



Replace Exclusionary Discipline Policies and Practices with Effective Alternatives

Youth Voice

Why is this an Important Issue for Minnesota Children and Young People?

GradMinnesota believes in the power of young people to create their own bright futures. By listening to their voices, we can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and choices they face. Thus it is important to empower and mobilize youth to share their experiences, bring their perspectives, and give recommendations on issues that affect them. When young people are actively engaged in the decision-making process, programs are more likely to meet their needs and create the changes they desire. While identifying the priority recommendations for GradMinnesota, the GradMinnesota Advisory Council and staff listened carefully to the voices of young people and incorporated their input.

The following quotes from young people on exclusionary discipline policies and practices were compiled from several sources.

Suspension is often misapplied.

"I was getting suspended for not being in class on time. I had to go from lunch in the basement up to class on the fifth floor and I couldn't make it in 5 minutes." – Pushed out youth⁵

Suspension does not work and has negative consequences.

"Don't just sit there and suspend someone and then they come back to school and you're wondering why they're fighting again because the problem has not been resolved. Actually help them. Just because you suspend them doesn't mean it's going to be over [and] they're going to come back in a week and everything is going to be okay. Because it's not. In fact, they come back even more mad." – Pushed out youth⁵

"Instead of learning from our behavior, schools just force us out without real conversations and interventions. Suspensions don't work, summonses don't work, arrests don't work. Keep us in the classroom, keep us accountable, and build relationships. That works." – Savannah⁴

"In the school I used to go to, the consequence was that you either got dismissed, suspended, or expelled, that was it. There was no detention or anything like that... If you want us to learn, that's not a way of making an effort to teach us when they're kicking us out." – Young Person at SNS Youth Summit³

Negative school climate hurts.

"I just didn't like school. It wasn't because I'm dumb. I get sick just entering the building. I feel like I'm in prison. Its how the school was set up. They had iron bars like [the area prison]. Cuz back then [the prison] was like mad gangster, with gangbangers and whatever ... Cameras everywhere. I don't feel safe." – Jeff¹

Discipline disparity exists.

"I feel like White teachers react better to White students." – Young Person at SNS Youth Summit³

Positive and effective alternatives can work!

"Last year I started and completed my training as a peer mediator, and I'm proud to say that I'm part of the change that has begun to happen in my school." – Benia⁴

"For the past 3 years, we have been using restorative justice and guidance interventions to deal with conflict so that we can reduce suspensions and arrests at our school. School staff, students, teachers, and deans are being trained in using restorative circles and other restorative practices. Parents are also being trained in using restorative justice to deal with conflict at home with their children. Students and school safety officers are meeting to share perspectives on safety issues and to build relationships. It works, I see it!" – Neissa⁴

Findings from Research Utilizing Youth Voice

In 2011, Youth United for Change in Philadelphia did a research study with 273 pushed-out youth. A major theme identified was that many young people never make the decision to leave school, but are forced out instead⁵. Many get caught up in harsh disciplinary systems which limit their educational opportunities, making them feel unwelcome and pushing them out gradually. The study suggested instituting discipline policies that are restorative instead of punitive to help reduce the pushout rate.

In 2013, the Solutions Not Suspensions initiative (led by the Minnesota Minority Education Partnership) held a youth summit focusing on issues of the discipline gap and the school-to-prison pipeline. For the young people who attended the summit, 100% believed that students are disciplined differently based on their skin color; 100% thought students miss too much school time due to suspensions; and 100% thought that there are better ways than suspension to handle behavior issues. Five recommendations emerged from their discussions: (1) revising the role of policy in schools, (2) increasing the diversity and cultural competency of teachers and staff, (3) student participation in creating clear/transparent discipline policies and procedures that emphasizes the use of alternative practices that keep students in school, (4) relationship rebuilding between staff and students, and (5) thorough assessments of the situations before discipline is determined³.

One key finding in the GradNation report “Don’t Quit on Me” is that young people who leave high school reported that school climates and policies are unsafe, unsupportive or disrespectful. School policies, such as exclusionary policies and practices, often worked against students’ values and did not accommodate for what was happening in their lives outside of school².

For more resources on youth voice, please visit read more about the [Minnesota Youth Council](#); the official youth voice to legislators and the Governor in Minnesota.

References

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