

Understanding School Discipline In California: Perceptions and Practice

Results of a Statewide Survey
of California School Districts

September 10, 2012

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Authors

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About EdSource

EdSource is an independent, non-profit research and policy organization with a 35-year history of excellence in providing independent data and highly respected research, reporting and analysis on key education issues. Its goal is to promote sound education policies, enhance public engagement, and highlight successful practices and strategies that will result in improved learning outcomes.

This survey report, its appendices, and an executive summary are available to download at <http://www.edsource.org/disciplinesurvey>.

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Executive Summary

While school safety is of paramount importance to school administrators, concerns have grown in recent years about the effects of discipline policies on schools and students, and especially their disproportionate impact on African American and Latino students.

Attempts to reform these policies in order to keep students in school whenever possible and lead to more positive outcomes for students have gained momentum in recent months, most prominently in a series of bills approved by the state Legislature and awaiting Governor Jerry Brown's signature.

Yet little is known about how school discipline policies are actually being implemented in California's schools and districts.

To find out, EdSource conducted a survey in the spring of 2012 of school administrators in charge of school discipline policies of all districts in California with a student enrollment of more than 1,000 students.

Responses were received from 315 school districts—a 56 percent response rate—with enrollments totaling 4.1 million, representing two-thirds of all students in California schools.

Responses represented the views of the administrators in charge of school discipline in their districts, typically the superintendent, district discipline officer or other senior administrator.

The following are among our principal findings. More details on these and other findings can be found in the full report on the survey.

School administrators say greatest need is for counselors and other support staff to address discipline problems

When asked how they would spend additional funds to target discipline problems, by far the majority of school district administrators (68 percent) said their highest priority would be additional counselors and other support staff. Other needs rated as high priorities were more training for school staff (52 percent), expanding conflict resolution programs (43 percent), more wrap-around community services (48 percent), and more rehabilitative services for suspended or expelled youth (42 percent). One in four (26 percent) place a high priority on increased security staff and other security measures, although a much higher proportion (42 percent) in high-suspension districts ranked increased security as a high priority.

State budget cuts are having an impact on discipline policies

More than 80 percent of school officials said the state's budget crisis is having an impact on their ability to deal with student behavior and discipline. Only 15 percent said it had "little or no impact."

In general, respondents said that enforcing discipline policies imposes a financial burden on their districts, with 18 percent saying it imposes a heavy burden. The greatest expenses are administrative staff time (82 percent), followed by alternative education and rehabilitative services for expelled youth (51 percent), implementing school security measures (43 percent), and use of legal counsel (30 percent).

Most school administrators rank student discipline and behavior management as a concern in their districts

Four out of five respondents (81 percent) ranked student discipline and behavior management as a concern when compared to other issues they are dealing with in their districts. Only 16 percent ranked it as being of "little concern," and only 3 percent ranked it of "no concern." (Twenty-two percent ranked it as a "major concern," and 59 percent as a "moderate concern.") The proportion ranking it as a "major concern" increased to 38 percent in districts with the highest suspension rates.

Concerns expressed about disproportionate impact of discipline policies

Research indicates that African Americans and to a lesser extent Latinos are disproportionately suspended or expelled in California schools compared with white students.

Two-thirds of respondents expressed concern that their school discipline policies were having a differential impact on students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, with one-third (34 percent) indicating they are "very concerned."

In high-suspension districts, the level of concern was even greater. Almost half of officials (48 percent) said they are "very concerned" and another 32 percent said they are "somewhat concerned."

Administrators seek more district definition of “willful defiance” and “disruption of school activities” categories

Survey respondents overwhelmingly (86 percent) feel that state law gives them adequate flexibility to implement effective discipline policies.

However, they expressed a desire for clearer definitions at the district level of behaviors categorized as “disrupting school activities/willfully defying school authorities,” as described in Section 48900(k) of the California Education Code.

Less than one-third (28 percent) of officials said their districts have clear district-wide definitions of this behavior category. More than half (55 percent) said it would be “very helpful” and 30 percent said it would be “somewhat helpful” to have such definitions. At the same time, officials are divided as to the utility of the category in the first place. Fifty-three percent indicated that they believed it was “useful,” while 47 percent thought it was “open to misinterpretation and overuse.”

“Positive Behavioral Support” used frequently to target discipline problems

By far the most popular single approach for managing and improving student behavior, adopted by 38 percent of districts in our survey, is known as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Principal features of PBIS, which is supported by the U.S Department of Education, involve setting clear school-wide behavior expectations of students, spelling out a continuum of responses for violating those expectations, having students acknowledge appropriate behavior, and relying on data to guide decision-making.

Districts implement a patchwork of alternative approaches to managing school discipline

In addition to PBIS, schools districts are trying out a range of alternative and in many cases lesser-known approaches to handling discipline on their campuses. Nearly half of administrators reported strategies in place in at least some of their schools, some more formal than others, including peer mediation and student courts and programs such as CHAMPS, Character Counts, Safe School Ambassadors, Safe and Civil Schools, Link Crew, Project Impact, Choose Civility, and Second Step.

Only 7 percent of administrators said they have a district-wide “restorative justice” program. As described by the California School Boards Association, instead of focusing on what law or regulation was broken and what punishment is warranted, “this approach asks questions such as: Who was harmed? What are the needs and responsibilities of all affected? How do all the affected parties work together to address needs and repair harms?”

School districts use external community services, but most say these services are inadequate to meet students' needs

Some 27 percent of administrators surveyed indicated that their districts often use services from outside community organizations to address student behavior and discipline problems, and another 47 percent sometimes do. But only 8 percent said that community resources available to help students and families dealing with behavior and discipline problems are “very adequate.” Another 31 percent said they are “somewhat adequate.”

School discipline policies are evolving

Nearly 80 percent of officials on our survey indicated they are currently revising or have revised their school discipline policies at some point during the past five years. Only one in five districts has not revised its policies during that time period.

Two-thirds of suspended high school students are suspended for three or more days

School districts have discretion on how long to suspend students, and generally can do so for up to five days. Responses to this survey suggest that about 65 percent of suspended high school students are suspended for three or more days. Fourteen percent are suspended for the maximum of five days. That number increases to 19 percent in high-suspension schools. At the middle school level, 42 percent of suspended students are suspended for three or more days, while only 10 percent are suspended for that length of time at the elementary level.

Administrators in one in five districts said their districts had ordered expulsion of a student while preferring a different course of action

Administrators in one in five districts (22 percent) said their districts had ordered an expulsion of a student because of stipulations in the state education code when they would have preferred a different course of action. The percentage of administrators who would have preferred taking a different course of action is lowest (15 percent) among districts with low African American and Latino enrollments.

Police officers are present on most high school campuses

Only 10 percent of districts responding to our survey have their own police departments. But another two-thirds (67 percent) utilize police officers from local police departments—usually referred to as “school resource officers.” Seventy percent indicated that police officers are present on all or most of their high school campuses.

Four out of ten districts provide behavior management sessions for parents

A common theme in the literature on school discipline is the need to involve parents in behavior management programs. Forty-four percent of school officials indicated that their districts provided behavior management classes for parents, although another 29 percent indicated they are considering offering them. Although our responses did not indicate the barriers to providing these classes, they do suggest a high level of interest in doing so.

During the past several years, there have been growing concerns regarding the effectiveness of school discipline policies, as well as their disproportionate impact on African American and Latino students. For at least a decade,¹ questions have been raised about district-level “zero tolerance” policies that have contributed to larger numbers of students being suspended or expelled for non-violent offences.

Suspensions refer to out-of-school suspensions, rather than in-school suspensions, where students spend a portion of a day, or even several days in a row, in an alternative setting on their school campus supervised by school personnel.

Attempts to reform school discipline policies in California have gained momentum in recent months, most prominently in a series of bills that have been approved by the state Legislature and are currently awaiting Governor Jerry Brown’s signature. Yet little is known about how school discipline policies are actually being implemented in individual districts across the state.

To find out, EdSource conducted a survey in the spring of 2012 of administrators in charge of school discipline policies of all California districts with a student enrollment of more than 1,000 students. It is the first such survey to be conducted of California school districts. Responses were received from 315 school districts—a 56 percent response rate. These districts, with enrollments totaling 4.1 million, educate two-thirds of all students in California schools.

This report sheds light on a wide range of issues related to school discipline, including school administrators’ views on the adequacy of state laws and regulations, the costs of imposing school discipline policies, the extent to which districts are relying on alternative approaches to school discipline, the use of data to improve student discipline outcomes, and the average length of suspensions.

With the assistance of the Field Research Corporation, which has been operating The Field Poll in California since 1947, EdSource sent surveys to the 563 California school districts that had student enrollments of more than 1,000 students. The surveys asked about district-level school discipline policies in spring of 2012. Districts were requested to designate the official most familiar with school discipline policies to complete the 51-item survey either online or by mail. In most cases, the district superintendent completed the survey. Out of 563 school districts, 315 responded to the survey, yielding a response rate of 56 percent.

In addition to analyzing all survey items for all 315 districts sampled, we explored district-level variation by disaggregating the results by race and ethnicity, and suspension rates.

Race and Ethnicity

Districts were sorted into one of three categories based on 2011-12 district-wide enrollment: 1) African American and Latino students comprised 66 percent or more of enrollment, 2) African American and Latino students comprised between 33 percent and 65 percent of enrollment, and 3) African American and Latino students comprised less than 33% of enrollment. More than one-third (34%) of the districts in the sample had a student population that was 66 percent or more African American and Latino.

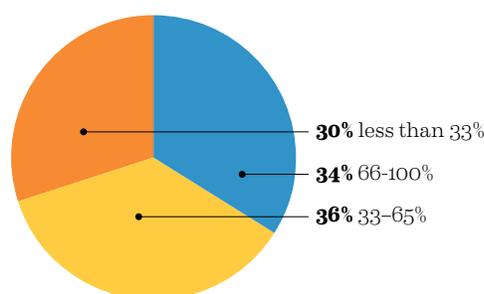
Suspension Rates

Finally, districts were sorted into one of three categories based on the share of total students issued an out-of-school suspension at least once in 2009 based on data collected by the Office of Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education: 1) “High” (9 percent or more students were suspended), 2) “Medium” (between 4–8 percent of students were suspended, and 3) “Low” (less than 4 percent of students were suspended). Twenty-eight percent of the districts in the sample were “high suspension” districts.

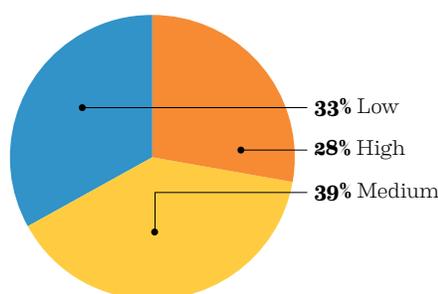
For detailed information about the sample, methodology and data sources used to analyze district characteristics, please see Appendix A.

315 Districts Sampled:

African American and Latino Enrollment



Suspension Rates



1. School administrators say the greatest need is for additional counselors and other support staff

When asked how they would spend additional funds to target discipline problems, by far the majority of survey respondents (68 percent) said their top priority would be additional school counselors and other support staff. Other needs rated as high priorities were: more training for school staff (52 percent), more wrap-around community services (48 percent), expanding conflict resolution programs (43 percent), and more rehabilitative services for suspended or expelled youth (42 percent).

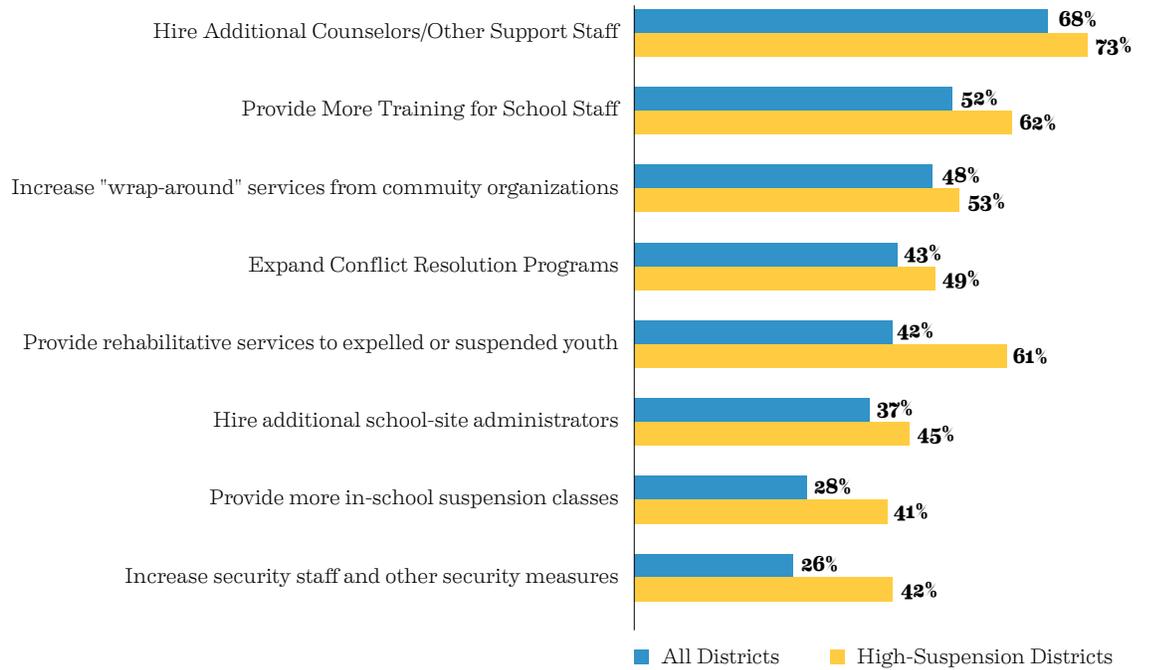
Fewer officials placed a high priority on hiring additional school-site administrators (37 percent), adding in-school suspension classes (28 percent), and increasing security staff (26 percent).

In districts with the most suspensions, a larger proportion of officials placed a higher priority on the need for additional counselors and support staff (73 percent), more training to school personnel (62 percent), more rehabilitative services for suspended or expelled youth (61 percent), bolstering security staff and other security measures (42 percent), and providing more in-school suspension classes (41 percent).

The need for more counseling is especially notable in light of the significant number of reductions in school counselors in districts across the state in recent years. These reductions occurred primarily at the high school level, given the rarity of counseling at elementary schools. A recent EdSource survey of the state's 30 largest districts showed a 20 percent reduction during this period (from about 3,000 school counselors to 2,400) since the beginning of the Great Recession in 2007-08.² (See Figure 1 on page 11)

Question:

If additional resources were available to help your district better meet its goals for student behavior and discipline, how much priority would you place on each of the following district actions?

Figure 1**High Priority Actions by Districts if Additional Resources Were Available**

2. State budget cuts are having an impact on discipline policies

Four in ten district administrators surveyed said that the state's budget crisis is having a "major impact" on their ability to deal with student behavior and discipline problems. (See Figure 2.) Only 15 percent said it has had "little or no impact." That is even more the case in high-suspension districts, where more than half of officials (52 percent) said that the state's budget crisis has had a major impact.

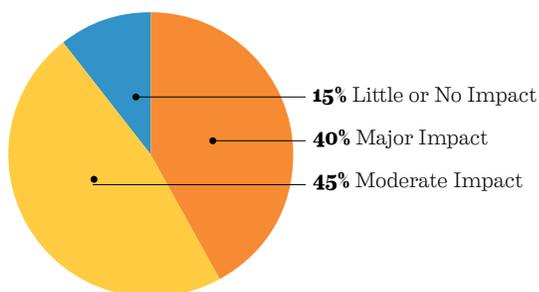
The state's budget crisis aside, 75 percent of respondents said that enforcing discipline policies imposes a financial burden on their districts, with 19 percent saying it imposes a "heavy burden." The greatest expenses are described in Figure 3: administrative staff time (82 percent), followed by alternative education and rehabilitative services for expelled youth (51 percent), implementing school security measures (43 percent), and use of legal counsel (30 percent).

Question:

What impact has the state's ongoing budget crisis had your district's ability to deal with student behavior and discipline?

Figure 2

Impact of State Budget Crisis on Discipline Policies

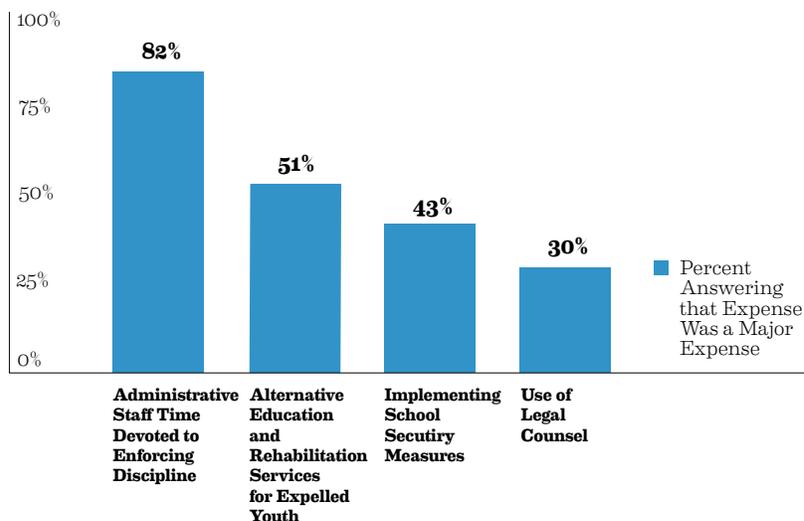


Question:

When enforcing school discipline, please indicate which types of expenses represent a major expense to the district?

Figure 3

Major Expenses Related to Discipline Enforcement



Several school districts also cited the costs of campus supervisors and truancy officers and lost Average Daily Attendance (ADA) revenues. A smaller number referred to the costs of graffiti and vandalism repairs, hiring counselors and security guards, and installing cameras.

3. Four out of five administrators rank student discipline and behavior management as a concern in their districts

Four out of five officials (81 percent) ranked student discipline and behavior management as a concern relative to other issues they are dealing with in their districts. Only 16 percent ranked it as being of “little concern” and only 3 percent ranked it of “no concern.” Twenty-two percent ranked it as a “major concern” and 59 percent as a “moderate concern.” The proportion ranking it as a “major concern” increased to 38 percent in high-suspension districts. In school districts with less than one-third enrollments of African American and Latino students, only 11 percent of officials ranked student discipline and behavior management as a “major concern.” (See Table 1.)

Table 1

“How Highly Does Student Discipline and Behavior Management Rank as a Concern in Your District?”

	Major Concern	Moderate Concern	Little Concern	Not a Concern	Total
All Districts	22%	59%	16%	3%	100%
% African American and Latino					
66-100%	25%	64%	11%	0%	100%
33-65%	28%	56%	15%	2%	100%
< 33%	11%	59%	24%	7%	100%
Suspension Rate					
High	38%	55%	6%	0%	100%
Medium	24%	60%	13%	2%	100%
Low	8%	62%	27%	3%	100%

Suspension rates measured by share of students that were suspended in 2009.

High: 9 percent or more students suspended

Medium: 4-8 percent of all students suspended

Low: less than 4 percent of students suspended

4. Concerns expressed about impact of discipline policies on students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds

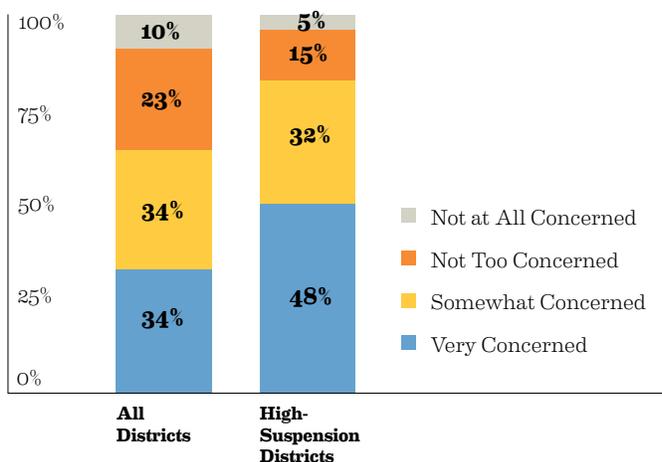
Research indicates that African Americans and to a lesser extent Latinos are disproportionately suspended or expelled compared with white students.³

Two-thirds of survey respondents (68 percent) expressed concern that their school discipline policies are having a differential impact on students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, with 34 percent saying they were “very concerned.” (See Figure 4.)

Question:

How concerned is your district about whether its disciplinary policies are affecting racial and ethnic student populations differently?

Figure 4
Race and Ethnicity: Concern About Differential Impact of Disciplinary Policies



In high-suspension districts, almost half of officials (48 percent) said they were “very concerned” and another 32 percent said they were “somewhat concerned.”

5. Administrators seek district definition of “willful defiance” and “disruption of school activities” categories

School officials overwhelmingly (86 percent) feel that state law gives them adequate flexibility to implement effective discipline policies. (See Figure 5.)

A slightly higher proportion (92 percent) of officials from high-suspension districts say that is the case. This finding is consistent across districts with different levels of African American and Latino enrollments.

State law gives districts considerable discretion in deciding whether to suspend or to expel students for a range of behaviors. But, also in this area, district administrators by a large majority say they don't think state law should be more explicit in distinguishing between suspendable or expellable behaviors.

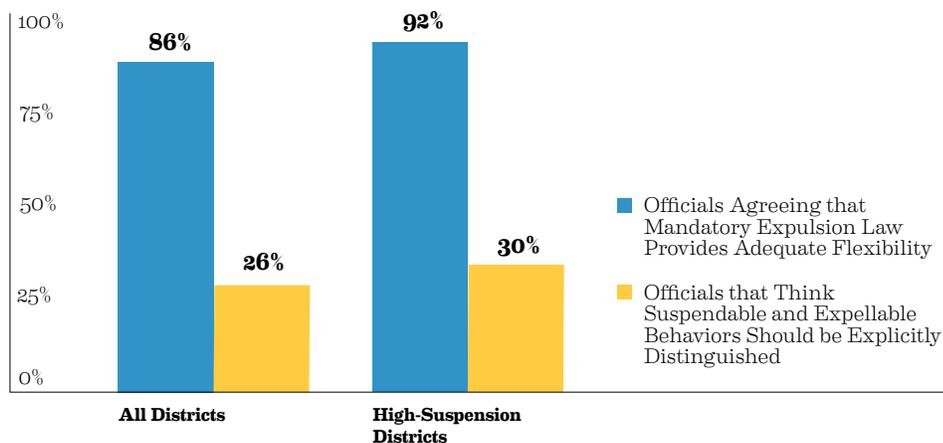
Question

■ Do you feel state law regarding mandatory expulsion provides adequate flexibility for your district to implement an effective student discipline policy?

■ The state's Education Code identifies a range of behaviors as possible grounds for either suspension or expulsion. Do you think state law should be more explicit in distinguishing between suspendable and expellable behaviors?

Figure 5

Views on Adequacy of State Laws



“Willful defiance” and “disruption of school activities”

However, 85 percent of survey respondents did express a desire for a clearer definition within their districts of what constitutes the behavior category of “willful defiance/disruption of school activities.”

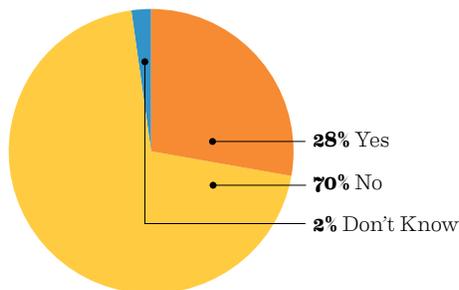
Section 48900(k) of the California Education Code says a student can be suspended or expelled if he or she “disrupted school activities or otherwise willfully defied the valid authority of supervisors, teachers, administrators, school officials, or other school personnel engaged in the performance of their duties.” During the past school year, some 42 percent of all suspensions in California were attributed to such behavior. However, these terms are largely undefined and open to substantial interpretation by school officials.⁴

Less than one-third (28 percent) of administrators say their districts have clear district-wide definitions of this behavior category. (See Figure 6.) More than half (55 percent) say it would be “very helpful” and 30 percent say it would be “somewhat helpful” to have such district-wide definitions. (See Figure 7 on page 17.)

Question:

Does your district have a clear district-wide definition about which behaviors fall into the category of “disruption of school activities” and “willful defiance”?

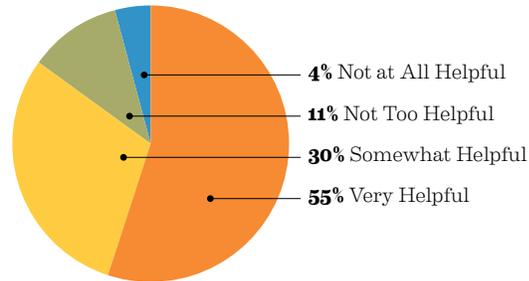
Figure 6
District Has Clear, District-wide Definitions of “Disruption” and “Willful Defiance”



Question:

How helpful would it be for there to be a clear district-wide definition of behaviors that constitute a “disruption of school activities” and those that constitute “willful defiance”?

Figure 7
Need for District-wide Definitions of
“Disruption” and “Willful Defiance”



At the same time, officials are divided as to the utility of the category in the first place. Fifty-three percent indicated that they believe it is “useful,” while 47 percent thought it was “open to misinterpretation and overuse.”

6. There is little uniformity in alternative approaches to managing school discipline

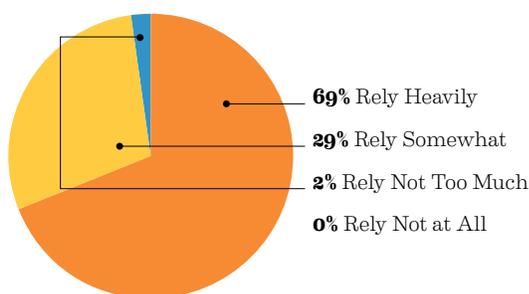
Our survey shows a wide range of strategies have been adopted by the majority of California districts to reduce discipline problems in their districts, and to lower suspension and expulsion rates.

Almost all respondents said their districts “rely heavily” (69 percent) or “rely somewhat” (29 percent) on establishing clear rules for appropriate behavior and clear consequences for misbehavior. (See Figure 8.)

Question:

When dealing with student misbehavior as part of your district’s overall discipline policy, to what extent does your district rely on clear rules for appropriate behavior and consequences for misbehavior?

Figure 8
District Reliance on Clear Rules and Consequences



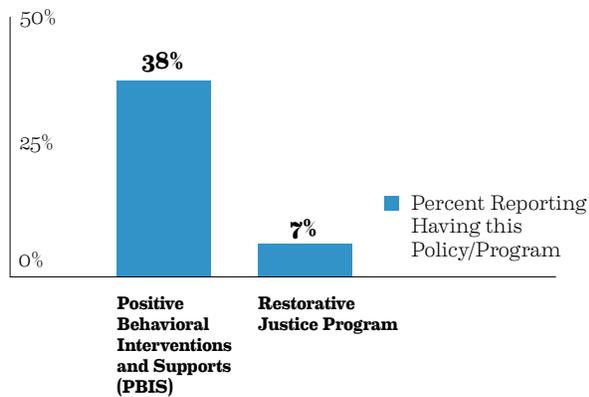
Many districts have also implemented more formalized alternative approaches to behavior management.

By far the most popular approach is Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), which 38 percent of respondents said is a district-wide policy. (See Figure 9.) Principal features of PBIS, which is endorsed by the U.S. Department of Education, involve setting clear school-wide behavior expectations of students, spelling out a continuum of responses for violating those expectations, having students acknowledge appropriate behavior, and relying on data to guide decision-making.⁵

Question:

Does your district have district policies for each of the following programs that are aimed at reducing student suspensions and expulsions?

Figure 9
Programs Aimed at Reducing Suspensions and Expulsions



Only 7 percent of administrators (representing 21 school districts) said they have a district-wide “restorative justice” program. Such programs have been introduced in several California school districts, notably in Oakland,⁶ Richmond⁷ and San Francisco.⁸ Definitions and implementation of restorative justice vary. The California School Boards Association refers to the approach as “a way of thinking about justice as a process for healing rather than for punishment” that focuses on “how do all affected parties together address needs and repair harms.”⁹

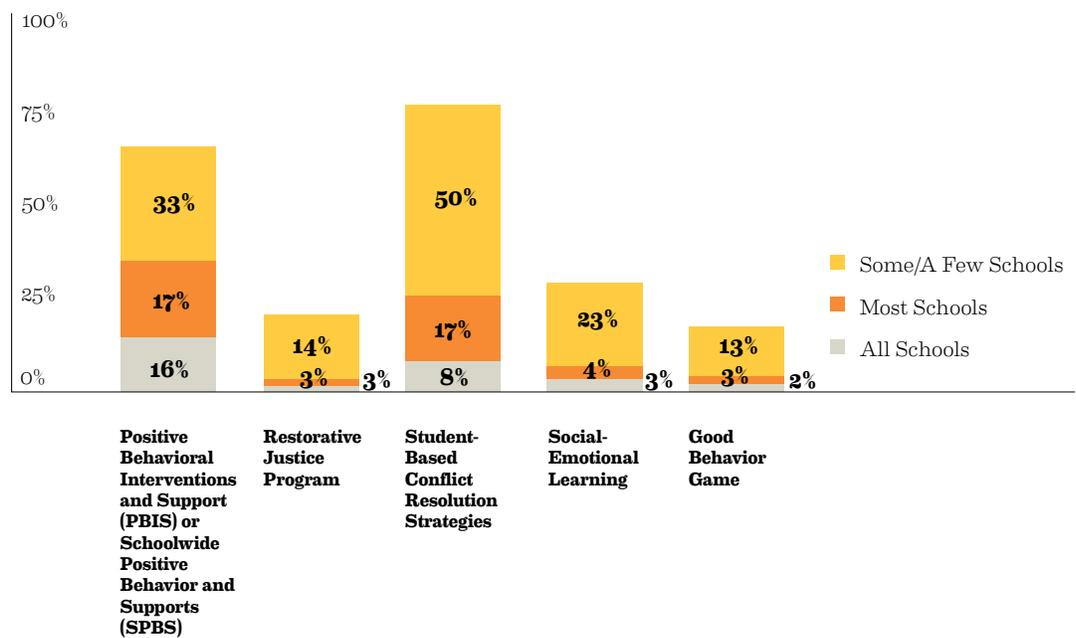
Other approaches that school districts employ in all or most of their schools are student-based conflict resolution strategies such as peer mediation and student courts (25 percent), social-emotional learning programs (7 percent),¹⁰ and the Good Behavior Game (5 percent).¹¹ (See Figure 10).

Question:

About what proportion of the schools in your district employ each of the following strategies to reduce student suspensions and expulsions?

Figure 10

Proportion of Schools with Alternative Discipline Strategies



Nearly half of districts reported having a patchwork of strategies in at least some of their schools, some more formal than others, including such programs as Character Counts, Safe School Ambassadors, Safe and Civil Schools, Link Crew, Project Impact, Choose Civility, and Second Step.

7. Nearly half of school administrators say that community resources are inadequate

At a time when school districts are having to cut back on counseling and other services that in the past might have helped schools cope with student behavior and discipline problems, respondents indicated that they do rely on non-school, community-based resources to assist them in working with students subject to disciplinary action.

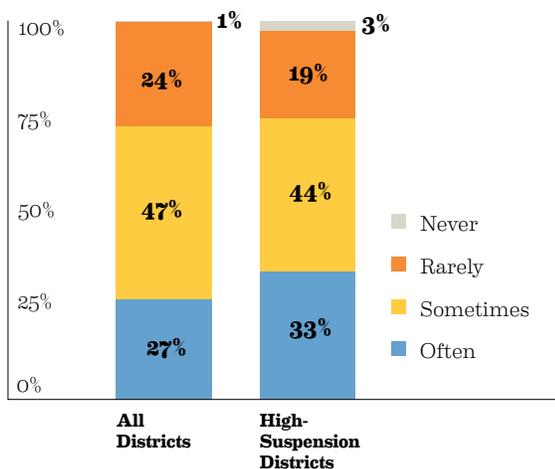
As noted above, 48 percent of districts (and 53 percent in high-suspension districts) said that if they had additional funds they would place a high priority on using those funds to access “wrap-around” mental health, counseling, and other services from community organizations.

However, only about one in four respondents (27 percent) said their schools “often” use outside community resources and organizations to help them address student behavior. (See Figure 11.)

Question:

How often do the schools in your district use services from outside community resources and organizations to address student behavior and discipline problems?

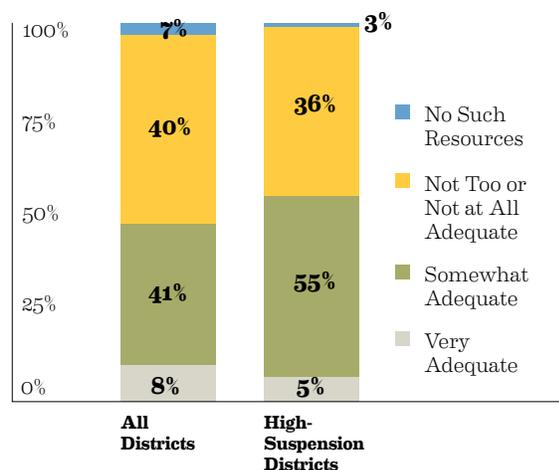
Figure 11
Frequency of Use of Community Resources



Question:

How adequate are the non-school resources in the communities around your schools in helping students with behavior and discipline issues?

Figure 12
Adequacy of Community Resources



One reason may be that fewer than one in ten (8 percent) of survey respondents said that these resources are “very adequate.” (See Figure 12.) Another 41 percent said they are “somewhat adequate.”

The proportion of respondents ranking community services as “very adequate” was even lower in high-suspension districts, where only 5 percent of respondents said that community resources and organizations are “very adequate”—despite a higher percentage (33 percent) who said they “often” rely on them. (See Figure 11 on page 21.)

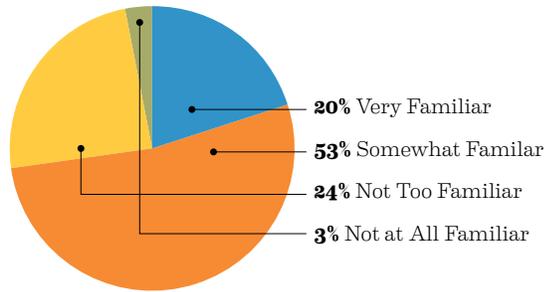
The California School Boards Association has underscored the importance of drawing up an inventory of district programs, services, and community resources available to help schools with safety concerns so that school-site officials have a way to easily access them.¹²

Almost four out of five (78 percent) of districts said they maintain an up-to-date list of all resources available to the district, including community-based ones.

Just over half of respondents (53 percent) believe that school site personnel are “somewhat familiar” with these resources, while only 20 percent said they believe they are “very familiar” with them. (See Figure 13 on page 23.)

Question:

From your perspective, how familiar are school-site personnel with the community resources available to help students with behavior and discipline issues?

Figure 13**Familiarity of School Personnel with Community Resources**

8. Most high school suspensions are for three or more days

Schools are allowed to suspend students for up to five days, but the California Department of Education does not collect data on the length of each suspension.

Administrators taking the survey reported that in the elementary grades by far the majority of suspensions are for one or two days (59 percent and 31 percent respectively). Only 5 percent of suspensions are for three days. (See Figure 14.)

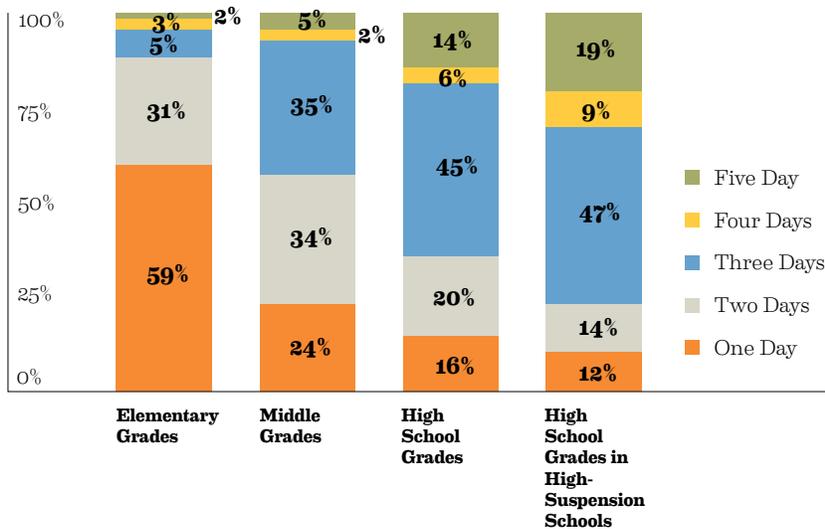
In the middle grades, many more suspensions are for three days (35 percent)—a big jump from the 5 percent reported at the elementary level. At the high school level, respondents report that the proportion rises to 45 percent.

In high schools with the highest suspension rates, a higher proportion of suspensions—19 percent—were for five days, compared to 14 percent at all high schools in the districts in our sample.

Question:

Apart from longer suspensions pending an expulsion hearing, what is the most common length of suspensions for your district's students in the following grades?

Figure 14
Length of Suspensions by Grade Levels



9. School discipline policies are subject to revision

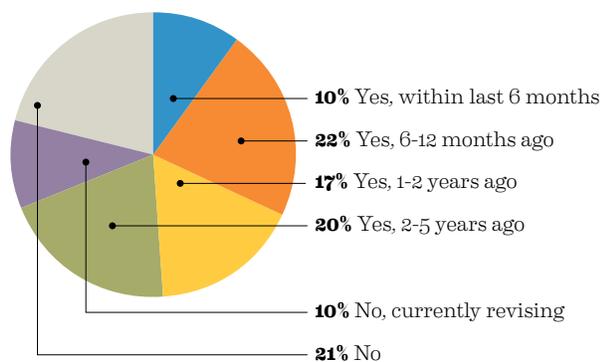
Seventy-nine percent of districts indicated they have revised their school discipline policies at some point during the past five years or are currently revising them. Only one in five districts has not revised its policies during that time period. (See Figure 15.)

Question:

Has your district substantially re-vised its school discipline policies within the last five years?

Figure 15

Revision of School Discipline Policies



These changes may have come about in response to changes in legislation, as well as local needs and policies. However, they may also suggest that school districts are not rigidly sticking to their discipline policies, but are open to change.

Nearly one-third of survey respondents said they'd be interested in serving on a task force "to recommend improvements in school discipline policies, identify best practices, and suggest policy changes at a local, state and federal level." Another 41 percent said they may be interested in participating in such a task force, but would like more information.

10. The majority of districts would benefit from having more data

Several organizations—most notably the American Psychological Association's Zero Tolerance Task Force—have stressed the importance of basing discipline procedures and programs on data to ensure they contribute to improved school safety and student behavior.¹³

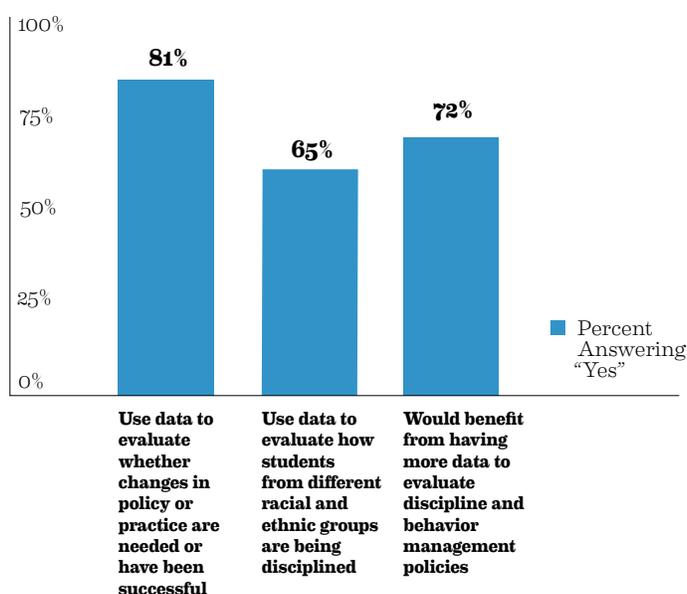
Four out of five respondents (81 percent) indicated that they use data to evaluate the effectiveness of their discipline policies, and to identify the behaviors that pose the biggest challenge in their districts. (See Figure 16.) A lower percentage (65 percent) said they use data to evaluate how students from different racial and ethnic groups are being disciplined, a possible area of concern.

Yet the great majority of officials (72 percent) say they would benefit from having more data. The responses we received did not, however, explain why and how they could benefit from additional data.

Question:

Please indicate whether your district collects and uses data to evaluate its school discipline and behavior management policies in each of the following areas:

Figure 16
Use of Data to Evaluate Discipline Policy



11. Administrators say the majority of teachers receive training in a range of issues related to school discipline

Consistent with the overarching principle that discipline should be part of the learning process for students, the American Psychological Association's Zero Tolerance Taskforce stressed the need for educators to be trained in behavior management, including "culturally responsive" classroom management and instruction, and for principals to work with teachers to define which offenses should be referred to the office for further disciplinary action.

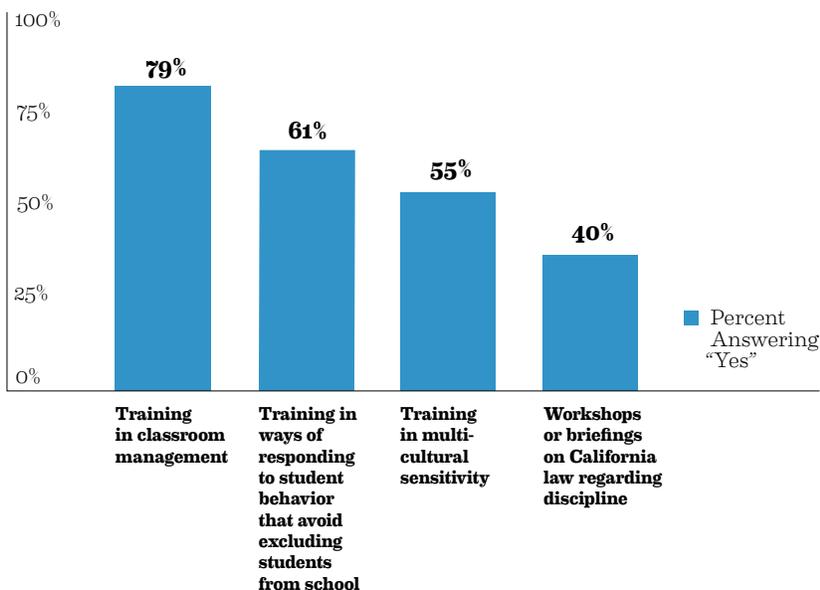
In our survey, 61 percent of respondents said that teachers receive training in alternatives to excluding students from the classroom through suspension or expulsion. (See Figure 17.) Similarly, 79 percent said teachers receive training in classroom management, and 55 percent said they are trained in multi-cultural sensitivity.

Question:

Does your district provide teachers any of the following kinds of training related to student behavior and discipline?

Figure 17

District-Provided Teacher Training



These responses indicate that the majority of teachers are receiving training in various issues related to student discipline. Yet they also indicate that large numbers of teachers appear to receive little or no training along these lines.

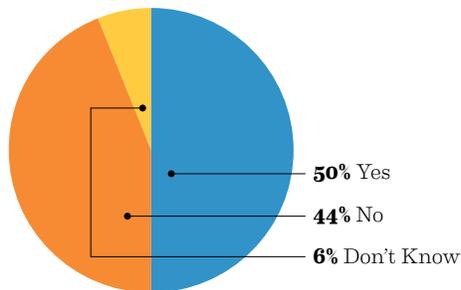
On the survey, only 40 percent of districts indicated that they offer workshops or briefings for teachers on California law covering student discipline.

Similarly, while about half of districts said they do have written guidelines as to when teachers should refer students to the principal's office, rather than address behavioral issues in the classroom, 44 percent said they don't have such guidelines. (See Figure 18.)

Question:

Does your district have written guidelines for when teachers should refer students to the principal's office, rather than address behavioral issues in the classroom?

Figure 18
Written Guidelines for Referrals to Principal's Office



12. Some districts order an expulsion of a student when preferring a different course of action

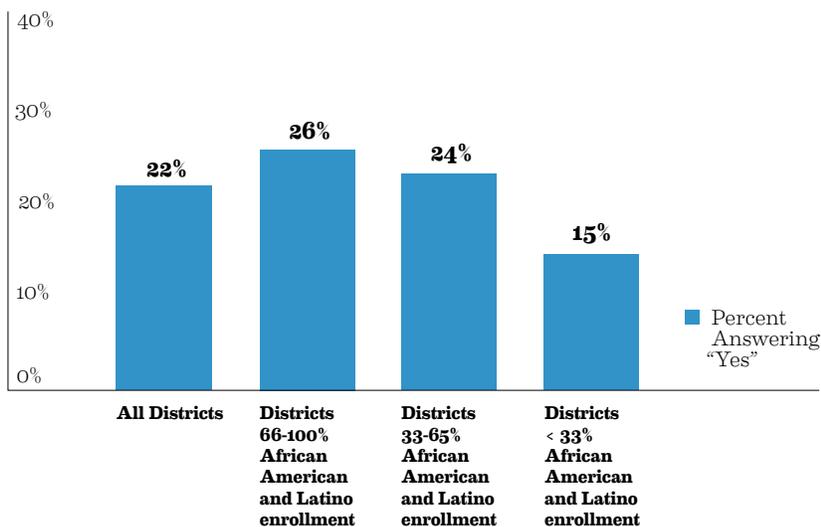
Administrators in one in five districts (22 percent) said they had ordered an expulsion of a student because of stipulations in state law when they would have preferred a different course of action. (See Figure 19.) The percentage of officials who would have preferred taking a different course of action is lowest (15 percent) among districts with the lowest African American and Latino enrollments.

Question:

Because of state law regarding mandatory expulsion, are you aware of your district ordering the expulsion of a student when it preferred a different course of action?

Figure 19

Districts Ordering Expulsion When Preferring an Alternative Action



13. In-school suspensions are available on most campuses, but are not the norm

There has been growing recognition that if students are able to serve their suspensions on their school campuses, they are more likely to not get into further trouble while away from school, and to stay connected to the school environment and hence be at less risk for dropping out.¹⁴

However, in-school suspensions are far from the norm in California schools. (See Table 2.) At the elementary school level, administrators in 26 percent of districts say students serve their suspensions all or most of the time in classrooms on their campuses. That percentage drops to 13 percent at the middle and high school levels.

Table 2

“How often do your district’s students in the following grades serve suspensions in school, such as in a supervised classroom?”

	Always	Most of the Time	Some of the Time	Rarely	Never	Don't Know	Total
Elementary Grades	1%	25%	41%	22%	10%	2%	100%
Middle Grades	0%	13%	58%	22%	5%	2%	100%
High School Grades	1%	12%	50%	23%	12%	2%	100%

14. Districts rarely transfer students to a continuation school or other alternative placement in lieu of suspension or expulsion

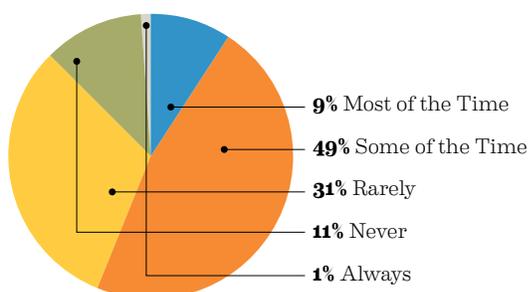
Research suggests placement in alternative education settings, rather than pushing students out altogether, may help them stay in school.¹⁵ However, only 10 percent of administrators in our survey indicated that they “always” or “most of the time” transfer high school students to a continuation school or other alternative placement instead of suspending or expelling them. (See Figure 20.)

Question:

How often does your district transfer students to a continuation school or other alternative placement for disciplinary reasons instead of suspending or expelling them?

Figure 20

Transfers to Alternative Placements Instead of Suspensions/Expulsions



Further research is required to explain the extent to which the use of alternative placements is determined by decisions made by school officials based on the specific offense or circumstance, the overall availability of alternative placements, or the quality of those placements when they are available.

15. The majority of districts don't provide behavior management sessions for parents

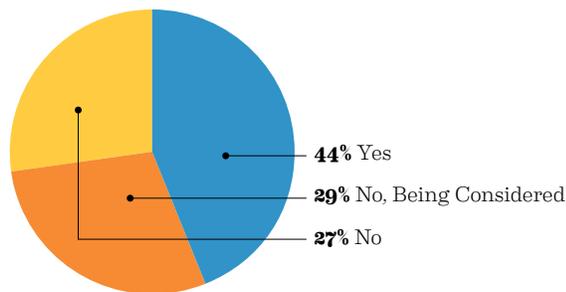
A common theme in the literature on school discipline is the need to involve parents in behavior management programs.¹⁶ Forty-four percent of school officials indicated that their districts provided behavior management classes for parents, although another 29 percent indicated they are considering offering them. (See Figure 21.)

Question:

Does your district offer behavior management classes or sessions for parents that are aimed at reducing student behavior problems in schools?

Figure 21

Behavior Management Classes for Parents



16. Police officers are present on most high school campuses

Concerns have been raised that the presence of police officers on school campuses may inadvertently result in harsher punishment of students, and contribute to pushing them out of school unnecessarily, or even permanently.¹⁷ A recent report on New York schools found that African American students were disproportionately arrested by police officers.¹⁸ “All indicators point to police personnel becoming involved in disciplinary infractions that should be handled by educators,” the New York Civil Liberties Union noted.

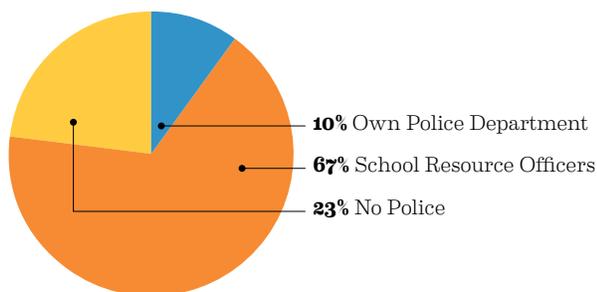
Our survey indicates that only 10 percent of California districts have their own police departments. (See Figure 22.) But another two-thirds (67 percent) utilize police officers from local police departments—usually referred to as “school resource officers.”

Question:

Does your district have its own police department, or does it rely on school resource officers from local departments?

Figure 22

District Use of Police



As defined by the Center for the Prevention of School Violence, a school resource officer is a “certified law enforcement officer permanently assigned to provide coverage to a school or a set of schools . . . specifically trained to perform three roles: law enforcement officer, law-related counselor, and law-related education teacher.”¹⁹

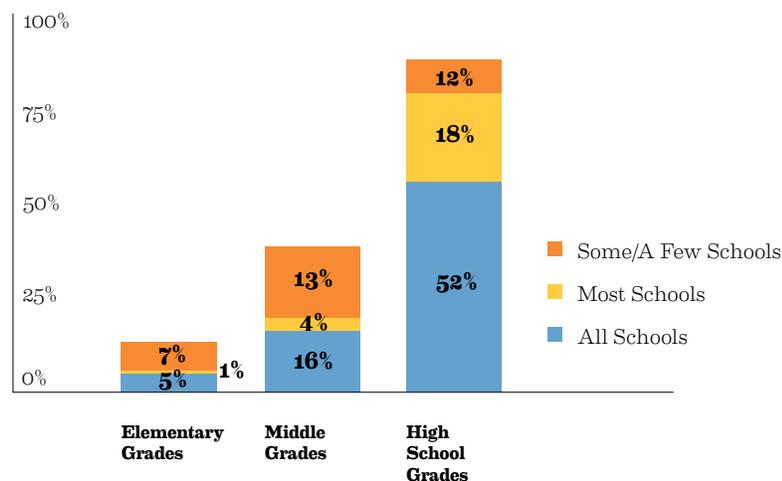
The presence of police officers varies considerably depending on the grade level. (See Figure 23.) At the elementary level, police officers are present on all school campuses in only 5 percent of districts surveyed; officers are present on all middle school campuses in 16 percent of districts surveyed. At the high school level, however, the number increases to 52 percent of the districts surveyed having officers present on all campuses; another 18 percent of the high school districts surveyed said they had officers in most schools.

Question:

About what proportion of your district schools in the following grades have police officers stationed for student monitoring and disciplinary purposes?

Figure 23

Presence of Police on Campus

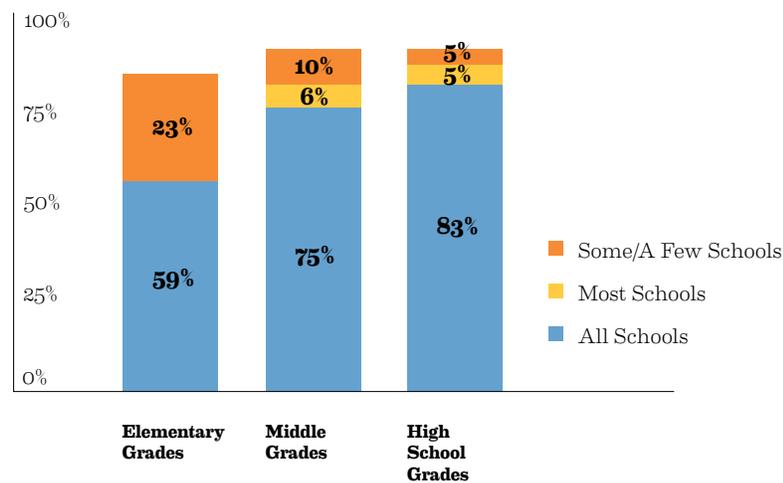


Similarly, the proportion of armed police officers on all campuses rises depending on the grade level—59 percent of respondents whose districts have police officers on their campuses said they are armed in all their elementary schools, 75 percent in all their middle schools, and 83 percent in all their high schools. (See Figure 24.)

Question:

About what proportion of the police officers assigned to each type of school are armed?

Figure 24
Armed Police Officers on Campus



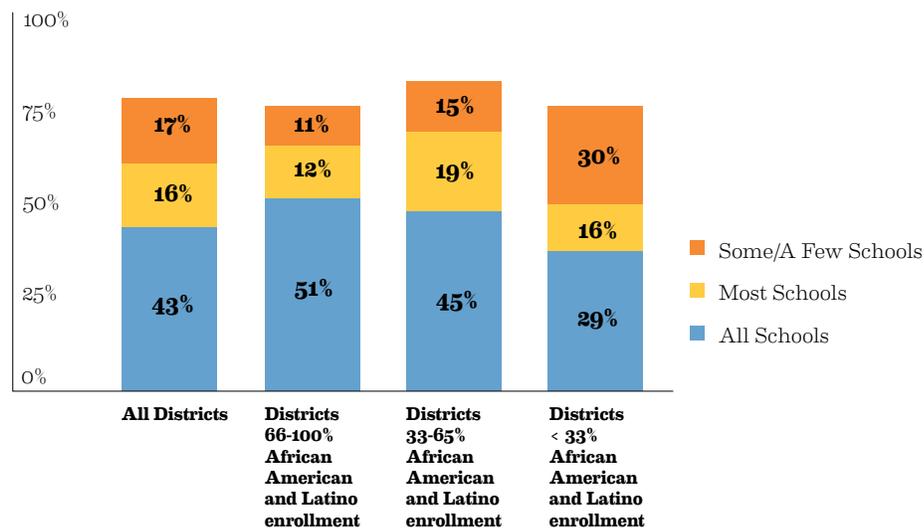
Interestingly, only 26 percent of administrators overall placed a high priority on increasing security staff and other security measures—a far lower percentage than other priorities they listed, such as additional counselors.

However, in high-suspension districts, 42 percent of administrators placed a high priority on increasing security on their campuses.

17 Few schools use metal detectors, while many deploy video cameras

The majority of survey respondents said that all or most of their high schools have video cameras on their campuses for disciplinary purposes (59 percent). (See Figure 25.) The higher the proportion of African American and Latino students, the more likely campuses are to have video cameras. Only a very small number (5 percent) of districts report having metal detectors in all of their high schools.

Figure 25
Video Cameras on High School Campuses



This survey represents a first step toward gaining a deeper understanding of how school discipline policies are being implemented on school campuses in California

Our findings have implications for policy in several areas:

- The state budget crisis is having an impact on school districts' abilities to enforce discipline policies, providing another reason for the state to minimize the impact of the crisis on schools. In particular, administrators say funding for additional counseling and student support services should be a high priority.
- Administrators stress the need for their districts to more clearly define what behaviors constitute "willful defiance" and "disruption of school activities." Given the high percentage of suspensions for these behaviors, further clarification at a district level could have an impact on overall levels of suspensions in the state.
- In light of the patchwork of alternative approaches being implemented on school campuses across the state, additional research is needed to determine which approaches are the most effective. In particular, the impact of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports deserves further study, given that nearly 40 percent of school districts have adopted the approach in some form or another.
- Suspensions of three days or more that officials report in the middle grades—and the substantial increase of three-day suspensions when compared to the elementary grades—is cause for concern and warrants further examination.²⁰
- Increased training for teachers and parents could bolster current and future practice, provide a consistent framework for behavior improvement strategies, and support a range of preventive practices.
- Because districts indicate their need to access community resources, additional research is needed to establish which resources they believe are of primary importance. But at the very least, efforts must be made to ensure that available resources are brought to the attention of school site personnel and utilized where appropriate.

- The sporadic use of in-school suspensions as well as alternative placements underscore the potential for an expansion of these school-based programs as an alternative to pushing students out of school altogether. However, regardless of their desirability, the costs of alternative placements and programs could severely restrict a district's ability to provide them, and ways to underwrite them will need to be found.
- The impact of police officers and other security personnel on most high school campuses in California is not known. Further research in this area will help highlight whether their presence contributes to pushing out students unnecessarily from school (the so-called school-to-prison pipeline), or whether their contribution to a safe environment trumps other considerations.
- Given the need for more data expressed by the majority of district administrators we surveyed, steps should be taken to expand data collection efforts, even on a voluntary basis. Currently, California school districts are required to submit minimal data to the California Department of Education as part of the Uniform Management Information Reporting System (UMIRS).²¹

But in light of the importance of data for assessing the effectiveness of discipline policies, and the need expressed by the majority of school officials we surveyed for more data, steps should be taken to expand data collection efforts, even on a voluntary basis. A possible model could be the plan proposed this spring by the Los Angeles Unified School District to collect suspension data at a classroom and teacher level.²²

The principal goal of California schools is to provide all students with access to a high quality education that prepares them for college and career while at the same time ensuring that schools are safe and orderly places of learning.

Balancing those two imperatives present significant challenges, and, as our survey indicates, doing so has become even more challenging as a result of the state's budget crisis. The expulsions of about 18,000 students from California schools each year, along with some 700,000 suspensions inevitably means that students are removed from the learning environment, at times permanently.

Thus how school discipline is handled on school campuses is not just a local issue but is an urgent one for California as a whole.

While diverse approaches that are responsive to local needs have their advantages, there is also a need to get a clear sense of which strategies are effective, and which are not. Especially important is determining what approaches are also the most cost-effective, given the budgetary constraints on all California school districts.

To that end, EdSource hopes to convene a task force of school officials to recommend improvements in school discipline policies, identify best practices, and suggest policy changes at a local, state and federal level. Encouragingly, one third of respondents to our survey expressed an interest in participating in such a task force.

This survey represents a first step towards getting a clearer sense of school disciplinary policies at a district and school level, as well as the needs of school officials.

What is also clear is that school officials could use additional support, including more counseling and student support services on their campuses, more training of school staff, more “wrap-around” services from community-based organizations, and expanding conflict resolution programs.

Figuring out how to provide some or all of these supports would be in California's long term interests if they could contribute to better learning — and thus lifelong — outcomes for thousands of students whose educational futures may be at risk as a result of ineffective or counter-productive school discipline policies.

Appendix A: Methodology

In the spring of 2012, EdSource sent surveys to the 563 California school districts with student enrollments of more than 1,000 students regarding district-level school discipline policies. These districts serve approximately 98 percent of California's total student enrollment in 2011-12 and are located in 53 of the state's 58 counties. Districts were asked to designate the official most familiar with school discipline policies to complete the 51-item survey. In most cases, the school superintendent completed the survey. In others, the school discipline officer did so. Respondents were given the choice of filling out a "hard copy" of the survey or completing the survey online. Follow-up emails were sent to all non-responding districts, and telephone calls were made to selected districts. The survey was conducted with the assistance of the Field Research Corporation, which has been operating The Field Poll in California since 1947.

Out of 563 school districts, 315 responded to the survey with just over half (53 percent) of the responding districts filling out hard copies of the survey and 47 percent completing the survey online. The survey response rate was 56 percent, and the margin of error is ± 3.6 percent. All data points discussed in the narrative of this report were statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.

Characteristics of Responding Districts

The 315 districts that responded to the survey are located throughout 46 California counties. Just over 4 million students are currently enrolled in these districts, some two-thirds of all students in California public schools. Of the responding districts, 35 percent were elementary school districts (with 2011-12 enrollment totaling 581,999 students), 12 percent were high school districts (with enrollment of 405,392), and the remainder (54 percent) were K-12 unified districts (with enrollment of 3.1 million students).

To conduct analyses disaggregated by race and ethnicity and suspension level, we relied on public-use, district-level data from the California Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights.

Race and Ethnicity

To analyze the share of total enrollment that is African American and Latino in the districts sampled, we merged in 2011-12 district enrollment data made available by the California Department of Education. We designated districts into one of three categories: 1) African American and Latino students comprised 66 percent or more of enrollment, 2) African American and Latino students comprised between 33 percent and 66 percent of enrollment, and 3) African American and Latino students comprised less than 33 percent of enrollment. We explored analyzing the results by poverty status (measured by percent of the district receiving free and reduced priced meals,) but found that it was highly correlated with the share of enrollment that was African American and Latino.

Suspension Rate

Finally, to analyze differences among districts in the share of students that is suspended at least once, we made use of a data spreadsheet prepared by the Civil Rights Project that is based on data from the Office of Civil Rights. This spreadsheet (“Suspension Risk in California”) contains district-level data for a sample of California districts that describes the share of total students that has been suspended at least once in 2009.²³ Districts were separated into one of three categories: 1) “High” (9 percent or more students were suspended), 2) “Medium” (between 4 percent and 8 percent of students were suspended), and 3) “Low” (less than 4 percent of students were suspended). Approximately 75 percent of the districts in our sample had valid data in this spreadsheet. Therefore, disaggregated analyses by suspension rates are based on this smaller subsample of districts (N=235).

The 315 districts surveyed reflect the types of districts (elementary, high, unified) as well as the racial-ethnic and suspension diversity of the 563 California districts that served over 1,000 students. (See Table 1A.)

Table 1A District Characteristics	All Districts Serving >1,000 Students	Sampled Districts
# Districts	563	315
# of Counties	53	46
2011-2012 Enrollment	5,971,614	4,095,576
% of 2011-12 Total Enrollment	96%	66%
Type of District		
Elementary	38%	35%
High	12%	12%
Unified	50%	54%
African American and Latino Enrollment		
66-100%	33%	34%
33-65%	37%	36%
< 33%	30%	30%
Suspension Rate		
High (9% + students suspended)	29%	28%
Medium (4%-8% students suspended)	38%	39%
Low (Less than 4% students suspended)	33%	33%

Appendix B:

List of Formalized Strategies/ Programs Cited by Districts*

Character Counts: a non-profit and non-partisan organization that provides character building programs based on six pillars of character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship. <http://charactercounts.org/>

Challenge Day: a non-profit organization that organizes day-long programs at schools where teens are encouraged to develop positive peer relationships and make a positive change in their community. <http://www.challengeday.org/>

CHAMPS: a professional development program provided by Safe and Civil Schools. During this program, teachers learn how to establish classroom rules and expectations, motivate students, and correct misbehaviors. <http://www.safeandcivilschools.com>

Choose Civility: an initiative of the Stanislaus County Office of Education that promotes civility and positive behavior. This initiative is based on the work of Dr. P.M. Forni, author of *Choosing Civility: the 25 Rules of Considerate Conduct*. <http://www.stancoe.org/civility/index.html>

Link Crew: a high school transition program that helps students feel more comfortable in their first year of high school. <http://www.boomerangproject.com/link/what-link-crew>

Olweus Bullying Program: a bullying prevention program for elementary, middle, and high school students that is designed to improve school climate and culture. <http://www.clemson.edu/olweus/>

Peace Builders: a violence prevention curriculum and professional development program for grades K-12. <http://www.peacebuilders.com/>

Project IMPACT: a program of the University of California, Berkeley Graduate School of Education that supports K-12 classroom teachers who choose to serve in the Bay Area's low-income, low-performing public schools. New teachers are encouraged to join this program and all participants receive a stipend. <http://gse.berkeley.edu/admin/extrel/impact.html>

Safe and Civil Schools: an organization that provides consulting, training, and coaching services based on the PBIS model of research-based positive behavior support. <http://www.safeandcivilschools.com>

Safe School Ambassadors: a program that teaches students non-violent communication and intervention tools to stop bullying and violence on campus. This program is taught by Community Matters. <http://www.community-matters.org/safe-school-ambassadors/>

Second Step: a violence prevention program for grades K-12 that provide lessons for teachers on topics such as problem solving, cooperation, and empathy. <http://cfc.secondstep.org/>

Too Good for Drugs and Violence: a series of lessons for grades K-12 designed to prevent drug use and violence in schools. <https://www.mendezfoundation.org/toogood/whatistoogood>

Yes I Can: a program designed to foster the inclusion of students with disabilities by teaching interpersonal and social skills. <http://www.servicelearning.org/library/resource/784>

VIDA (Vital Intervention Directional Alternatives): a Los Angeles County Sheriff's program that addresses self-esteem, motivating success, and breaking the cycle of criminal behavior. <http://www.vida.la/>

Where Everyone Belongs (WEB): a middle school orientation and transition program that helps 6th and 7th graders feel comfortable in their first year of middle school. <http://www.boomerangproject.com/middle-school-transition>

*These are in addition to the programs cited by a larger number of districts such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Good Behavior Game, Restorative Justice, Social-Emotional Learning programs (SEL), student courts and peer mediation.

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<http://articles.latimes.com/2000/jul/05/local/me-47936>
- 2 Schools Under Stress: Pressures Mount on California School Districts, EdSource, May 2012.
<http://www.edsource.org/pub12-schools-under-stress.html>
- 3 "Opportunities Suspended: The Disparate Impact of Disciplinary Exclusion from School", The Civil Rights Project, UCLA, August 2012.
<http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/resources/projects/center-for-civil-rights-remedies/school-to-prison-folder/federal-reports/upcoming-crr-research/>; "African American Male Achievement Initiative: A Closer Look at Suspensions of African American Males in Oakland Unified School District, Urban Strategies Council, May 2102. http://www.urbanstrategies.org/aamai/images/docs/AAMA_OUSD_Suspension-Analysis.pdf
- 4 See "State laws leave room for interpretation when it comes to school suspensions," by Louis Freedberg and Sue Frey, EdSource Today, March 8, 2012.
<http://www.edsource.org/today/2012/state-laws-leave-room-for-interpretation-when-it-comes-to-school-suspensions/6549>
- 5 "What is Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports?"
http://www.pbis.org/school/what_is_swpbs.aspx
- 6 "See Oakland Unified School District Restorative Justice,
<http://publicportal.ousd.k12.ca.us/1994105819855310/site/default.asp>
- 7 "Suspensions at Richmond High plummet," New America Media, February 28, 2012.
<http://newamericamedia.org/2012/02/suspensions-at-richmond-high-plummet.php>
- 8 "San Francisco tries to mend problems without suspensions," by Jill Tucker, San Francisco Chronicle, March 26, 2012.
<http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/SF-schools-try-to-mend-problems-without-suspension-3433992.php>
- 9 Safe Schools: Strategies for Governing Boards to Ensure Student Success, California School Boards Association (2011 Third Edition).
- 10 Social-emotional learning programs help students acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills that lead to positive behavior and relationships. See Buccanfuso, C.P., & Kuhfeld, M.B. (March 2011). Multiple Responses, Promising Results: Evidence-based Nonpunitive Alternatives to Zero Tolerance. Washington, D.C.: Child Trends.
- 11 The Good Behavior Game rewards students for displaying appropriate on-task behaviors in the classroom and helps reduce disruptive behavior that may require disciplinary responses.
<http://www.interventioncentral.org/behavioral-interventions/schoolwide-classroomgmt/good-behavior-game>
- 12 op. cit., Safe Schools, 2011.
- 13 Skiba, R., Reynolds, C. R., & al, e. (2006). Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools? An Evidentiary Review and Recommendations. American Psychological Association, Zero Tolerance Task Force. American Psychological Association.
- 14 See, for example, "Effective discipline for misbehavior: In School vs. Out of School Suspension, by Blomberg, Neil, Concepts, 2004 <http://concept.journals.villanova.edu/article/view/138/109>; "Opportunities Suspended: The Disparate Impact of Disciplinary Exclusion from School," by Losen, Daniel, Justice Center of The Council of State Governments and the Public Policy Research Institute, July 2011. <http://nwrcc.educationnorthwest.org/resource/1234>
- 15 See, for example, "Opportunities Suspended: The Disparate Impact of Disciplinary Exclusion from School," by Losen, Daniel, Justice Center of The Council of State Governments and the Public Policy Research Institute, July 2011.
<http://nwrcc.educationnorthwest.org/resource/1234>
- 16 Creating a Positive School Climate: Parent Involvement, by Skiba, R., & Peterson, R. (2000). U.S. Department of Education, Special Education. Washington D.C.: Safe and Responsive Schools Project.
- 17 Policing in Schools, ACLU, August 2009.
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<http://www.nyclu.org/news/first-full-year-of-nypd-data-shows-black-students-disproportionately-arrested-school>

19 School Resource Officers: What We Know, What Think We Know, What We Need to Know, Center for Prevention of School Violence, http://www.ncdjdp.org/cpsv/pdf_files/nij_sro_rpt.pdf

20 See Suspended Education: Urban Middle Schools in Crisis, Losen, D. and Skiba, R., Southern Poverty Law Center, 2010.

21 See Advance Data Collection for UMIRS, California Department of Education website: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/se/umirs.asp>

22 <http://www.scpr.org/blogs/education/2012/04/10/5508/l-unified-collect-suspension-data-down-classroom-t/>

23 The spreadsheet is available here: <http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/resources/projects/center-for-civil-rights-remedies/school-to-prison-folder/summary-reports/suspended-education-in-california>