

# The Washington Post - Study shows wide varieties in discipline methods among very similar schools

By Donna St. George, Published: July 18, 2011

Here's one myth of school debunked: Harsh discipline is not always a reflection of the students in a particular school. It can be driven by those in charge.

In a study of nearly a million Texas children described as an unprecedented look at discipline, researchers found that nearly identical schools suspended and expelled students at very different rates.

[The report](#), released Tuesday, challenges a common misperception that the only way schools can manage behavior is through suspension, said Michael D. Thompson, a co-author of the report, done by the [Council of State Governments Justice Center](#) and [Texas A&M University's Public Policy Research Institute](#). **"The bottom line is that schools can get different outcomes with very similar student bodies," he said. "School administrators and school superintendents and teachers can have a dramatic impact."**

The research could not cite reasons for differences — whether some schools might be more tolerant of misbehavior or better at classroom management or using alternative approaches. The analysis used more than 80 variables, including race, economics, test scores, attendance, teacher salary and experience, and expenditures per student.

**The research showed that while some high-poverty schools suspended students at unexpectedly high rates, others with strikingly similar characteristics did not. The same discipline gap was clear for prosperous, suburban schools and small, rural schools; some were harsh, and others with nearly identical qualities were not.**

"It's a really important finding," said Russell Skiba, an Indiana University professor who has studied discipline issues for 15 years. **"It says it's not totally about what kids and communities bring but it's a choice that schools make."**

The study was said to be the first of its kind — a statewide analysis of 6.6 million records that examined every Texas seventh-grader in 2000, 2001 and 2002 and tracked them for the next six years or more. Education data were matched with juvenile justice records for a fuller picture.

The results showed that suspension or expulsion greatly increased a student's risk of being held back a grade, dropping out or landing in the juvenile justice system. Such ideas have been probed in other research, but not with such a large population and across a lengthy period, experts said.

Among the study's central findings was that 23 percent of students who had been suspended at least once had contact with the juvenile justice system. By comparison, 2 percent of students with no suspensions had juvenile justice involvement.

This connection between classroom and courtroom is often referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Links between one set of records and the other had never been done on such a large scale, the study’s authors said.

“This is documenting there is a pipeline,” Skiba said. “The more you’re involved in discipline at the school level, the greater you risk involvement at the criminal justice level.”

### **‘Discretionary’ offenses**

**The study showed that 97 percent of disciplined students got in trouble for “discretionary” offenses, which can include serious fights but often refer to classroom disruption and insubordination. Fewer than 3 percent were ousted for violations with state-mandated punishment, such as bringing weapons or drugs to school.**

In an analysis that controlled for 83 variables to isolate the effect of race on discipline, **the study found African American students had a 31 percent higher likelihood of being disciplined for a discretionary offense, compared with whites and Hispanics with similar characteristics.**

**The analysis also concluded that African Americans had fewer mandatory-discipline offenses than whites or Hispanics. “The numbers are heartbreaking,” said Matt Cregor of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, who called the study “remarkable” for its scope and depth. The results, he said, reflected patterns elsewhere. “What we’re seeing in Texas is no different than what we are seeing nationally.”**

“We’re not going to close the so-called achievement gap or end this graduation or dropout crisis until we take a hard look at the numbers like these and the practices and policies that created them,” Cregor said.

A majority of students disciplined had repeat offenses — eight on average over the study period of six years. **“With so many kids being disciplined repeatedly, one has to ask whether this is working the way everyone wants it to,”** said Thompson, the study’s co-author.

Texas state Sen. John Whitmire (D), chairman of the state Senate’s Criminal Justice Committee, **said the report confirmed his growing belief that school discipline is broken. Safety is important, he said, but too many students are suspended for typical teenage lapses.**

“It’s just become the easiest thing to do,” Whitmire said. “It’s easier than working with kids.”

Nearly 60 percent of students had been disciplined at some point from seventh grade on — with in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, disciplinary alternative programs or juvenile justice alternative programs.

Some educators urged looking beyond suspensions. Said Doug Otto, superintendent of schools in Plano, Tex.: **“The right kind of intervention in a timely way can make all the difference in the world for most kids.”**