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## Suspending High School Students Comes at a Steep Price: A Texas, Statewide Investigation

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### Abstract

In this study, the financial costs of out-of-school suspensions assigned to Hispanic and black students in Grades 9, 10, and 11 were calculated. Descriptive statistics, calculated on Texas statewide archival data, revealed that public schools lost millions of dollars because of the number of days they assigned Hispanic and black students to an out-of-school suspension. With two different dollar amounts being estimated (i.e., a low-cost amount at \$40/day and a high cost at \$50/day), the low-cost estimates for Hispanic students were 3.9 million dollars, whereas the low-cost estimates for black were totaled 2.4 million dollars. The high-cost estimates for Hispanic students were 4.9 million dollars lost, whereas the high-cost estimates for black students were 3 million dollars lost for school districts. Implications of these findings and recommendations for future research are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

Exclusionary discipline consequences frequently occur in schools in the United States (Lee *et al.*, 2011). In fact, they occur far too frequently and in an inequitable manner. In addition to removing students from the classroom setting, exclusionary discipline consequences are related to increased dropout rates. High schools with high suspension rates had high dropout rates for both their white and black students (Lee *et al.*, 2011).

Schools have adopted a zero-tolerance policy in many places, a policy that has resulted in many more students being suspended, many times for non-violent and minor misbehaviors. In a recent investigation, Heilbrun *et al.* (2015) examined discipline data on black and white students in 306 high schools. In their study, the suspension rates of black students were more than twice the suspension rates of white students. White students were more likely to be suspended for alcohol or drug-related offenses whereas black students were more likely to be suspended for disruptive behavior (Heilbrun *et al.*, 2015).

Researchers have focused much of their efforts on out-of-school suspensions and not as much on in-school suspensions. Both discipline consequences, however, are exclusionary in nature as they involve students being removed from class. Chlewa *et al.* (2018) examined student academic outcomes after being assigned to an in-school suspension. The in-school suspension was associated with lower GPAs and with a higher rate of dropping out of high school.

In a study conducted in the state of interest for this article, Texas and Hilberth (2010) analyzed reading and mathematics scores on the state-mandated assessment to determine the degree to which in-school suspension and out-of-school suspension influenced student performance. She documented that students regardless of race/ethnicity, who were assigned to an in-school suspension or an out-of-school suspension, all

had a decrease in their academic performance. Black, Hispanic, and white students who had been assigned to an in-school suspension all had statistically significantly lower reading test scores and lower mathematics test scores than their peers who had not been assigned to an in-school suspension. Similar results were established for out-of-school suspension (Hilberth, 2010). Concerns exist that students who are suspended begin a downward spiral of poor interactions that eventually lead to interactions with police. Mittleman (2018) examined 15 years of data about how suspensions influenced students negatively who are already facing adversity. Suspensions more than double a student's chance of arrest (Mittleman, 2018).

For school districts to receive funding from the state for students, students must be in attendance at the assigned school during the attendance reporting period. Students who are suspended or who are removed from the school campus are not counted as being present. As such, schools do not receive funding for students who are not counted as being present. For the days the students are suspended, schools are forfeiting the dollars they would otherwise be receiving for those students.

### Statement of the Problem

For years, principals and assistant principals have dealt with discipline issues throughout the State of Texas. Searching for ways to maintain safe and secure schools, they have often suspended students to remove them from school. The Office for Civil Rights (2014, p. 1) reported that in the 2011-2012 school year, out of 49 million students enrolled in the United States, 3.45 million students were assigned to an out of school suspension. With respect to the State of Texas, White and Slate (2018) examined the extent to which differences were present in the number of days assigned to exclusionary discipline consequences as a function of economic status for Texas middle school students. They established that Hispanic and black students were

the two ethnic/racial groups of students who were suspended most often from school. Every day students are assigned to an out-of-school suspension or to another exclusionary discipline consequence that removes them from their school campus. When this removal occurs, school districts do not receive the average daily attendance dollars for that student. Increasing numbers of exclusionary discipline consequences are costing districts tens of thousands of dollars as well as continuing to contribute to the dropout rate.

**Purpose of the Study**

Three purposes were present in this statewide and empirical investigation. One purpose of this study was to determine the financial costs of out-of-school suspensions for Grade 9 Hispanic and black students. The second purpose of this study was to determine the financial costs of out-of-school suspensions for Grade 10 Hispanic and black students. The third purpose of this study was to ascertain the financial costs of out-of-school suspensions for Grade 11 Hispanic and black students.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were addressed in this study: (a) What are the financial costs of out-of-school suspensions for Texas Grade 9 Hispanic and black students?; (b) What are the financial costs of out-of-school suspensions for Texas Grade 10 Hispanic and black students?; and (c) What are the financial costs of out-of-school suspensions for Texas Grade 11 Hispanic and black students?

**Significance of the Study**

Though extensive research studies are available regarding the excessive numbers of exclusionary discipline consequences assigned to students of color (Gastic, 2008; Lee *et al.*, 2011), little research exists on the financial costs to districts due to suspensions from schools. This study was conducted to add to the literature available on this topic. Stakeholders who could benefit from this research include superintendents, assistant superintendents, board members, principals, and assistant principals.

**METHOD**

**Research Design**

By analyzing archival data, a descriptive research design was used. As with non-experimental research, no variables were manipulated in this investigation (Christensen and Johnson, 2016) because they had already occurred. The variables of interest were the total costs incurred when Hispanic and black students in Grades 9, 10, and 11 were assigned to an out-of-school suspension.

**Participation and Instrumentation**

Data were requested from the Texas Education Agency Public Education Information Management System through a

Public Information Request form. Specifically requested was information on the three major discipline consequences (i.e., in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and Discipline Alternative Education Program placement) assigned to Texas school students' student demographic characteristics such as race/ethnicity, gender, and grade level. Following receipt of the data from the Texas Education Agency Public Education Information Management System, data were converted into an SPSS dataset and analyzed. The total funding cost was calculated by taking a low daily rate of \$40 per day and a high daily rate of \$50 per day. The daily rate was calculated by using the Weighted Average Daily Attendance, which is the total dollar amount given to a school divided by the number of students divided by the number of school days.

**RESULTS**

Descriptive statistics based upon the Weighted Average Daily Attendance rates were used to calculate the total dollar amount lost due to suspensions. A low dollar estimate was calculated by multiplying \$40 times each day a student was assigned to an out-of-school suspension. These monies would then constitute a low estimate of the costs incurred for days students were assigned to an out-of-school suspension. A high dollar estimate was calculated by multiplying \$50 times each day a student was assigned to an out-of-school suspension. These monies would then constitute a high estimate of the costs incurred for days students were assigned to an out-of-school suspension.

With respect to Grade 9, 10, and 11, the total number of out of school suspension days for Hispanic students was 52,902. The low estimate of the total financial costs in Grade 9, 10, and 11 due to these out-of-school suspensions of Hispanic students was \$3.9 million dollars. A lower number, 31,197, of out-of-school suspension days was present for black students. The low estimate of the total financial costs in Grade 9, 10, and 11 due to these out-of-school suspension days for black students was \$2.4 million dollars.

The total number of incidents for Hispanic Grade 9 students that resulted in out-of-school suspensions were 31,271. Hispanic Grade 9 costs for students suspended were \$2,378,680.00. A total of 18,186 incidents resulted in suspensions for black students in Grade 9. The total financial costs due to the suspensions of Grade 9 black students using the low rate were \$1,399,240.00. The costs for out-of-school suspension days for Grade 9 Hispanic students was almost 1 million dollars higher than for Grade 9 black students when using the low rate. When the high rate was calculated, the costs for Grade 9 Hispanic student's out-of-school suspensions were \$2,973,350.00. The financial costs of Grade 9 black students using the high rate were \$1,749,050.00. Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics for this analysis.

In the second research question, the suspension costs for days for Grade 10 students were calculated. The total number of days that resulted in suspensions in Grade 10 Hispanic students

**Table 1:** Total incidents and suspension costs for students in Grade 9 using low rate and high rate

Rate and student group	n of incidents	M	Mdn	Total
<i>Low rate</i>				
Hispanic	31,271	\$76.07	\$80.00	\$2,378,680.00
Black	18,186	\$76.94	\$80.00	\$1,399,240.00
<i>High rate</i>				
Hispanic	31,271	\$95.08	\$100.00	\$2,973,350.00
Black	18,186	\$95.18	\$100.00	\$1,749,050.00

was 10,461. The financial costs of suspension days for Grade 10 Hispanic students using the low rate was \$741,920.00. The total number of incidents that resulted in black students being suspended in Grade 10 were 8,647. Using the low rate, the financial costs of suspension days for Grade 10 black students was \$652,880.00. The costs for Grade 10 Hispanic students was almost \$100,000.00 higher than black students. When calculating the high rate, the costs of suspension days for Grade 10 Hispanic students was \$927,400.00. For Grade 10 black students, when using the high rate, the costs of suspension days was \$816,100.00. Table 2 contains the descriptive statistics for this analysis.

In the third research question, the costs for suspension days for Grade 11 students were calculated. The total number of incidents that resulted in suspensions for Grade 11 Hispanic students was 5,739. The financial costs of suspension days for Grade 11 Hispanic students using the low rate was \$405,040.00. The total number of incidents that resulted in Grade 11 black student suspensions was 4,816. The financial costs of suspension days for Grade 11 black students was \$350,800.00. The costs of suspension days for Grade 11 Hispanic students was about \$55,000.00 more than the costs of suspension days for Grade 11 black students. When calculating the high rate, the costs of suspension days for Grade 11 Hispanic students was \$506,300.00 and \$438,500.00 for Grade 11 black students. The descriptive statistics for this analysis are contained in Table 3.

**DISCUSSION**

Descriptive analyses revealed that school districts across the State of Texas are losing millions of dollars due to their assignment of Hispanic and black students to out-of-school suspension. In this investigation, Hispanic students who were suspended had 52,902 incidents. Black students who were suspended had 31,197 incidents. Not only do these results validate the research that Hispanic and black students are assigned an inordinate number of exclusionary discipline consequences, but Hispanic students also had over 20,000 more incidents than black students. The total amount of money lost due to suspensions for Hispanic and black students was almost 6.4 million dollars in one school year for the State of Texas. In Grade 9, Hispanic students had 31,271 incidents, whereas black students had 18,186. Again, Hispanic students had almost double the number of incidents as

black students. Hispanic students in Grade 9 accounted for 2.3 million dollars lost due to suspensions, whereas black students accounted for 1.4 million dollars lost. If the high rate of \$50/day is used, the number of Hispanic suspension days accounted for 2.9 million dollars lost, whereas black students accounted for 1.7 million dollars lost.

In Grade 10, Hispanic students had a decline in the number of incidents to 10,461. This result could be because of students dropping out of school. This figure was a 21,000-incident decrease, a very substantial change in the data. Hispanic student suspensions resulted in \$741,920.00 dollars lost. The total number of suspension incidents for black students declined to 8,647. This number was a decrease in total incidents by 10,000, another drastic decline in data. Where did all of the students go? We contend that these students left school or dropped out of school completely. The total money lost due to suspensions in Grade 10 was \$652,880.00 dollars for black students. Analyzing the high rate of \$50/day lost, Hispanics lost \$927,400.00, and black suspensions cost the schools \$816,100.00.

In Grade 11 Hispanic students had 5,739 incidents. Their incident total was almost half of the Grade 10 total. Again, more students are leaving the school or dropping out of school permanently. The total amount of dollars lost in Grade 11 for Hispanic students was \$405,040.00. Black students had a total incident number of 4,816. This number was half the incidents reported from Grade 10 data. The total amount of money lost to these suspensions was \$350,800.00. When calculating the costs using the high rate, Hispanic suspensions resulted in \$506,300.00 dollars lost, whereas black students' suspensions cost \$438,500.00. School districts are losing millions of dollars by suspending students from the school.

**Implications for Policy and for Practitioners**

Legislators and policymakers should examine the number of suspensions issued by schools and consider funding allocations for schools that reduce suspensions. This analysis is important to consider when school leaders contend that the funding allocation is below standards for the State of Texas. School leaders who state that funding is short should also examine their numbers in regard to suspensions to determine just how much money their district is losing due to suspensions.

**Table 2:** Total incidents and suspension costs for students in Grade 10 using low rate and high rate

<i>Rate and student group</i>	<i>n of incidents</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Low rate</i>				
Hispanic	10,461	\$70.92	\$80.00	\$741,920.00
Black	8,647	\$75.50	\$80.00	\$652,880.00
<i>High rate</i>				
Hispanic	10,461	\$88.65	\$100.00	\$927,400.00
Black	8,647	\$94.38	\$100.00	\$816,100.00

**Table 3:** Total incidents and suspension costs for students in Grade 11 using low rate and high rate

<i>Rate and student group</i>	<i>n of incidents</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Low rate</i>				
Hispanic	5,739	\$70.58	\$40.00	\$405,640.00
Black	4,816	\$72.844	\$80.00	\$350,800.00
<i>High rate</i>				
Hispanic	5,739	\$88.22	\$50.00	\$506,300.00
Black	4,816	\$91.05	\$100.00	\$438,500.00

## Recommendations for Future Research

The data analyzed in this study were on with the total number of incidents with Hispanic and black students, as well as the total amount of dollars lost due to their suspensions in the state of Texas. Researchers are encouraged to conduct these analyses separately for girls and boys, as well as separately for all ethnic/racial groups of students. Another recommendation would be to analyze these data by grade level and by transition points to ascertain the degree to which changes might be present. A third recommendation would be to extend this study, conducted entirely on Texas data, to other states to determine the extent to which findings delineated herein are generalizable.

## CONCLUSION

Each year, school districts are losing millions of dollars due to suspensions in the State of Texas. A total of 6.3 million dollars were lost to school districts because of the days they assigned Hispanic and black students to exclusionary discipline consequences. Grade 9 students have the highest total of suspensions, which suggests the transition to high school is causing a major problem in the state of Texas. Students are leaving the system once they enter Grade 10 and 11. The State of Texas must examine the data, and a source of major funding could be to decrease the number of suspensions.

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