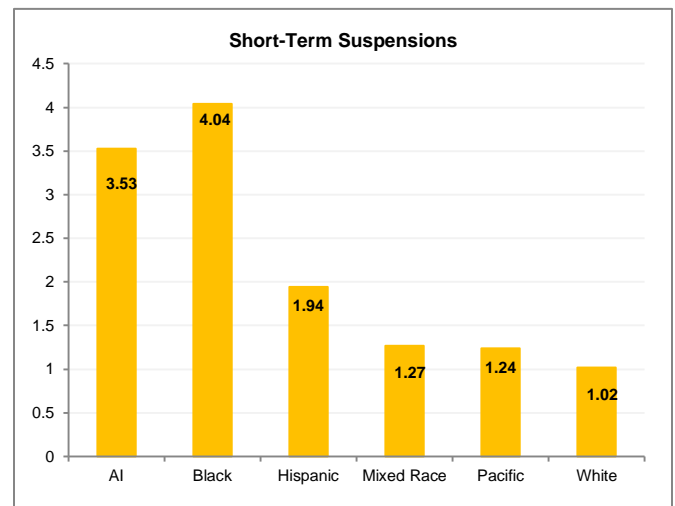
proliferation of school suspensions. Unfortunately, black, Hispanic, and Native American youth are disproportionately impacted, accounting for nearly 60% of suspended students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). In North Carolina, ethnic minority students comprise more than 70% of students suspended annually. The majority of suspensions occur due to low-level school offenses, such as disrespect, insubordination, and skipping school.

Figure 1. Percentage of youth suspended between non-white and white student groups, from 2010-2011 to 2012-2013.



Source: NC Department of Public Instruction

Figure 2. Suspension rates per 10 students in 2013-2014, by ethnic/racial group.



Source: NC Department of Public Instruction

School offenses in North Carolina can range from use of tobacco to bomb threats. However, the majority of suspensions occur from nonviolent school offenses. Past research indicates a majority of students received short-term suspensions for simple offenses such

¹ National Center for Education Statistics. (2006). Number of students suspended and expelled from public elementary and secondary schools, by sex, race/ethnicity, and state. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/ipeds_data_query_system/ipeds_data_query.asp

² NC Department of Public Instruction. (2015). Report to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee: Annual Study of Suspensions and Expulsions. Retrieved from <http://www.ncpublicschools.org>

³ Kang-Brown, J., Trone, J., Fratello, J., & Dattary-Kapur, T. (2013). A generation later: What we've learned about zero tolerance in schools. Retrieved from <http://www.vera.org>



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as dress code violations and inappropriate language⁴. These findings reflect similar analysis of elementary and middle school student discipline records in other parts of the country. One report indicated black and Hispanic students were more likely to be suspended than white students for the same school offense. In addition, black and Hispanic students receive harsher discipline for school offenses such as disrespect and noncompliance^{5 6}.

Some school districts response to high levels of suspension is providing alternative programs and schools. One model includes *alternative learning centers*, which provides alternative placement to suspended students in their traditional school. These programs majority serve ethnic minority students who receive a level IV school offense such as serious disruptions or use of controlled substance.

ALTERNATIVE LEARNING CENTERS

Winston-Salem/Forsyth County schools implemented alternative learning centers in 2006 and revamped the program in 2010. Similar to the state, the county reported a reduction in suspension rates over the past three years. Table 1 provides a comparison of statewide and districtwide suspensions from 2011-2012 to 2013-2014. From the 2011-2012 to 2013-2014 school year, the state demonstrated a 23.5% decrease and the district an 18.7% decrease in suspensions. While suspension rates declined, the number of suspended students served by alternative learning centers increased from 5% to 8%. In 2013-2014, the majority of students in the centers returned to their traditional classroom environment by the end of the academic year (70%). The county continues to increase the number of certified teachers in centers and reduce the load of teachers monitoring both in-school suspension and alternative learning center students.

Table 1. Changes in suspension rates across the state and Winston-Salem/Forsyth County schools.

	2011-2012		2012-2013		2013-2014	
	County	State	County	State	County	State
W	1,707 (16%)	70,925 (27%)	1,608 (15%)	65,133 (27%)	1,344 (15%)	51,267 (26%)
B	6,746 (63%)	146,639 (57%)	6,554 (62%)	142,869 (58%)	5,343 (61%)	113,853 (58%)
H	1,802 (17%)	23,569 (9%)	1,897 (18%)	23,244 (8%)	1,622 (19%)	18,562 (9%)
AI	24 (<1%)	6,383 (3%)	18 (<1%)	6,242 (3%)	23 (<1%)	5,330 (3%)
O	482 (4%)	10,571 (4%)	474 (5%)	10,168 (4%)	439 (5%)	8,486 (4%)
All	10,761	258,087	10,551	247,656	8,771	197,498

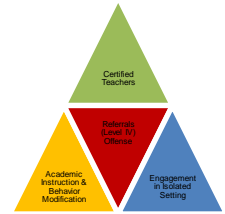
W=White; B=Black/African American; H = Hispanic; AI = American Indian; O = Other

Source: NC Department of Public Instruction

Students in alternative learning centers are provided with choices and opportunities to receive academic support and positive behavior intervention. More than 70% of students in alternative learning centers represent an ethnic minority. On average, during the 2013-2014 year students spent 42 days in centers. If the state spends about \$262⁷ a day to house youth in juvenile detention centers, the \$8,396 spent annually per pupil in Forsyth County potentially saves the state money. Retaining students in school in safe and supervised settings can potentially prevent their involvement in further truancy and reallocate the \$2,608 saved towards other programs and resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

School systems should have zero tolerance for violence in schools; however, applying zero tolerance to nonviolent school offenses contributes to the continuous disparities that exist between ethnic minority and white students. Providing alternative placement using clear behavior expectations for students to receive support from certified teachers, academic instruction, and behavior modification potentially reduces school absences and promotes student retention. Increasing opportunities for students to remain in an academic setting and engaged in the school environment may reduce additional academic gaps and challenges.



Alternative learning centers can become a model for the state and nation. Examining school offenses may warrant alternative placement versus out-of-school suspension and reduce the probability of students funneled into the juvenile justice system. Future research will need to examine the impact of centers on reducing suspension and increasing academic outcomes. Suspended students need options and alternatives in order to improve their academic trajectory.

This issue brief was produced from data collected during the 2013-2014 academic term. Findings only represent short-term outcomes and did not examine whether students returned to alternative learning centers or academic outcomes. Thank you to all the teachers, students, parents, and administrators in Forsyth County.

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⁴ Bonneau, K. & Owens, J. (n.d.). School suspensions in North Carolina: Key facts and statistics from the 2008-2009 school year. Retrieved from https://childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/pdfs/familyimpact/2010/Suspension_Data_Summary.pdf

⁵ Bradshaw, C. P., Mitchell, M. M., O'Brennan, L. M., & Leaf, P. J. (2010). Multilevel exploration of factors contributing to the overrepresentation of black students in office disciplinary referrals. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 102* (2), 508.

⁶ Skiba, R. J., Homer, R. H., Chung, C., Rausch, M. K., May, S. L., & Tobin, T. (2011). Race is not neutral: A national investigation of African American and Latino disproportionality in school discipline. *School Psychology Review, 40*(1), 85-107.

⁷ Justice Policy Institute. (May, 2009). The cost of confinement: Why good juvenile justice policies make good fiscal sense. Retrieved from <http://www.justicepolicy.org>