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Hard Truths About Suspension and Social Justice:

A Look at a School for Deaf Students

By Todd LaMarr and Lisalee D. Egbert

Suspensions—a form of discipline that removes students temporarily from the learning environment—are used to address unwanted behaviors in the classroom. While suspensions have been a common form of school discipline for many years, they can become problematic when they reach high rates and when they disproportionately impact specific groups of students. While every student can face suspension, suspensions are not administered evenly across gender, racial, and ethnic categories. Students of color and males are disproportionately suspended and negatively impacted by suspensions (Morris & Perry, 2016; Smith & Harper, 2015; Wood, Harris III, & Howard, 2018).

Suspensions can negatively impact students in many ways. Suspension from the classroom can lead to students missing out on information, falling behind in class, and, as a result, struggling with overall academic performance (Morris & Perry, 2016). Suspensions are associated with a greater risk of students dropping out of high school without a diploma (Noltemeyer, Ward, & McLoughlin, 2015). Further, some research indicates that school suspensions contribute to a school-to-prison pipeline; practices and policies that push students out of the classroom also serve to push them into the criminal justice system (ACLU, 2019; Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015).

Suspensions in Schools for the Deaf

While school suspensions have received a lot of attention in the field of education, little if any research exists on suspensions in deaf education. In fact, we have not been able to find any articles or reports in deaf education that focus on suspensions and potential group disparities.

We collected data ourselves, selecting one residential school for deaf students and using data available in the public state database. We initially collected data on two deaf schools but decided to focus on one since the data told a similar story in both schools (i.e., high suspension rates in previous years and improved rates more recently). Additionally, focusing on just one school

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Figure 1.

Suspension Rates: Deaf School, County and State

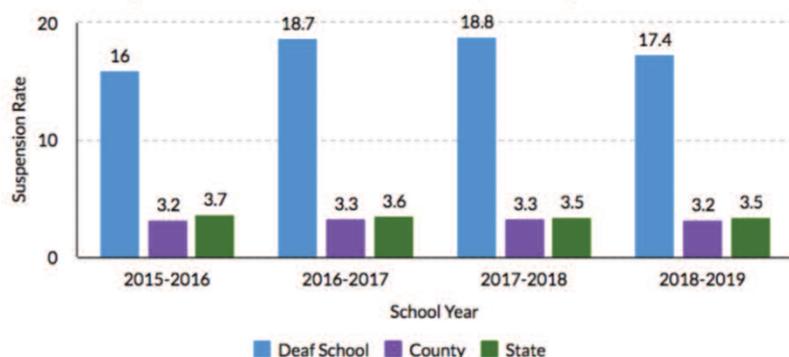
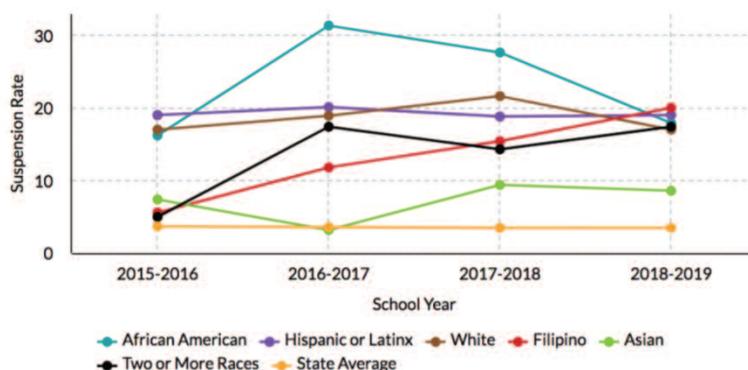


Figure 2.

Suspension Rates by Race/Ethnicity Over Time



allowed us to go more in depth. Based on this data, four main findings stand out:

- The school’s average suspension rate was alarmingly high compared to county and state averages (see Figure 1). Over the last four years, the deaf school’s suspension rate was never lower than 16 percent; the suspension rate for the county and state in which the school was located never reached above 4 percent. In 2018-2019, the most recent school year for which data are available, the state’s average suspension rate was 3.5 percent, the county’s was 3.2 percent, and the deaf school’s was 17.4 percent.
- Overall, students of color were more likely to be suspended than their white peers (see Figure 2). Across the four years, suspension rates varied significantly among ethnic groups; however, every year the highest suspension rates were received by a group of students of color, most frequently by African American and Hispanic/Latinx students. While white students had a high suspension rate, African American and Hispanic/Latinx

students always had an even higher suspension rate. Additional patterns related to race and ethnicity included the following (see Figure 3):

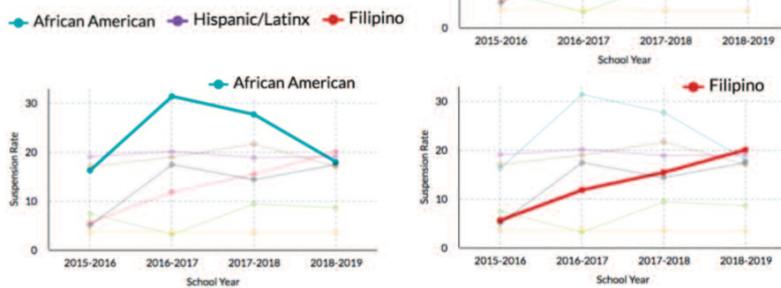
- African American students received the highest suspension rate of all the groups during the last four years. In the 2016-2017 school year, African American students were suspended at a rate of 31.3 percent, a rate much higher than that of Hispanic/Latinx students and white students at 20.1 percent and 18.9 percent, respectively, who were suspended during the same time period.
- While the suspension rate for Hispanic/Latinx students did not fluctuate greatly over the last four years, their rate remained consistently high, never dropping below 18.8 percent.
- Suspension rates for Filipino students continued a steep upward trajectory, increasing from 5.6 percent in 2015-2016 to 20.0 percent in 2018-2019,

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Figure 3.

Suspension Rates for African American, Hispanic/Latinx and Filipino Deaf Students



more than tripling in just four years.

- There were disparities based on gender. Males were suspended at a much higher rate than females (see Figure 4), and African American male students received the highest suspension rate every year (see Figure 5). For each of the last four years, the rates of suspension for African American males were alarming. In the 2016-2017 school year, for example, the suspension rate for African American male students was 43.8 percent.
- The data for the most recent school year presented some positive trends: The most recent suspension data showed a decrease in suspensions compared with the data of previous years. For the 2018-2019 school year, the total suspension rate at the deaf school was 17.4 percent. Although still high, it is lower than the two previous years, although not as low as 2015-2016. Further, compared to the previous year, the 2018-2019 suspension data saw a large decrease in the suspension rate for African American students (over 9 percent) and a slight decrease for white (4.6 percent) and Asian (0.8 percent) students.

The Data Illuminate Social Justice Demands

The data from this school, though perhaps not representative of deaf schools throughout the country, warrants us, as parents and educators, to pay more attention to suspension rates at our nation’s schools for deaf and hard

of hearing students. Of course, suspension may in some cases be necessary, but we need to look at schools for the deaf, just like schools in mainstream education, in light of the negative effect suspensions have on suspended students. To do this, school administrators, teachers, and staff, with the involvement of parents, need to consider what their suspension policies are; they need to consider their suspension rates; and they need to consider if racial, ethnic, or gender disparities exist in policy implementation.

The data may be especially concerning because deaf students of color who received the highest rates of suspension also performed lower academically than Asian and white deaf students at the school (see Figure 6). For example, state data show rates of achievement for Asian and white deaf students in meeting the English Language Arts/Literacy standard that are low—but higher than those of African American and Hispanic/Latinx students. In 2018-2019, for example,

15.38 percent of Asian students and 3.03 percent of white students exceeded the standard, and 7.69 percent of Asian students and 9.09 percent of white students met the standard. In comparison, no African American or Hispanic/Latinx students exceeded the state standard, and not one African American student and only 3.70 percent of Hispanic/Latinx students appear to have met it.

Of course, we recognize that these data are just numbers and do not reveal any full story. Many factors could have an impact on suspension rates. We are unaware of the practices and policies of the school. We are unaware of the reasons for suspensions or the school’s practices and policies related to

Figure 4. Suspension Rates: Males and Females

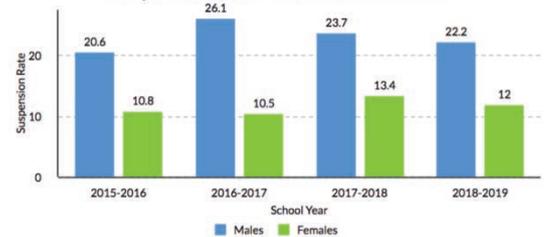


Figure 5. Male Suspension Rate by Race/Ethnicity

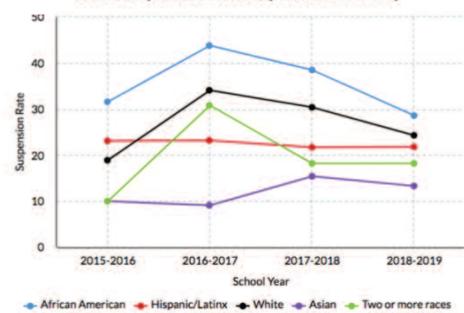
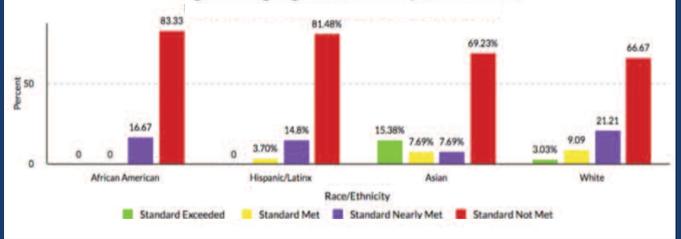


Figure 6. English Language Arts/Literacy (2018-2019)



suspension. We do not know if the school is aware of its suspension rates, the patterns that the rates reflect, or if steps are underway to address the high rate of suspensions.

Fortunately, many research-backed strategies exist that allow a reduction in suspension rates. Schools may help to reduce suspension rates if they:

- Adopt an intervention that encourages teachers and staff to have an empathic mindset about discipline rather than automatically responding punitively toward misbehavior (Okonofua, Paunesku, & Walton, 2016)
- Practice restorative justice as an alternative to suspensions when students misbehave (Fronius et al., 2016)
- Provide professional development focused on unconscious bias for teachers and staff (NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., 2017)
- Enhance school resources to identify and support students who have experienced adverse childhood experiences (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018)
- Adopt a strength-based view of educating African American boys (Wright, 2018)
- Train and support teachers in implementing culturally responsive positive behavior supports (Bal, 2018; Banks & Obiakor, 2015)

Suspension and its implementation are a social justice issue. To create learning environments that foster academic achievement and inclusion, we, as educators who care about the lives of our deaf and hard of hearing students, need to ensure we address the suspension data at our schools. The data for most schools is publically available and can help educators and families bring attention to this too often ignored area of education that has significant

short-term and long-term impacts on all students but especially students of color—and especially those students of color who are male.

Authors' note: Our hope is that this article

will act as a catalyst for educators and parents to look up the suspension rate at their child's school and, if the rate is high, open up a discussion with the school about implementing alternative practices to suspensions.

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