

Shocking Numbers Of Kindergarten, First Grade Suspensions

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When Kazzmaire Dorsey was in kindergarten and first grade at the Luís Muñoz Marin School in Bridgeport, he spent more of his school day sitting in the office or suspended at home than in the classroom, his lawyer says.

“He definitely felt very bad about it,” said Kathryn Meyer, the lawyer, who acts as an advocate for children in Kazzmaire’s situation. “I don’t think he understood why he had this trouble. The school’s reaction just increased this feeling that he’s bad and deserved to be excluded, instead of teaching him the right ways to be.”

The suspension of very young children has drawn statewide concern in Connecticut with the release of numbers from the state Department of Education that show 1,967 suspension incidents — including in-school and out-of-school cases — last year, involving 998 children who were 6 years old or younger. The vast majority of the children suspended were attending schools in the state’s larger cities.

While it’s difficult to assess whether those numbers are high or low — they account for a small fraction of the 110,818 instances of suspension last year in kindergarten through grade 12 statewide — many educators and advocates consider them shocking.

Jamey Bell, the state’s Child Advocate, who requested the numbers on suspension, said young children with problem behaviors often are acting out in response to trauma or troubles at home or because of an undetected disability that is impairing learning.

“I don’t believe that they are acting out with any forethought and volitionally misbehaving and not following the rules. Therefore, it’s an inappropriate consequence to exclude them from school,” Bell said. “So many of these kids are disproportionately from urban areas with the greatest degrees of poverty, lack of employment, struggle and disconnection from economic success. These are children of families that are struggling.”

Walter S. Gilliam, an associate professor of child psychiatry and psychology at the Yale’s Child Study Center, said “We know the best place for young children is to be in school. Removing a child from that opportunity only puts that child behind educationally and gives rise to more problems.”

Gilliam said there is “no data anywhere” to suggest that suspension is helpful for children, adding, “There is a lot of reason to believe it’s probably more harmful.” He said research shows that if teachers are provided “with a little bit of assistance, you can bypass a lot of these expulsions and suspensions.”

In many cases, Gilliam said, it seems schools are trying to send a strong message to families and children in the hope that somehow the children will behave better as a result. But, he said, the best predictor of getting suspended again is having been suspended in the past.

State Department of Education Spokeswoman Kelly Donnelly said in an email that it “is unacceptable for students to be removed from the classroom excessively or needlessly.” She noted that the state’s overall number of suspensions for all students in kindergarten - grade 12 has declined by about 14 percent in the past five years.

Rates Of Suspension Vary

The difference in rates of suspension between suburban and urban districts is substantial, with West Hartford and Farmington having five or fewer incidents of suspensions in this age group in 2012, while Bridgeport had 293 and Hartford had 238.

In some cases, the rates of suspension are quite different even between somewhat similar districts and schools. For instance, Hartford has only about 240 more children enrolled in kindergarten and first grade than New Haven, but had 238 instances of suspension compared to 89 incidents in New Haven.

Amistad Academy in New Haven and Achievement First Hartford Academy are both public charter schools run by Achievement First, with very similar enrollment numbers in the early grades. But while Amistad had 38 instances of suspension during the last school year among children age 6 and younger, Achievement First Hartford Academy had 114 in the same age group.

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An even more dramatic comparison: The incidence of suspension of kindergartners and first graders at Achievement First Hartford Academy last year was an estimated nine times the rate in Hartford public schools. Put another way, an estimated 11.7 percent of kindergartners and first-graders at Achievement First Hartford Academy were suspended last year an average of 5.4 times each. In the Hartford public school system, 3.3 percent of kindergartners and first-graders were suspended an average of 2.1 times.

Asked about Hartford's numbers, district spokesman David Medina said in an email response that "there are times suspension is necessary for appropriate reasons. They are typically temporary and instruction is provided."

Marc Michaelson, regional superintendent for Achievement First, said the school, where students annually out-perform their Hartford peers by significant margins on state standardized tests, has "a very high bar for the conduct of our students and that's because we've made a promise to our scholars and our families that we are going to prepare them for college."

But Michaelson said the high number of suspensions at Achievement First Hartford Academy are not "acceptable." He said the school will work to bring those numbers down.

A child may be suspended, he said, if he or she is causing a "major disruption of the learning environment." He said that would mean pushing or lifting or throwing furniture, or aggression, or screaming, or throwing a tantrum. Such behaviors compromise the learning environment, Michaelson said. "We don't feel it's acceptable for one student to steal the learning time of 25 students."

Children Confused, Remorseful

When people hear about the suspension of such young children, their first reaction is often disbelief that a child could do something so bad that he or she must be excluded from class.

"The job for educators would seem to be to manage the behaviors of young children," said Ann Smith, executive director of the African Caribbean American Parents of Children with Disabilities in Hartford. "These are babies. ... We must look at their educational needs and the need for additional trainers and resources."

Experts say that emotional problems, learning disabilities and other factors often are involved in a child's acting out. In Kazzmaire Dorsey's case, his mother, Phyllis Rhodes, said that almost every day during his kindergarten and first grade years, she would get a call from his school saying he was "screaming, yelling, talking back, throwing things."

Rhodes said school representatives would ask her to come in and talk to Kazzmaire or to pick him up and bring him home; sometimes, she said, she would learn later that he had spent hours sitting in the office. "They would just leave him there in the office — doing nothing, not learning a thing," Rhodes said.

Bridgeport Superintendent Paul Vallas said he didn't know enough about Kazzmaire's situation to comment, but he said that the district reduced the number of suspensions for children 6 and under from 293 last year to 58 so far this year, as of Friday.

"Our approach this year has been to very aggressively push to not send kids home," Vallas said. "The more time children spend out of a classroom the more damage is done."

Meyer, who is a lawyer with the Center for Children's Advocacy, a non-profit group, said she has many cases like Kazzmaire's.

"I have kids whose parents are called to come get them every single day or four times a week, three times a week," she said. "I've had a lot of parents lose their jobs."

In Kazzmaire's case, the school wasn't "addressing the root cause of the misbehavior, they were resorting to exclusion," Meyer said. "They weren't accessing the right tools when they were working with Kazzmaire."

Meyer said she worked last year with the school to come up with an educational plan that provided routines and supports to help manage Kazzmaire's behavior, so that by the end of the second grade he was spending much more time in class and learning.

A suspension often makes a young child feel excluded and "remorseful," Meyer said. "They don't know what they did," she said. "They are totally confused, or what happened was an impulsive act."