

Punitive School Discipline Doesn't Work. Let's Help Schools Do What Does.

By Marlana Wallace

DCFPI supports the [Student Fair Access to School Act of 2017](#), which offers reasonable parameters to ensure student access to education. This legislation would steer all DC schools away from an ineffective, counterproductive, and costly overreliance on punitive discipline—one that negatively impacts all students, school communities, families and the city at large. We recommend that the sensible protections in this legislation are also paired with corresponding investments in school resources, including Restorative Justice, and a Positive School Culture Fund.

When schools rely on suspension or expulsion as discipline methods, they create more problems than they solve. Students miss lessons, fall behind when they return, and are more likely to drop out, struggle to find jobs, or become involved with the Juvenile Justice System. This costs everyone in the District, both ethically and financially. Prevention is far less expensive.

Special education students and homeless students are both about [two and half times](#) more likely to be suspended than students without disabilities or their peers living in stable housing. Students identified as “at-risk” of academic failure because of poverty or performance are [2.71 times](#) more likely to be suspended. There is no evidence that students of color misbehave to a greater degree than white students. Yet in DC, [10 percent](#) of Black students were suspended and sent out of the classroom compared to only 0.5 percent of white students. This bill would limit suspensions for the kinds of subjective infractions that disproportionately hurt special education students, low-income students, and students of color.

When schools have the funds to fully staff Restorative Justice Models, they can better address the root causes of disruptive behavior. Students acquire the skills to manage their emotions and actions, learn to take responsibility for their mistakes, develop a greater sense of empathy, strengthen relationships, and repair harm. Teachers are better supported in managing the classroom without interrupting the learning of individual students. A more positive school climate allows for greater attention to academics, which benefits everyone and boosts student performance.

Mayor Bowser and the DC Council should increase funding for Restorative Justice Models. We also support the inclusion of a Positive School Culture Fund in this legislation, which would empower schools to pursue promising practices that reduce school push-out. For example, school leaders might offer new teacher trainings or trauma-responsive services. We should also ensure the student populations most affected by punitive school discipline receive the resources the city has already promised them through the [2014 special education reforms](#), and through the [targeted use of “at-risk” funding](#).

Watch our testimony today, or read it in full [here](#).

Sensible policies in the Student Fair Access to School Act include:

- Requiring every school to **establish a consistent school discipline policy** that promotes the safety and well-being of the school community and emphasizes positive approaches, limited use of school exclusion, preventative and restorative responses to misbehavior, graduated and age appropriate discipline for misbehavior, and clear communication of due process with students and families.
- Creating a **plan for continuity of education** for any student subject to a suspension.
- Ensuring that a student's **return to school is not contingent on a parent** or guardian accompanying them to school, who may not be able.
- **Protecting students** from the harmful effects of an out-of-school suspension or expulsion in kindergarten through eighth grade, except when causing significant bodily harm or emotional distress to another. Ensuring high school students are not subject to an out-of-school suspension for being late or absent, violating the dress code, defiance, or behavior off of school grounds.
- **Limiting suspensions** for students to no more than five days consecutively in elementary and middle school and ten days in high school, or 20 days total in a school year.
- Special attention to whether the student is being excluded for a manifestation of their disability, and if so, the creation of a **positive intervention plan**.
- The provision of **supportive resources to train teachers** on trauma, chronic stress, positive interventions, implicit bias and restorative practices.
- Requiring each school to **maintain comprehensive data** on student demographics and discipline.