

Students with Disabilities and Suspension Rates: A Cautionary Tale for School Districts

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships among K-12 student attendance rates, English language learners, poverty, suspension rates, and students with disabilities. The setting of this study was 94 school districts from New York State's Nassau and Suffolk counties, a suburban region adjacent to New York City. The results of this study showed that suspension rates had statistically significant and positive correlations with students with disabilities, accounting for 68.89 percent of the variance. As students with disabilities populations increased so did suspension rates by school district. If the results of this study remain consistent with future studies, school district leaders should develop strategies linked with diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as restorative justice practices or other alternatives to suspension to ensure that their students with disabilities, who require additional resources from K-12 school stakeholders to succeed, are not being disproportionately suspended from schools.

I. Purpose

There has been ongoing debate in the research literature regarding the degree to which K-12 school district-wide variables impact students with disabilities (SWDs) populations and how those variables contribute to or impede the student success of such populations. For example, prior research by Forman and Markson (2018) has shown that student attendance rates had positive relationships with student achievement. As attendance rates increased, so did student achievement. However, Fancsali et al. (2019) found that SWDs populations have inverse relationships with attendance rates. As SWDs populations increased in school districts, attendance rates went down. SWDs typically required additional time and resources from school district stakeholders, so that poor attendance rates among this population were detrimental to their success in school. Similarly, SWDs were disproportionately suspended from school, when compared with the overall student population. As was the case with lower attendance rates, suspension from school removed SWDs from instructional time and resources required for their academic success (Fancsali et al., 2019).

Hulse (2021) found that English language learners (ELLs) were overrepresented in SWDs populations in the K-12 schools among several U.S. States, including New York. If ELLs were being wrongfully classified as SWDs, Hulse argued that this became both a civil rights issue and an academic issue. ELLs, who did not demonstrate any mental disabilities, were being treated as SWDs when their barriers to learning were based on language (Hulse, 2021). Royal (2020) also studied why certain populations of students were being overly classified as SWDs. Royal suggested that poverty had a negative impact on brain development which could be detrimental to students' achievement throughout their academic careers. However, Royal found that students living in poverty were disproportionately classified as SWDs due to school psychologists' inability to distinguish economic disadvantages to academic achievement from mental abilities among the students they evaluated (Royal, 2020).

To be sure, there have been ongoing controversies surrounding the various school district-wide variables on populations related to SWDs in the research literature. As a result, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationships among K-12 student attendance rates, English language learners, poverty, suspension rates, and students with disabilities. The strength and directions of these relationships were examined in this study.

II. Theoretical Framework

Anderson (2021) found SWDs were more likely to be suspended or expelled than their general education peers and more likely to be chronically absent. This study used five years of student-level data for all Michigan special education students to examine the relationship between educational setting, absenteeism, and disciplinary outcomes. The researcher suggested that moving students from one setting to a more inclusive setting would not necessarily reduce their likelihood of disciplinary referrals and suspensions.

Morgan et al. (2019) examined whether U.S. schools systemically discriminate when suspending or otherwise disciplining students with disabilities (SWD). This meta-analysis examined 18 prior studies to find relationships of suspension from school and SWDs. The researchers found no strong evidence of any relationship and therefore empirical evidence regarding whether U.S. schools discriminate when disciplining SWDs. Of studies using only individual-level covariates, 65 of 100 estimates (i.e., 65%) indicated that SWDs were more likely to be suspended than students without disabilities. Six of 25 (24%) of the estimates indicated that SWDs were more likely to experience exclusionary discipline. Seven of 25 (28%) of the estimates indicated that SWDs were less likely to experience exclusionary discipline. Descriptive evidence of disparities was insufficient to infer that U.S. schools systemically discriminated when suspending or otherwise disciplining students based on their disability status or, for SWD of color, based on their race or ethnicity.

Cruz and Rodl (2018) investigated student demographics, school context, and school practice factors that were predictors of out-of-school suspension in a diverse school district in California to determine if there were disparities across demographic groups over time. This study examined students' suspension risk over time and confirmed that student-level predictors such as gender, race, and grade level were consistent predictors of suspension, and that school context factors such as suspension rate impacted risk. Results indicated that school practices meant to reduce suspensions were not necessarily ameliorative across time for most demographic groups, but some school practices that academically engaged students at a young age would be more impactful at reducing suspension risk over time.

Anderson and Ritter (2017) found that marginalized students were more likely to receive exclusionary discipline (suspensions/expulsions), even after controlling for the nature and number of disciplinary referrals across Arkansas. Within schools, the disproportionalities in exclusionary discipline (suspensions/expulsions) were driven primarily by non-race factors such as free- and reduced-price lunch eligibility and special education status.

Sullivan et al. (2014) explored patterns and predictors of suspension in a sample of 2,750 students with disabilities in 39 schools in a Midwestern district in Wisconsin. The researchers demonstrated that disability type, gender, race/ethnicity, and free/reduced lunch status were significant predictors of suspension among students with disabilities. The study supported that disability type, gender, race/ethnicity, and free/reduced lunch status were significant predictors of suspension among students with disabilities. Results of this study added to the evidence that students with disabilities may be overexposed to exclusionary discipline.

Krezmien et al. (2006) found through an analysis of Maryland suspension data from 1995 to 2003, a disproportionate number of suspensions of minority students and students with disabilities. The researchers found substantial increases in overall rates of suspensions, as well as disproportionate rates of suspensions for African American students, American Indian students, and students with disabilities. Moreover, students with disabilities had higher suspension ratios than students without disabilities. Students with emotional and behavioral disorders had the highest rates for suspensions, especially for African American students. The data reported by the researchers raised a number of issues about changes in the overall rates of suspension and in the offenses for which students were suspended and the disproportionate impact of suspensions on African American students, American Indian students, and students with disabilities. The researchers questioned whether the costs associated with increases in suspensions were worth the personal costs to students. The researchers also questioned whether zero-tolerance policies in the state have mitigated or exacerbated serious offending.

Skiba et al. (2005) found rates of suspension and expulsion consistently predict district rates of special education disproportionality. The research group confirmed the view that ethnic disproportionality in special education was due in large measure to the impact of poverty. Yet these results joined other researchers' results in suggesting that relationships among poverty, race, achievement, and special education eligibility were complex. The research group also found that district rate of school suspension and expulsion, proved to be the most robust predictor of special education disproportionality. A relationship between racial or ethnic disparities in discipline and special education referral may be further evidence of a general inability on the part of schools to accommodate cultural differences in behavior. Even if it were possible to demonstrate statistically that individual poverty status completely accounted for the variance previously attributed to race in special education disproportionality, that demonstration would still be insufficient to disentangle the fundamental complexity of race, poverty, and special education referral. Clearly, students living in poverty begin school with disadvantages that diminish educational readiness.

Townsend (2000) found that school disciplinary practices for students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities have long been questioned. Moreover, the school discipline of both dominant culture and ethnic minority students have raised concerns. While suspect discipline practices have been used with students across ethnic backgrounds, they have been found to be disproportionately meted out to African American students. Townsend suggested that culturally responsive instructional and management strategies mitigate school suspensions and expulsions of African American

children and youth. The researcher further indicated that school discipline practices disproportionately excluded African American students from opportunities to learn. Townsend recommended that schools address this phenomenon by examining their discipline data, their discipline policies, and their instructional practices incorporating culturally responsive experiences for those students and their families. Townsend concluded that reducing the cultural discontinuity students experienced in school settings represented a culturally responsive approach to preventing school exclusion and improving the success of African American children and youth.

III. Data Sources

The New York State Education Department's Data Site for the 2018-2019 school year was the primary source of data for this study. Ninety-four school districts from Long Island's Nassau and Suffolk counties, New York, were included in this study. There were more than 94 school districts in this region. Several school districts were excluded for having unusually small populations of students. For example, those school districts that had less than 100 students in either their high schools or their elementary schools were excluded from this study. Also, some of the school districts in this region were not full K-12 school districts and were also excluded from this study. The 94 school districts in this study only included K-12 school districts because it was the researchers' intentions to keep consistency on full K-12 school district reporting on data that related to attendance rates, ELLs, poverty, suspension rates, and SWDs.

IV. Method

The researchers purposefully chose a pre-pandemic reporting year out of concern that data reporting during the pandemic would skew the data on student attendance and suspension rates as many school districts engaged in remote learning during the pandemic. SWDs were measured by the percent of students classified as such by school district on the New York State Education Department's Data Site (NYSED Data Site, n.d.). SWDs were defined by the New York State Education Department's Data website as the following:

Students with disabilities are those who have been identified as such by the Committee on Special Education and are receiving services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Students with disabilities include those having an intellectual disability; hearing impairment, including deafness; speech or language impairment; visual impairment, including blindness; serious emotional disturbance; orthopedic impairment; autism; traumatic brain injury; developmental delay; other health impairment;

specific learning disability; deaf-blindness; or multiple disabilities and who, by reason thereof, receive special education and related services under the IDEA according to an Individualized Education Program (IEP), Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), or a services plan. (Report Cards Glossary | NYSED Data Site, n.d.)

SWDs, from the 2018-2019 reporting year, were the dependent variable in this study.

Attendance rates, ELLs, poverty, and suspension rates were the independent variables in this study. Attendance was reported as the percent of average daily student attendance by school district. The suspension rate was the number of students suspended (not including in-school suspensions) divided by the number of enrollments in a given school year. English language learners (ELLs) were defined by NYSED as the following:

[T]hose who, by reason of foreign birth or ancestry, speak or understand a language other than English and speak or understand little or no English, and require support in order to become proficient in English and are identified pursuant to Section 154.3 of Commissioner's Regulations. These students are also referred to as Limited English Proficient. (Report Cards Glossary | NYSED Data Site, n.d.)

ELLs were recorded as a percent by school district.

Poverty was measured by the percent of students classified as "economically disadvantaged" by school district. "Economically disadvantaged" was defined by the New York State Education Department's Data website as the following:

those who participate in, or whose family participates in, economic assistance programs, such as the free or reduced-price lunch programs, Social Security Insurance (SSI), Food Stamps, Foster Care, Refugee Assistance (cash or medical assistance), Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), Safety Net Assistance (SNA), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), or Family Assistance: Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). If one student in a family is identified as low income, all students from that household (economic unit) may be identified as low income. (Report Cards Glossary | NYSED Data Site, n.d.)

A Pearson Product-Moment correlation analysis, with a two-tailed test of significance with alpha set at .05, was used to analyze the relationships between the variables.

V. Results

Table 1 illustrated the relationships between K-12 student attendance rates, ELLs, poverty, suspension rates, and SWDs.

Attendance did not have a statistically significant relationship with SWDs, $p > .05$. ELLs also did not have a statistically significant relationship with SWDs, $p > .05$. Similarly, Poverty did not have a statistically significant relationship with SWDs, $p > .05$.

Suspensions had a statistically significant relationship and positive correlation with SWDs, accounting for 68.89 percent of the variance, $p < .05$. As SWDs went up by school district, so did suspension rates.

VI. Conclusion

School District Leaders, School Building Leaders, university researchers, and educators must develop ways to keep schools safe without compromising the quality of education services. Comprehensive and preventive approaches for maintaining school safety which have taken the forefront

over the past few years must become universal to replace punitive and exclusionary procedures. By targeting all students, not just "problem students," comprehensive approaches encourage positive alternatives to maladaptive behavior. Accurate collection and reporting of suspension data can be used by the states, counties, and school districts to track suspension practices, monitor school suspension practices, and evaluate interventions to reduce disproportionate suspensions.

Additionally, it is vital that special educators must be more involved in the development of school disciplinary policies along with alternatives to suspension from school. Special educators at the school, administrative, and state levels should become more proactive in the development of disciplinary policies that promote school safety and limit the influence of inflexible zero-tolerance practices on students in special education whose problem behaviors may be related to their disability.

VII. Implications of the Research

The SWDs within the school districts in this region of the country were not disproportionately represented among

Table 1					
<i>Correlations with SWDs (N = 94)</i>					
		SWDs	Attendance	ELLs	Poverty
Attendance	r	0.05			
	r ²	0.25%			
	p	0.636			
	N	94			
ELLs	r	-0.168	-0.609**		
	r ²	2.82%	37.09%		
	p	0.106	0.000		
	N	94	94		
Poverty	r	-0.088	-0.653**	0.871**	
	r ²	0.77%	42.64%	75.86%	
	p	0.402	0.000	0.000	
	N	94	94	94	
Suspensions	r	0.830**	-0.128	0.064	0.116
	r ²	68.89%	1.64%	0.41%	1.35%
	p	0.000	0.221	0.542	0.267
	N	94	94	94	94

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

the low attendance, ELLs, and children living in poverty populations. As a result, future research should be qualitative in nature, to be highly descriptive on the types of programs or strategies in this region that have prevented SWDs from not being overly represented among these populations. The results of these future studies could potentially better inform educational policies and practices as they relate to SWDs.

Finally, If the results of this study remain consistent with future studies, school district leaders should develop strategies aligned with diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as restorative justice practices and/or other alternatives to suspension to ensure that their students with disabilities, who require additional resources from K-12 school stakeholders to succeed, are not being disproportionately suspended from school.

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