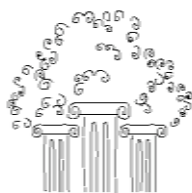


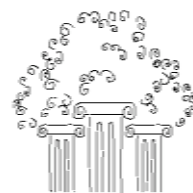
# Keep Kids in School



# Improving School Discipline



Connecticut Appleseed  
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# Keep Kids in School: Improving School Discipline

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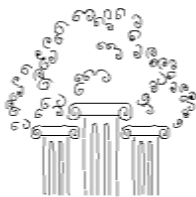
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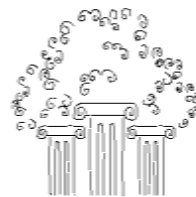
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## Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the dedication of our lead pro bono partner, Bingham McCutchen LLP and, in particular, Bingham McCutchen counsel and Connecticut Appleseed Board member Michael C. D'Agostino. We are also grateful for tireless pro bono assistance from attorneys at Day Pitney LLP, as well as extraordinarily generous help from attorney Beth FitzPatrick.

Connecticut Appleseed's "school to prison pipeline/keep kids in school" research is generously supported by grants from the Connecticut Health Foundation and the Travelers Foundation, with additional support from the Perrin Family Foundation and the Greater New Haven Community Foundation.

Connecticut Appleseed is also deeply indebted to our non-profit partners for providing crucial assistance on the project, including the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance and Youth Rights Media.

### Executive Summary

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## About Connecticut Appleseed

Connecticut Appleseed is a statewide, non-partisan 501(c)3 organization that works to help make systemic changes in the delivery of services to enhance social and economic justice in our state. Our mission is to develop solutions for the causes, rather than the symptoms, of our state's social problems. We mobilize the skills and resources of pro bono lawyers and other professionals to improve access to education, health care, financial and other services for broad segments of the state's population.

## Overview of the Issue

In Connecticut, state law provides a broad framework for school disciplinary options available to districts, including: in-school suspensions; out of school suspensions; expulsion; and, referrals to "alternative" public schools that have been created to provide intensive, targeted education.

Over the last few decades there has been a significant rise in the number of disciplinary incidents within public schools, as well as an increase in the number of certain students who "graduate" from these disciplinary incidents into being caught in the juvenile justice system. Complicating this issue is the over-representation of students of color in these disciplinary incidents and, subsequently, within the juvenile justice system.

Suspensions are often the first point in a child's potential pathway to the juvenile justice system. Many times suspensions create a revolving door of continued and increased disciplinary problems that eventually result in expulsion, or where struggling students are sent to disciplinary alternative schools. While individual districts have differing types of alternative schools, on a whole these alternative schools are not subject to traditional school standards (such as curriculum content, length of school day, and certification of teachers). Many times these alternative schools fail to provide meaningful educational services to the students who need them the most.

This report is not intended to examine the juvenile justice system. Rather, it looks closely at the disciplinary policies in Connecticut's public schools, at uneven application of those policies, and most importantly, at some of the most successful programs that have been established across the state to deal with students who have been disciplined repeatedly and/or excessively to reduce the likelihood that they will end up in the juvenile justice system.

## IV. Methodology

This report combines practical, on the ground perspectives from school administrators, policy research at both the state and district level, and district-specific disciplinary data from the Connecticut Department of Education. It assembles and analyzes what Connecticut Appleseed's project team learned about of the intersection of policy and practice in a substantial number of Connecticut school districts, as well as through research.

The data in this report is from the Connecticut State Department of Education's ED166 Disciplinary Offense Data Collection for the 2007-08 school year for the following districts and schools within these districts:

⇒ Beacon Falls	⇒ Hamden *	⇒ Orange
⇒ Branford *	⇒ Hartford *	⇒ Regional School District 13
⇒ Bridgeport *	⇒ Fairfield *	⇒ Shelton *
⇒ Milford	⇒ New Haven *	⇒ Stamford *
⇒ East Hartford	⇒ Norwalk	⇒ Stratford *
⇒ Wolcott	⇒ West Hartford	⇒ Tolland
	⇒ Windsor Locks	⇒ Waterbury

These districts were selected to represent a cross section of Connecticut's school population. Our report includes data from the above districts, while relying strongly on interviews with school administrators and personnel in **the nine districts which are indicated with an asterisk.**

## Findings

Across the twenty school districts sampled in the 2007-08 school year, the largest category for which students were disciplined was "School Policy Violations"; within that category, "Insubordination/Disrespect" was by far the major School Policy Violation. This is in line with national trends, where most disciplinary incidents occur in discretionary categories such as policy violations. Overall disciplinary trends among the districts include:

- The use of general, sometimes not fully understood, disciplinary policies
- Uneven levels of disciplinary incidents that disproportionately involve black, Hispanic, and special education students
- Little public information regarding, and oversight of, alternative schools
- Use of Positive Behavior Supports among many school districts, but otherwise, varied preventive services that are highly dependent on the availability of funds

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### ***Districts' Disciplinary Policies***

Across the board, we found that school district disciplinary policies (also known as Code of Conduct policies) are distributed to parents and children at the beginning of the school year, but are rarely fully understood. In some districts, we found some staff frequently unaware of disciplinary policies and changes to those policies; however, Superintendents and Principals typically exhibited a clear and thorough understanding of district policies.

While many districts expressed an interest in reviewing their code of conduct policies, for the most part they are "boilerplate" - as described by one district official. While policies certainly impact the disciplinary options available to Principals, most school officials felt that the greatest impact on a child's discipline ultimately occurs in the classroom and is based on the teacher's personal philosophy regarding disciplinary referrals and classroom management. As a result, most students are disciplined by individual teachers under the catchall category of "School Policy Violations", which is the largest category of disproportionate discipline and which happens to provide a broad level of discretion.

### ***Uneven Impact of School Discipline***

#### *Black/Hispanic Students*

Across the twenty school districts we found highly disproportionate levels of disciplinary incidents among black and Hispanic students. This pattern also exists across the state, and is exacerbated among male students.

Based on 2007-08 data for all districts in Connecticut provided by the Connecticut Department of Education:

- Black males were five times more likely, and Hispanic males were two and half times more likely, to be expelled than white males.
- Black males were five times more likely, and Hispanic males were three times more likely, to receive an out-of-school suspension than white males.
- Black males were two times more likely to receive an in-school suspension than white males.

In district and school interviews, the issue of uneven representation of Black/Hispanic students in disciplinary incidents was not raised by staff, nor did we explicitly ask questions about it, as it is a highly sensitive topic for districts. However, a few districts broadly discussed the need for cultural diversity training among their teaching staff because of the increasingly diverse cultural background of students and the comparatively homogeneous demographics of teaching staff (i.e. young, Caucasian, women).

Many of these districts were interested in confronting their race and class issues, but cited lack of funding as the main barrier. However, Shelton High School has a Diversity Team, where several students and two staff members who work with schools in within the district on diversity issues. And Hamden School District has had several "Community Conversations" between parents, teachers, staff, and others on issues of Schools and Diversity.

#### *Special Education students*

Across the twenty school districts that were different in size and type, disciplinary incidents also disproportionately involved students diagnosed as special education. The most disproportionate discipline of special education students occurred in one district where 27% of disciplinary incidents involved students with special needs - although only 10% of the student population had been identified as having special needs. At the lowest end of the sample, 21% of disciplinary actions in another district involved students with special needs - while 15% of that student population had been identified as having special needs.

In general, we did not find that school districts discussed issues regarding students with special needs, nor was the issue of disproportionate disciplinary incidents a focal point of our interviews. While disparities among districts clearly exist related to discipline for special education students, the degree of those disparities is less than those on racial/ethnic lines. Nevertheless, discipline related to special education students merits future follow-up.

## *Little Information on Alternative Schools*

Connecticut law mandates that alternative education be provided for students who have been expelled. However, there are no statutes that guide alternative education policy and procedures. While some districts have adopted homebound instruction for expelled students, other districts have opted to create full day nontraditional schools either on or off campus.

Among district interviews we found positive perspectives towards alternative schools. In fact, one school district that did not have an alternative school mentioned desiring one for at risk students. However, there are core problems with alternative schools including:

- No national standards for alternative education programs. Whether homebound tutoring, an established program, or a physically separate school, alternative schools are not evaluated by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC)
- No requirement of certified teachers. While many school districts hire retired teachers for alternative instruction, there is no regulation that mandates certified teachers for alternative education programs.
- Lack of thorough curricular/academic requirements. Schools are only required to provide two hours per day of instruction for students. Teachers that we interviewed expressed a strong and unequivocal belief in the connection between academic achievement and behavioral problems. Since students are typically at alternative schools for behavioral issues in the first place, they should have at least the same level of academic instruction as others in public schools - if not more intensive instruction.

In discussions with districts we found them open and receptive to learning models of best practices in delivering alternative educational services to students, which merits future follow up and exploration.

## **Positive Initiatives to Address the Pipeline**

Overwhelmingly, in both formal and informal conversations, district officials spoke optimistically about Positive Behavior Support (PBS), a program that involves a systemic continuum of support for all students. While seven out of our twenty school districts have trained their schools in school-wide PBS, funding remains a significant constraint to implementing this comprehensive program to the extent that administrators desired.

***Interventions that warrant further consideration***

Despite financial constraints, we found several districts that were successfully taking small but proactive steps to tackle school discipline. Examples of these steps include:

- Peer Mediation in Bridgeport, a program adopted from the Partnership of Children in New York City, was brought to Bridgeport with the help

**Targeted mental health resources for Bridgeport students**

The Bridgeport Learning Center is a therapeutic day program for students with mental illnesses who often exhibit severe behavioral challenges. The center employs different interventions based on differing student needs (i.e. they have students with psychosis, severe depression, PTSD, etc) with a focus on emotional psychiatric issues.

For intervention programs and techniques, the center uses the least restrictive to most restrictive, depending on the circumstances. They adopted and adjusted the "Boys and Girls Town" model to deal with social skills and behavioral issues, while also using the Positive Behavioral Support Program that is practiced district-wide in Bridgeport. They also have a "refocus room" where students are occasionally sent to regroup themselves, which is the school's version of "in-school suspension." Unlike many schools, there is but one security guard at the school that is generally not needed, but who is there for search and seizure purposes if necessary.

of a GE grant. Bridgeport contracted with Partnership for Children to obtain their model of a peer mediation program. Both students and adults are trained under this model and student peer mediators are not limited to "positive" or "successful" leaders - the school tries to have a diverse group of mediators of students at all levels. This program is in 13-15 of Bridgeport's 39 schools in grades above the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and is perceived by administrators in Bridgeport as a successful program that helps them reach out to different types of students.

- Stamford's Superintendent Starr has sought to change the types of academic opportunities available to students by de-tracking classes from 3-5 tracks to two tracks. While this effort has recently begun, to date teachers have observed a decline in behavioral problems and attribute it to successfully mixing different types of students.

- Westhill High School in Stamford has formed a Young Men's Council as a way to reach previously suspended students. Male students who have been suspended are invited to interact after school with school staff who are particularly skilled at connecting with youth. It provides the youth with an opportunity to vent, get

over the incident, and re-integrate constructively.

- Scofield Magnet School in Stamford has a program in place called "Saturday School" where students subject to discipline (i.e. fighting, repeated tardiness, insubordination) must attend three hours of school on Saturday to do school work. Because of lack of funds to sustain the program, the Scofield PTO fundraises to keep it going. The principal reported finding the program very successful and an experience that students rarely need to repeat.
- Stratford High School uses Cantor's Assertive Discipline as their framework for the progression of disciplining students that begins with a reminder, progresses to a warning and then to a private conversation that may be followed by an ejection from the classroom if necessary. They also utilize Imentoring and Ementoring for students.

**Executive  
Summary**

**Looking Forward**

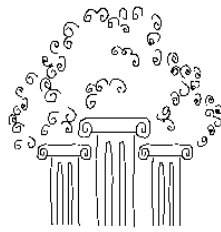
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Based on our district-level interviews with nearly nine districts, as well as from informal conversations with state-level officials, overwhelmingly, we heard broad support for the goals of PA-0766, An Act Concerning In-School Suspensions. At the same time, the clear consensus among the districts was a paramount concern with cost-effectiveness. As a result, we found consensus to revisit the statute to achieve its goals by providing flexibility to districts for specific disciplinary interventions that will cost-effectively retain as many students as possible within the schools while maintaining a successful learning environment.

This could begin by incorporating a requirement for districts to report annually on their Strategic School Profile on how they have addressed their disciplinary challenges, as well as how progress would be measured and attained. This would allow districts to best decide how to craft creative and inexpensive interventions, perhaps with support from the Department of Education. .

The state's current fiscal crisis is mirrored at the local level. In the absence of available funding, policies should be modified to encourage inexpensive steps at the district and school level similar to some of the findings in this report. Legislators should recognize some of these ingenious and modestly-priced programs that have already been instituted by districts and schools to confront their disciplinary challenges.

We submit this report for the purpose of better informing an energetic dialogue on how to maintain school discipline without placing so many students at risk of entering the juvenile justice system.



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