

Keep Kids in School



Improving School Discipline II



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Keep Kids in School: Improving School Discipline II

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**KEEP KIDS IN SCHOOL: IMPROVING SCHOOL DISCIPLINE II
FINAL REPORT
2015-2016**

I. INTRODUCTION

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. 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 population.

Consistent with that purpose, this report updates our February, 2011 Report by providing insight into the growing body of successful “best practice” disciplinary interventions that schools have been implementing in the past several years and which can be brought to scale across Connecticut. This insight was revealed through in-depth interviews with multiple representatives from eleven diverse school districts in the state. This report includes 2014-2015 data on school discipline from the Connecticut State Department of Education (“SDE”) which shows a general trend of improvement, but with a few setbacks and instances of stagnation surrounding the implementation of disciplinary programs throughout the state. The SDE data generally coincides with the findings from our interviews, the vast majority of which were conducted either during the same time frame or in 2016.

II. Executive Summary

Connecticut Appleseed recruited, trained and managed a team of volunteer attorneys to conduct interviews in eleven representative school districts to update and supplement the findings we shared in our February, 2011 report, also entitled “Keep Kids in School: Improving School Discipline.” While professional titles and school levels varied by district, our volunteers typically interviewed two to four administrators, principals and teachers in each district. This report documents the progress and innovative solutions, along with SDE data from a more recent period, which show a further transition away from traditional forms of punishment and toward proactive behavior management. By publicizing the evolving best practices in schools and addressing the continued move away from punishment, this report – like our February, 2011 report – seeks to minimize the percentage of students who become entangled in the juvenile justice system.

In summary, our recent set of interviews found that many schools have gone beyond just implementing in-school suspension as a way to reduce more serious forms of punishment, and have moved to a more holistic model of behavior management. We particularly focused on the experience of the Hamden, CT School District in this report, as Hamden represents a model example of a district successfully implementing policies that have had significant beneficial effects on their school discipline. The report will also describe the experiences of other school districts, but specific attention will be placed on initiatives and interventions within the Hamden District that have proven to be particularly effective in improving school discipline.

What is most telling about the progress of the schools in Connecticut, and particularly in Hamden, is that schools are taking steps beyond just reducing the use of out-of-school suspension and expulsion. Overwhelmingly, the schools interviewed acknowledged that one of the key drivers of success is that teachers are being trained to focus on connecting positively with students, communicating shared expectations and goals, and working with school administrators and parents to intervene early with students displaying behavioral challenges in the classroom.

III. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are immensely grateful for generous support from our lead pro bono partner, Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP, which provided a deep bench of attorneys and staff to conduct and summarize the district interviews. Morgan Lewis associate Vanessa M. Brown, a former middle school special education teacher, put in countless hours reviewing and summarizing the information. We appreciate also the prior pro bono assistance from a team of in-house attorneys working at CIGNA, led by Senior Counsel Michael Kolosky. Connecticut Appleseed will be sharing these updated findings with board of education chairs across the state and also intends to distribute copies of this report to the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education and the Connecticut Board of Education, as well as the Connecticut Department of Education.

IV. OVERVIEW OF THE ISSUE

The February, 2011 Improving School Discipline report focused primarily on the implementation of interventions, such as in-school-suspension, to help alleviate the long-lasting effects of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. As noted in that report, out-of-school suspensions and expulsions can do more harm than good, and are often tied to increased participation in the juvenile justice system. They can also be a driver of what has been termed the “school-to-prison pipeline.”

In the years since that report, our interviews with schools indicate that there is less of a predominate focus on supplanting harsher methods of discipline with less-harsh discipline, but rather a fundamental shift in school culture away from the concept of discipline writ large. As Justin Carbonella, the Youth Services Director for the City of Middletown noted, school discipline fails for many reasons. Those who follow the rules and excel in school do not need the fear of detention or suspension to guide their behavior. They have developed an appropriate behavioral compass. On the other hand, students with chronic disciplinary issues need to develop a skill set to learn how to behave appropriately in the school environment and understand what is to be expected of them and how their behavior impacts others. Suspension doesn’t correct their behavior, because students need a new skill set. It is incumbent on teachers and administrators to work with problem students to build these skills rather than segregate or punish students, which seems to have provided very little learning value.

As a result, an overwhelming number of our new set of interviews did not emphasize that in-school-suspension was the primary focus of school discipline, although it had in the recent past. Many of our interviewees instead noted that their approach to discipline is to stop the discipline before it becomes necessary by employing school rules and structure that promote positive

interactions during the day and softer approaches to dealing with troubling behaviors. In at least one school district, “restorative” principles are employed to turn what would normally require disciplinary action into a conversation with students, parents, and school administration to help change behavior - rather than punish students for violations of school policies.

V. METHODOLOGY

This Report takes a more pointed look into eleven specific school districts and their progress five years after the initial report was written. The school suspension data in this report is from the SDE’s ED166 Disciplinary Offense Data Collection for the 2014-2015 school year. The data subset to which this report refers includes the following districts and schools within them:

Middletown	East Hartford	Thompson
Farmington	Stafford	Coventry
Meriden	Hamden	ACES
Wallingford	Norwich	

Our statistical data and the findings herein rely on the above-mentioned school districts. This report also looks specifically at the Hamden School District in more depth as an example of both the successes and failures that are associated with improving and maintaining systems of school discipline.

VI. FINDINGS

A. The Transition Away from Discipline Based on Segregation is the Overwhelming Trend.

Results for the 2014-2015 school year related to all In-School Suspensions, Out-of-School Suspensions, and Expulsions can be found in **Appendix 1**. For perspective, we also include comparable data from 2011-2012. Of the eleven districts surveyed, only two (East Hartford and Middletown) reported an increase in overall school discipline. In Middletown, where there was a slight uptick in disciplinary incidents between the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years, the numbers are markedly lower than they had been during the 2012-2013 school year, showing a general longer-term trend toward fewer incidents. In East Hartford, however, the number has slowly increased over time.

The increases or decreases in suspensions should not be viewed in a vacuum, however. Over a longer period of time, the rate of suspension and expulsion reveal a more significant decrease. The overall trend shows a far more targeted improvement among school districts, and that improvement is highlighted in the conversations held with school leaders at the various schools interviewed for this report.

B. The Hamden School Model: Implementing Positive Changes for Significant Growth into 2016.

This report will principally focus on the successes and challenges faced by the Hamden School District – as the district serves as a representative example of the evolution that has occurred since the legislature’s action in 2007. With nearly ten years of implementation of programming under its belt, Hamden’s qualitative and quantitative data showcase the importance and benefit of deterring out-of-school suspension.

Hamden stands out as unique in its approach to school discipline as it has truly seen a shift in the number of students that are being referred to out-of-school suspension or expulsion. In fact, for the first time in several years, the Connecticut State Department of Education did not cite Hamden as a “district of concern” in the number of suspensions for minority students or students with disabilities. In the 2015-2016 school year, out-of-school suspensions have decreased significantly at the elementary level and slightly increased at the secondary level, though the secondary levels are still significantly down from previous years. Even in-school-suspension is down from the previous year, indicating that the interventions taking place within the school day are helping to lessen the need for suspension and other types of student segregation writ large.

C. Racial Inequality in Schools: Arrest and Discipline Rates Continue to Unevenly Impact Minority Students

As discussed in Connecticut Voices for Children’s November 2016 Report titled “Persistent Racial Inequality in School Arrest Rates in Connecticut,” the 2014-2015 show that the gaps that existed in the 2010-2011 data continue to persist.

Students of Color

In the 2014-2015 data, the arrest rate declined 71% for Asian students, 49% for Latino students, and 47% for white students between 2010-11 and 2014-15. However, it only decreased 37% for black students and 35% for mixed students. It did not decline at all for American Indian students during that period. On average, black and Latino students experienced school arrest rates that were approximately 3.4 times higher than white students in 2014-15. While the overall decrease in school arrest is encouraging, the fact that there is still a gap for minority students is tremendously concerning.

Despite the growing body of knowledge on the devastating effects of school arrest on minorities, not a single school interview addressed or acknowledged the issue of arrest, or racial disparity in behavioral intervention. Many schools, however, acknowledged the presence of police, or “school resource officers” on their (predominately) high school campuses. Addressing and acknowledging that students of color are harmed differently, and typically more devastatingly, than their white peers is a reality that school districts must address in a meaningful way if Connecticut is to effect change.

Working Towards Change

One school district in particular outlined steps they are taking to help address the issue of school arrests. In Middletown, one of the early steps in developing cooperation between the schools and the city law enforcement was the development of a Memo of Understanding between the Superintendent and the Middletown police chief focused on school-based arrests. Now, the first time a student is arrested, there a focus on trying to help the student avoid entering the judicial system (other than for serious offenses) and the stigma that accompanies such arrest. Along with this, there is an increased focus on addressing the root of the problem and reintegrating students into school following suspension.

D. Alternative Discipline

Few schools mentioned the use of alternative disciplinary options available to them, whether that is within their school or an entirely different school for more challenging behaviors. ACES addressed three options that they employ for discipline that rises beyond the typical student intervention:

- *Step Academy* – the students stay in the classroom and do not rotate into the hallways, while the teachers rotate to the students.
- *Alternative High School* – for students who have not succeeded in traditional high school.
- *Therapeutic School (K-12)* – for behaviorally special education students that are a danger and consequently are in full restraints.

Hamden's Navigator Program

Hamden began an 8th grade alternative program called Navigator, where students spent the year building a boat, while learning academics and life lessons such as teamwork and leadership. This alternative program focused on building students' self-confidence while also improving students' academic achievement. The theory behind the program was to help students learn that they can do anything they put their mind to. Subsequent student testimonials revealed that many students did not believe that they were capable of building a boat, but that they "accomplished what most did not think was possible."

VII. PROACTIVE vs. REACTIVE APPROACHES TO DISCIPLINE: ONGOING BEHAVIORAL SUPPORT

PBIS Program in Schools

In the preceding report, many of the schools acknowledged the use of a Positive Behavior Intervention & Supports (PBIS) Program in their schools. This program is focused on providing a school-wide system of support that includes programs to define, encourage, and reinforce appropriate student behavior. While some schools interviewed still employ the program, there are districts like Coventry that shy away from such formulaic approaches.

As an alternative to PBIS, Coventry High School implemented an Advisory Period, separate from Guidance, to help students address problems they may encounter during the school day. The school noted that they “promote” methods of working with behaviors vs. recipes for handling behaviors. For Coventry, the focus is on passionate teachers. To Coventry, PBIS is not a useful tool. They note that “[t]here is no ‘if this’ then ‘this’ recipe for our success.

At the same time, Middletown attributed much of its reduction in disciplinary incidents within the Middletown schools to their PBIS program. As part of their program, they formulated a school governance council composed of teachers, parents and students that worked to develop a student-parent-teacher compact.

The compact defines goals, expectations and shared responsibilities of the schools, names parents and students as equal partners for student learning, including parent commitments to help see that homework is completed, states further that television and “screen time” are limited to make sure students get adequate sleep and stresses that schools are committed to provide a supportive, drug and violence-free learning environment. The compact was formalized and posted on the school website. It was then communicated to the students and teachers across the district.

The PBIS Program is still maintained in the Farmington school district. They also employ two separate programs as well, detailed below:

- **Care Team** – intervene when students appear to have experienced family trauma, such as a loss of a parent or loss of housing. Teachers are trained to observe and track behavior in the classroom. Students showing signs of disturbance are referred to a team consisting of a special education teacher and a social worker, sometimes with support from the Center for Children with Special Needs (CCSN).
- **Step Program**: The District has recently observed higher incidents of mental illness among its students. In response, the District has created a “step room,” apart from the classroom. In this room, students are taught by a special education teacher with assistance from a social worker and a paraprofessional. In the past, these students were moved outside of the school and placed, at the District’s expense, in State-sponsored programs.

The District believes that its program is more effective in preventing disciplinary incidents than the State’s programs, and it saves the District money. The District has even begun to admit tuition-paying students into its Step Program.

VIII. CONTINUING AND REINFORCING BEST PRACTICES IN INTERVENTION

A. Scientific Research Based Interventions (SRBI)

The Hamden School District has committed to improving interventions for struggling students through the statewide initiative of Scientific Research Based Initiatives (SRBI).¹ In this program, each elementary school will receive one SRBI coordinator who will analyze assessment data, plan interventions in collaboration with math and literacy specialists, and provide interventions for students in Tier II and Tier III. The overall result of this program will be that the neediest students will receive instruction from the most highly qualified, certified staff.

B. Juvenile Review Boards

Several high school principals, most notably in Hamden, noted that juvenile review boards (“JRBs”) are a helpful and desirable means of intervention. JRBs target first-time offenders under 15 years of age whose offenses are no more serious than misdemeanors. Police refer these young offenders to a JRB, where a panel of community volunteers hears the “case” and offers a balanced and restorative justice solution to compensate and/or heal the victim. Offenders are typically provided with counseling. Middletown also employs a Juvenile Review Board, and notes that the intent is to expand their role in addressing disciplinary issues. They are working to keep students out of the court system where possible and trying to identify student behavioral issues earlier before they escalate.

C. Freshman Team Initiative in Hamden Schools

Hamden schools have recognized that many students have a difficult time transitioning from middle school to high school. To aid in that transition, the district has created a program where high school freshman are organized into 5 teams of 75-85 students. Students from each team take their classes together, and each team includes a guidance counselor, social worker, school psychologist and administrator as part of the larger team. This structure allows more immediate and consistent support to students throughout the day. There is also a Freshman Support Center (FSC)—a small structured study hall with a tutor to help students focus on their work.

D. Restorative Practices

The Middletown School District has been working on the implementation of “Restorative Practices” within the schools and the idea of “collaborative problem solving.” Rather than assigning blame for the rule that was broken or imposing punishment for bad behavior, the focus is on the harm that was caused by the student and what can be done to restore or address the matter. Often the approach is to have a restorative encounter between the victim and the offender, along with trained professionals and other involved parties in an incident (parents, students, teachers, administrators).

¹ See http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/pdf/curriculum/cali/2015_srbi_survey_results.pdf

This encounter takes place in a safe environment where they discuss the behavioral issue, who was harmed, how that behavior made the harmed person feel, how it affected other and working to figure out a way to remedy the harm inflicted. Ultimately, the goal is to help develop relationships between the harmed parties. The purpose is much less to assign guilt than to hold the student accountable for his actions and understand the consequence of his or her actions and how it affects others.

IX. FIVE YEARS LATER: NEXT STEPS FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE

The data presented in this report reflects continued and sustained movement toward success since the last edition of this report. School officials and teachers are currently thinking very differently about discipline. Most notably, there is a marked shift away from “discipline” as a concept – and toward an understanding about behavioral support and proactive approaches to behavior management.

Many of the schools interviewed have made great strides in not only moving away from expulsion and out-of-school suspension, but in moving away from in-school suspension to more creative options that are based on classroom and behavioral management. As noted above, teachers and administrators are taking multi-disciplinary approaches to behavior management, including working alongside social workers, special education teachers, and school resource officers.

The greatest area for concern remains the persistent disparity in treatment of students with special needs, racial minorities, and socioeconomically-disadvantaged students. While there has been a general downward trend in school discipline in Connecticut, this trend does not extend to minority students. This subject was not discussed in depth by any school officials interviewed, which means that it is either not considered to be an area of weakness, or it is not being fully acknowledged by school teams.

Addressing racial and socioeconomic diversity within the schools may be the important next step for schools to close the gap that continues to afflict students of color and special education students. Only by taking this next step will our state be able to foster vibrant, diverse classrooms that nurture the great potential of all Connecticut children.

APPENDIX 1

All Incidents Resulting in In School Suspension, Out of School Suspension, or Expulsion in the Featured School Districts

	REPORTING DISTRICT NAME	2013-2014	2014-2015	PERCENT CHANGE BETWEEN 2012-2013 AND 2013-2014	PERCENT CHANGE BETWEEN 2013-2014 AND 2014-2015
1.	Coventry School District	172	108	14.7%	-37.2%
2.	East Hartford School District	3775	4006	3.5%	6.1%
3.	Farmington School District	103	77	0.0%	-25.2%
4.	Hamden School District	1429	957	-11.6%	-33.0%
5.	Meriden School District	2297	2074	-32.3%	-9.7%
6.	Middletown School District	669	770	-32.3%	15.1%
7.	Norwich School District	485	442	-32.0%	-8.9%
8.	Stafford School District	214	205	-27.7%	-4.2%
9.	Thompson School District	117	100	-37.1%	-14.5%
10.	Wallingford School District	763	547	-14.7%	-28.3%
11.	Area Cooperative Educational Services	544	567	-4.4%	4.2%