

**EDUCATION  
RIGHTS  
NETWORK**

A **ONE PA** Campaign



# SUSPENDED EDUCATION IN PITTSBURGH PUBLIC SCHOOLS 2015-16

## A REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY

# INTRODUCTION

Parents, teachers, and leaders in Pittsburgh Public Schools have a common goal - to support the academic development and personal growth of young people. For students to be able to learn, and for teachers to be able to teach, it is critical that our schools have positive and productive learning environments. Establishing classrooms that are safe and supportive -- which includes encouraging positive behavior -- provides the foundation that helps students to stay on track academically.

Too often, students are removed from the classroom for minor misbehavior. Exclusionary discipline – actions such as suspension and expulsion that remove young people from their regular classrooms – may address problems in the short term, but can have a detrimental or even devastating impact on students’ educational and life outcomes. When students aren’t in the classroom, they’re missing out on important instructional time. Students who are suspended can fall behind in their learning and become even more disengaged from school, and research correlates suspension with lower test scores, higher dropout rates, and decreased post-secondary enrollment and persistence. And while people may assume that high suspension rates are a response to violence, in fact they most often reflect increased removal for relatively minor, non-violent infractions.

In the 2015-16 school year, Pittsburgh Public Schools students in K-12th grades missed over 16,000 days of school due to out-of-school suspension. The Education Rights Network (an initiative of One PA) has spearheaded an ongoing three-year “Solutions, Not Suspensions” campaign to address the overuse and disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline in Pittsburgh Public Schools, and to

promote preventive and positive approaches to discipline that hold young people accountable while keeping them in school. Notably, Pittsburgh Public Schools has also, in its recently released Pittsburgh Public Schools 2017–2022 Strategic Plan *Expect great things*, prioritized creating a system-wide strategy to address school climate and discipline in order to reduce the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline and increase instructional time.

With support from the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, the Education Rights Network has analyzed out-of-school suspension data for the last two years in Pittsburgh Public Schools. **This report gives an overview of out-of-school suspensions in the district, and draws attention to two particular areas of concern: suspensions of our youngest learners, and the intersection of race, gender and disability in out-of-school suspensions.** We also outline our recommendations for policy changes, based on the Dignity in Schools Campaign *Model Code on Education and Dignity*, that we believe will create learning environments that best support young people as well as school staff.

Pittsburgh Public Schools students come from diverse backgrounds and experiences, with a range of strengths and challenges. Educators work on a daily basis to build upon these strengths and address challenges, and we know how demanding their jobs can be. Both students and teachers must be supported in using positive alternatives to exclusionary discipline. Families, students, teachers, school and district leaders, and community partners all have important parts to play, and we hope that you will get involved in the effort to create Solutions, Not Suspensions, for young people in Pittsburgh.

*National research has shown that exclusionary discipline disproportionately affects certain groups of students – students of color (particularly African-American students), students with disabilities, and LGBTQ students are more likely than their peers to be suspended or expelled. Implicit bias – unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that affect an individual’s actions – plays a part in creating discipline disparities, particularly for minor, behavior-related offenses.*

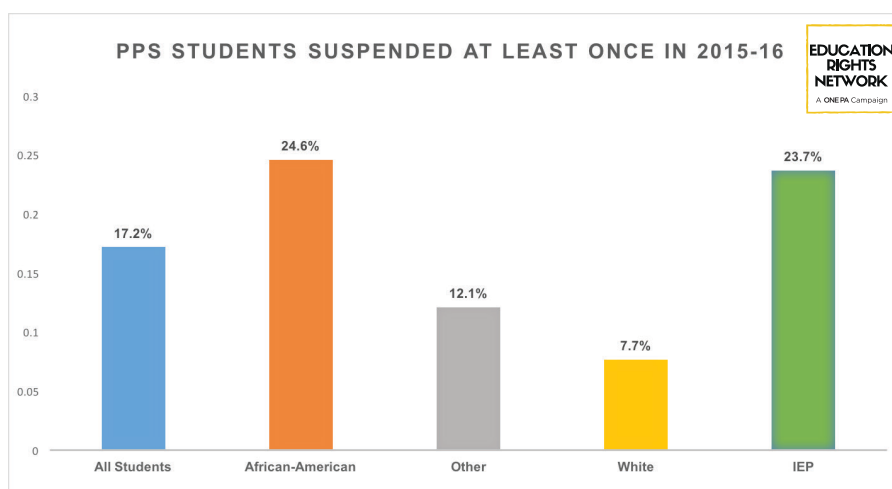
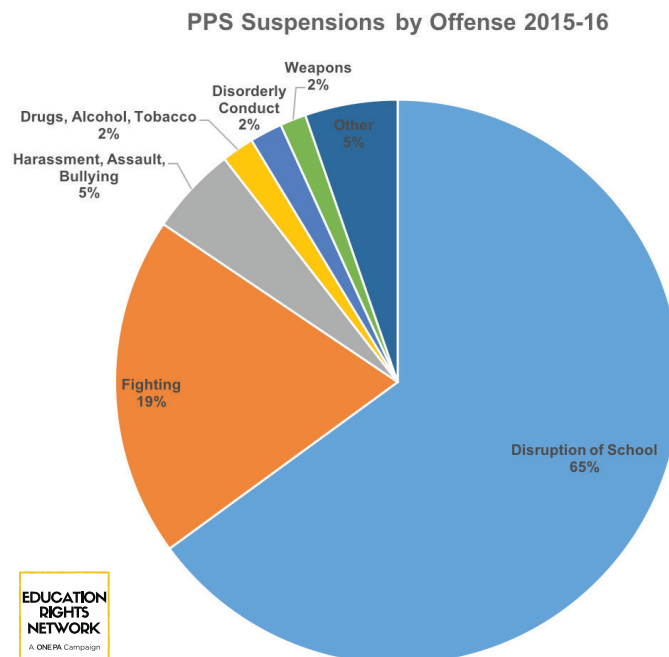
# SUSPENDED EDUCATION IN PITTSBURGH PUBLIC SCHOOLS 2015-16: K-12 OVERVIEW

The charts below provide a snapshot of suspensions in grades K-12 for school year 2015-16.

# of K-12 students suspended at least once	4,017
% of K-12 students suspended at least once	17%
# of K-12 out-of-school suspensions	8,247
# K-12 days of school missed due to out-of-school suspensions	16,005

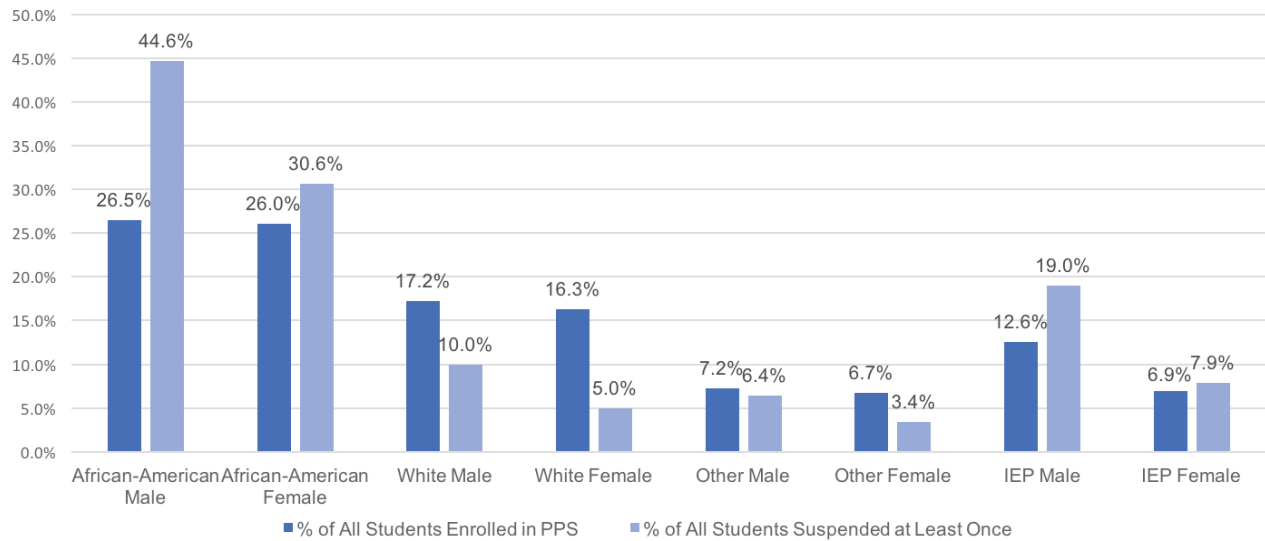
65% of all suspensions were for “disruption of school” violations such as truancy, inappropriate language, and classroom disruptions. Students missed nearly 7,500 days of school for these minor, non-violent offenses.

Suspensions overall have decreased in PPS. In 2015-16, there were over 1,600 fewer suspensions than the previous year - a 17% decline - and this is something to be celebrated. Yet, disparities remain consistent for students of color and students with disabilities. African-American students were over three times more likely than White students to be suspended at least once, and nearly 1/4 of African-American students and students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for special education (excluding students identified as “gifted”) were suspended at least once.





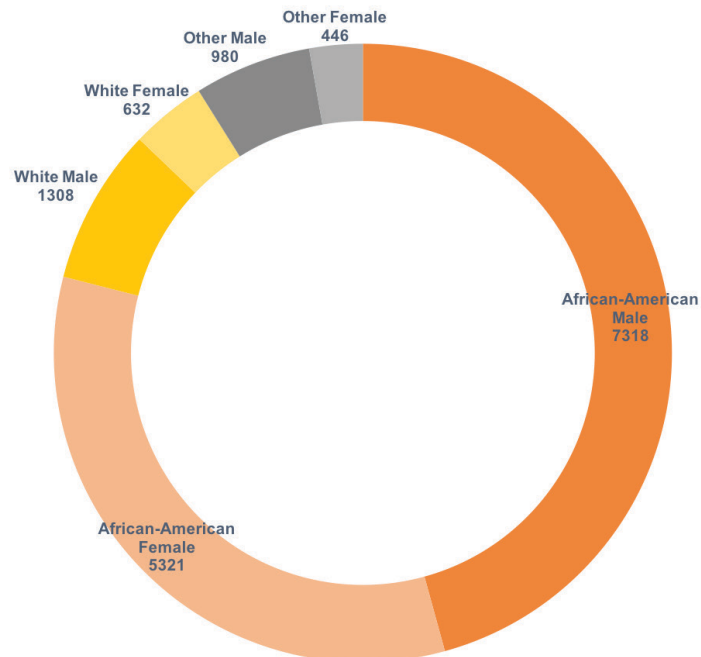
### PPS Disproportionality in Suspensions 2015-16 Proportion of Students Enrolled Vs. Students Suspended



African-American males are most severely overrepresented in the discipline system. While African-American males make up nearly 27% of the district's total enrollment, they account for nearly 45% of students suspended at least once. As a contrast, White males make up 17% of the district's total enrollment, and only 10% of students suspended at least once.

African-American students missed 12,639 days of school due to out-of-school suspensions – far more than students of other races.

### PPS Total Days Suspended 2015-16 (16,005 Days Total)



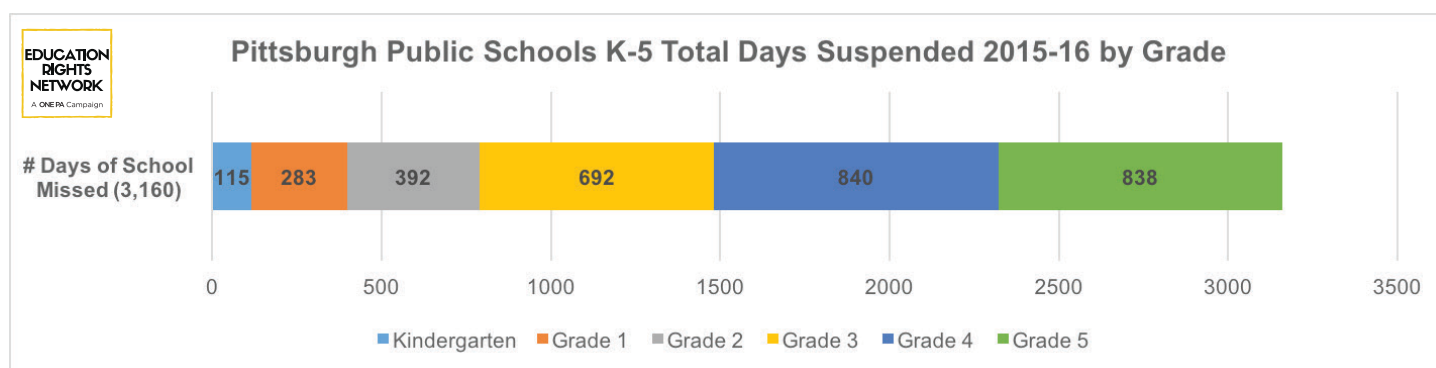
## K-5TH GRADE SUSPENSIONS

Our youngest students need to be in the classroom to learn the basics. Good attendance in elementary school leads to better outcomes, and time taken out of the classroom for suspensions can have a detrimental impact. The charts below provide a snapshot of suspensions in grades K-5 for school year 2015-16.

# of K-5 students suspended at least once	1,134
% of K-5 students suspended at least once	10%
# of K-5 out-of-school suspensions	2,221
<b># K-5 days of school missed due to out-of-school suspensions</b>	<b>3,160</b>

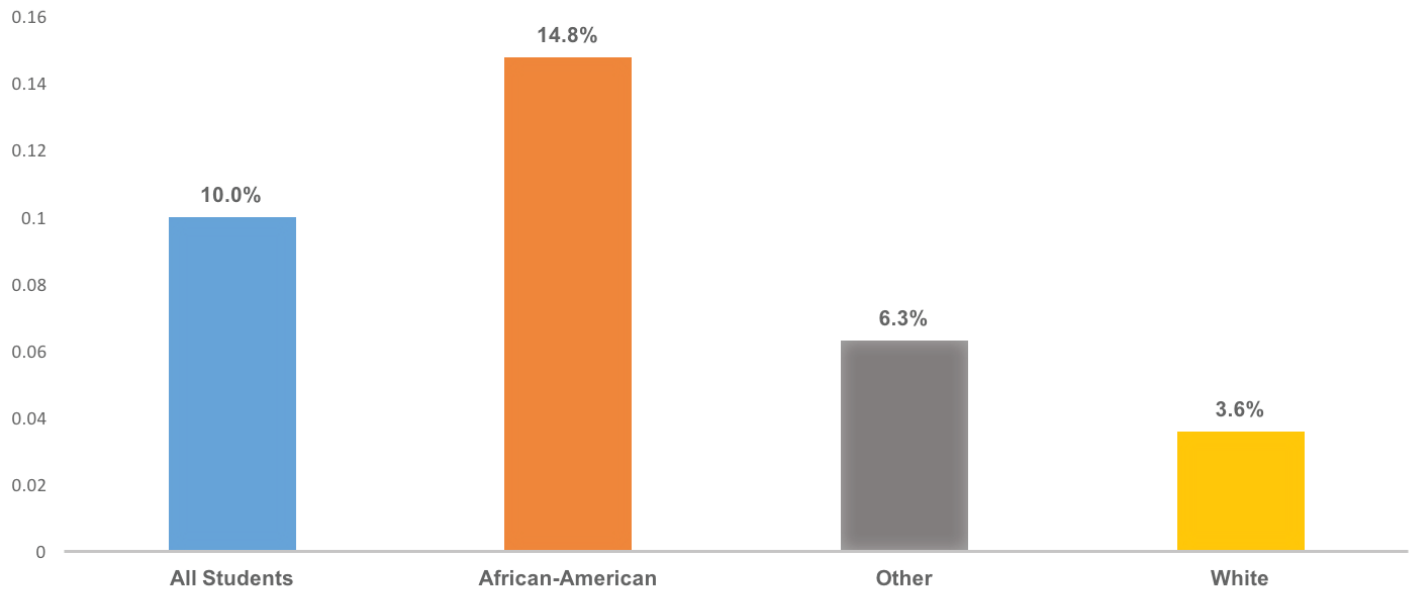
*While suspensions do remove students from their learning environment in these critical years, they don't deter future infractions. In fact, students suspended in earlier grades are far more likely to be suspended in later grades.*

Students in all grade levels were suspended, and K-5 students missed over 3,000 days of instruction due to out-of-school suspension. 65% of K-5 suspensions (1,435 total) were for “disruption of school.” Even kindergarten students missed well over 100 days of instruction - 98 of these were for disruption. In total, 827 K-5 students missed 1,892 days for these minor, non-violent offenses.



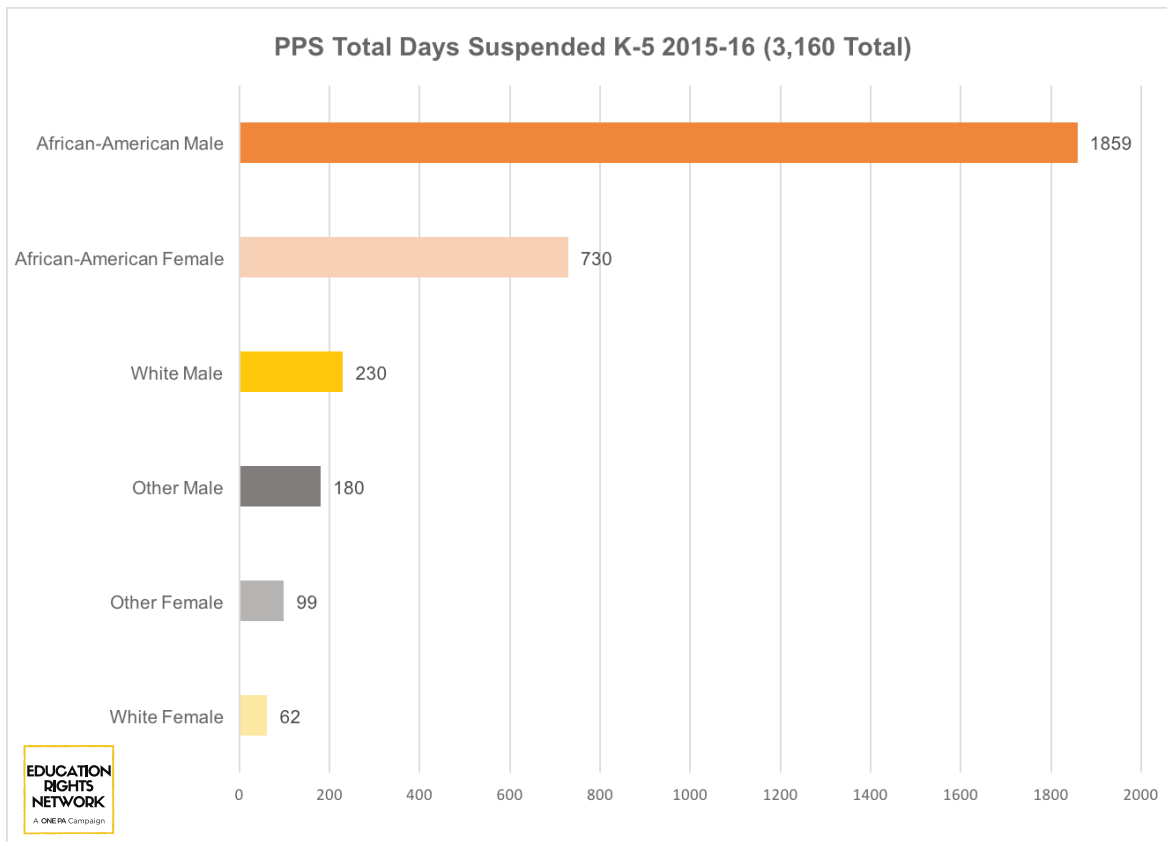
*The Civil Rights Project at the University of California Los Angeles – an organization which has done extensive research on exclusionary discipline – considers a school or district to be “high suspending” if it suspends 10% or more of elementary students in any major racial group. With 10% of all elementary students suspended at least once, and nearly 15% of African-American elementary students suspended at least once, Pittsburgh Public Schools meets this “high-suspending” designation.*

## PPS K-5 STUDENTS SUSPENDED AT LEAST ONCE IN 2015-16



Racial disparities in grade K-5 out-of-school suspensions are not just similar to those in grades K-12 – they’re slightly higher. African-American students are over twice as likely as “other” students and over four times as likely as white students to be suspended at least once.

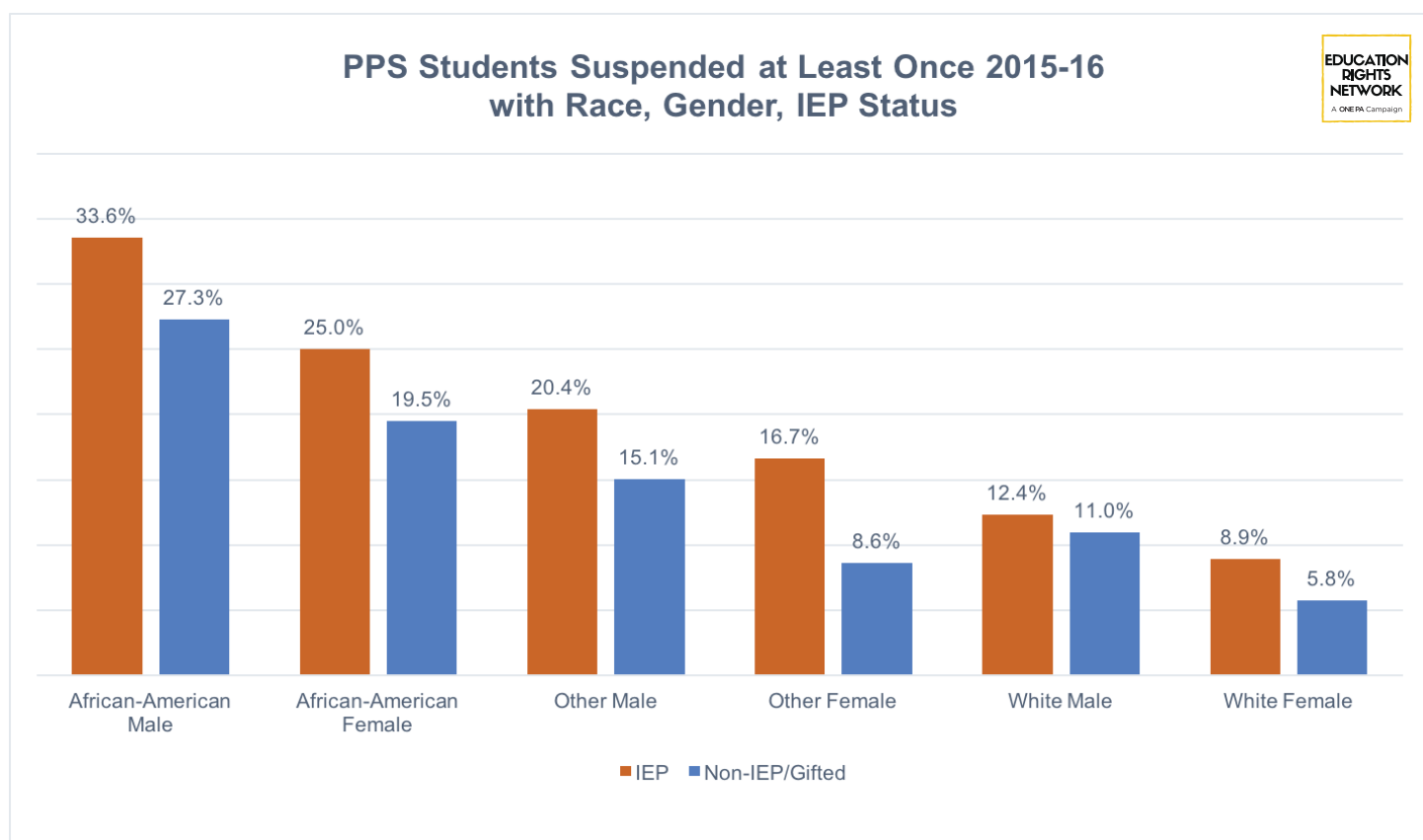
African-American K-5 students missed nearly 2,600 days of school due to out-of-school suspensions. Once again, African-American males were most disproportionately impacted.



# RACE, GENDER AND IEP STATUS

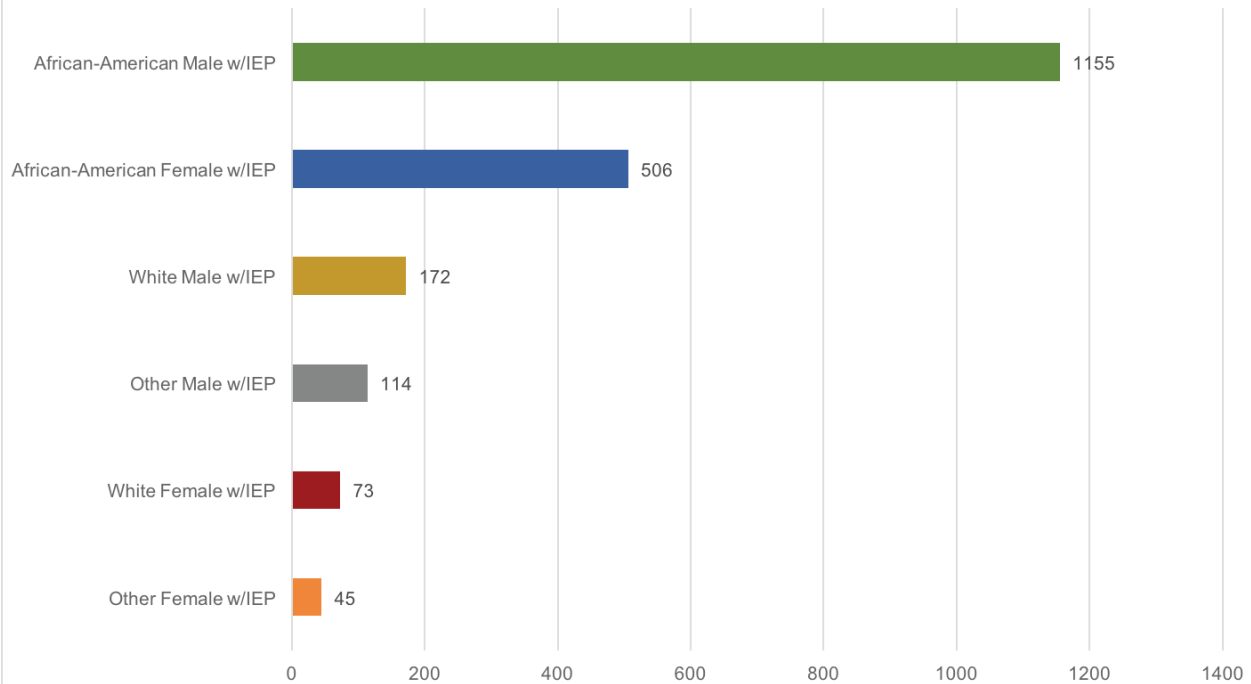
Students with disabilities – that is, students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for special education (excluding students identified as “gifted”) – are generally at greater risk for exclusionary discipline than their peers without disabilities.

# of students with IEPs suspended at least once	1,080
% of students with IEPs suspended at least once	23.7%
# of out-of-school suspensions for students with IEPs	2,456
<b># days of school missed due to out-of-school suspensions for students with IEPs</b>	<b>3,691</b>



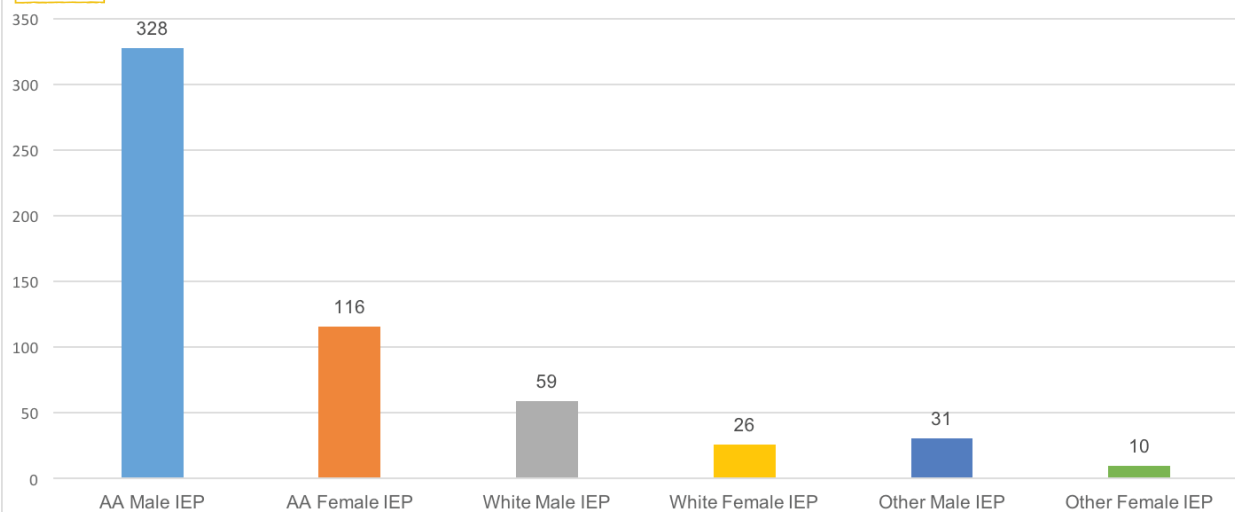
Across all race and gender groupings, Pittsburgh Public School students with IEPs were suspended at higher rates than students without. Students of color with IEPs were at particularly significant risk. One-third of African-American males, one-fourth of African-American females, and one-fifth of “Other” males (Hispanic, multi-racial, Asian, Native American) with IEPs were suspended at least once in 2015-16. And “Other” females with IEPs were almost twice as likely as their non-IEP/gifted peers to be suspended.

## PPS Days Suspended for "Disruption of School" for Students with IEPs 2015-16



65% of suspensions of students with IEPs were for “disruption of school.” 714 students with IEPs were suspended nearly 1,600 times and missed a total of 2,065 days of school for these minor, non-violent offenses. African-American students again were hardest hit, as African-American students with IEPs missed 1,661 days for “disruption of school.”

## PPS K-5 "Disruption of School" Suspensions for Students with IEPs 2015-16



Trends were similar for K-5 students with IEPs. 302 K-5 students with IEPs received 570 “disruption of school” suspensions and missed over 750 days of school. 444 – nearly 80% -- of these “disruption of school” suspensions to students with IEPs were given to African-American students, who missed 610 days of school for these minor, non-violent offenses.



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

**Education Rights Network**, a parent-led organization that works to achieve inclusion and equity for all students in Pittsburgh, is building a movement to end the overuse and disproportionate use of suspensions in PPS through the “Solutions, Not Suspensions” campaign. Our policy recommendations directed to the Pittsburgh Public Schools, State Legislators, and others are detailed below. They are closely linked to our endorsement of a community schools approach in Pittsburgh Public Schools designed to support the well-being of students and families.

## **Ban Out-of-School Suspensions/Expulsions in PreK-5th Grade for Minor Misconduct**

Ban suspensions for Pittsburgh Public School students from PreK-5th grade for minor misconduct like disruption of school. Assign, in every school with PreK-5th grade students, at least one full-time counselor or social worker whose primary job is to coordinate appropriate guidance interventions and supports. Pittsburgh Public Schools claims not to remove PreK students from school for behavior - if this is the case, it should be codified in District policy. As disproportionality in suspensions is a statewide issue, we are also calling for a statewide ban on suspensions for minor misconduct in grades PreK-5.

***If suspensions remain consistent next year, PreK-5th students could miss almost 1,900 days of instruction for minor misconduct - the equivalent of nearly 10 years of school. End suspensions for 5th grade and below!***

## **Provide Effective Support and Resources for School Staff**

Guarantee effective support for teachers and schools in dealing with discipline by using positive approaches that keep students in the classroom - for example, small class sizes, increased support staff, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and Restorative Practices. Invest in district-wide school-based support personnel to provide ongoing training and support in these approaches to principals and staff to ensure fidelity of implementation. Prioritize collaboration and relationships between students, parents and educators to create safe and engaging classrooms that protect the human right to education and dignity.

## **Revise Student Code of Conduct**

Adopt district-wide, consistent, support-based, trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate disciplinary policies that move away from exclusionary discipline practices. The Code of Conduct must be student and parent friendly, highlighting that guidance interventions and supports are provided to students before any disciplinary action. Replace vague language that allows for racial, gender, and disability bias.

## **Ensure Transparency of Discipline Data**

Even when suspensions decrease, disparities based on race, gender and disability have remained constant. Report suspension, expulsion, use of physical restraint, and arrest data broken down by grade, gender, race, and disability category monthly on the District website.

## **Implement a School Climate Advisory Board**

Institute a PPS School Climate Advisory Board composed of parents and students who are impacted by school push out, administrators, teachers, advocates, community partners and other stakeholders to work collaboratively to recommend district-wide disciplinary policies, training and supports based on best practices.

## **Invest in Counselors, Not Cops**

Police should not be stationed in schools, or used to counsel or discipline students. An agreement with the Pittsburgh Police Department must be in place to specify the cases when law enforcement can be called in to a school, with particular safeguards in place to ensure students' rights to education and dignity are protected along with their constitutional rights to counsel and due process.

## **Collaborate with PA Human Relations Commission**

It's been 25 years since the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (PHRC) intervened in Pittsburgh Public Schools due to low achievement for African American students and racial disparities (including disparities in discipline). The PHRC must continue to work with the Equity Advisory Panel to monitor the District's progress and have more active oversight of the discipline measures in the agreement with PPS.

# SOURCES

- Out-of-school suspension data provided by Pittsburgh Public Schools
- Pennsylvania State Data Center: Special Education Data Report, 2015-16
- Pittsburgh Public Schools 2017-2022 Strategic Plan (<http://www.ppsstrategicplan.org/strategic-plan>)
- National Education Policy Center: Discipline Resource Sheet ([http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/ResourceSheet\\_School\\_10-3.pdf](http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/ResourceSheet_School_10-3.pdf))
- The Civil Rights Project at UCLA: “Are We Closing the School Discipline Gap” and “Suspended Education in Massachusetts: Using Days of Lost Instruction Due to Suspension to Evaluate Schools” (<https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu>)
- Dignity in Schools Campaign (<http://www.dignityinschools.org/>)









## **JOIN THE MOVEMENT TO BRING SOLUTIONS, NOT SUSPENSIONS, TO PITTSBURGH!**

The Education Rights Network (EdRights) is comprised of a dedicated group of parents and caregivers who are working to ensure equity and inclusion for all students in Pittsburgh Public Schools. In addition to reviewing and analyzing suspension data and raising awareness of the issue, EdRights works to educate and support parent leaders via “Know Your Rights” workshops and direct help in navigating the district’s Code of Conduct and discipline procedures. EdRights has successfully mobilized and supported parent leaders to rally for necessary changes to the district’s discipline policies and practices, and has achieved wins including the ratification of some recommended changes to the district’s Code of Conduct.

For more information or to become involved, visit [www.onepa.org/EdRights](http://www.onepa.org/EdRights), call 412-626-7454, or email [EducationRightsNetwork@gmail.com](mailto:EducationRightsNetwork@gmail.com).