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Report on Suspensions Recommends that Schools Rethink Discipline Practices

***Nearly two-thirds of suspensions are for relatively minor violations;
attendance violations are second leading cause of suspensions***

As Connecticut's families and schools prepare for the start of the school year, the authors of the state's first comprehensive study of the use of out-of-school suspensions to discipline K-12 students are recommending that school administrators rethink their disciplinary policies. The report by Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based child policy think tank, suggests that out-of-school suspensions may be overused and counterproductive.

The report finds that:

- **Suspensions are common, and suspension rates vary widely among school districts.** During the 2006-2007 school year, 7% of children in Connecticut schools were suspended, and over 250,000 school days were lost due to suspensions. The percentage of students suspended ranged from 1% to 22% across school districts.
- **Nearly two-thirds of suspensions were for relatively minor offenses, such as skipping school and showing disrespect.** Attendance violations, including truancy, were the second leading reason for suspensions.

“Students who voluntarily skip school are being ‘punished’ by being involuntarily excluded from school through a suspension,” said Shelley Geballe, President of Connecticut Voices for Children. “This is counterproductive and compounds the damage to the children’s educational progress.”

- **Students who are suspended are disproportionately those who need educational opportunities the most.** Students in districts with the lowest socioeconomic indicators were nearly four times as likely to be suspended as students in other school districts. Compared to white students, black students were more than four times as likely, and Hispanic students more than three times as likely, to be suspended. Special education students were more than twice as likely to be suspended than their peers.

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The report points to research on school discipline practices which indicates that overreliance on suspensions is not only ineffective, but can be counterproductive in terms of student behavior and educational outcomes.

- Suspensions can result in significant educational and social costs, widening the educational achievement gap, increasing juvenile delinquency, and increasing drop out rates.
- Excluding children from school for disciplinary reasons is not effective and can be counterproductive. Suspensions can unintentionally reward poor behavior, as students often perceive a few days off from school as a vacation.

“Children need a safe and respectful environment to learn,” said Taby Ali, Policy Fellow and report co-author. “But excluding students from school doesn’t work to promote discipline and threatens to widen our educational achievement gaps.”

“Children can’t learn when they’re not in school,” said Alexandra Dufresne, Senior Policy Fellow at Connecticut Voices and co-author of the study. “We need to invest in disciplinary policies that promote positive learning environments, preserve educational opportunity and strengthen the personal relationships between at-risk students and caring adults in schools.”

In 2007, the Connecticut General Assembly passed a law requiring that suspensions be served in school, rather than out of school, unless the student “poses such a danger to persons or property or such a disruption of the educational process that the student shall be excluded from school.” The law was originally scheduled to go into effect on July 1, 2008, but implementation was delayed until July 2009.

To move toward more effective disciplinary practices, Connecticut Voices for Children recommends that:

- There should be no further delays in implementation of the new law limiting out-of-school suspensions.
- Funding should be provided to schools for preventive and alternative discipline programs to reduce the need for suspensions. Preventive discipline measures include programs that focus on positive reinforcement. Alternative punishments that do not involve excluding children from schools include detentions and restitution (i.e., a student acts to repair the damage the student’s actions have caused through, for example, an apology or community service).

Connecticut Voices for Children (www.ctkidslink.org) is a research-based policy and advocacy organization that works to advance strategic public investment and wise public policies to benefit our state’s children, youth and families.

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