

TRANSFORMING SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

Students can't learn if they aren't in the classroom. Every year, thousands of Washington students are excluded from school. Higher rates of suspensions and expulsions lead to higher dropout rates, increases in grade repetition, and a rise in incarceration rates. Students of color, low-income students, and special education students are disciplined at higher rates than other students, which contribute to Washington's opportunity and achievement gaps.

During the 2013 legislative session, the League of Education Voters worked closely with community partners and advocates in a statewide coalition committed to transforming school discipline policies. In convening this coalition, we helped pass SB 5946, which makes discipline data public and keeps more students in school by limiting the number of days students can be removed from class.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM NEW SCHOOL DISCIPLINE LEGISLATION & RULES

- **One-year limit** to expulsions. When based on public health or safety, a school may petition the superintendent of the district to exceed the one-year limit.
- **One-semester limit** to suspensions. Long-term suspensions are limited to one semester or trimester and must end during the current school year.
- **Emergency expulsions** must now end or be changed to another form of discipline within 10 school days. An emergency expulsion is when a student is removed from school immediately.
- **Public data** must be provided by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). OSPI must publicly post discipline data online that is broken down by demographics such as race, socioeconomic status, and gender.
- **Reengagement plans and meetings** must be developed for students by their schools, tailored to the student's circumstances, including consideration of the incident that led to the student's suspension or expulsion. Reengagement meetings with the student are required.
- **Students cannot be suspended or expelled for expressing suicidal thoughts.** Previously, a number of schools were removing students who expressed suicidal thoughts, further endangering them.
- A **statewide taskforce** has been created as a result of the law that will develop consistent definitions of discipline and an increased collection of discipline data. This will include information about what educational services are being provided while students are out of school, the status of petitions to reenroll in school, and the number of school dropouts as a result of discipline.

DISCIPLINE SUCCESS STORIES

“Washington state took a big step in the right direction when it passed SB 5946, which keeps more students in school by limiting the number of days students can be removed from class and unifies the way school districts collect and analyze discipline data.”

— Tre’ Maxie

Washington State Board of Education

Changing school discipline policies and practices works. For example, Baltimore City Public Schools began implementing discipline reforms in 2008 under former CEO Andrés Alonzo, and those reforms continued under former Interim CEO Tisha Edwards. Since the new discipline policies and practices went into effect, out-of-school suspensions have dropped from one in five students to one in eight, and the dropout rate fell by almost four percentage points in three years (from 7.9 in 2008 to 4.2 in 2011).

More locally, Highline School District recently implemented the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program in their schools with significant reductions in students losing instructional time due to out-of-school suspensions. Recent data indicate suspensions and expulsions decreased from 2,722 in 2010 to 1,628 in 2013. Lincoln High School in Walla Walla has had similar results with trying to move away from a punitive approach to student behavior.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISTRICT BEST PRACTICES

- **Improve school climate.** Use a positive approach to discipline and train teachers on classroom management, cultural competency, and student social and emotional needs.
- **Minimize students’ time out of school.** Decrease the use and length of suspensions and expulsions.
- **Create clear expectations and graduated levels of consequences.** Expectations and consequences should be age appropriate and match the severity of the student’s behavior.



TAKING ACTION IN WASHINGTON

Through grassroots organizing, we:

- **Completed more than 150 interviews with stakeholders** to identify policies and practices that exacerbate disproportionality.
- **Held over 20 community forums and presentations for more than 1,300 activists** on school discipline, the school-to-prison pipeline, and Washington’s opportunity and achievement gaps.
- **Coordinated over 750 actions to legislators and policymakers** through postcards, emails, petitions, testimonies, phone calls, and personal visits.
- **Organized over two dozen community members** to testify in support of strong discipline rules.

We invite you to join us as we continue to work toward transforming school discipline in Washington state.

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