An Analysis of Out-of-School Suspensions in Hillsborough County:

Summary

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This part of the report summarizes the major findings of the analysis, including:

- Figures on out-of-school suspensions in the Hillsborough County Public Schools during the 1996-97 school year (compiled from district data)
- Major findings of the School Discipline Survey (completed by administrators in December, 1997)
- Community resources for promoting prosocial behavior
- School variables related to out-of-school suspension rates
- Differences between demographically similar schools with differing rates of out-of-school suspension

1996-97 Out-of-School Suspensions: Figures and Comparisons

District Out-of-School Suspension Figures

During the 1996-97 school year, there were a total of 145,903 students enrolled in the Hillsborough County Public Schools and 33,620 out-of-school suspensions. Thus, the overall suspension rate for the district was .23 (meaning there were 23 suspensions for every 100 students enrolled). A total of 16,204 students (11% of the student body) experienced at least one suspension. While boys and girls were equally represented in the student population, boys made up 73% of suspensions while girls made up only 27%. Black students also were over-represented, making up 24% of the total student population but 44% of suspensions. White students, on the other hand, were under-represented in suspensions, making up 55% of the student body but only 37% of suspensions. Suspension rates for Hispanic rates were roughly proportional to their representation in the total student population. Hispanic students made up 18% of the school population and 17% of suspensions.

Comparison of District Figures with Pinellas County

In 1996-97, according to the St. Petersburg Times (September, 16, 1998), neighboring Pinellas County had a total of 103,625 students and 27,032 out-of-school suspensions. Thus, their overall suspension rate was .26 (slightly higher than the rate in Hillsborough County). A total of 12,413 students (12% of the student body) experienced at least one suspension. While data on suspensions of boys vs. girls was not reported, data showed that Black students were over-represented in suspensions in Pinellas County as well. While Black students made up 18% of the total student population, they made up 36.4% of suspensions (slightly higher than the over-representation in Hillsborough County).
Elementary, Middle and High School Average Rates of Suspension

Data from Hillsborough County for 1996-97 showed that out-of-school suspension rates increased dramatically from elementary to secondary school. While the mean out-of-school suspension rate across elementary schools was 5.6, it was 52.3 across middle schools and 39.2 across high schools. (Again, this means, for example, there were 52.3 suspensions for every 100 students in middle school.) The mean number of students experiencing a suspension increased as well, from 3.3% in elementary schools to 23.68% in middle schools, and 20.7% in high schools. These figures indicate that the greatest cause for concern regarding suspension is at the middle school level. Three middle schools actually had more out-of-school suspensions than students (due to repeat suspensions) during the 1996-97 school year.

Reasons for Out-of-School Suspension

By far the greatest reason for out-of-school suspension in the district in 1996-97 was disobedience (including disobedience/insubordination, disorderly conduct, disrespectful, disruptive, inappropriate behavior, noncompliance with discipline, and profanity). There were a mean of 25.8 suspensions for disobedience at the elementary level, 371.2 at the middle school level, and 552.26 at the high school level. Again, the rise from elementary to secondary school was dramatic. The next most common reason for out-of-school suspension was violence against persons (including battery, fighting, sexual battery, sexual harassment, sexual offense, and threat/intimidation). In this category, fighting made up by far the greatest number of offenses. At the elementary level, there were a mean of 10.3 suspensions for violence against persons. This number rose to 101.5 at the middle school level and dropped somewhat at the high school level to 75.4. Weapons possession resulted in few out-of-school suspensions, with a mean of 0.9 suspensions at the elementary level, 4.0 at the middle school level, and 7.8 at the high school level.

Results of the School Discipline Survey

The School Discipline Survey is discussed in detail in Section III of the report. Key findings are highlighted in this section.

Disciplinary Methods Used for Repeat Offenses and Their Effectiveness

With regard to the disciplinary methods that schools in the district are using for repeated behavioral offenses, results showed that almost all schools use warnings, out-of-school suspension, parent phone calls, and parent conferences. Very few schools use corporal punishment. In-school suspension was reported to be used at 76.7% of elementary schools, 86.7% of middle schools, and 100% of high schools. Peer mediation, which some schools noted to be highly effective in reducing fighting if used properly, was reported to be used by 54.6% of elementary schools, 83.3% of middle schools, and 73.3% of high schools. Saturday detention, also noted to be useful disciplinary strategy, was reported to be used by 3.1% of elementary schools, 20.0% of middle schools, and 53.3% of high schools.
When asked about the effectiveness of various methods of discipline in terms of behavioral improvement, responses from elementary schools indicated that Saturday detention (used by very few schools) and parent conferences were most successful. At the middle school level, peer mediation and Saturday detention were rated highest. At the high school level, out-of-school suspension, in-school suspension, and peer mediation were rated as most effective. The following list shows the rankings of effectiveness (from most to least effective) at each level:

Table VIII-A: Ranking of the Effectiveness of Various Disciplinary Strategies in Changing Behavior (Highest to Lowest)--By Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elementary Schools</th>
<th>Middle Schools</th>
<th>High Schools</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Parent Conference</td>
<td>2. Saturday Detention</td>
<td>2. In-School Suspension (tie)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Referral to Guidance(tie)</td>
<td>9. Referral to Guidance (tie)</td>
<td>7. Detention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Referral to Human Relations (tie)</td>
<td>9. Work Detail (tie)</td>
<td>8. Warning</td>
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</tbody>
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Grade Levels With the Most Out-of-School Suspensions

In the absence of data from the district on the grade levels with the most suspensions, administrators were asked to estimate this for their schools. At the elementary level, most suspensions appear to occur in the 4th and 5th grades. At the middle school level, 7th and 8th graders are suspended most frequently. At the high school level, most suspensions occur in 9th and 10th grades.

Typical Length of Out-of-School Suspensions

The length of the average out-of-school suspension increases from 1-3 days at the elementary level to 3-5 days at the middle school level and 3-10 days at the high school level. Most schools decide on the length of a suspension based on the severity of the offense and/or the student's past history.
What is a Suspendable Offense?

There was considerable variability between schools in terms of offenses that are always, sometimes, or rarely punished using out-of-school suspension. This was particularly true for unruly, defiant, disruptive behavior/profanity. Some schools always suspend, some sometimes suspend, and some rarely suspend for these types of infractions. There was some variability as well in how different schools respond to verbal/physical assaults or threats. Most high schools suspend for this type of behavior, but many elementary and some middle schools noted that they only sometimes suspend students for such an offense.

How Are Suspended Students Removed from and Returned to School?

Almost all schools require that parents pick up their children following an administrator's decision that the student is to be suspended out of school. Additionally, most schools require that a parent conference take place before a suspended student can return to school. At the middle and high school levels, this parent conference may sometimes be replaced by a meeting of the student with the counselor. Many schools also noted, however, that their greatest challenge in involving parents in the disciplinary process is contacting or communicating with them. Thus, although most schools require parent conferences, it is likely that this process runs less than smoothly.

Staffing for In-School Suspension Programs

As noted above, not all schools in the county had an in-school suspension program in 1996-97. Part of the reason for this appears to be difficulty with financing and staffing these programs. Only 11.3% of elementary schools and 6.7% of middle schools reported that they employ separate staff for these positions. Many other schools have teachers rotate or volunteer for these positions or (in elementary schools) utilize office staff.

Problems With and Reasons to Continue Using Out-of-School Suspension

According to administrators' responses, the three greatest problems with out-of-school suspension are: 1) the lack of supervision at home or in the community, 2) students are not involved in learning or socialization while suspended, and 3) suspension is ineffective in solving problems.

Administrators believe that the most important reasons for continuing to use out-of-school suspension are: 1) to allow other students to learn and teachers to teach, and 2) to ensure the safety of other students. Issues such as maintaining a proper school environment, forcing parents to take responsibility, serving as a deterrent to other students, and serving as a consequence for misbehavior also were mentioned by a number of schools. Twelve percent of elementaries and 6.7% of middle schools noted a lack of alternatives to out-of-school suspension as well.
Common Characteristics of Students Who Have Been Suspended Repeatedly

According to administrators responding to the School Discipline Survey, students who are suspended repeatedly have behavior and/or social problems, get little support from their families (or have dysfunctional families), disrespect authority figures, and have poor achievement in school.

Community Resources for Promoting Prosocial Behavior

There are a wide variety of organizations providing services to children and their families in Hillsborough County. A list of the organizations responding to the Community Organization Survey is found on p. 52 of the analysis. Many of these organizations provide services on-site in schools, although the number of staff members devoted to this work is limited.

Almost all (84%) of the organizations participating in this analysis take referrals from school personnel. A large majority of the referrals that come to these programs are made by school social workers (54%), teachers (46%), or guidance counselors (38%). Principals, assistant principals, school psychologists, and building service teams also make a portion of referrals to these agencies.

It is important to note that many (70%) of the agencies responding to this survey indicated that they did not have a waiting list and that services could be provided immediately.

Notable Services/Programs for Students At-Risk of or Experiencing Frequent Suspensions

See body of report for a list of organizations responding to the Community Organization Survey and the Early Childhood Survey.

Note to readers reading this on the Internet: We are currently trying to compile a list of notable services/programs for students at-risk of or experiencing frequent suspensions. If you know of such a program, please e-mail Linda Raffaele at raffaele@tempest.coedu.usf.edu. Please provide the name of the program, a description of services, and the name/phone number of the contact person.

Relationships Between Out-of-School Suspension Rates and Selected Demographic Characteristics

Schools vary in a number of ways, including the demographic characteristics of the students they serve, the resources they have available, the average academic achievement of their students, their size, and the turnover of their staff. These variables may well be related to behavior of students at the school, and thus, to rates of out-of-school suspension. Correlational analyses, which indicate the degree of relationship between two variables (but do not imply that one variable causes the other), were conducted to determine which of these variables was most strongly related to out-of-school suspension rates.
As a note for readers of this report who are not familiar with correlational analysis, correlations can range from -1 to +1. Positive correlations indicate that as one variable increases, the other increases as well. The closer a positive correlation is to +1, the stronger the positive relationship. Negative correlations indicate the opposite, i.e., as one variable increases, the other decreases. The closer a negative correlation is to -1, the stronger the negative relationship. Correlations of 0 indicate that there is no relationship between the variables.

Results showed that the following variables showed a moderate (.3) to high (.5) correlation--either negative or positive--with out-of-school suspension rates at all three levels (i.e., elementary, middle, and high):

- Percentage of students receiving free or reduced price lunch (positive correlation)
- Percentage of White students (negative correlation)
- Percentage of Black students (positive correlation)
- Administrators' perceptions of family involvement in students' lives (negative correlation)
- Administrators' perceptions of family involvement in students' education (negative correlation)
- Average Florida Writes score (negative correlation)
- Average Stanford Reading score (negative correlation--elementary and middle schools only)
- Average Stanford Math score (negative correlation--elementary and middle schools only)

Variables that showed a low correlation (.1)--either positive or negative with out-of-school suspension rate across the three levels were as follows:

- Total enrollment (school size)
- Degree of overcrowding
- Percentage of families attending the last parent conference
- Percentage of families volunteering at the school
- Whether the school engaged in some or no community collaboration
- Percentage of students meeting kindergarten readiness standards (elementary only)
- Average number of teacher absences
- Drop-out rate (high schools only)

When all of the variables mentioned above were entered into a regression equation, results showed that the best single predictor of OSS rate was the average Florida Writes score, which accounted for 21% of the variance between schools. Adding 4 additional factors (student homogeneity, average Stanford Math score, average Stanford Reading score, and percent of new staff) increased the amount of variance accounted for by the model to 57%.

What these analyses show is that student demographic characteristics make a difference in out-of-school suspension rates between schools. More importantly, however, academic success is
highly related to behavior. Schools who have students with better academic performance also have students who are better behaved (or at least are less likely to be suspended out of school).

**Differences Between Demographically Similar Schools With Significantly Different Rates of Suspension**

Qualitative analysis revealed a number of differences between demographically similar schools with significantly different rates of out-of-school suspension. For a discussion of these differences, see Part VI of the report. (Differences will be summarized in greater detail in the final report).

Almost all of the schools included in this part of the analysis serve a majority of children who are economically impoverished. This resulted from the fact that the high OSS schools (those with the highest rates of out-of-school suspension in the district), which were selected first, were schools serving this type of student population. However, the fact that demographic matches with much lower suspension rates were found for every one of the 24 high OSS schools shows that although schools may serve a majority children from lower socioeconomic circumstances, rates of suspension can still be kept down. The low OSS schools in this part of the analysis provide evidence that it is not solely the student population being served--but also the policies and practices of individual schools--that determine rates of suspension.