



# Facts From NLTS2

## School Behavior and Disciplinary Experiences of Youth With Disabilities

Problem behavior at school “interferes with the educational process and places a burden on teachers” (U.S. Department of Education 2002, p. III-17). Disciplinary problems have long been linked to negative outcomes for students with disabilities, such as course failure and dropping out of school (Wagner et al. 1991). Parents, administrators, teachers, and communities all are interested in keeping schools safe and maintaining positive environments conducive to learning (Finley 2003; Gallegos 1998; Sprague, Smith, and Stieber 2002). To accomplish these goals, schools employ a range of policies and approaches to managing student behavior, including classroom token economies, positive behavior supports, and suspensions and expulsions (Leone et al. 2000; NASP Center 2005; Peterson and Skiba, 2001; Sugai et al. 2000).

Data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)<sup>1</sup> provide a national picture<sup>2</sup> of disciplinary experiences at the secondary school level of youth with disabilities, offering a perspective on youth who exhibit problem behaviors at school and on schools’ implementation of disciplinary actions.<sup>3</sup>

### Students’ Behavior at School

Teachers were asked to indicate how well 7th- through 12th-grade youth with disabilities “control their behavior to act appropriately” and how frequently they argue and fight with others in class.<sup>4</sup> Most secondary-school-age students with disabilities do not exhibit problem behaviors at school (figure 1). Teachers report that about one-third control their behavior to act appropriately in class “very well,” and an additional 46 percent do so “well.” More than half

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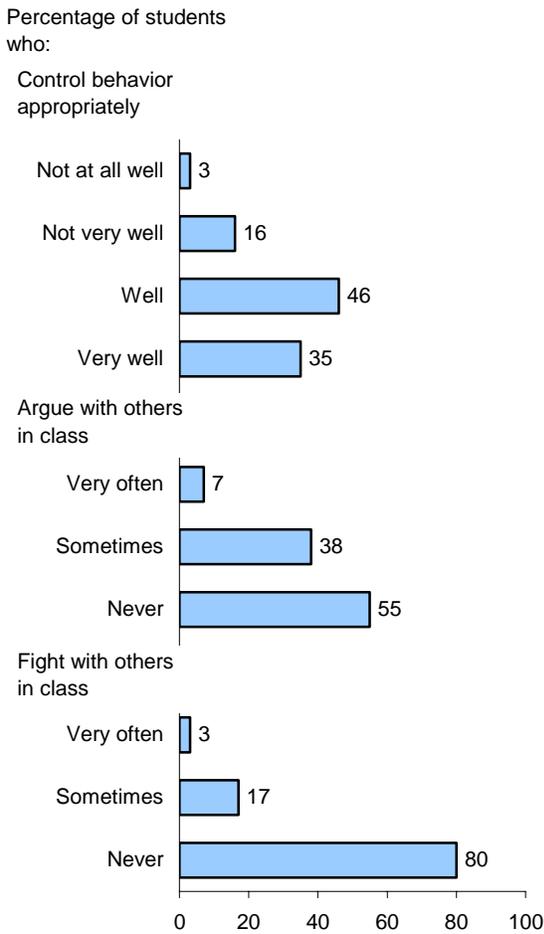
<sup>1</sup> The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) has a nationally representative sample of more than 11,000 students who were in at least seventh grade and receiving special education services in the 2000-01 school year. This sample represents a total of 1,838,848 youth with disabilities, according to federal child count figures (U.S. Department of Education 2002). See [www.nlts2.org](http://www.nlts2.org) for more information about the study.

<sup>2</sup> Data reported here are population estimates from data weighted to represent students in each disability category who attended school in the kinds of districts from which they were sampled.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the data presented in this fact sheet also are included in Wagner, Marder et al. (2003) and Wagner, Newman et al. (2003).

<sup>4</sup> NLTS2 school data were collected in spring 2001; students were ages 14 through 18. Data were obtained through mailed surveys of teachers of students’ general education academic classes (for those with that type of class) and of school staff members most knowledgeable about students’ special education classes and overall school programs. Classroom behavior ratings combine responses from these two surveys to include behavior in both general education and special education classes; unweighted sample sizes for various behavior rating items range from 4,646 to 5,473.

Figure 1. In-school behaviors of youth with disabilities



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Special Education Research, National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), Wave 1 teacher and student's school program surveys, 2002.

(55 percent) are reported “never” to argue in class, and four out of five have teachers who report they “never” fight with others in class.

Although many are reported to behave appropriately, some display problem behaviors at school. According to teacher reports, almost one in five students with disabilities control their behavior to act appropriately in class “not very well” or “not at all well.” Somewhat more youth appear to engage in arguing with others in the class. For example, teachers report that

38 percent argue “sometimes” and 7 percent do so “very often.” One in five also are reported to fight in class, with 17 percent “sometimes” fighting with others and 3 percent fighting “very often.”

### Schools’ Disciplinary Actions

Schools can respond to some inappropriate student behaviors by suspending or expelling students from classroom instruction or through other types of disciplinary actions, such as a referral to the principal’s office or detention. School staff were asked whether youth had been suspended, expelled, or involved in any other type of disciplinary action during the 2001-02 school year.<sup>5</sup> Approximately one-third of those with disabilities (34 percent) were involved in some type of disciplinary action in a school year (figure 2).

Secondary-school-age youth with disabilities are more likely to experience an in-school than out-of-school suspension, with 17 percent undergoing an in-school and 11 percent an out-of-school suspension.<sup>6</sup> Some have been suspended from school multiple times in a school year. For example, 9 percent have received an in-school suspension more than once in a year, and 6 percent have had more than one out-of-school suspension. Many fewer students have been expelled than suspended from school; 1 percent of students with disabilities were expelled in a school year.

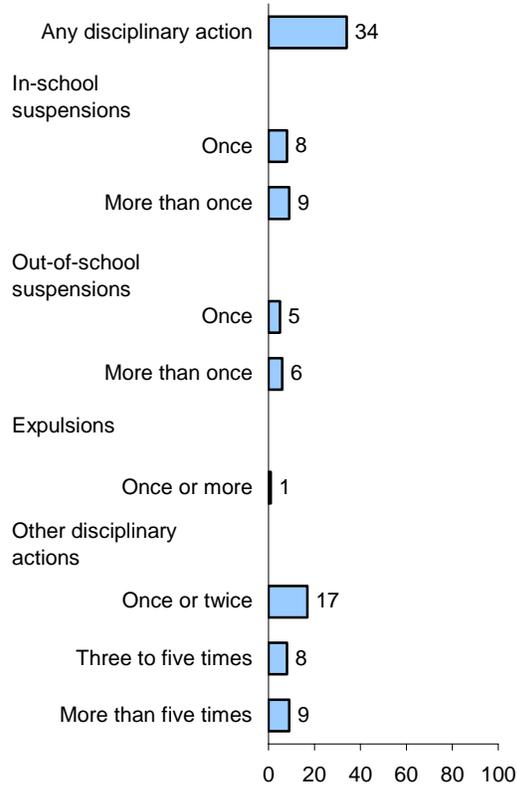
Schools employ other types of disciplinary actions in addition to suspensions and expulsions, such as sending

<sup>5</sup> The number of disciplinary actions in a school year was obtained from a written survey completed by school staff in spring 2002, with 4,783 to 5,029 unweighted responses to these items.

<sup>6</sup> The statistical significance of differences was determined by two-tailed *F* tests. Only differences that reach a level of statistical significance of at least  $p < .05$  are included in the text.

Figure 2. School disciplinary actions for youth with disabilities

Percentage of students who have experienced in most recent school year:



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Special Education Research, National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), Wave 1 student's school program survey, 2002.

a student to the principal's office. Approximately one-third of students with disabilities have experienced other types of disciplinary actions, with 17 percent being disciplined once or twice, 8 percent three to five times, and 9 percent more than five times in the school year.

Secondary-school-age students with disabilities are more likely than those in the general population to be suspended or expelled from school. Specifically, one-third of students with disabilities (33 percent) are reported by parents to have been suspended or expelled during their school careers, compared with 21 percent of their same-age

peers in the general population (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] 1999).<sup>7</sup>

### Disability Category Differences in Students' Behavior and Disciplinary Actions<sup>8</sup>

Although some youth in every disability category exhibit problem behaviors and experience disciplinary actions at school, there is substantial variation across categories (table 1). For example, 61 percent of youth with emotional disturbances are reported to argue in class, compared with 42 percent of students with learning disabilities, 40 percent of those with autism, and one-third or fewer of youth with speech, hearing, or visual impairments or deaf-blindness. Similarly, two out of five youth with emotional disturbances are reported to have difficulty controlling problem behavior in class, compared with one-fifth or fewer of those with learning disabilities, speech, hearing, visual, or orthopedic impairments, or deaf-blindness.

Students with emotional disturbances are significantly more likely to have been suspended or expelled in one school year or over their school careers than youth in all other disability categories. In fact, they are 27 percentage points more likely to have received disciplinary actions in one school

<sup>7</sup> This fact sheet provides comparable data for students in the general population when available. Data related to students' ever having been suspended or expelled during their school careers is based on parent report for both NLTS2 and NCES; specifically, NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interview (2001) and National Household Education Survey, parent survey (1999), responses for youth ages 13-17. Comparable nationally-representative data for youth in the general population are not available for disciplinary actions in one school year and for students' behaviors.

<sup>8</sup> The terminology for classifying students who receive special education services that is used here is specified in federal regulations for the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (P.L. 105-17), 111 Stat. 37-157 (Knoblauch and Sorenson 1998).

Table 1. Students' behavior and disciplinary actions at school, by disability category

Students' behavior/disciplinary actions	Learning disability	Speech/language impairment	Mental retardation	Emotional disturbance	Hearing impairment	Visual impairment	Orthopedic impairment	Other health impairment	Autism	Traumatic brain injury	Multiple disabilities	Deaf-blindness
Percentage of students who:												
Control behavior to act appropriately in class not at all well or not very well	13	10	23	40	10	12	14	26	31	22	32	18
Argue with others in class sometimes or very often	42	28	56	61	27	30	35	50	40	49	46	29
Fight with others in class sometimes or very often	16	13	28	38	11	7	11	22	24	30	29	21
Had any disciplinary actions in most recent school year	33	19	29	63	22	15	13	36	14	30	18	22
Have ever been suspended or expelled <sup>1</sup>	27	17	33	73	18	13	13	41	17	30	18	14
Mean number of disciplinary actions in most recent school year												
	2	1	2	7	2	1	1	3	1	2	1	2

<sup>1</sup>Ever suspended or expelled is parent-reported data; all other data in table are teacher reported.

SOURCES: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Special Education Research, National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), Wave 1 parent interviews, 2001; Wave 1 teacher survey, 2002; and Wave 1 student's school program survey, 2002.

year and 32 percentage points more likely ever to have been suspended or expelled than those in the next most frequently occurring category—youth with other health impairments. More than three out of five youth with emotional disturbances (63 percent) have experienced disciplinary actions, including suspensions and expulsions, in one school year, with an average of seven disciplinary incidents. Almost three-quarters (73 percent) have been suspended or expelled during their school careers.

Youth with other health impairments, the disability category that includes students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) when it is a primary disability, also have relative high rates of receiving disciplinary actions in one school year (36 percent) or ever (41 percent). Their single-year rate of disciplinary actions is

significantly higher than the rate of youth in 7 of the 11 other disability categories,<sup>9</sup> and their rate of suspensions or expulsions over their school careers is significantly higher than the rate of youth in all other categories except emotional disturbance.

From 27 percent to 33 percent of youth with learning disabilities, mental retardation, or traumatic brain injuries are reported ever to have been suspended or expelled and 13 percent to 18 percent of those with visual, orthopedic, speech/language or hearing impairments, autism, multiple disabilities and deaf-blindness are reported to have done so.

<sup>9</sup> Other than students with emotional disturbances, learning disabilities, traumatic brain injuries, or mental retardation.

## Demographic Differences in Students' Behavior and Disciplinary Actions

For youth in the general population, differences in school behaviors and receipt of disciplinary actions are apparent for groups who differ in selected demographic characteristics (Freeman 2005; Gallegos 1998; Llagas 2003; Skiba et al. 2002). Several of these differences also are apparent for students with disabilities.

Figure 3. Students' behavior and disciplinary actions at school, by gender

Percentage of students who:

Control behavior to act appropriately in class not at all well or not very well

Males 22

Females 11

Argue with others in class sometimes or very often

Males 46

Females 45

Fight with others in class sometimes or very often

Males 20

Females 20

Had any disciplinary actions in most recent school year

Males 40

Females 23

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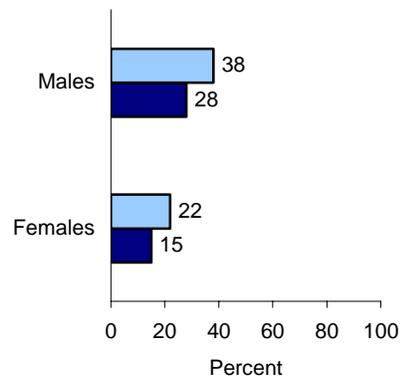
SOURCES: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Special Education Research, National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), Wave 1 teacher and student's school program surveys, 2002.

**Gender.** Secondary-school-age boys with disabilities are no more likely than girls to be reported to argue or fight with others at school, but they are twice as likely as girls to be described by their teachers as not behaving appropriately in class (22 percent vs. 11 percent) (figure 3). The teacher-reported rate of disciplinary actions in a year for boys with disabilities also is almost twice that of their female peers (40 percent vs. 23 percent).

The parent-reported rate of ever having been suspended or expelled is higher for boys with disabilities than for girls (38 percent vs. 22 percent; figure 4). Similarly, more secondary-school-age boys than girls in the general population are reported by their parents ever to have been suspended or expelled during their school careers (NCES 1999).

**Race/ethnicity.** Youth with different racial/ethnic backgrounds differ in reported behavior and receipt of disciplinary actions

Figure 4. Students have ever been suspended or expelled, by gender



SOURCES: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Special Education Research, National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), Wave 1 parent interviews, 2001. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey (NHES) 1999 parent survey, responses for youth ages 13-17.

(figure 5). In general, 7th- through 12th-grade African American students with disabilities are reported to exhibit more problem behaviors at school than are White or Hispanic students with disabilities. More than half (56 percent) of African American students are reported by teachers to argue with others in class, compared with 43 percent of White and 39 percent of

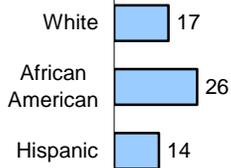
Hispanic students. More than one-fourth (29 percent) are reported to fight with others in class, compared with 19 percent of White students and 13 percent of Hispanic students. In addition, about one-fourth (26 percent) of African American students with disabilities are reported by teachers not to control problem behavior in class, compared with 14 percent of Hispanic students.

African American students with disabilities have suspension or expulsion rates higher than those of White or Hispanic students with disabilities (figure 6). Almost half of secondary-school-age African American youth with disabilities (46 percent) are reported by parents to have been suspended or expelled from school at some time in their school careers, whereas fewer than one-third (30 percent) of White

Figure 5. Students' behavior and disciplinary actions at school, by race/ethnicity

Percentage of students who:

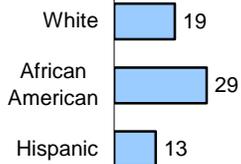
Control behavior to act appropriately in class not at all well or not very well



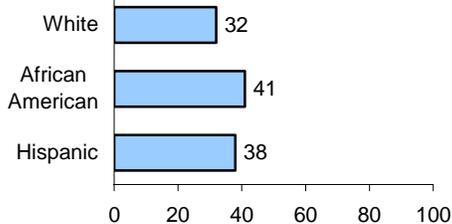
Argue with others in class sometimes or very often



Fight with others in class sometimes or very often

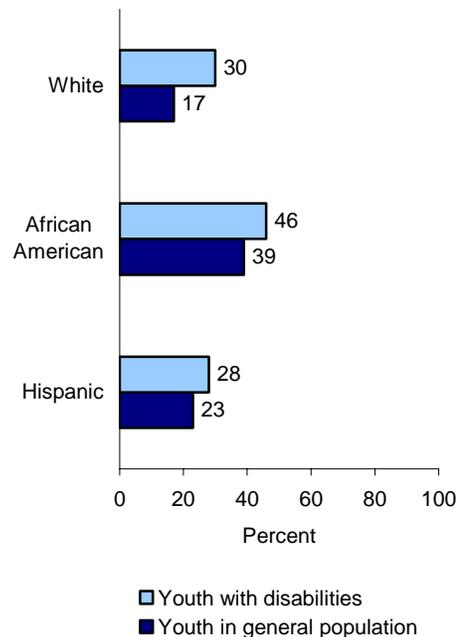


Had any disciplinary actions in most recent school year



SOURCES: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Special Education Research, National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), Wave 1 teacher and student's school program surveys, 2002.

Figure 6. Students have ever been suspended or expelled, by race/ethnicity



SOURCES: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Special Education Research, National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2), Wave 1 parent interviews, 2001. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey (NHES) 1999 parent survey, responses for youth ages 13-17.

students and 28 percent of Hispanic youth with disabilities are reported by parents ever to have experienced these types of disciplinary actions. In this respect, youth with disabilities are similar to their peers in the general population, where 39 percent of secondary-school-age African American students are reported by parents ever to have been suspended or expelled, compared with 17 percent of White and 23 percent of Hispanic students. Unlike those of their peers in the general population, suspension or expulsion rates for White and Hispanic youth with disabilities do not differ significantly from each other, whereas these rates are higher for Hispanic than for White students in the general population (NCES 1999).

**Grade level.** Students with disabilities in middle school grades are more likely to be reported to misbehave in class than are those in high school. Sixty-one percent of 7th- and 8th-graders are reported by teachers to argue with others in class, compared with 46 percent of 9th- and 10th-graders and 40 percent of 11th- and 12th-graders. Younger students also are more likely to fight with others in class, with almost one-third of middle schoolers reported to do so, compared with 20 percent of those in 9th and 10th grades and 16 percent of those in 11th and 12th grades. Despite this inverse relationship between classroom behavior and grade level, disciplinary action rates do not differ significantly by grade level. Forty percent of 7th- and 8th-graders, 37 percent of 9th- and 10th-graders, and 31 percent of 11th- and 12th-graders have received one or more disciplinary actions in a school year.

### **Summing Up**

Whereas most secondary-school-age youth with disabilities are reported to behave appropriately, approximately 20 percent to 40 percent are reported to

exhibit problem behaviors at school, including not controlling behavior (19 percent) and arguing with others in class (45 percent). One-third of students with disabilities have experienced disciplinary actions at school, such as suspensions, expulsions, referrals to the principal's office, or detentions, and they are more likely than their peers in the general population to have faced these types of disciplinary actions.

Students with emotional disturbances are significantly more likely to have been suspended or expelled in one school year or over their school careers than youth in all other disability categories. Youth with other health impairments also have relative high rates of receiving disciplinary actions in one school year or ever.

Detected differences in rates of disciplinary actions across demographic categories show that secondary-school-age boys are almost twice as likely as girls to have been suspended or expelled or to have received other types of disciplinary actions. Boys also are twice as likely to be described as not behaving appropriately in class. Additionally, African American students are reported by teachers to exhibit more problem behaviors at school than are White or Hispanic students with disabilities. African American students also have suspension or expulsion rates higher than those of their White or Hispanic peers. Middle-school-grade students with disabilities are more likely to be reported to misbehave in class than are those in high school, although disciplinary action rates do not differ significantly by grade level.

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