

HOW SCHOOL DISCIPLINE POLICIES AFFECT CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

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WHAT IS CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM?

Chronic absences add up—and school discipline practices can make the problem better, or worse. Chronic absenteeism is defined as students missing 10 percent or more of the school year for any reason, excused or unexcused, including suspensions. That means missing 18 days of school in Arkansas, or just two days a month. In 2014-15, more than 12 percent of kindergarten through third graders in Arkansas (17,361 students) missed 18 or more days of school.

This loss of instructional time hurts students' academic success. Children who are chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade are much less likely to read proficiently by the end of third grade and are more likely to have poor attendance in later grades. By middle and high school, chronic absence has proven to be a warning sign that a student will drop out, especially for lower-income students. So have exclusionary discipline practices.

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE POLICIES AFFECT CHRONIC ABSENCE

Students in middle and high school are much more likely to be suspended or expelled. Over a three-year period ending in the 2014-15 school year, elementary schools reported 8 percent of students receiving in-school suspensions, with 5 percent of students suspended out-of-school. In middle school, 22 percent of students were suspended in-school and 16 percent out-of-school, while the comparable numbers in high school were 25 percent (in-school) and [12 percent \(out-of-school\)](#).¹

During the 2016-17 school year, disciplinary consequences included 104,350 in-school suspensions, 57,301 out-of-school suspensions, and [357 expulsions](#).² Some students who were suspended multiple times are counted in those numbers, so a percentage of the student population wasn't available yet. The staggering totals represent far too much time that students are missing from instructional time.



Research shows that black students in the U.S. are more likely than other students to be suspended or expelled for the same disciplinary incidents, and the disparity is [even greater in Arkansas](#) than in most other states.³

A new state law passed in 2017 (Act 1059) prohibits out-of-school suspensions or expulsions for students in kindergarten through fifth grade. The law allows exceptions for students who pose a physical risk to themselves or others or who cause a serious disruption that cannot be addressed through other means. The Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) has not created rules to define what “physical risk” or “serious disruption” mean; however, the Department intends to update its [2012 rules](#) soon, which should incorporate those definitions.⁴

Arkansas’s plan to implement the new federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), includes chronic absence as a key indicator for assessing school and student success. It will be important to track the impact of the new discipline law on this measure.

BETTER WAYS TO KEEP KIDS ACCOUNTABLE—AND IN SCHOOL

The best way for schools to prevent discipline problems is by creating a positive culture and strong student and parent engagement, including frequent communication about families’ needs and the importance of school attendance.

Many schools also see good results with research-based strategies called Response to Intervention and Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports. Those are school-wide systems of proactive discipline that include academic and behavioral support to encourage students to remain in school and ready to learn every day. Schools that use these strategies focus more on reinforcing good behavior rather than punishing undesirable behavior. As a result, they have found that very few students typically need intense case management or referral to a court or hearing officer.

The Department of Education’s Behavior Support Specialists help districts and educational cooperatives implement these strategies to keep students in school and to help improve their literacy and behavioral outcomes. Arkansas State University also provides training.

Under the State Personnel Development Grant, the Department of Education’s Behavior Support Specialists support districts and education service cooperatives in implementing PBIS and RTI to improve students’ literacy and behavioral outcomes. Arkansas State University also provides PBIS training to schools.

Conscious discipline and restorative justice are also effective alternatives to suspensions and expulsions. Conscious discipline emphasizes “social and emotional learning” in classroom instruction and behavior systems, usually at the elementary grade level. Teachers help children learn to understand and cope with their emotions and develop empathy for others, which reduces their likelihood of acting out. One community group in Arkansas, Concerned Citizens of Prescott, is now paying for teacher training in this method, to combat exclusionary school discipline practices in the district.

Restorative justice is used more often with older students as a way of getting to the root cause of their behavior problems. This strategy teaches students to resolve conflict and restore relationships that they may have harmed. It holds students accountable for their actions while building a positive school culture. Some districts such as Springdale Public Schools have had success with this approach. Think Big Little Rock also hopes to work with the Little Rock School District to expand its restorative justice program.

For more information about chronic absenteeism, see AACF and AR-GLR’s 2016 report, [“Make Every Day Count: Reducing Chronic Absence in Arkansas Schools.”](#)⁵

NOTES:

¹ University of Arkansas’s Office for Education Policy (2017). “School Discipline in Arkansas.” <http://www.officeforeducationpolicy.org/downloads/2017/05/discipline.pdf>.

² Arkansas Department of Education’s Statewide Information System Report, 2016-17: <https://adedata.arkansas.gov/statewide/State/DisciplinaryActions.aspx>.

³ Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. (2013). “Keeping Kids in Class: Fixing Racial Disparities in School Discipline.” <http://www.aradvocates.org/wp-content/uploads/Keeping-Kids-In-Class-February-2013.pdf>.

⁴ Arkansas Department of Education. (2012). “Guidelines for the Development, Review and Revision of School District Student Discipline and School Safety Policies” (Rule No. 005.19). http://www.arkansased.gov/public/userfiles/Legal/Legal-Current%20Rules/ade_253-discipline%20and%20safety%20policies-March%202012.pdf.

⁵ Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families. (2016). “Make Every Day Count: Reducing Chronic Absence in Arkansas Schools.” <http://www.aradvocates.org/publications/make-every-day-count-strategies-to-reduce-chronic-absence-in-arkansas-schools>.



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