

Analysis of school discipline policy and academic performance to inform capacity building for school improvement

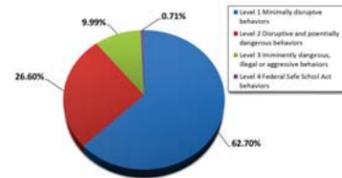
Andy Whisman, Ph.D., West Virginia Department of Education, Office of Research

Recognizing the need for safe and supportive learning environments, the West Virginia Board of Education enacted *Expected Behaviors in Safe and Supportive Schools*. The policy became effective July 1, 2012 and put forth the social skills standards expected of students; interventions to support appropriate behaviors as well as consequences for inappropriate behaviors; and a framework for policy implementation at all levels of public education. Two studies were conducted to: 1) establish baseline conditions during the first year of policy implementation; 2) examine the impact of disciplinary involvement on academic performance; and 3) provide recommendations for improvement under the policy. Findings provide a basis for monitoring progress toward developing more safe and supportive school environments.

Study 1: Analysis of school disciplinary incidents reported during the 2012-2013 school year.*

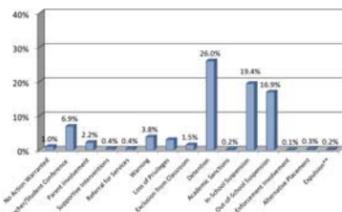
Methods

This study involved two descriptive analyses using statewide end-of-year discipline data. In the first analysis, *discipline referrals* were the unit of analysis, and the number, seriousness, and types of student behaviors reported were examined, as were the interventions used by schools. In the second analysis, the *student* was the unit of analysis where questions about student characteristics and subgroup representation were examined.

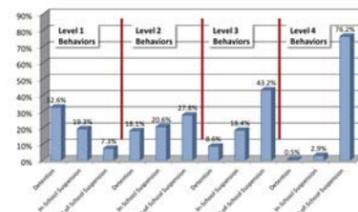


Discipline Referrals

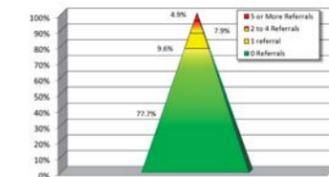
Overall, 220,656 discipline referrals were analyzed, corresponding to a statewide prevalence rate of 784 referrals per 1,000 students. However, evidence of underreporting was observed suggesting incomplete data from some school districts. Referrals for minimally disruptive (level 1) behaviors were most frequently reported. As the severity of behaviors increased the proportion of discipline referral decreased such that the most severe (level 4) behaviors (i.e., violent, illegal, or dangerous behaviors) were rare, accounting for less than 1%.



More than 85% of referrals for the most severe behaviors were met with out-of-school suspensions or expulsions. Yet, about two thirds of the consequences for the least severe behaviors were detentions, in-school suspensions, or out-of-school suspensions.



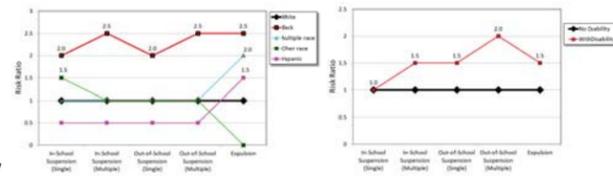
Although most discipline referrals were for minimally disruptive behaviors, the majority of consequences used by schools were detentions (26%), in-school suspensions (19%), or out-of-school suspensions (17%)



Student Characteristics

Consistent with a multi-tiered system of support, of all public school students in West Virginia 78% were absent from the discipline data, indicating no referrals were made for them for inappropriate behaviors. The remaining 22% were represented with 1 or more discipline referrals. About 13%—nearly 36,000 students—experienced multiple referrals, and accounted for 88% of all discipline behaviors reported.

Subgroup representation was disproportionate compared to the statewide student population. Black students were at increased risk for being referred and for exclusionary discipline actions compared to White students. Students with disabilities also were at increased risk compared to students without disabilities. These findings are not unique to West Virginia—nationwide data show all states report subgroup disparities. The magnitude of disparities in West Virginia, however, were modest by comparison—typically the state ranked in the lower half of states for which for subgroup disparity data were available.



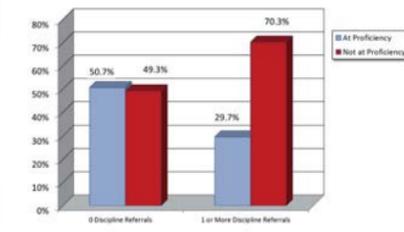
Study 2: Examination of impacts of disciplinary involvement on academic performance, and differential impacts among student subgroups.

Methods

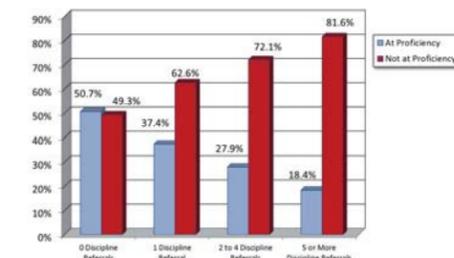
Using statewide discipline data for 2012-2013, cross tabulation and binary logistic regression were used to determine odds of scoring below proficiency in mathematics on West Virginia's statewide summative assessment. The study involved 160,480 grade 3-11 students, of whom 29.6% had one or more discipline referrals (12% had only a single referral, 10.4% had 2 to 4 referrals, and 6.7% had 5 or more).



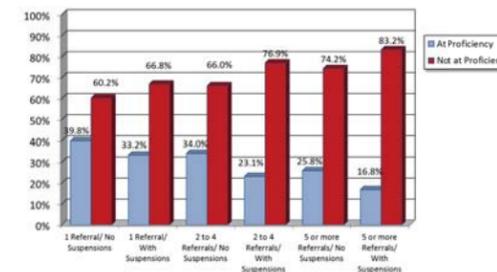
Student Academic Performance



Students with one or more discipline referrals were 2.4 times more likely to score below proficiency than those with no referrals. For these students a 40 percentage point proficiency gap existed.



The odds of poor performance increased as disciplinary involvement increased. Students with 2-to-4 referrals were at 2.7 greater odds of scoring below proficiency, and students with 5-or-more were at 4.6 greater odds. There was a 25 percentage point proficiency gap among students with a single referral. This increased by 20 percentage points with each level of increased disciplinary involvement.



When the consequences of disciplinary involvement take the form of in-school or out-of-school suspension, the risk of scoring below proficiency was even greater and proficiency gaps were widened.

Discipline—Student Subgroup Interactions

Interactions between disciplinary involvement and disability status showed students with disabilities with one referral were no more likely to score below proficiency than students with disabilities with no referrals. Those with 2-to-4 and 5-or-more discipline referrals, however, were at 3.7 and 12 times the odds of scoring poorly than similar students with no referrals.

Results for interaction effects between disciplinary involvement and socioeconomic status were mixed. Also, despite results from Study 1 showing Black students to be at increased risk of being referred for inappropriate behavior and for being suspended, no interaction was found between disciplinary involvement and race relative to academic performance.

Recommendations for Improvement

- 1) Encourage diligence among schools in accurately reporting discipline behaviors to ensure complete data;
- 2) Implement positive discipline approaches to minimize student disciplinary involvement, and alternatives to suspension to minimize the use of exclusionary consequences;
- 3) Provide appropriate behavioral interventions in the context of a three-tiered framework of behavioral supports, especially for students with multiple discipline referrals; and
- 4) Further investigate and build statewide capacity to minimize subgroup disparities in discipline practices.

* Funded by the National Association of State Boards of Education