



# RECLAIMING STUDENTS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*The educational & economic costs of exclusionary discipline in Washington State*

A state-wide report by:



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every year, tens of thousands of children are removed from Washington State schools through exclusionary discipline.<sup>11</sup> While some students are excluded from school for just a few days, there is a hidden subset of students who are pushed out on a long-term or indefinite basis. According to a growing body of research, these long-term and indefinite exclusions are a high-risk and high-cost approach to addressing youthful behavior: in many cases, these exclusions are a tipping point leading toward dropout, delinquency, and lifelong poverty.

Additionally, comprehensive reviews of discipline data from various cities and states around the country have revealed troubling disparities in who is affected by exclusionary discipline. Despite community concerns that the same patterns of disparity would be found in a survey of Washington's public schools, no such state-wide survey had been conducted until now. The Appleseed report team embarked on a review of Washington public schools' data and policies to learn more about the actual impact of these exclusions in our state, to shine a light on these invisible children, and to address these growing concerns.

This report focuses on the impact of state laws, state regulations, and school district policies and practices that remove students from school and prevent them from accessing educational services due to behavior or violations of school codes of conduct. We looked at the number of students long-term suspended (excluded from school for more than 10 consecutive days), emergency expelled, or expelled (excluded from school indefinitely), and what happens with those students during those periods of exclusion from school. Our key interests were to identify how schools used these practices and how they affected students in and out of school, to uncover the unforeseen costs of exclusionary discipline to individual students and the state economy, and to determine how these practices might be amended to increase access to education for Washington State students.

Through the collection of our own data, analysis of state data, and review of existing social science research, we have sought to understand the impact of these exclusions on individual educational achievement and on our collective economic picture. Like many other states, Washington schools' data reveals that students of color and low-income students disproportionately experience the impacts of suspensions and expulsions. Unlike many other states, however, Washington has no state law or regulation clearly setting forth the process by which those students can continue to receive some form of educational services during any period of exclusion.

Also, students in Washington's public schools can face indefinite exclusion from school with no certainty of an opportunity to re-engage in school at any time. In light of the links between exclusion from school and dropouts, the impact of these policies on students and schools give cause for alarm. Exclusionary discipline has an impact that goes far beyond the classroom—the educational and economic future of Washington students hangs in the balance. The numbers, the stories, and the consequences highlighted in this report reveal the urgency with which we all must act to improve educational access and outcomes for Washington's students.

<sup>11</sup> Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. (2011). 2009- 10 Behavior Report – Suspensions and Expulsions. Retrieved from <http://www.k12.wa.us/SafetyCenter/Behavior/pubdocs/rptBehavior0910.pdf>; Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. (2011). 2009-10 Weapons Report – Suspensions and Expulsions. Retrieved from <http://www.k12.wa.us/SafetyCenter/Weapons/pubdocs/rptWeapons0910.pdf>.

## KEY FINDINGS

The Appleseed report team requested information from all 295 school districts in the state, however, not every district could provide a response to every question posed. For example, 183 school districts could provide detailed information about the number of long-term suspensions, emergency expulsions, and expulsions, but only 177 could provide race and ethnicity information about those incidents and only 172 could provide information about free or reduced-price lunch status.<sup>12</sup> Analyzing each of these data segments, we were able to construct a more complete picture of the impact of exclusionary discipline policies in our state.

The data, combined with a review of the most current social science research, points to several key findings that highlight the need for action in Washington State. Those key findings include:

### **FINDING 1: Exclusionary discipline negatively impacted academic success and a student's relationship with the educational system.**

- Higher disciplinary exclusions were associated with higher dropout rates—school districts with more than 100 incidents per 1,000 students had an average graduation rate 24% lower than school districts with fewer than 25 discipline incidents per 1,000 students.
- Exclusionary discipline caused significant loss of instructional time among Washington students—students in 183 of the state's 295 school districts missed at least 70,000 days of school due to long-term suspensions alone during the 2009-2010 school year, greatly reducing the probability of academic success for these students and increasing their risk of dropout.
- Surveyed educational stakeholders expressed concern about the message that exclusionary discipline sends to students, citing themes of alienation, low expectations, and overall disengagement in school as a result of exclusions.

### **FINDING 2: The vast majority of disciplined students did not receive educational services for the duration of their exclusion.**

- Data from 183 school districts revealed that only 7% of students were reported to have received educational services while excluded from school.<sup>13</sup>
- Only 80 school districts (27% of the state total) were able to provide information about educational services used during student exclusions. Of those 80 districts, 44 could not provide specific information as to what kind of educational services were provided.
- School districts providing educational services to excluded students had an average graduation rate 10% higher than school districts that did not report providing services.

<sup>12</sup> For additional information on data breakdowns and methodology, please see Methodology on page 2.

<sup>13</sup> This figure does not include special education qualified students. See Finding 2 on page 17 for additional information.

**FINDING 3: Exclusionary discipline practices disproportionately impacted students of color and youth living in poverty.**

- Data from 177 school districts show that students of color were 1.5 times more likely to be disciplined than their white peers, and that Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders, American Indian/Alaska Natives, and African Americans were more than twice as likely to be disciplined.
- White students were nearly twice as likely to receive educational services during exclusions than students of color.
- While low-income students made up 47% of the overall student population of reporting districts, 58% of all discipline incidents involved a low-income student.
- Students in families above the poverty line were 1.6 times more likely to receive educational services during exclusions than low-income students.

**FINDING 4: Reliance on exclusionary discipline practices varied significantly from district to district, even among districts with similar demographic characteristics.**

- While 32 school districts (10%) reported no incidents of exclusionary discipline in the 2009-2010 school year, 17 districts (6%) reported a number of exclusionary discipline incidents equivalent to more than 10% of their total student population.
- Variance of discipline rates per capita did not correlate to the size of the school district or the overall demographics within that district. Instead, what did vary was the way school districts defined misbehavior and the range of tools and methods used to address student behaviors in school district codes of conduct.

**FINDING 5: Discipline data yielded only a partial picture of the number of students impacted by exclusionary practices each year in Washington public schools.**

- Due to limitations in record keeping and reporting, it was not possible to summarize the total number of students excluded from school through disciplinary actions, the total number of discipline incidents in any given school year, or the number of days of school missed.
- Despite significant advancements in the capacity of Washington's public schools to collect and analyze data on school discipline, significant data fields have been omitted from new collection efforts that leave the picture of discipline incomplete.

In light of both the figurative and literal costs associated with exclusionary discipline, one must ask whether the benefits of suspending or expelling students justify the price, and whether viable alternatives exist. Studies of school discipline practices and the practices' impact on school safety suggest that while disciplinary exclusions may temporarily alleviate a problem, in the long run, they do not benefit either the student who is excluded or those who remain in the school.<sup>14</sup> Most educators can tell you from personal experience that it is often the same students who are disciplined multiple times, and the data supports this: disciplined students are likely to break a school rule again and to receive multiple suspensions or expulsions. For these students, exclusionary discipline is not effective in correcting behavior and, instead, can lead to total disengagement from school.

Our schools must have tools to ensure safe and productive learning environments, just as they must have the tools to ensure that each and every child in the state is afforded an opportunity to learn—regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. The current practice of exclusionary discipline is an ineffective tool with costs to our children and our society. The findings of the Appleseed report team are a call to action—a call for school districts to use other tools to promote safe and productive learning environments, and for the state to provide adequate resources and training that ultimately keep students engaged in school.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

All children in Washington State should receive an education as guaranteed by our state constitution. Based on our findings, we recommend that, collectively as a state, we take the following steps to ensure that all students have equitable access to public schools and that student behavior does not result in a loss of educational services.

**Reduce the use of out-of-school exclusions.** Adequate training, support, resources, and funding should be provided to school districts to drastically reduce reliance on out-of-school exclusions, replacing them with evidence-based and promising practices that address student behaviors while keeping students engaged in school and on track to graduation.

**Require school districts to provide access to educational services during periods of exclusionary discipline.** Modifications should be made to the Revised Code of Washington and the Washington Administrative Code to reflect school districts' obligation to provide access to an education that comports with the Common School Provisions, including the Basic Education Act, to students during periods of exclusionary discipline. Ensure that schools have adequate funding for the provision of these educational services.

**Ensure that no student is subject to indefinite exclusion.** State laws, regulations, and school district policies should require an end date for all expulsions. Emergency expulsions should be converted to some other form of discipline within 10 days. Ensure that every student is expected to re-engage in school following a period of exclusion and has assistance from the school to successfully return.

<sup>14</sup> TeamChild. (2012). LABELED [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.teamchild.org/>.

**Adopt and follow recommendations of the Education Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee in order to support a reduction in the disproportionate impact of exclusionary discipline on students of color.**

The state legislature should continue incorporating the recommendations made by the Education Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee to any law, regulation, policy, and practice changes in exclusionary discipline and encourage collaborative efforts with community groups to help decrease the disproportionate rates.<sup>15</sup>

**Require school districts to retrieve excluded students and re-engage them in education.**

Provide sufficient resources for districts, from the moment a student is excluded, to plan for proactive retrieval and re-engagement of excluded students so that they make a successful return to school.

In order to assist in the success of these primary objectives, we also recommend that the statewide Comprehensive Education Data and Research System (CEDARS) be updated so that school districts collect—and the state can review—data showing whether students subject to discipline receive educational services while out of school and whether they return to in-school education. We recommend that statewide discipline data should include the specific behavior for which the discipline was imposed; the race, ethnicity, age, gender, and eligibility for special education; and eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch status. We also recommend that the state regularly monitor the number of students subject to discipline each year and the number of school days missed by these students as a result of school exclusion. This data should be publicly available and easily accessible on the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) website for each district and school. As of the 2012-2013 school year, some of these data fields are already being tracked by school districts in the discipline file of the CEDARS.

Transforming Washington’s current exclusionary discipline practices should be a collective effort. School districts need the support and collaboration of students, parents, the medical community (including pediatricians and mental health providers), juvenile justice professionals, the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), community agencies, advocates, and others to support and maximize the work school districts will need to do. While discipline codes and practices may vary from district to district across the state, students’ access to basic educational opportunities should not. The opportunity exists for the State of Washington to fill a significant gap for tens of thousands of Washington students by ensuring that no exclusion from school is indefinite and that students have the opportunity to keep up with their education even during periods of exclusion from school.

<sup>15</sup> Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Achievement Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee. (2009). *Synthesis of the recommendations from the 2008 achievement gap studies*. Retrieved from <http://www.k12.wa.us/cisl/pubdocs/Synthesis2008Recommendations.pdf>.





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