## Background

The national graduation rate hovers around 75 percent and the dropout rate exceeds 50 percent in some parts of the nation.[1] Each year, approximately 1.2 million young people dropout of school nationally.[2] Students that dropout are three times more likely to be incarcerated.[3] Economists estimate that raising high school graduation rates would reduce violent crime by 20 percent and property crime by 10 percent.[4] The same economists find that each additional high school graduate would yield an average of $36,500 in lifetime cost savings to the public. Research shows that most students at risk of dropping out can be identified as early as elementary or middle school and can graduate if they are provided with timely, appropriate support. A number of factors increase the likelihood of a student dropping out of school and include: truancy; suspensions; expulsions; behavioral problems; D and F grades; repeating grades; and if the student is in special education, an English-language learner, a migrant, in foster care, or has serious health concerns.[5]

### *Trends in School Discipline*

In 2006, more than 3.3 million students were suspended out of school at least once and 102,000 were expelled.[6] Students of color and students with disabilities are more likely to be suspended and expelled than their peers for the same behavior.[7] The majority of suspensions are for misbehavior such as insubordination, disruptive behavior, or school fights.[8] School districts began expanding punitive discipline policies in the 1990s. Many school districts created zero tolerance policies, meaning that the school's discipline policy mandated a specific punishment for a certain offense regardless of the circumstances. By 1997, 79 percent of schools had a zero tolerance policy for tobacco.[9]

There has been an effort nationwide to reform school discipline policies and practices. At the federal level, many organizations have been trying to use the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as the No Child Left Behind Act, to change the federal law. The Senate education committee recently passed an ESEA bill that contains several provisions regarding discipline, such as requiring the 5 to 10 percent of lowest achieving schools to improve their suspension and expulsion rates. However, while some schools would be required to address discipline, many schools would not be.[10] Also, many of these organizations have serious

---

[1] Data Quality Campaign, *Supporting Early Warning Systems*, December 2011, accessed online Dec. 19, 2011. <http://dataqualitycampaign.org/files/Hot%20Topic_Early%20Warning.pdf>

[2] Alliance for Excellent Education, *The High Cost of High School Dropouts: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools*, November 2011, accessed online Dec. 19, 2011. <http://www.all4ed.org/files/HighCost.pdf>

[3] Lochner, L. and Moretti, E., "The Effect of Education on Crime: Evidence from Prison Inmates, Arrests, and Self Reports," *The American Economic Review*, 2004, 94 (1), 155-189. Freeman, R., "Why Do So Many Young American Men Commit Crimes and What Might We Do About It?," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 1996, 10(1), 25 – 42.

[4] Levin, H. and Belfield, C., *The Cost and Benefits of an Excellent Education*, January 2007, accessed online Dec. 19, 2011. <http://www.cbcse.org/modules/download_gallery/dl.php?file=35>

[5] Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), *Developing a Dropout Early Warning and Intervention System (DEWIS)*, accessed online Dec. 19, 2011. <http://www.k12.wa.us/K12DataGovernance/Meetings/Jan20Mtng/DEWISGuideFinal.pdf>

[6] National Center for Education Statistics, *Contexts of Elementary and Secondary Education*, 2009.

[7] American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, *Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools? An Evidentiary Review and Recommendations*, December 2008, accessed online Dec. 19, 2011. <http://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/zero-tolerance.pdf>

[8] Rausch, M.K. and Skiba, R., *Unplanned Outcomes: Suspensions and Expulsions in Indiana,* Summer 2004, accessed online Dec. 19, 2011. < http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED488917.pdf>

[9] National Center for Education Statistics, *Violence and Discipline Problems in U.S. Public Schools: 1996-97,* March 1998, accessed online Dec. 19, 2011. <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/frss/publications/98030/index.asp?sectionid=5>

[10] Conversation with NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc, December 2011.

concerns about reduced accountability for schools in the bill. It is unlikely the bill will become law any time soon.

In addition to Congress' work on the issue, the U.S. Department of Education has been working to address school discipline. In the last few years, the department has increased the number of schools that submit discipline data, added additional categories of data, and made the data website easier to use.[11] The website has school and school district level data broken down by race and ethnicity and shows the number of students disciplined and whether they are disabled or not. While more data is available than there was several years ago, there is still concern about the accuracy of the data since there is no verification of the data. The Department of Education is also investigating school districts across the country with disproportionate use of discipline against minority students.[12]

In addition to federal efforts, local communities have worked to reform school discipline policies and practices. Model school discipline policies often focus on keeping students in school, involve parents, provide students and parent an appeal process, and make suspension and expulsion rates part of school accountability. Denver Public Schools implemented new discipline policies in 2008-09 and since then high school attendance, graduation, completion, and dropout rates have all improved.[13] The Denver policy clarified and expanded parents' and students' due process rights, such as: the right to be notified of disciplinary actions, to be heard throughout the disciplinary process, to have representation at hearings, and the right to appeal. Further, the policies required that schools work to eliminate racial disparities in discipline and must continuously monitor and assess school discipline practices through data collection.[14]

## School Discipline in Washington

In Washington, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) collects discipline data. The data that is publicly available is school district level data, not school level data and it is not broken down by race and ethnicity.[15] The weapons report shows the number of students suspended or expelled by school districts for incidents involving weapons, such as guns and knives.[16] The behavior report shows the number of students suspended or expelled by school districts for bullying, tobacco, alcohol, illicit drugs, fighting without major injury, violence without major injury, and violence with major injury.[17] OSPI will begin collecting individual student discipline data in 2012-13. The data collection will include suspensions and expulsions for the above categories.[18] Because this is individual student data, the data will be broken down by race and ethnicity. While this additional data will be collected, it is unclear if OSPI will summarize the data and make it available to the public, meaning that people could find out the number of African-American students suspended at a specific high school.

---

[11] U.S. Department of Education, *Civil Rights Data Collection*, accessed online Dec. 19, 2011. <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/>

[12] Maxwell, L., "Civil Rights Office Expands Its Reach Into Schools," *Education Week,* December 2011, accessed online Dec. 19, 2011. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/12/14/14ocr_ep.h31.html>

[13] Denver Public Schools Superintendent, *A Compelling Story on Keeping Kids in School*, March 2010, accessed online Dec. 19, 2011 <http://www.padresunidos.org/newsletters/A_Compelling_Story_on_Keeping_Kids_in_School_3.8.10_DPS_ENewsletter.pdf>

[14] Stop the Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track, *Padres & Jovenes Unidos*, accessed online Dec. 19, 2011. <http://www.stopschoolstojails.org/padres-jovenes-unidos-denver.html>

[15] OSPI, *School Safety Center, a*ccessed online Dec. 19, 2011. <http://www.k12.wa.us/safetycenter/Weapons/default.aspx>

[16] OSPI, *2009-10 Weapons in Schools Report,* January 2011, accessed online Dec. 19, 2011. <http://www.k12.wa.us/safetycenter/Weapons/pubdocs/rptWeapons0910.pdf>

[17] OSPI, *2009-10 County/District Student Behavior Data,* February 2011, accessed online Dec. 19, 2011. <http://www.k12.wa.us/SafetyCenter/Behavior/default.aspx>

[18] Conversation with OSPI, November 2011.

While OSPI does not currently make data available that is broken down by race and ethnicity, some districts have made this data available. In Seattle, African-American students in high school are four times more likely to be suspended than White students.[19] In the Central Kitsap School District, African-American students are 3.8 percent of school enrollment but account for 11.3 percent of suspensions in elementary schools and 10.8 percent of suspensions in high schools.[20]

In Washington, there were 3,000 suspensions or expulsions involving weapons at school in 2009-10. The number of incidents has increased slightly from 2.71 incidents per 1,000 students in 2000-01 to 3.05 incidents per 1,000 students in 2009-10.[21] In 2009-10, there were 1,025,184 students enrolled in the K-12 system, and there were 47,508 suspensions and 1,771 expulsions for behavior incidents.[22] Just as discipline policies and practices vary greatly from district to district so do the number of suspensions and expulsions. While some school districts suspend and expel no students for behavior incidents, other districts suspend and expel hundreds of students each year. Because district sizes vary so much it is best to look at the percent of suspensions and expulsions compared to district enrollment. Seattle Public Schools' suspension and expulsion percentage (for behavior) compared to total enrollment was 5.55 percent in 2009-10. However, a number of districts had much higher rates: Vancouver's was 8.25 percent, Longview's was 8.38 percent, Centralia's was 8.29 percent, and Shelton's was 10.17 percent.

There are several programs in Washington to address school discipline and dropout rates. Several years ago, the Shelton School District and OSPI worked together to develop a dropout early warning data and intervention system.[23] The goal was to develop a system that identifies students at-risk of dropping out. The system looks at a number of risk factors including if a student has been suspended or expelled. The system identifies students at-risk of dropping out and then the school, community, and parents work together and apply interventions to prevent the student from dropping out. Since implementing the dropout early warning data system, the dropout rate in Shelton has decreased from 7.8 percent to 5.4 percent, and the on-time graduation rate has improved from 59.7 percent to 76.5 percent.[24]

In addition, there is also the Building Bridges Program which awards grants to partnerships of schools, families, and communities to build comprehensive dropout prevention, intervention, and retrieval systems to identify students at risk of dropping out of school and provide timely inventions and supports.[25]

---

[19] Seattle Public Schools, *Seattle Public Schools Data Profile*, December 2011, accessed online Jan. 4, 2011. <www.seattleschools.org/data>

[20] Okinaka, K., "Central Kitsap and Bremerton Schools Show Racial Trends in Discipline Data," *Bremerton Patriot*, August 2011, accessed online Jan. 4, 2011. <http://www.bremertonpatriot.com/news/126787413.html>

[21] *2009-10 Weapons in Schools Report.*

[22] *2009-10 County/District Student Behavior Data.*

[23] *Developing a Dropout Early Warning and Intervention System (DEWIS).*

[24] OSPI, *Washington State Report Card, Shelton School District,* accessed online Jan. 5, 2012. <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/summary.aspx?year=2010-11>

[25] OSPI, *Building Bridges Grant Program,* accessed online Dec. 19, 2011. <http://www.k12.wa.us/SecondaryEducation/GraduationTeamEffort/BuildingBridges/GrantProgram.aspx>