

Executive Summary

Virginia public schools need proven alternatives to harsh disciplinary measures like suspension and expulsion. Students who are excluded from school are more likely to experience academic failure, dropping out, mental health problems, and justice system involvement. Moreover, schools with high suspension rates generally have less satisfactory climate ratings and lower test scores and graduation rates. Worse yet, there is no evidence to suggest that suspension and expulsion deter misconduct or improve school safety. See Appendix A.

We reviewed disciplinary outcome data reported by local school divisions to the Virginia Department of Education for the 2014-15 school year. We found:

- Virginia public schools issued over **126,000 out-of-school suspensions** to approximately 70,000 individual students.
- After trending downward for at least four years, the **suspension rate increased** from the 2013-14 school year.
- Over 20% of suspensions were issued to elementary school students, including **16,000 suspensions to students in pre-kindergarten through third grade**.
- Over **10% of ninth grade students were suspended** at least once.
- In seven divisions, more than 15% of all students were suspended at least once: Brunswick County (22.5%); Petersburg City (20.2%); Danville City (18.3%); Mecklenburg County (16.9%); Franklin County (16.2%); Sussex County (15.4%); and Northampton County (15.4%).

The vast majority of suspensions were issued for non-violent, relatively minor misbehavior. In fact, approximately half of suspensions were for cell phones, disruption, defiance, insubordination, and disrespect. Perhaps most nonsensically, 670 suspensions were issued for “attendance.” In other words, students were sent home from school for skipping class or not coming to school.

The suspensions were disproportionately issued to male students, African American students, and students with disabilities. For instance, 12.4% of African American students were short-term (10 school days or fewer) suspended at least once, compared to 3.4% of white students; and 10.9% of students with disabilities were short-term suspended at least once, compared to 4.6% of students without disabilities. **At least 25 school divisions suspended between 25% and 40% of their African American male students with disabilities.**

This issue brief provides information about five proven methods of preventing and productively addressing misbehavior in school: MyTeachingPartner, social and emotional learning, multi-tiered systems of supports, threat assessments, and restorative practices. These programs and strategies, if implemented well and used consistently, would greatly reduce suspensions and narrow racial and disability disparities. The brief concludes with recommendations for lawmakers and policymakers.