



History and Impact of Exclusionary Discipline in Schools



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History of Exclusionary Discipline

Exclusionary discipline is a way for schools to discipline students by removing them from the learning environment. These policies came from the “tough on crime” approaches implemented in response to the War on Drugs in the 1980s (Advancement Project, 2010, p. 9-10).

During that time, there was an increase in police presence in schools. There were also harsher responses to student behavior, such as “lengthy out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, referrals to alternative schools, referrals to law enforcement, and school-based arrests” (p. 4).

These harsher policies increased because of narratives like the superpredator myth. This myth stated the bad morals of youth was a threat to society in America (p. 10).

New laws like the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 and state laws allowing adolescents to be tried as adults increased the harshness of disciplinary action (p. 10).

School shootings, such as Columbine in 1999, also fueled the increased use of exclusionary policies in schools (p. 10).

Those who created exclusionary discipline policies did not have an accurate understanding of child and teen development. A normal part of child and adolescent development is to “question authority, be especially susceptible to peer influence, and not fully consider or understand the consequences of one’s actions” (p. 14).

Because these behaviors were viewed as abnormal, exclusionary policies criminalized normal child and teen behavior.

Exclusionary policies were also based on the belief that the threat of detention or expulsion will prevent student misbehavior (p. 17). The reality is “removing a student from school appears to predict higher rates of future misbehavior” (p. 5).

Evidence showed exclusionary policies did not “promote either school safety or academic success” (Advancement Project, 2010, p. 5). In fact, these policies negatively impacted academic performance, resulted in higher chances of school dropout and increased contact with the criminal legal system (p. 5).

Despite the evidence, exclusionary policies continued to expand over the years.

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Impact of Exclusionary Discipline

A 2006 American Psychological Association report analyzing the effects of exclusionary policies over the last 10 years shows “schools [were] not any safer or more effective in disciplining students than they were before zero-tolerance policies were implemented” (Advancement Project, 2010, p. 16-17).

Studies also show students who are suspended 3 or more times by the end of their sophomore year of high school are 5 times more likely to drop out than students who have never been suspended (p. 17).

Exclusionary policies can also decrease students’ sense of connection to the school, which increases the “likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors, violence, and alcohol or substance abuse” (p. 17).

Some people say exclusionary discipline is appropriate for major misbehavior. However, the majority of exclusionary discipline is implemented for minor misbehavior (Advancement Project, 2010, p. 4). Some examples include:

- “In Akron, Ohio, a student can be expelled for being late to class, having cigarettes, or uttering profanity” (p. 14).
- “In Houston, Texas, district policy permits the placement of a student in an alternative school for smoking, defiance of authority, fighting, ‘disrespect,’ use of profanity, or name-calling” (p. 14).

Exclusionary policies also impact students with disabilities. From 2021 to 2022 alone, rates of in-school and out-school suspension for students with disabilities increased significantly, with rates more than doubling for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Significant Developmental Delay (SDD), and Emotional and Behavioral Disorder (EBD) (Bishop, 2023). Out of about 13% of students with a disability, about 71% received out of school suspension for 10 or more school days from 2022 to 2023 (Bishop, 2023).

Unfortunately, Georgia school systems do not give enough attention to students’ mental and emotional health, even for students enrolled in special education programs (Bishop, 2023). Providing better emotional and mental health services would address the root cause of behaviors leading to disciplinary actions, such as suspensions.



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Exclusionary policies disproportionately impact students of color. Compared to their White peers, Black students are two to three times more likely to be suspended in and out of school, expelled, referred to law enforcement, experience a school-based arrest, and be corporally punished (UC Berkeley Public Health, 2024).

Unfortunately, Georgia follows national trends, as “African American students are 3.5 times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than White students” (Gonzales et al., 2018, p. 26-27).

Besides receiving punishment at higher rates, students of color are also “punished more severely for less serious or more subjective infractions” (Advancement Project, 2010, p. 15).