



Connecticut Students With "Emotional Disturbances" Face High Rate of Suspensions

By PATRICK SKAHILL & DAVID DESROCHES • May 19, 2019

It's still hard for Keyanna Tucker to talk about what happened to her when she was six.

"I was molested," Tucker said. "I didn't know how to cope with it ... I didn't know what was going on, but I knew it wasn't right. So I started becoming a bully."

Tucker, who is now 22, recalled other problems. Her father was incarcerated, which was another layer of stress. And as time went on, her behavior slowly got worse.

Eventually, school officials at Simpson-Waverly School, a pre-K-to-grade-eight school in Hartford, told her she had an "emotional disturbance," a federal special education classification for students with mental health and behavior problems. And the disturbance she lived with led to problems in the classroom. Over her years in Hartford public schools, Tucker was suspended more than two-dozen times and expelled twice.

"Nobody never took the time to really guide me the right way when it came to my emotions," she said. "So my emotions became hate ... you couldn't say anything to me."

Tucker's school experience as a student with an emotional disturbance is a symptom of a system-wide problem. An analysis of state data by Connecticut Public Radio shows that students with emotional disturbances are four times more likely to be thrown out of class than the average student. During the 2017-18 school year, roughly one-third of these students were suspended or expelled -- more than any other disability by a wide margin.

Additionally, black students like Tucker get the "emotional disturbance" label at a rate twice as high as all other racial and ethnic groups combined, and these students face potentially life-long consequences that include higher dropout rates and a lower likelihood of post-secondary education, according to the National Center for Special Education Research.

Keyanna Tucker was recognized by Hartford Public Schools as having an emotional disturbance when she was in the third grade. This came after being molested at six years old, and being estranged from her father, who was incarcerated. Now, she wants to get back into the classroom, and help students overcome their own challenges. The various details of Keyanna Tucker's story have been confirmed by a former school employee who worked closely with her. The employee -- who was introduced to Connecticut Public Radio by Tucker -- asked not to be identified because she's not authorized by the district to speak. But Tucker's school experience is similar to that of other children who experience trauma and end up getting kicked out of school for behavior problems.

"The students who are identified as having an emotional disturbance should have a whole package," said State Child Advocate Sarah Eagan. "They should have the benefit of full assessment, of full intervention, of individualized services and supports."

Instead, they're often suspended, which means they're excluded from the classroom for, at most, ten consecutive school days. Or they're "expelled," which means they're denied school privileges for longer than that.

Fran Rabinowitz, a former Bridgeport schools superintendent who now runs the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents, said when districts suspend, they "send the kids out in the streets."

"It's not an intervention," she said. "And I don't in any way want to condemn the districts, I did it myself -- we suspended children because we did not have the resources or alternative programs for those children to meet those children's needs."

Students with an emotional disturbance make up roughly one percent of the state student population, and about 7 percent of special education students, which is about 6,000 kids. But when it comes to discipline, their percentages are a lot larger. About one third of students listed by the state as having an "emotional disturbance" were suspended or expelled in 2017-18. Note: "Other Health Impairment" includes many different subcategories and also includes ADD/ADHD.

There's another way students with an emotional disturbance are removed from a classroom -- they're sent to other schools. It's often because the district decides it can't teach the child, and another school would be better. It's not punitive, like a suspension or expulsion. Instead it's considered an educational placement decision.

This gets expensive. While it's unclear how much was spent specifically on out-placing students with an emotional disturbance, data from the State Department of Education show a third of them do not attend their home school. For all students with disabilities -- which includes students with emotional disturbances -- districts spent nearly half a billion dollars in 2017 to send them to other schools. This doesn't include transportation costs, which is in the tens of millions.

Keyanna Tucker recalled spending her expulsion days in alternative programs where very little was taught. Other times she remembered weeks without schoolwork, waiting for her friends to get out of school so she could talk with someone.

"Wake up, eat cereal, go back to sleep, and wait until everybody got out of school," she said. "It's like y'all wanted me to die out there."

When There's A Classroom 'Crisis,' What's An Appropriate Response?

Emotionally disturbed students reflect a wide range of mental illnesses, including post-traumatic stress disorder, trauma, anxiety disorders, and depression.

Once identified as having an emotional disturbance with associated behavior problems, it's considered best practice for the child to get a behavior intervention plan, which describes common problem behaviors exhibited by the child and appropriate intervention methods.

Some districts work with a board-certified behavior analyst to develop this plan and individualize it to each student.

Except that doesn't always happen, said Kathryn Meyer, a lawyer with the Center for Children's Advocacy. "A child who is classified as having an emotional disturbance is a client that we see very frequently, whose needs are not being met," Meyer said.

The school is a community," Meyer said. "When one member of your class is not successful, it impacts the whole class." Meyer said students with an emotional disturbance students often present very challenging behavior, like classroom outbursts or other aggressive actions that can disrupt the class and pose dangers to other students and staff members.

"They are the most outwardly-displaying their behaviors and their disability," Meyer said. "We're not at all surprised to see that they are the most likely to be excluded."

The number of children exhibiting significant behavior problems in class has ballooned across the state, representatives of a teachers union have said. However, it's hard to pin an exact number on that, because districts don't track classroom removals. Only suspensions and expulsions are tracked.

Teachers say something has to change.

"We have a serious crisis happening in many elementary schools across the state of Connecticut," said Robyn Kaplan-Cho with the Connecticut Education Association, the state's largest teachers union, during a recent legislative testimony.

"Here's a classic scenario," she said. "Student is in crisis, has a disruptive incident, teacher attempts to de-escalate, it's not successful, the teacher has to temporarily remove the student so she can continue with the rest of the class. Ten minutes later, the student is returned to the classroom, but nothing has changed. They are exactly where they were 10 minutes ago."

"It's literally the Groundhog Day of elementary schools," she said. "It's happening over and over and over."

This pinwheel of rapid removal and return is untenable, and can lead to a loss of learning time for students and a host of

issues for educators who might not be trained in mental health intervention or drafting behavior plans for special-needs students, according to teachers who testified at the bill's public hearing.

"It requires a lot of time," said Meyer with the Center for Children's Advocacy. "Data collection, structured observation, interviewing, analysis, and putting together a very individualized tailored plan for that child."

Meyer said when she works with students who have an emotional disturbance, she often sees behavior plans that are "boilerplate."

And that's if the plans are developed at all.

State regulations require educators make a "prompt referral" for special education services for any student "whose behavior ... in school is considered unsatisfactory or at a marginal level of acceptance."

But teachers and special education advocates say these referrals for services are not happening.

"Sometimes they are referred, and sometimes you're told, 'Don't put a referral in,'" said Tom Nicholas, a former social worker now with the CEA union. "It was often discouraged, and sometimes [administrators] wouldn't accept the referral. That goes on pretty commonly."

Limited Resources, Limited Options

Fran Rabinowitz, the former Bridgeport superintendent, recalled students getting suspended because schools didn't have anything better to offer them. Rabinowitz said that in well-resourced schools, psychologists are able to work with students before they have an issue. But in poorer districts, psychologists are often overwhelmed with students who are beyond the point of crisis, leaving no time to work with students whose problems aren't as severe.

So crisis students are often sent to the principal's office. "Which is hardly an environment run by professionals for intervention," Rabinowitz said.

Ideally, she said, a school should be staffed with plenty of social workers and school psychologists, there should be a strong "social and emotional learning" component to the school culture and curriculum, and teachers should be well-trained in behavior de-escalation. But with limited resources, most schools lack all of these components.

And the money that districts do have, Rabinowitz said, is often tied-up serving students with the most significant needs. "It doesn't leave much over for the children who are not yet identified" as having a disability, she said, "which leads to more identification, which for me, is the chicken and the egg."

But if interventions happen early and often, students can avoid developing the significant behavior problems that often lead to being identified as having an emotional disturbance, she said. Once the identification happens, resources by law have to be used for the more intense interventions, which again leaves fewer resources for kids with only minor behavior problems.

Over the last decade, Connecticut districts spent lots of money to place students with disabilities in other schools. State-wide, expenses rose an average of about 6 percent annually. (Data Source: State Department of Education)

Being stuck between investing in prevention or intervention often puts districts in a difficult position. But Eagan, the child advocate, said more can be done. "We talk about resources and assume that there are no resources available," Eagan said. "Districts that we think about that have high suspension rates must have no money to put into the classroom. I think that sometimes that's true but I want to challenge that."

Eagan said districts that suspend emotionally disturbed students at disproportionate rates, "are also sending some of those same students to very expensive, out-of-district, state-approved, private special education programs."

What's more, Eagan said, is a recent state auditor report, which pointed out there's no system for evaluating how well those programs are working.

In that report, auditors found that costs of programs varied wildly, and that record-keeping practices rarely complied with legal requirements. There are also seven for-profit special education providers in the state, which raised questions about the motivation behind service cost, which is paid for by state and local taxpayers.

Getting Past The Anger, And Back To The Classroom

There could be a legislative solution. Many teachers are supporting a bill that would require school districts to set up protocols for removing kids from class when they act out, and give them the proper supports. They say the current system is broken and something has to change.

But some, like the Connecticut Association of School Psychologists, or CASP, say the bill would disproportionately impact students of color, who are often targeted by teachers for behavior problems that they tolerate among white students.

"We are concerned that unintentionally this bill will discriminate against those that we strive to protect on a daily basis," said Thomas Brandt, CASP president.

Others, like John Flanders, executive director of the Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center, say the established protocol works, it's just not being used. "There are mechanisms under current law that can protect kids," Flanders said. "The way to correct the flaws in this bill is to simply require an immediate referral" for special education services for a child with behavior problems.

Under current regulations, persistent behavior problems are already supposed to automatically trigger this referral, but districts aren't complying, teachers testified. But some, like East Hampton teacher Cindy Mazzota, say that special education might not be the answer for some students with behavior problems. They want to see different solutions put in place before a problem escalates to more formalized interventions.

"We're talking about a group that maybe shouldn't be" referred for services, Mazzota said, adding that these are behavioral issues that shouldn't necessarily lead to a special education designation.

Kaplan-Cho from the CEA union agreed. "It's not solely a special education issue," she said.

That's why they want an alternative solution to special education, which is addressed in the proposed legislation.

Former Bridgeport Superintendent Rabinowitz said many students can avoid being identified for costly special education services, if interventions happen early and often. "Sometimes a child just needs someone to listen to them," she said. "To sit with them, to teach them alternative ways of dealing with the overwhelming anger that they feel."

Keyanna Tucker remembers the feelings of anger she had as a child. The confusion she felt as a third grader labelled "emotionally disturbed" who was kicked out of class for weeks at a time. She remembers the isolation she felt and the long days she spent at home, away from her peers.

But she also remembers the adults in her life who did seem to genuinely care. Even though she's had run-ins with police, Tucker did graduate high school at 18. And now, after a childhood spent outside the classroom, she wants to dedicate her life to getting back in it, using her experiences to connect with students as a motivational speaker.

For now, she's working, and thinking about getting a college degree.

"My heart is with helping the youth," she said. "No matter where I'm at, I'm not happy. But when I'm in a school, when I'm working with those kids and I'm talking with them and learning them, I'm the best me. The kids bring out the best me."

Connecticut Public Radio obtained data for this story as the result of a Freedom of Information Act request. We are making the data and computer code used for this project available for re-use and your own analysis.

<https://www.wnpr.org/post/connecticut-students-emotional-disturbances-face-high-rate-suspensions>