



Reforming School Discipline Policy in Washington, DC

Johanna Lacoë Testimony to the DC Council

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Chairman Grosso and other distinguished members of the DC Council’s Education Committee, thank you for inviting me to join you for today’s hearing on reforming the District’s school discipline practices. Nationwide, the proportion of suspensions and expulsions that are for lower-level, nonviolent behavioral actions such as classroom disobedience or use of foul language, has increased.¹ Of the total number of expulsions and suspensions (lasting five or more days), the proportion that penalize these low-level infractions increased from 22 percent in 2000 to 43 percent in 2008.² Furthermore, African American children experience exclusionary discipline practices at a disproportionate rate when compared with their white peers.³ These trends appropriately raise concerns and have led many school districts to implement, or consider implementing, policy reforms designed to reduce the use of out-of-school suspensions for nonviolent offenses. In addition, practices such as behavioral intervention or restorative justice, which aim to improve school climate and keep kids in school, are increasingly included as part of school discipline policy reforms.

As a policy researcher and deputy area leader for justice research at [Mathematica Policy Research](#) in Oakland, California—and even before I joined Mathematica—I have studied the impacts of exclusionary discipline practices, such as out-of-school suspensions and expulsions,

¹ Steinberg, M. P., & Lacoë, J. (2017). What do we know about school discipline reform? Assessing the alternatives to suspensions and expulsions. *Education Next*, 17(1).

² Steinberg, M. P., & Lacoë, J. (2017). What do we know about school discipline reform? Assessing the alternatives to suspensions and expulsions. *Education Next*, 17(1).

³ U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. (2014). *Data snapshot: School discipline*. Retrieved from <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/Downloads/CRDC-School-Discipline-Snapshot.pdf>

on students' outcomes and achievement in public school systems. As your committee considers adopting the Student Fair Access to School Act of 2017 (bill 22-594), I am pleased to share findings from this research at today's hearing. I hope my work, and the work of other researchers in this field, can inform policy changes and decisions related to implementing school discipline practices that improve outcomes for students. In particular, I am encouraged to see that bill 22-594 calls for revised school discipline policies that "emphasize evidence-based and promising practices."⁴ As you know, evidence-informed decision making can be the difference between enacting legislation that does little to improve outcomes for children and policy changes that effectively reduce racial disparities and position children for a successful future.

My testimony today describes findings from a review of discipline policy reforms instituted in the School District of Philadelphia during the 2012–2013 school year. Specifically, Philadelphia reformed its student code of conduct to prohibit suspensions and expulsions for two types of non-violent student conduct: (1) failure to follow classroom rules and (2) use of profane language. My co-author, Matthew Steinberg from the University of Pennsylvania, and I conducted several studies to understand the implementation of these changes to Philadelphia's discipline policy and the effect of the changes on students' behavior and achievement.⁵ Today I will highlight four main points that are relevant to the bill under consideration.

District-level discipline policy changes require attention to school-level implementation.

The School District of Philadelphia was among the first school districts in the country to reform its student code of conduct in favor of more tempered responses to misbehavior, with the goal of keeping students in the classroom. First enacted during the 2012–2013 school year, changes to Philadelphia's student code of conduct attempted to do so by (1) stopping the use of out-of-school suspensions for low-level infractions and (2) providing school administrators with more discretion to respond to serious disciplinary infractions.

⁴ Council of the District of Columbia. *Education public hearing*. Retrieved from <http://dccouncil.us/events/education-public-hearing13>

⁵ New paper available here: [Reforming School Discipline: School-Level Policy Implementation and the Consequences for Suspended Students and their Peers](#).

Initially, we found significant variation in how schools implemented this new policy. In fact, many Philadelphia schools did not comply with the policy change that prohibited out-of-school suspension for low-level offenses. On average, schools that did not comply with the new policy tended to serve lower-income students and faced higher rates of misbehavior, compared with schools that complied with the policy.

Although the policy change in Philadelphia did encourage schools to consider alternative approaches to suspensions and expulsions, it provided little guidance—and no financial support—for schools to implement alternative approaches with fidelity. Alternative disciplinary practices, for example, could include evidence-based approaches such as [*Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports*](#), which seek a more systematic change in student behavior, one that addresses the issue before discipline is necessary.^{6, 7} These approaches focus more on holistic changes to the school’s climate and response to misbehavior, but they require resources, assistance with professional training, schoolwide engagement, and interdisciplinary coordination. I believe such approaches are directly in line with the educational culture shift toward “promotion of trauma-informed educational settings,” as described in the proposed legislation.

Should the DC Council continue to consider these types of approaches as part of a reform aimed to reduce suspensions and expulsions, policy leaders and administrators must be prepared to support schools to fully and consistently adopt those practices.

Discipline reform affects student achievement, in some cases.

Many critics and supporters of discipline reforms are concerned with the impact of reforms on the achievement of suspended students and their peers. In our study of Philadelphia schools, we found that suspensions for low-level infractions decreased in the first post-policy year of about 1 suspension per 100 students (compared with other districts in Pennsylvania), but this reduction did not persist in the following years. Students who were previously suspended

⁶ There is a growing body of literature that supports schoolwide approaches to address student behavior. Consult the Office of Special Education Program’s Positive Behavioral and Intervention Support website (<http://www.pbis.org/researchLiterature.htm>) for a list of current studies pertaining to schoolwide positive behavior support.

⁷ Bradshaw, C.P., Mitchell, M.M., & Leaf, P.J. (2010). Examining the effects of schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports on student outcomes results from a randomized controlled effectiveness trial in elementary schools. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 12(3), 133–148.

experienced a reduction in the probability (-.88 percentage point change), number (1.16 fewer suspensions), and length (1.99 fewer days) of suspension for these infractions.⁸ In addition, for students suspended for classroom disorder infractions in the pre-reform period, school absences declined following the district's policy reform, and academic proficiency in math improved modestly.

Critics of reforms aimed to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline are concerned that these reforms will negatively affect the achievement of school peers. In Philadelphia, we found no change in the achievement of peers who attended schools that fully complied with the policy (and no longer suspended students for low-level infractions). But the story is different in schools that did not fully comply with the policy (and continued to suspend students for low-level infractions). In those schools, which comprise 77 percent of Philadelphia schools, the math achievement of peers declined following the policy change, relative to comparison schools (0.06 standard deviation decline, on average).⁹

Minority students experience unintended impacts.

Nationwide, out-of-school suspensions disproportionately center on minority students and students who receive special education services.¹⁰ Research shows that racial disparities in suspensions begin as early as preschool, with African American children comprising 18 percent of enrollment in preschools but 48 percent of preschool children experiencing one or more suspensions, according to the federal Office for Civil Rights. These disparities extend through primary, middle, and high school, in which African American students comprise 16 percent of all enrolled students but 34 percent of students suspended once, and 43 percent of students receiving multiple out-of-school suspensions.¹¹ Like Washington, DC and Philadelphia, many schools are changing their discipline practices with the goal of addressing such disparities.

⁸ Steinberg, M., & Laco, J. (2017). *The academic and behavioral consequences of discipline policy reform*. Washington, DC: Fordham Institute.

⁹ Steinberg, M., & Laco, J. (2017). *The academic and behavioral consequences of discipline policy reform*. Washington, DC: Fordham Institute.

¹⁰ Laco, J., & Steinberg, M. (2017). Rolling back zero tolerance: The effect of discipline policy reform on suspension usage, school climate, and student achievement. Working paper.

¹¹ Steinberg, M. P., & Laco, J. (2017). What do we know about school discipline reform? Assessing the alternatives to suspensions and expulsions. *Education Next*, 17(1).

However, our review of discipline policy reform in Philadelphia revealed an unintended impact on minority students. The policy change in Philadelphia was motivated in part by observed racial and ethnic disproportionality in suspensions. And in fact, the policy change *decreased* the use of suspension for low-level offenses for African American students relative to their white peers—but these declines were more than offset by an *increase* in suspensions for more serious offenses among African American students, relative to white peers. This finding suggests that the observed improvement in disproportionality in suspensions for low-level offenses might have resulted from shifting punishments for minority students toward more serious offenses.

Although the policy reform was effective at reducing out-of-school suspensions for classroom disorder, it was ineffective at addressing racial disparities in the use of these practices, and even exacerbated some disparities. Overall, we can say that simply changing a district’s policy on suspensions might not reduce underlying disparities, if it is not accompanied with training on non-exclusionary approaches and resources to implement those approaches.

Data collection is essential to understand the impacts of policy change.

Our work in Philadelphia would not have been possible without detailed, student-level data collected on behavioral infractions and punishments that occurred over time. Ongoing data collection activities, such as those described in bill 22-594, enable social policy researchers like me to provide reliable and informative feedback on the effectiveness of policy change on student behavior and achievement. There is still a lot we don’t know. Therefore, I am encouraged by the student-level data currently collected in the District of Columbia and I am encouraged by the provisions in the bill calling for enhanced collection of data on disciplinary practices.

In particular, I appreciate language in the bill related to collecting student-level data on infractions and punishments, including a description of the action that led to the suspension. These data would be greatly enhanced by documentation of any schoolwide practices that were implemented at the same time as the policy change, so we can fully understand the mechanisms

contributing to any changes in student behavior and other critical outcomes identified through evaluation.

Thank you for inviting me to speak before your committee today. I hope that the research findings I have described help inform your deliberations and contribute to developing and implementing school discipline policies that effectively and fairly serve students and families in the District. It should be noted that effective discipline reform extends beyond changes to out-of-school suspension and expulsion policies. I would encourage this committee to also consider approaches for positive school-based interventions, including whole school culture changes that focus on preventing misbehavior before it occurs. Such strategies can be difficult to implement and require resources, but they are certainly worth considering. The committee should be commended for taking on this complex challenge. I look forward to responding to your questions.