

Information Presented to the Education Committee,  
March 6, 2008 Education Committee Informational Forum on In-School Suspension  
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Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann and Distinguished Members of the Education Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak as a panelist at the March 6, 2008 Education Committee Informational Forum on In-School Suspension. As requested, we submit below a written summary of our remarks at that event.

## **I. Introduction**

Connecticut Voices for Children is a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families. We are here to speak about a report we are writing on exclusionary punishments in Connecticut, particularly out-of-school suspensions. Our research seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of out-of-school suspension policy and practice in Connecticut. Accordingly, we are reviewing a wide array of local and national data and research on the issue and are conducting extensive interviews with teachers, social workers, school officials, superintendents, SDE representatives, and advocates for parents and children.<sup>1</sup>

In particular, our research examines the following questions:

- 1) What does the aggregate data tell us about exclusionary punishments, particularly out-of-school suspensions, in Connecticut?
- 2) What are the strongest arguments for and against exclusionary punishments, and in what particular cases are they most appropriate?
- 3) What are the challenges and barriers to reducing out-of-school suspension rates? In other words, what explains the gap between education research -- which disfavors exclusionary punishments -- and educational practice in Connecticut?

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<sup>1</sup> We are reviewing the following sources of information: State Department of Education data about school discipline; national data about school discipline; districts' and schools' codes of conduct; reports about school discipline in Connecticut; Connecticut law regarding school discipline, the legislative history of the recent in-school suspension law, including testimony presented in favor and against; legal, public policy, and education literature on school discipline (from both policy organizations and peer-reviewed academic journals); news reports on suspension in Connecticut in the last ten years; selected other states' law regarding school discipline.

- 4) Are there effective alternatives to exclusionary punishments? And more broadly speaking, what are the best ways to achieve the goals of discipline, order, safety, and a positive learning environment, while minimizing exclusions and their attendant costs?

In our remarks today, we will focus on Connecticut data regarding out-of-school suspensions and research regarding the costs and benefits of out-of-school suspensions. Our hope is that this information will provide context for the Forum's discussion about the new in-school suspension law. We are happy to provide the Committee with information about the other findings of our research upon request.

## II. Data Highlights

The following data is from the State Department of Education, which collects extensive data from schools on their discipline practices. This data is from the 2005-2006 school year, the most recent year for which data is publicly available.

- During the 2005-2006 school year, 152,849 school days were lost to out-of-school suspensions or expulsions. This is the equivalent of 850 school years.
- Out-of-school suspension rates vary tremendously among districts. Rates range from 1 out-of-school suspension/100 students/year to 49 out-of-school suspensions/100 students/year.<sup>2</sup>
- Four school districts had over 40 out-of-school suspensions/100 students/year.
- The weighted state average across districts is 14 out-of-school suspensions/100 students/year.
- There are disproportionately more disciplinary sanctions<sup>3</sup> issued in DRGs F, G, H, and I – particularly DRG I.
- Minority students receive a disproportionate number of exclusions. For example, in 2005-2006, African-American students comprised 13.3 percent of the public school population, but comprised 30.6 percent of the students suspended out-of-school and expelled. Similarly, Hispanic students comprised 15.2 percent of the public school population, but comprised 25 percent of the students suspended out-of-school and expelled.
- Special education students are also disproportionately represented in exclusionary punishment rates. In 2005-2006, special education students comprised 11.5 percent of the public school population, but comprised 21 percent of the students who were suspended out-of-school or expelled.

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<sup>2</sup> We report incidents/100 students/year because data regarding the unique number of students suspended is not publicly available. The incident rate reflects the fact that sometimes the same student is suspended more than once during a school year.

<sup>3</sup> "Disciplinary sanctions" include expulsions, out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions, detentions, loss of bus privileges, counseling, conferences and community service. Data regarding out-of-school suspension rates for each DRG are not available.

- Out-of-school suspensions occur on in all grades -- including pre-kindergarten—but peak in transition grades, namely 6<sup>th</sup> grade and 9<sup>th</sup> grade.
- Out-of-school suspension rates taper off after 9<sup>th</sup> grade, the peak year. We do not know whether this is because 9<sup>th</sup> grade is a transition year, or because students who are frequently excluded from school for disciplinary reasons tend to drop out after 9<sup>th</sup> grade.
- A number of pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and elementary school students are suspended out-of-school or expelled each year. While the total number of days lost to exclusionary punishments in kindergarten is low compared to the number of days lost by older students, it is worth noting that 80 percent of days lost to exclusionary punishments occurred in DRG I.
- More than half of out-of-school suspensions are for school policy violations. (56.7 percent of out-of-school suspensions are for school policy violations; 43.3 percent of out-of-school suspensions are for “serious offenses.”)

### III. The Costs of Out-of-School Suspensions: Highlights

#### Educational Effects:

- There are serious educational costs to missing school, particularly for children and youth at-risk.
- Exclusionary punishments contribute to the achievement gap.
- Exclusionary punishments contribute to drop-out, particularly for youth at-risk.

#### Effects on School Climate and Discipline:

- Suspending children for misbehavior often unintentionally rewards and reinforces poor behavior.
- While in some cases, schools have no choice but to exclude disruptive or potentially dangerous students, we are aware of no evidence demonstrating that out-of-school suspensions are an effective disciplinary tool in the majority of cases in which they are issued.
- Alternative punishments, such as after-school detention, community service, or punishments by which the child seeks to “repair” the harm his misbehavior has caused, have been found to be more effective than exclusionary punishments in improving student discipline.
- Preventative approaches, such as Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) have been found to be more effective in improving student discipline than exclusionary punishments.

#### Juvenile Justice Implications:

- In 2007, Connecticut’s Court Support Services Division reported that 89 percent of youth in Connecticut’s juvenile justice system had been suspended or expelled. While this correlation does

not prove causation, police have expressed concern about public safety when students remain home from school unsupervised for other reasons, such as truancy.

#### **IV. The Costs of Out-of-School Suspensions: More Detail**

When and whether to exclude children from school for disciplinary reasons is an important issue, for several reasons. First, ensuring a safe and respectful learning environment is critical to the success of a school. Yet there is little evidence that excluding students is an effective method of promoting discipline.<sup>4</sup> While exclusions are necessary in some situations, non-exclusionary punishments, such as detentions and in-school suspension, are more effective in many cases.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, measures designed to get to the root of the disciplinary problem and to prevent misconduct from escalating, -- such as positive reinforcement -- are more effective tools of ensuring a safe and positive learning environment.<sup>6</sup> Just as some children come to school already knowing how to read, some children come to school with the social and personal skills necessary to learn productively in a community. Others do not. The only way to change these children's behavior is to *teach* them the skills they need to maintain self-discipline and to interact positively with others. Excluding a child from school, in itself, is rarely a pedagogically-sound means of teaching these skills.

Second, there is a significant educational cost to missing school. Connecticut has the largest achievement gap in the nation.<sup>7</sup> Children in poor districts are already working at a tremendous disadvantage compared to their peers in other districts. While successful schools have demonstrated that the gap can be bridged, it is only through extraordinary vision and hard work. Children in poor districts can simply not afford to miss even a day of instruction. And data from Connecticut suggests that the children who are most likely to be excluded from school are also the ones who are least able to afford to fall behind.

Third, out-of-school suspensions can unintentionally reward and reinforce poor behavior,<sup>8</sup> as students often perceive a few days off from school as a vacation. Educators report that when some students feel socially or academically overwhelmed in school and wish to avoid a pressing situation that is stressful, they act out in order to be sent home. Because the threshold for "earning" a suspension is quite low in some districts, students can manipulate the system without having to do anything bad enough to anger their parents or feel too guilty. Allowing children to avoid difficult situations by acting out unwittingly reinforces this behavior.

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<sup>4</sup> See V. Costenbader and S Markson, "School Suspension: A Study with Secondary School Students," *Journal of School Psychology* (1997), Vol. 36, Issue 1. (Survey of 252 suspended students found that 69% percent felt that the suspension was of little use, and 32% predicted that they would be suspended again.); S Bock, K Tapscott, and J Savner. "Suspensions and Expulsion: Effective Management for Students?" *Intervention in School and Clinic*, Vol. 34, Issue 1 (1998); R Skiba. "Zero Tolerance, Zero Evidence: An Analysis of School Disciplinary Practice," *Indiana Education Policy Center* (August 2000).

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., A. Adams. "The Status of School Discipline and Violence," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, vol 567, *School Violence*. (Jan 2000) at 146.

<sup>6</sup> G. Sugai and R Horner. "The Evolution of Discipline Practices: School-wide Positive Behavior Supports," *Child and Family Behavioral Therapy* vol 24, no 1-2 (2002). Behavioral Improvements in school discipline occurred when a positive and preventative approach was applied. For more information on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports see [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org).

<sup>7</sup> ConnCan, "Issue Brief: The Achievement Gap," Number 1 (July 2006).

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., A Smith. "Out of School Suspension Falling out of Favor," *New Haven Register* (August 26, 2007). Statement from West Haven High School Principal Ronald Stancil, "Kids don't necessarily mind being suspended (at home) so much. It's kind of like a reward for them."; R Skiba. "Zero Tolerance, Zero Evidence: An Analysis of School Disciplinary Practice," *Indiana Education Policy Center* (August 2000).

Fourth, suspensions may increase risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system.<sup>9</sup> Educators, lawmakers and advocates worry about what children and youth do when they are sent home from school, largely unsupervised when their parents work. In 2007, Connecticut's Court Support Services Division (CSSD) reported that 89 percent of 16 and 17-year olds involved in the juvenile justice system had been suspended or expelled from school.<sup>10</sup> While the link between school discipline problems and delinquency is attributable to many factors, police have expressed concern about delinquency when students are unsupervised during school hours.<sup>11</sup>

Fifth, how we discipline our children, and which children we choose to discipline, is an important lesson in justice. Public education in Connecticut has never been just about teaching children to read, write, and solve problems. It has traditionally about instilling moral values and capabilities necessary for citizenship, including an understanding of justice. Children, particularly teenagers, are keenly attuned to fairness. Most children accept punishment when the punishment "fits the 'crime'" and when it is fairly administered. But there is little that undermines adolescent's confidence in the good intentions of adults as the perception that punishment is disproportionate, arbitrary, or inconsistent. Poorly conceived or administered punishments run the risk of distracting students from reflecting on the wrongfulness of their own actions and taking responsibility for their own behavior. They do not "make right" the wrong committed, or address the underlying issues responsible for the misbehavior. In addition, inappropriate punishments undermine children's faith in their schools and their educational futures. Many children come from families and communities robust enough to weather a few injustices; an unnecessary suspension is nothing but a passing slight. However, many children grow up in communities in which injustice is a grinding fact of life, and which otherwise slight injustices reinforce the lack of agency and hope. For these children, it is particularly important to get the teachable moment right.

More importantly, over reliance on exclusion as a disciplinary technique frays, and sometimes severs, the relationship between children and adults in the school,<sup>12</sup> particularly when the child's misbehavior is an undiagnosed cry for help. Excluding children often enough, in the wrong contexts for the wrong reasons, can make children feel that they are unwanted and that they do not belong in school.<sup>13</sup> Many of these children are already struggling academically, and so when they return to school after missing even a few days, they feel that there is no way for them to catch up. Since many of the children who are excluded from school already feel a tenuous link to their education, even a short suspension from the school can have a startling and disproportionate impact, becoming the final "push" in a long process of dropping out. In a knowledge-driven economy such as Connecticut's, the long-term effects of dropping out from high school are devastating. Research indicates that the best insurance against dropout is the presence of an adult in the school who really knows and cares about a student;<sup>14</sup> indeed, all the aspects of successful schools arguably all boil down to the quality and robustness of the personal relationships

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<sup>9</sup> R Stephens. "National Trends in School Violence: Statistics and Prevention Strategies," *School Violence Prevention: A Practical Handbook* (1997) at 75.

<sup>10</sup> Connecticut Court Support Services Division, "JJPIC: Proposed Court and Service System for 16 and 17 year olds," January 4, 2007 Presentation.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., M Garriga's "Police, Panel Staffers Will Visit Truant Students," *New Haven Register* (February 15, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> A Adams. "The Status of School Discipline and Violence," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, Vol 567, *School Violence*. (Jan 2000) at 145; V. Costenbader and S. Markson. "School Suspension: A Study with Secondary School Students," *Journal of School Psychology* (1997), Vol. 36, Issue 1.

<sup>13</sup> W Jordan, J Lara, and J McPartland. "Exploring the Complexity of Early Dropout Casual Structures," *Johns Hopkins University Center for Research on Effective Schooling for Disadvantaged Students*, Issue 48 (1994).

<sup>14</sup> V Lee and D Burkam. "Dropping Out of High School: The Role of Social Organization and Structure," *American Education Research Journal*, v40 n2 p353-393 (2003).

between students and caring adults. For this reason, it is particularly important that even – especially – in disciplining a child, the school sends the right message.

Finally, given the data cited above, it is hard to argue that suspensions are fringe issues that affect just a small minority of troubled children. Even if exclusionary punishments have the harmful effects noted above in only a minority of cases --- and it is impossible to know if this is true – the absolute number of children affected is quite high.