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The Wrong Approach to Discipline

Distressing new federal data on the disciplinary treatment of black students adds urgency to investigations into the treatment of minority children in a dozen school districts around the country by the Office of Civil Rights in the Department of Education. The agency, which is negotiating policies with some of these districts, needs to push for procedures that keep children in school.

The new 2009-10 federal data, drawn from more than 72,000 schools, serving about 85 percent of the nation's students, covers a range of issues, including student discipline and retention.

Black students made up only 18 percent of those in the sample but 35 percent of those suspended one time and 39 percent of all expulsions. Blacks, in general, are three-and-a-half times as likely to be suspended or expelled than their white peers, and more than 70 percent of the students who were involved in arrests or referred to law enforcement agencies were black or Hispanic.

The federal disciplinary data echoes a major study in Texas last year that showed racial disparities in school discipline. Both surveys offer grim evidence that states and local districts must revisit "zero tolerance" policies, which are increasingly common in schools and often cover too broad a range of misbehaviors. Studies have shown that removing children from school can lead to long-term problems like the risk of being held back, dropping out or ending up in the juvenile justice system. Students who pose a danger to others should be suspended or expelled, but that is not the case in most removals.

For its part, the Office of Civil Rights should be pressing school systems with the worst records to develop fair and sensible strategies that involve working with troubled children and their families instead of reflexively showing them the door.

Suspensions, Expulsions of Black Students: The School to Prison Pipeline?

'Kiddie racial profiling' in the classroom keeps students behind, Part 1 of 2
Lisa Loving Of The Skanner News

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Mom Tamberlee Tarver has spent months advocating for her son, Camron, at his North Portland school. She is working with other parents to educate the educators about the long-term impacts of excessive suspension and expulsion of black students. Lisa Loving photo

Tamberlee Tarver's son Camron has been suspended from his North Portland school nine times since last October.

He's run away from teachers, tried to run away from school, spit on a teacher and thrown papers on the floor.

Camron has a short list of disabilities impacting his coordination and his ability to focus – and now is being treated for an anxiety disorder.

A kindergartner, Camron is five years old.

"I'm currently looking for a therapist to undo some of the damage that's been done so far – because my son's turned into a whole different person," Tarver says.

Who knew such little kids could be kicked out of school? But a 2005 study by Yale University found that in Oregon, preschoolers are expelled at twice the rate of school-aged kids, and that black toddlers are expelled at about twice the rate of white tots – even higher than the national average.

Not only are the littlest African American students banished from classes at higher rates than their teenaged counterparts, but nationwide, Black students are punished with classroom dismissals at a far higher rate than any other group throughout the K-12 system – especially if they're in special education programs.

Yet, many researchers say, there is no evidence that Black kids act out more than any others.

Despite the fact that the dynamic has been known and recognized for generations, many educational policymakers have been slow to move on the evidence that hundreds of millions of dollars could be saved nationwide by state and local governments with one simple policy: use suspensions and expulsions as -- genuinely -- a final resort.

Can reducing the use of kiddie racial profiling to discipline youth by kicking them out of class be the key to reducing the achievement gap – and the incarceration rate?