



# EVERY STUDENT EVERY DAY

## Ending DC's School-to-Prison Pipeline

### SY16-17 Quick Facts

- DC schools issued 12,897 out of school suspensions to 7,181 students.
- Over 4,700 out-of-school suspensions were issued to elementary school students.
- Over 4,300 out-of-school suspensions were for “disrespect, insubordination, or disruption.”
- Out-of-school suspensions disproportionately impact the following student populations:
  - Students with disabilities
  - Students identified as “at-risk”
  - Students identified as homeless
  - Students in CFSA care
- DCPS schools deliberately failed to record some out-of-school suspensions.

Every year, thousands of DC students are formally excluded from taxpayer-funded public schools as a result of minor incidents. Countless others are excluded off the books. It is time for the District to ensure all of its students have fair and meaningful access to their education.

Excluding students from school through the use of suspensions and expulsions is both bad policy and bad practice. Excluding a young person from school not only fails to teach the young person the skills necessary to cope with stress and improve their own behavior in the future, but also puts the young person on the path to being held back, dropping out of school, or becoming involved with the justice system.<sup>1</sup>

The overuse of suspensions and expulsions also harms non-suspended students. Recent research has found that high numbers of exclusions can result in decreased test scores for non-suspended students, lower overall ratings of school safety, and poorer overall school climate.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, positive solutions based upon building relationships and understanding the reasons underlying student behavior have been shown to not only reduce problematic behavior, but also improve overall student behavior and achievement.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, despite this wealth of research, our District schools continue to over-rely on the use of exclusion while failing to embrace and expand solutions proven to work.

\*\*This fact sheet relies primarily on data from the SY 2016-17 discipline report published by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education. The report is available at:  
[https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page\\_content/attachments/2016-17%20School%20Year%20Discipline%20Report.pdf](https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/2016-17%20School%20Year%20Discipline%20Report.pdf)

## Thousands of DC Students Are Suspended for Minor Incidents

During the 2016-17 school year, DCPS and charter schools issued 12,897 out-of-school suspensions to 7,181 students (7.4%). While 143 fewer students received out-of-school suspensions compared to the 2015-16 school year (7,324), the total number of out-of-school suspensions increased by 202 year-over-year. Thus, while fewer students were suspended from school in SY2016-17, those students who were suspended were excluded from school more often.<sup>4</sup>

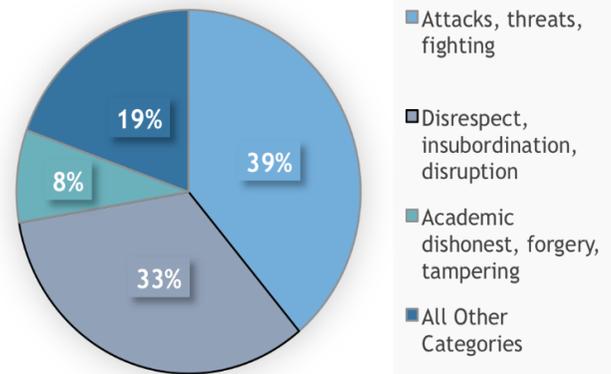
Comparing DC to two local, similar jurisdictions demonstrates DC's over-reliance on the use of school exclusion. Compared to schools in Baltimore City and PG County, DC schools issued nearly 54% and 32% more suspensions per 100 students, respectively. Additionally, DC suspended 30% and 18% more of its overall student body than Baltimore City and PG County, respectively. (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Comparison of OSS by Jurisdiction<sup>5</sup>

	DC	Baltimore	PG County
Enrollment	96,431	77,866	125,043
# of OSS	12,897	6,764	12,704
OSS per 100 students	13.4	8.7	10.2
# of Students Suspended	7,181	4,449	7,871
% of Students Suspended	7.4%	5.7%	6.3%

Additionally, the reasons why youth are being suspended further demonstrate that DC's over-reliance on exclusionary discipline is misguided. While some suspensions may be for more serious behavior, at least one-third of suspensions are for minor behavior. During SY2016-17, the most common reason given by schools for out-of-school suspension was "attacks, threats, and fighting," which accounted for 39% (or 5048) of out-of-school suspensions.<sup>6</sup> The second most common reason for out-of-school suspensions was "disrespect, insubordination, or disruption," which accounted for 33% (or 4335) out-of-school suspensions.<sup>7</sup> (See Figure 2). Additionally, while not a large number, it is important to note that nearly 3% (400) of suspensions were for poor attendance, skipping, or being tardy to class.

Figure 2. OSS by Reason



What is particularly striking about these out-of-school suspensions is not just the number issued for minor behavior, but how many of them are issued to students in elementary school who are typically between the ages of 5 and 11. During SY2016-17, 4,730 out-of-school suspensions (37%) were issued to elementary school students.<sup>8</sup> (See Figure 3). Moreover, among out-of-school suspensions for the most common categories of suspension (attacks and disruption), elementary school students comprised over 40% of the total suspensions in each category.<sup>9</sup> (See Figure 4).

Figure 3. OSS by Grade Level

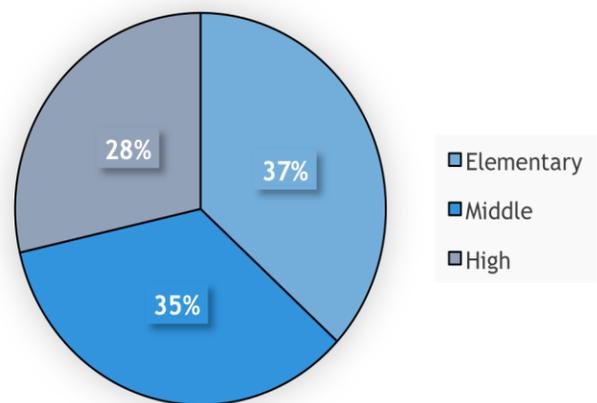
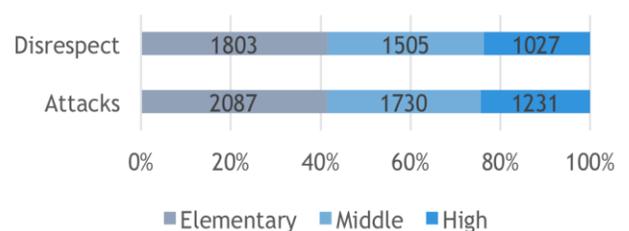


Figure 4. OSS by Select Type by Grade



## Highest Need Students Are Disproportionately Suspended

DC's over-reliance on the use of exclusionary discipline disproportionately excludes the students who are most in need of a strong, supportive school environment. Out-of-school suspensions disproportionately impact the following student populations<sup>10</sup>:

**Students with disabilities:** During SY2016-17, 2,000 students with disabilities received at least one out of school suspension. Students with disabilities accounted for 27.8% of all students suspended despite making up only 14.7% of all students.<sup>11</sup> Students with disabilities were suspended at a rate 2.45 times that of students without disabilities.<sup>12</sup>

**Students identified as "at-risk":** During SY2016-17, 5,138 students identified as "at-risk" received at least one out of school suspension. Students identified as at risk accounted for 71.6% of all students suspended despite making up only 49.9% of all students.<sup>13</sup> Students identified as at-risk were suspended at a rate 2.53 times that of students not identified as at-risk.<sup>14</sup>

**Students identified as homeless:** During SY2016-17, 645 students who were identified as homeless received at least one out of school suspension. Students identified as homeless accounted for 9.0% of all students suspended despite making up only 4.2% of all students.<sup>15</sup> Students identified as homeless were suspended at a rate 2.27 times that of students not identified as homeless.<sup>16</sup>

**Students in CFSA care:** During SY2015-16, 133 youth under the care of CFSA received at least one out of school suspension. Students in CFSA care accounted for 1.82% of all students suspended despite only accounting for .74% of all students.<sup>17</sup> Students in CFSA care were suspended at a rate 2.49 times that of students not in CFSA care.<sup>18</sup>

The fact that out-of-school suspensions disproportionately impact the students who most need the attention and assistance of problem-solving adults is further demonstrated the rates of unexcused absences experienced by youth who are suspended.

Prior to receiving their first suspension, youth who are suspended have missed, on average, at least 43.2% of the school year before being suspended. The average unexcused absent rate jumps significantly to 53% for the remainder of the year after that first suspension.<sup>19</sup> While the analysis is not sufficient to demonstrate a causal connection, the data demonstrates that youth who are already struggling to attend school are often being suspended, which then coincides with those youth disconnecting even further.<sup>20</sup> Youth currently being suspended need interventions that address the root causes of their struggles and a community of adults positioned to intervene and assist, not exclusion from their education.

## Countless Students Receive Undocumented Suspensions

Unfortunately, all of the aforementioned data must be considered a very conservative estimate of the number of out-of-school suspensions actually issued to students in DC every year. As the *Washington Post* revealed through its 2017 investigation, DCPS schools for a number of years have engaged in the systemic practice of using undocumented suspensions or "do-not-admit lists" to prohibit students from attending school without recording the absence as a suspension. Indeed, after examining a one month sample comparing do-not-admit lists and attendance records, the Post concluded that students were issued 406 days of suspension during that month, but only 15% of those days were actually reported as suspensions. Instead, students who were denied entry to the building due to documented or undocumented suspensions were even marked as present, "attending an in-school activity," or given an unexcused absence. As a result, while the data reported by the schools is indicative of a significant problem, it does not reveal the full extent of the number of students being excluded from school.<sup>21</sup>

## Recommendations

### 1) Support passage of the Student Fair Access to School Act of 2017

In order to curb DC's over-reliance on out-of-school suspension for minor incidents, the DC Council should pass the Student Fair Access to School Act of 2017 (SFASA). The SFASA creates the appropriate balance between ensuring that students - especially those most in need - have access to a meaningful education while recognizing the flexibility that teachers and administrators need to respond to dangerous behavior that risks the safety of students and staff. Passage of this bill is necessary to move DC away from policies and practices that are counter-productive and proven not to work.

### 2) Establish a Positive School Climate Fund

To encourage the use of positive school discipline solutions, the District should create a Promoting Positive School Climate Fund. School leaders could apply to the fund to implement evidence-based or promising practices designed to reduce their use of disciplinary exclusions. Such a process would simultaneously promote innovation and help build local knowledge about what interventions are most effective in DC schools. For example, school leaders might use the funds to hire a restorative practices coordinator, provide additional supports and training to teachers, secure technical assistance in Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), or provide additional trauma-responsive services in school.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Tony Fabelo et al., *Breaking Schools' Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement* (Council of States Governments Justice Center and The Public Policy Research Institute, Texas A&M University, July 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Brea Perry & Edward Morris, *Suspending Progress, Collateral Consequences of Exclusionary Punishment in Public Schools*, 79 Am. Soc. Rev. 1067 (2014); Russell J. Skiba and Daniel J. Losen, *From Reaction to Prevention: Turning the Page on School Discipline*, AMERICAN EDUCATOR, AFT, Vol. 39, No. 4, Winter 2015-16 Ed., at 6.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g., Trevor Fronius, et. al., *Restorative Justice in Schools: A Research Review*, WestEd (2016).

<sup>4</sup> *State of Discipline: 2016-17 School Year*, DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education, at 10-11 [hereinafter SY2016-17 Discipline Report].

<sup>5</sup> See Maryland State Department of Education, Suspensions, Expulsions, and Health Related Exclusions, Maryland Public Schools, 2016-2017, [http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DC\\_AA/SSP/20162017Student/2017ProdSuspExpulHRExc.pdf](http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DC_AA/SSP/20162017Student/2017ProdSuspExpulHRExc.pdf). This is actually a conservative comparison as the numbers used for Baltimore City and PG County included out-of-school suspensions and expulsions whereas DC's number just includes out-of-school suspensions.

<sup>6</sup> SY2016-17 Discipline Report, at 50-52. This category includes a host of wide-ranging behavior. Going forward this data should be collected and reported in a disaggregated manner.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 22-23.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 52.

<sup>10</sup> Black and Latino students are also disproportionately impacted by the use of out-of-school suspensions by DC schools. An upcoming Every Student Every Day fact sheet will dive deeper into these racial inequities.

<sup>11</sup> SY2016-17 Discipline Report, at 33-35.

<sup>12</sup> This was calculated using an odds ratio with a 95% confidence interval of 2.32 to 2.59.

<sup>13</sup> At-risk students include those youth who are homeless, in foster care, enrolled in TANF or SNAP, or in high school and overage or under-credited. See SY2016-17 Discipline Report, at 39-42.

<sup>14</sup> This was calculated using an odds ratio with a 95% confidence interval of 2.40 to 2.67.

<sup>15</sup> See SY2016-17 Discipline Report, at 39-43; Glossary, LearnDC, Office of the State Superintendent for Education, <http://www.learnDC.org/schoolprofiles/about/glossary/homeless-students> (reporting that approximately 1 in 24 students in DC is identified as homeless).

<sup>16</sup> This was calculated using an odds ratio with a 95% confidence interval of 2.08 to 2.48.

<sup>17</sup> *State of Discipline: 2015-16 School Year*, DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education, at 22-23. OSSE did not include the number of youth under the care of CFSA in its School-Year 2016-17 report.

<sup>18</sup> This was calculated using an odds ratio with a 95% confidence interval of 2.07 to 3.00.

<sup>19</sup> SY2016-17 Discipline Report, at 47-50.

<sup>20</sup> See *id.*

<sup>21</sup> Emma Brown and Alejandra Matos, *Some D.C. high schools are reporting only a fraction of suspensions*, WASH POST (July 17, 2017).