COVID-19 Increases Urgency to End School Suspensions for Minor Student Misbehavior, Prioritize Supportive Services not Police

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As students throughout the country face months of lost instruction, economic and health stressors, inequitable access to long distance learning, and inadequate special education support and services due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this report is a 7-year trend analysis of school suspension data for public K-12 schools in California, as well as the relationship between suspensions and security officer presence on high school campuses.

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Pandemic magnifies inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes for California’s low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities already facing disparate rates of school suspensions.

Los Angeles – As students throughout the country face months of lost instruction, economic and health stressors, inequitable access to long distance learning, and inadequate special education support and services following the COVID-19 pandemic, the UCLA Civil Rights Project’s Center for Civil Rights Remedies today released a groundbreaking report analyzing school suspension data for public K-12 schools in California, as well as the relationship between suspensions and security officer presence on high school campuses. The report comes just weeks after the Minneapolis Board of Education voted to end the district’s contract with the Minneapolis Police Department and Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler decided to remove police officers from the city’s high school campuses.

Titled Is California Doing Enough to Close the School Discipline Gap?, the report provides a unique seven-year trend analysis indicating that, while California has seen a decline in the use of suspensions in schools prior to the pandemic, the pace of the decline has slowed and large racial disparities in suspension rates remain. Moreover, the report documents how rates of lost instruction tend to rise as rates of security officers-to-students rise across the state’s high schools, and this correlation is strongest
for Black students. Finally, the report describes how some districts have very high rates of referrals to law enforcement, and school-based arrests, while others are failing to report these data to the public despite legal requirements to do so.

“There is an alarming storm brewing in California schools,” said Daniel Losen, report co-author and director of the Center for Civil Rights Remedies. “When schools reopen, students will need more support than ever before. It would be a tragedy to add to the disparate days of exclusion from instruction already lost as a result of the pandemic if schools continued to unnecessarily suspend students or invoke school security officers, when responding to typical adolescent behavior, particularly behavior by students of color and those with disabilities."

California currently includes high suspension rates as an accountability factor for the state-wide system of accountability. In 2019, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed legislation that permanently ended suspensions and expulsions for the minor misconduct category of disruption or defiance in grades K-3 (first implemented in 2015), and expanded it to cover students through grade 8, starting with the 2019-20 academic year. Los Angeles and other school districts led the way eliminating the category in K-12, beginning in January 2015. This report demonstrates that the state and those districts making the most progress have not seen backlash in higher suspensions in other categories.

The report found that state data trends reflect a positive impact stemming from these reforms. However, the report also found that students with disabilities, students of color -particularly Black students - and low-income students continue experiencing deep inequities:

- White students without disabilities, who were not low-income, lost 5 days per 100 enrolled across K-12.
- However White males with disabilities from low income families in grades 7-8 lost 89 days per 100 enrolled.
- Poverty and disability do not explain away the racial differences as Native American male students meeting these same criteria lost 107 days per 100 enrolled.
- And Black male students with disabilities in grades 7-8 from low-income households lost instruction at the disturbing rate of 149 days per every 100 enrolled.

“Every student has the right to a quality education, but not all California students have equal access to one,” said Paul Martinez, report co-author and research associate at the Center for Civil Rights Remedies. “A major and persistent contributor to inequity in students’ opportunity to learn is learning loss resulting from school suspensions. These inequities existed long before COVID-19, but the pandemic’s impacts will be beyond devastating to entire generations of California students if schools don’t act.”
Alarmingly, the report also found that several districts throughout California actually saw an increase in the rates of lost instruction due to suspensions, especially for students of color. Antioch, Morongo, Colton, Southern Kern, and Barstow Unified School Districts had the largest increases in the state. Additionally, alternative schools run by the County Office of Education in each county often had suspension rates that were far higher than regular school districts and their suspension rates were much greater than statewide averages for all groups of students.

“California schools will never close the achievement gap if they don’t close the discipline gap,” said Losen. “Facing unprecedented challenges and budget cuts, when they re-open, school districts will have to focus on more equitable policy and personnel choices to end injustice resulting from unnecessary suspensions and to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to learn.”

For a copy of the report, data spreadsheet and executive summary, go HERE.

About the UCLA Civil Rights Project’s Center for Civil Rights Remedies

The UCLA Civil Rights Project’s Center for Civil Rights Remedies (CCRR) is dedicated to improving educational opportunities and outcomes for children who have been discriminated against historically due to their race or ethnicity and who are frequently subjected to exclusionary practices such as disciplinary removal, over-representation in special education, and reduced access to a college-prep curriculum. Directed by Daniel J. Losen, CCRR has issued numerous reports about the use of disciplinary exclusion in California’s schools, including the 2015 report, “Closing the School Discipline Gap in California: Signs of Progress.”

CCRR is an initiative of the UCLA Civil Rights Project /Proyecto Derechos Civiles (CRP), co-directed by Gary Orfield and Patricia Gándara, researcher professors at UCLA. Founded at Harvard in 1996, its mission is to create a new generation of research in social science and law on the critical issues of civil rights and equal opportunity for racial and ethnic groups in the United States. It has monitored the success of American schools in equalizing opportunity and has been the authoritative source of segregation statistics. CRP has commissioned more than 500 studies, published more than 20 books and issued numerous reports from authors at universities and research centers across the country.