

Executive Summary: Rethinking Universal Suspension for Severe Student Behavior

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Recent education reforms encourage schools to reduce their use of suspensions. Schools, districts, states, and the U.S. Department of Education, concerned by historically high suspension rates and disproportionate reliance on suspensions for students of color¹, have changed codes of conduct, guidelines, and laws. In Chicago, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) made multiple changes to its suspension policy, student code of conduct, and related guidance to school leaders between 2009-10 and 2013-14. During this reform period, the percent of high school students with an out-of-school suspension dropped from 24% to 16% over four years.²

In this study, we ask: Are changes to suspension practices in Chicago schools associated with corresponding changes in student outcomes during the reform period? We also look at how these relationships vary by school's racial composition, as high schools in Chicago serving predominantly Black students have the highest suspension rates. Overall, we find that when schools reduced the use of out-of-school suspension for severe infractions³, on average students had slightly higher student test scores, and were more likely to come to school. Note that these findings apply to all students in the school, including both those who were likely to be suspended and those who were not. More specifically, we find the following relationships with student outcomes:

- **Test scores:** Overall, there were small increases in test scores. However, test score increases were concentrated in schools with below-average baseline suspension use, and schools serving a racially diverse student population. These schools, on average, had higher test scores before the discipline reforms.
- **Attendance:** On average, all students came to school more often—roughly one additional day per year, per student—net of any days missed due to suspension. Attendance increases were concentrated in schools serving predominantly Black students, where attendance increased an average of three days of school per year, per student. This is noteworthy as we look at students schoolwide, not just students likely to receive suspensions.
- **Perceived safety:** In schools serving predominantly Latino students, there was a small decline in perceived safety when suspension use for severe infractions declined. On the

¹ For example, the Illinois legislature passed SB100 in 2015, narrowing the circumstances under which students may be suspended, limiting the use of long-term suspensions, and granting suspended students certain rights.

² These trends are detailed in prior Consortium reports: [Stevens, Sartain, Allensworth, & Levenstein, 2015](#) and [Sartain, Allensworth & Porter, 2015](#).

³ These are infractions at severity levels 4-6 in the Student Code of Conduct, most of which are nominally illegal. For example, a fight is only considered severe if it includes more than two people or someone is injured.

other hand, in schools serving predominantly Black students, there was a similarly-sized improvement, although it was not statistically significant.

- **School climate:** Schools serving predominantly Black students saw meaningful improvements in their students' reports of school climate with reduced suspension use. Schools serving predominantly Latino or racially diverse student populations saw declines in the same measures.

Much of the concern about rolling back the use of suspensions is that the misbehavior of a few students will disrupt the learning of all the other students in the classroom. This research speaks to that question, looking separately at the outcomes of students with low and high risk of experiencing suspension. The students at the highest estimated risk of suspension felt safer in their schools when suspensions for severe infractions were reduced. Students at the lowest estimated risk of suspension, meanwhile, saw the largest test score gains. We do not find evidence that, overall, students' academic achievement was harmed by the policy changes.

This study challenges the assumption that severe infractions should trigger automatic suspensions. In CPS high schools, reducing the use of suspensions for severe infractions was not associated with declines in student safety. Some students felt *safer*, and the policy may have even made students better off in terms of test scores and attendance. However, it is important for districts to consider what supports schools, administrators, and teachers need when the use of suspensions is curbed. For example, administrators may need support to create school-wide culture changes and protocols, and teachers may need resources related to managing classroom behaviors or trauma-informed instructional practices in order to better support the needs of all of their students. Further, implementing more restorative approaches to addressing student misbehavior and conflict is hard work and requires resources in terms of training and staff. Thinking through all of the potential implications of rolling back suspensions is a critical component in supporting the work of schools.

Data and Methods

Data are for all Chicago high school students, 2008-09 through 2013-14, excluding selective enrollment and charter schools. This study examined individual student outcomes measured by standardized test scores, GPA, attendance, and responses to the annual *My Voice, My School* survey. Perceived safety is constructed from questions asking students to rate how safe they feel in class, in other parts of the school building, and outside the school building. School climate measures are constructed from questions related student-teacher relationships, teacher support for student learning, and student sense of belonging in the school. School discipline measures were developed based on all officially reported behavioral infractions and the resulting school disciplinary actions. The study focused on the highest-level behavioral infractions, which are most likely to be reported consistently across schools. The [CPS Student Code of Conduct](#) categorizes student offenses and outlines the potential school responses to the infractions. The severe infractions focused on for the study include weapon or drug possession, theft or burglary, extortion, and fighting with injuries or more than two participants. We measure one dimension of school suspension practice by calculating the percent of severe infractions that resulted in an out-of-school suspension for each school in each year. The fraction of severe infractions resulting in a suspension declined by 10 percentage points between 2008-09 and 2013-14.

The study explores the impact of changes in schools' use of suspensions for severe infractions by comparing students *to themselves* in other years, as they experience changes in school discipline practice. This approach accounts for aspects of the student and school which do not change over time. We also account for observed student behavior as well as student and teacher reports of school discipline and safety. Additionally, because school use of suspensions may reasonably be expected to impact uninvolved students—by influencing future student behavior, changing which peers are present in class, and communicating something about how the school administration perceives its students and their actions—the study estimates the overall impact on *all* students in CPS high schools, rather than just suspended students.