

Expelled Students More Likely to Drop Out, Get Arrested Fewer Education Hours And Lack Of Supervision Criticized

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A student who is expelled is more likely to drop out of school and get arrested, national experts say, but Glastonbury Superintendent Alan B. Bookman says almost all students in his district who are expelled return to school, graduate and go on to college.

Bookman said that in Glastonbury, where 11 students recently were expelled for drug-related issues, expelled students are unlikely to get into additional trouble because they are eager to get back to school.

"Most often these students still have the goal to go to college, and most of them will do that," Bookman said. "People think you get expelled, it's the most horrendous thing in the world, your life is ruined, but that's not the goal of expulsion. You want that student to have a better life, to do better, to be successful."

But most communities are not like Glastonbury, where the high school graduation rate is 99.5 percent and 95 percent of students go on to two- or four-year colleges.

National and local advocates for children worry that expulsion and suspension not only lead to higher dropout rates and arrests, but also disproportionately affect African American and Hispanic students, and leave expelled students with inadequate alternative education options.

"Harsh discipline in general has been shown to make students feel less connected to their school" and to strain their relationships with teachers and school staff, said Alexi Nunn Freeman, an attorney with the Advancement Project in Washington, D.C. "When that happens, [students] are more likely to engage in violent behavior, alcohol and substance abuse ... risky type behaviors."

While expulsion sometimes is necessary, Freeman said, too often it is used when other forms of discipline would be more appropriate and constructive.

The era of "zero tolerance" and "one strike and you are out" has led to the over-use of suspension and expulsion, rather than a more graduated or progressive discipline policy, she said.

Hannah Benton, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy in Hartford, said "exclusionary discipline" widens Connecticut's achievement gap because minority youth are suspended or expelled at rates significantly higher than white youths.

"Expelled youth lose significant instructional time and may have a difficult time re-engaging" when they return to school, Benton said. "While some disciplinary offenses may warrant removal from the regular education setting, we need to figure out how to keep these students on track."

Freeman said expulsions and suspensions are ineffective punishments that don't curb misbehavior and are actually likely to in-

School Expulsions in Connecticut: The Law

An expulsion is an exclusion from school for more than 10 consecutive days. (An out-of-school suspension cannot last longer than 10 school days.) An expulsion cannot last longer than a full calendar year, or 180 school days.

An expelled student under 16 must be offered an alternative education opportunity. For high school students, that opportunity must last at least two hours a day.

A student between 16 and 18 who has not been expelled previously must get an alternative educational opportunity, but it can be adult education.

No student can be expelled without a formal hearing, either before an impartial hearing officer or the school board.

A special-education student who is expelled must be offered an alternative educational opportunity that meets his or her needs, regardless of the expulsion circumstances.

A student must be expelled from school if the expulsion hearing finds reason to believe he or she possessed certain weapons on school grounds or at a school-sponsored activity; carried such a weapon off school grounds without a permit or used it to commit a crime; or sold or distributed or tried to sell or distribute illegal drugs on or off school grounds. Such students are subject to an 180-day expulsion, but this can be reduced by a school board or hearing officer.

SOURCE: Center for Children's Advocacy; state statutes

crease the number of incidents requiring discipline. "The reason it doesn't work is because it doesn't get to the root of the problem," Freeman said. Other approaches such as conflict-resolution are more likely to turn kids around for the better, she said.

Minorities More Affected

In Connecticut, the number of incidents resulting in expulsion appears to be on the decline, with 1,156 in the 2010-11 school year, down from 1,360 three years earlier. In 2010-11, according to an analysis by Connecticut Voices for Children, an African American student was 4.2 times more likely to be expelled than a white student, and a Hispanic student was 2.7 times more likely.

During both school years, the most common reasons for expulsion were drug-related offenses, fighting and possession of a firearm or sharp object. Suspensions, which last for 10 days or fewer, were far more numerous. Last year in Connecticut there were 77,115 in-school suspensions and 42,913 out-of-school suspensions. School districts are compelled to provide and pay for an educational alternative for most expelled students for at least two hours a day.

Kim Traverso, an educational consultant to the state Department of Education, said efforts are under way to help school staff intervene to prevent a student's problem behaviors from getting worse and leading to suspension or expulsion. "As a state department, we don't want any student who has difficulty and troubles to be expelled from school," Traverso said. "Unfortunately it does happen."

Statewide Test Anxiety And Spring Fever

The contrast in expulsion rates between urban and suburban areas is marked. In Glastonbury, the number of expulsions each year is usually in the single digits; last year not a single student was expelled.

Susan Reynolds, who is director of the expulsion program in Hartford for middle and high school students, said she has had 99 students in her program so far this year. That's more than last year, when the number was 94 for the entire year.

The Hartford program provides 2 1/2 hours of instruction in the mornings for middle school students and the same amount of time for high school students in the afternoons. Lately, she said, she has noticed a surge in the number of middle school students who have been expelled. Of 50 students in the program overall, she said, about 30 are middle school students, most of whom have been expelled for behavioral problems, such as disrupting classes or being disrespectful.

Reynolds said the number of expulsions tends to increase just before Christmas and just before students are given statewide standardized tests, such as the Connecticut Mastery Test. "I call it the CMT dump," Reynolds said. "Maybe [students] get anxious and act up. There's a lot of anxiety around testing."

Toward the end of spring, Reynolds said, she also sees more students in her program. Reynolds said that most expelled students return to school and go on to graduate, but that the kids in the expulsion program seemed to like it. "Oh, they beg to come back," Reynolds said. "It's fascinating. They like the small setting. They like the atmosphere. ... The staff is pretty open to the kids. We don't turn our head and say we don't have time for you."

Glastonbury has three educational options for expelled students, Bookman said. They can attend school from 3 to 6 p.m. in the afternoon, or attend a joint program with other towns, or receive individual tutoring.

Bookman said he decides which alternative is appropriate, although he discusses it with the student and his or her parent.

The short hours of the educational programs available to many expelled students are part of the problem with that punishment, said Alexis Highsmith, an attorney with Greater Hartford Legal Aid.

"They are not getting the number of hours academically that they really need," said Highsmith, who represents dozens of students in expulsion hearings. "It's really not the same kind of instruction. ... I think they have missed out on a lot."

In addition, she said, a student often is left unsupervised for most of the day. "Many kids get in more trouble," she said. "Sometimes they end up getting involved with another student who has also been expelled or suspended."

Highsmith also said she is concerned about the high number of expulsions for comparatively minor violations.

Jamey Bell, executive director of Connecticut Voices for Children, agreed that expulsions and suspensions disrupt the education of students who are already at risk — including minorities, students with learning disabilities and students from poorer communities — pulling them further behind. "Children should be in the classroom whenever possible," Bell said.