SCHOOL CLIMATE & DISCIPLINE

The elements of school climate include the safety and overall well-being of students, as well as students’ sense of connectedness and schools’ discipline practices and physical environments.

Higher student achievement is associated with safer and more supportive and engaging high schools\(^1\)

Suspensions for ‘willful defiance’ disproportionately impact Latino and African American students\(^2\)
Data Highlights

In 2012, 48% of suspensions in California were due to ‘willful defiance,’ an overly broad and subjective category defined as “disrupting school activities or otherwise willfully defying the valid authority of school staff.” Including disruptive behavior, such as eye rolling, coming to class late or talking back to a teacher. Willful defiance as grounds for suspension and expulsion is problematic because research shows that minority students receive harsher discipline than their peers and are more likely to be suspended when the disciplinary action is subjective and not prescribed. For example, African American students are 3 times more likely to be suspended than White students; and in 9 out of 10 of California’s largest school districts, African American and Hispanic students are suspended and expelled at higher rates than other students.

Suspensions take students out of the classroom, depriving them of valuable instructional time and increasing the likelihood that they will fall behind. Students who are suspended once or more are 6 times more likely to repeat a grade and 5 times more likely to drop out of school. Alternative discipline models such as Restorative Justice and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports can improve school climate, attendance and student achievement rates, and reduce out-of-school suspensions.

Positive school climate, which includes connectedness, is associated with higher academic achievement and healthy behavioral outcomes for students. However, only 43% of California high school students report having a high level of connectedness to their school. Based upon student characteristics, schools that are outperforming expectations on state tests (i.e. “beating the odds”) also report more positive school climates.

Pro-Kid® Policy Agenda

California should address inequitable suspension and expulsion policies that result in disproportionate out-of-school suspensions and missed learning time. To support districts and communities in addressing these factors, policymakers should elevate the importance of monitoring school climate, eliminate or revise statutes that result in disciplinary disparities and encourage training for administrators and teachers to improve school climate and positive discipline strategies in order to better support struggling students.

Momentum

The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) requires districts to monitor school climate and suspension and expulsion rates through their Local Control and Accountability Plans and demonstrate how they are using LCFF funding to improve student success in 8 priority areas, including school climate. Statewide training around school discipline has been elevated through legislation, partnerships with the Superintendent of Public Instruction and revisions to the credential program standards for school administrators.

California law establishes over 20 offenses used to suspend and expel students. In 2013, the California Department of Education began releasing detailed suspension and expulsion data related to “willful defiance,” providing a starting point to better understand the impact of school discipline policies. And while the Administration continues to resist statutory changes to some of the most problematic statutes, local efforts to implement Restorative Justice and/or Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports have been successful in places such as Los Angeles, Richmond and Oakland.

1 The School Climate Index (SCI) provides a state normed, school-level description of several non-academic factors that are known to influence learning success in schools, including (1) Supports and Engagement, (2) Violence, Victimization, and Substance Use at School, and (3) Truancy Incidents. WestEd, “School Climate & Academic Performance Across California High Schools,” 2012, http://californias3.wested.org/resources/33factsheet3_API_20120716.pdf, accessed September 2013.
9 Ibid.