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Too Many Suspensions

Maryland Public Schools Need to Turn to Alternative Punishments

The Maryland State Department of Education recently posted its annual report on school suspensions on its Web site. There was no public announcement. In fact, you really have to hunt for it. Perhaps that's because the 20-page report shows that Maryland continues to rely excessively on a seriously flawed form of punishment that hurts students and does little to improve school climate.

Maryland public schools doled out 127,002 suspensions to 72,609 students in the 2005-06 school year. That's nearly 9 percent of all students, which would be comparable to suspending almost all students in Anne Arundel County public schools. This is not a one-year blip. Maryland schools have been suspending a similar percentage of students for a decade.

This reflects our entrenched national "zero tolerance" disciplinary policies that are a misguided reaction to violent tragedies such as the 1999 Columbine High School shooting.

The reality is that these get-tough policies ensnare students who commit minor infractions as well as the few who are violent. In Maryland, most suspensions were imposed for nonviolent offenses, such as disrespect, insubordination and poor attendance — hardly the Columbine-style incidents that prompted the policies.

Clearly, schools must remove violent or dangerous students from classrooms. But they also must educate all of our children — and that rarely happens for those who are sent home. According to the annual report, more

The Backdrop

Maryland public schools imposed 127,002 suspensions on 72,609 students in the 2005-06 year. The top three jurisdictions were Prince George's County with 22,548 suspensions; Baltimore County, 20,515; and Baltimore, 15,025. Other selected county totals were Anne Arundel, with 13,291; Calvert, 1,912; Charles, 5,865; Frederick, 5,731; Howard, 3,009; Montgomery, 9,245; and St. Mary's, 2,583.

SOURCE: Maryland State Department of Education

than three-quarters of students suspended in Maryland received no education while out of school, even though legally they are entitled to it. Those children missed days, weeks and even months of lessons.

Some argue that children forfeit their right to be educated in a classroom when they misbehave. But suspension has severe consequences outside the classroom. Suspended children often are from families that don't have supervision at home, according to the 2000 Census. When children aren't in school, they are far more likely to become involved in fights, carry weapons, have sex, smoke cigarettes, and use alcohol and drugs. And they're

on a track toward jail.

Nor is suspension much of a deterrent. If it were, few students would be suspended more than once. However, more than 4,300 students in Prince George's County were suspended at least twice in 2005-06; 480 of them, five or more times.

How does sitting at home teach a child to respect his teacher? How does suspending a child with excessive absences improve her attendance? Instead of suspension, schools must set consequences that prevent and remediate inappropriate or dangerous behavior.

Schools and teachers need other strategies, and, fortunately, there are many that work, such as in-school suspension, mental health counseling, peer mediation and supervised recess to let kids blow off steam. Another approach focuses on "restorative" consequences; it moves away from punishment toward a model in which teachers, students and families solve problems together.

The message that alternatives to suspension are needed isn't getting across to Maryland educators and policymakers. The onus is on state policymakers and local school systems to communicate that message louder and clearer.

— Jane Sundius
Baltimore

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