

School Discipline, School Pushout, Student-Parent Handbook

Arbitrary and capricious student discipline policies and practices, pushing students out of school and the ultimate schoolhouse to jailhouse pipeline plague our public schools, with particularly negative consequences for children of color, low wealth or disabilities.

While our state education leaders, and many local education leaders, acknowledge this package of problems, they also often focus blame for these outcomes on the students and their parents, rather than the policies and practices, poor classroom management, and woeful negative leadership coming from school board, superintendents and principals who are ultimately in control and responsible for the existence of these conditions.

The State Board of Education, the MS Dept. of Education and the legislature from time to time have come up with appropriate policy changes and guidelines, but they seem to be more often ignored than implemented.

For example, students who show indications of difficulty in terms of academic or behavioral problems are supposed to receive assessment and supports through a *Teacher Support Team* and the *Response to Intervention* guidelines, which are also intended to assist teachers to learn how to appropriately respond to and assist with the particular needs of such students. In addition, there are commitments to use *Positive Behavior Intervention Supports* and *conflict resolution* strategies, all of which separately and in combination comprise meaningful alternatives to pushing students out of class, out of school, on to the streets and in to the juvenile justice system. Such students are entitled to an individual behavior plan which must be based on research-based evidence to support the strategies outlined in the plan.

But the student assessments made by a psychometrist or psychologist can be expensive and the school districts are reluctant to incur such costs (especially when their operating revenues from the state are drastically reduced). Further, there must be an appreciation for the needs of students who act out and this compassion and understanding is often lacking as a basis for helping students rather than casting them out.

Administrative frustration often leads to arbitrary, capricious and inappropriate disciplines that are counter-productive: beating students (so-called corporal punishment), suspension, expulsion, referral to the juvenile justice system, or warehousing students in non-productive in-school suspension rooms or poorly designed and operating Alternative Schools.

At the same time, parents and students often do not know their rights and, therefore, are not in a position to insist upon them and enforce them.

Nevertheless, each year by state statute there is an opportunity for parents and students to advocate for the adoption of better, more appropriate policies to guide teachers, administrators, students and parents by participation in the annual revision of the student-parent handbook adopted in each school district.

The student-parent handbook is where the rules and regulations are spread out on the record for everyone to understand as the framework by which the school district is committed to operate. Fair and just policies



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designed to keep students in school where they can learn can be incorporated in to the handbooks and policies and practices which push students out of school can be terminated.

This process requires that community education stakeholders come together to work for these kinds of revisions to the handbooks, which may not be achieved all at once, but which over a period of time can vastly improve and transform the culture and quality of education in the local schools.



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