

# Education Suspended

## *An Overview of Student Suspensions in Mississippi's Public Schools*



**February 2017**

School attendance promotes student success and ensures the probability of graduating on time, yet students from kindergarten through 12th grade are frequently disciplined in a way which requires them to lose critical hours and days from school instead of participating in an educational setting to gain the social and academic skills which are essential to becoming productive, educated, and successful citizens. This brief summarizes information on the status of school suspensions among Mississippi's public school students, compares this status to national suspension rates, and outlines policy considerations. The purpose of this policy brief is to advance data driven decision-making in promoting best practice models and educational policies for children and families in Mississippi.

Compared to the national average of 6%, Mississippi had a higher rate of children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions (OSS), during the 2013-2014 school year. Approximately 42,100 Mississippi students (K-12), or 8.3% of all public school students, were given one or more out-of-school suspensions.

During the same 2013-2014 school year, in public schools across the United States, 2.8 million students (K-12), or 6% of all students, received one or more out-of-school suspensions. Racial disparities in suspensions were apparent. Black students were nearly four times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions compared to White students [1]. In Mississippi during the 2013-2014 school year, Black students (12.7% OSS rate) were over three times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspension as White students (4.0% OSS rate). Research demonstrates this is due to teachers interpreting misbehavior differently, depending on a student's race, rather than a difference in behavior between White and Black students [2]. Black students are more likely to be suspended for infractions which are determined subjectively by the referring teacher such as insubordination, willful defiance [3], disrespect, excessive noise, threat, and loitering. White students tend to be referred for suspension due to offenses which can be objectively determined such as smoking, vandalism, leaving without permission, and obscene language [4].

**Eight percent of all Mississippi public school students were given one or more out-of-school suspensions during the 2013-2014 school year, compared to the national average of six percent.**

## Costs and Effects of Suspensions

A 2016 study estimated that suspensions in 10th grade alone, at the national level, increased the number of dropouts by more than 67,000. Since students who received suspensions are more likely to drop out of high school, this may result in lost wages and taxes, increased crime, higher welfare costs, and poorer health. The long-term fiscal and social costs of these losses have been estimated at \$11 billion in fiscal impact in lost tax revenues over the lifetimes of these additional dropouts, and \$35 billion in social impact and costs to the larger society [5]. Extreme disciplinary practices do not show positive results for either the children who have been suspended, or for their classmates. Research shows that over time, high levels of out-of-school suspensions in a school are associated with declining reading and math scores among non-suspended students [6]. Mississippi data also reflect a relationship between school suspension rates and student outcomes. An analysis of districts across the state for the 2013-2014 school year shows that school districts with a high performance rating under the Mississippi Statewide Accountability System tended to have low suspension rates and vice versa. Districts with an "A" rating for the 2013- 2014 school year suspended an average of 9% of their students and districts with a "D" rating suspended an average of just over twice as many (19%) of their students. For the student who is suspended, such disciplinary practices frequently lead to the suspended student becoming less engaged and "connected" at school and more likely to break school rules over time as the student becomes more resentful of the teacher/school and less trusting of school authority in general [7].

“A suspension can be life altering. It is the number-one predictor - more than poverty - of whether children will drop out of school, and walk down a road that includes greater likelihood of unemployment, reliance on social-welfare programs, and imprisonment.”

*National Education Association, neaToday (January 5th, 2015) [8]*

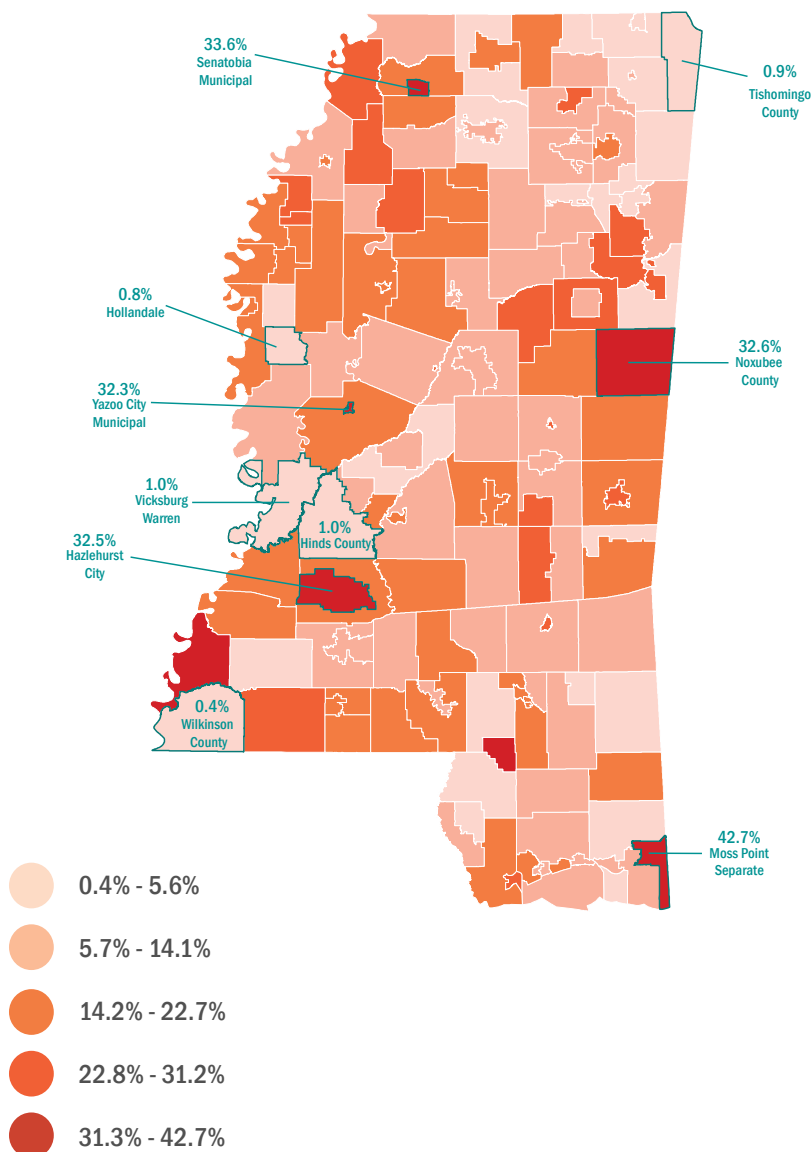
# Mississippi Suspension Data Findings

The Mississippi State Department of Education designates the power and authority of determining the grounds for suspension and disciplining students to local school districts' superintendents, school boards, and principals, with teachers recognized as the authority in classroom matters [9]. A review of 25 school districts' student handbooks resulted in a wide range of disciplinary policies and types of discipline, from in-school suspensions, detentions, and corporal punishment to out-of-school suspensions, alternative school placement, and expulsions.

The term "suspension" may be defined as follows: "the temporary denial of the privilege of attending school in [name of school district] imposed after due process upon any student of the district at the direction of the principal of the school in which the student is enrolled or the principal's designee, but shall not include in-school suspension.... The term 'suspension' is often referred to as an 'out-of-school suspension', or OSS" [10]

The term "in-school suspension" (or ISS) may be defined as: "a change of placement for the student from the regular classroom to a special classroom monitored by a full-time district employee. During this change of placement, the student will be afforded the opportunity to work on his/her school assignments in a supervised classroom [10]."

Reviewing data provided from the Mississippi Department of Education, researchers from the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University note the following current trends for children being suspended from Mississippi schools:



**Suspension Rates by District:** School districts vary considerably in their use of ISS versus OSS. For instance, during the 2014-2015 school year, 18.3% of students in the Quitman County School District received an OSS while no students received an ISS. Conversely, during the same school year, only 3.9% of students in the Bay St. Louis-Waveland School District received an OSS versus 24.5% who received an ISS. Data also revealed wide variability among school districts' use of suspensions when comparing schools by their Mississippi Statewide Accountability System letter grades; school districts with a high performance rating under the accountability system tended to have low suspension rates and vice versa.

## Districts with lowest total suspension rates

- |                      |        |
|----------------------|--------|
| 1. Wilkinson County  | (0.4%) |
| 2. Hollandale        | (0.8%) |
| 3. Tishomingo County | (0.9%) |
| 4. Hinds County      | (1.0%) |
| 5. Vicksburg Warren  | (1.0%) |

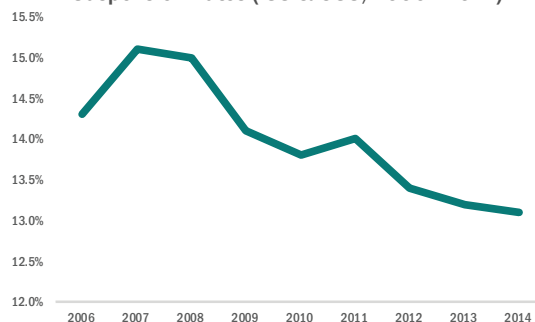
## Districts with highest total suspension rates\*

- |                         |         |
|-------------------------|---------|
| 1. Moss Point Separate  | (42.7%) |
| 2. Senatobia Municipal  | (33.6%) |
| 3. Noxubee County       | (32.6%) |
| 4. Hazlehurst City      | (32.5%) |
| 5. Yazoo City Municipal | (32.3%) |

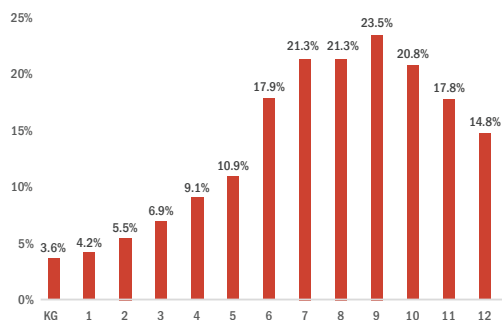
\* Among districts including multiple schools

**Time Series:** Between 2007 and 2014 school suspension rates (students with one or more OSS or ISS) have shown a general decline, with the lowest suspension rate of 13.1% in 2014 (8.2% OSS and 7.5% ISS). The one exception was a slight uptick in 2011, with a total rate of 14% (8.9% OSS and 8.2% ISS).

**Suspension Rates (ISS & OSS; 2006 - 2014)**



**Suspension Rates (Total) by Grade (2014)**

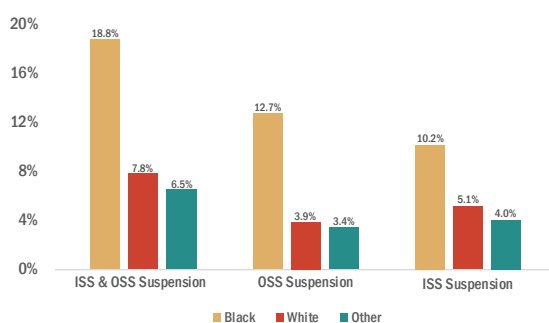


**Suspension Rates by Grade in 2014:** Data from the 2014-2015 school year shows a steady increase by grade in the percentage of students suspended (both OSS and ISS) with the highest percentage of suspended students, 9,459 (24.0%) suspended in 9th grade. Among 10th through 12th grade students there is a drop with each subsequent age group in the percentage of suspended students. The lowest number of suspended students during the 2014-2015 school year was among kindergarten students, 1,496 children (3.6%) and first grade students, 1,796 children (4.2%).

#### Suspension Rates by Race in 2014:

Racial disparities in suspensions are apparent nationwide and the discipline gap is especially stark in Mississippi. Black students in 2014 were more than twice as likely to receive a suspension compared to White students. Nineteen percent of all Black public school children during the 2014-2015 school year received an OSS or ISS compared to eight percent of White children during the same school year.

**Suspension Rates by Race (2014)**



**Suspension Rates by Type of Suspension in 2014:** The types of suspensions (OSS or ISS) differed by race. During the 2014-2015 school year, Black students were more than three times as likely to receive an OSS (12.7%) compared to White students (3.9%). Even when less restrictive discipline was used, Black students were twice as likely to receive an ISS (10.2%) compared to White students (5.1%). Looking at the percentages of children who receive each type of suspension, it is also interesting to note that a higher percentage of White children who were given a suspension received a punishment which allowed them to remain in school (ISS) rather than an OSS, while a higher percentage of Black children who were given a suspension received a punishment which required them to be absent from school (OSS). The OSS rate for Black students was 12.7% while the ISS rate for Black students was 10.2% and the OSS rate for White students was 3.9% while the ISS rate for White students was 5.1%.

#### Spotlight on Discipline Policy:

The Grenada School District's Student Handbooks state: "Academic success is directly correlated with instructional time received by the student. In the effort to fully implement School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports...and reduce the loss of instructional time due to out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, each school ...will utilize a wide variety of corrective strategies that do not remove children from valuable instructional time. These strategies are designed to prevent the occurrence of student infractions, teach alternative or replacement behaviors, or motivate students to demonstrate compliance with established school expectations outlined in the Code of Conduct.... [and] serve as a first line of remediation in the successful management of student behaviors."

Corrective strategies to be used as alternatives to suspension and expulsion include: Detention or In-School Suspension in conjunction with instruction designed to teach replacement behaviors; Behavioral contracts and/or Behavior Support Plans; Conflict Resolution/ Appropriate Communication/ Social Skills; Effective de-escalation strategies; Mentoring with specific focus on the remediation of behavioral infractions and plans to teach replacement behaviors; Pre-correction and effective limit-setting strategies designed to prevent the occurrence of behavioral infractions; Reflective activity focused on teaching of replacement behaviors for repeated infractions; Restitution; Re-teaching of school-wide behavioral expectations...using direct instruction, modeling, and corrective feedback; Social skills instruction...; Self-charting of behavior in conjunction with corrective and reinforcing feedback; Short-term Behavioral Progress Reports... and communication with home...; Supervised work assignment... at student's level or designed to address specific behavioral infractions; Written Apology with appropriate model and/or guidance from school personnel [14].








Additional details about this report, including study methodology, are available at: [www.msdataproject.com](http://www.msdataproject.com)

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# Addressing High Suspension Rates and Exploring Alternatives to Suspension

What are emerging national best practices for addressing the challenge of high suspension rates which could be promoted in Mississippi?

-  Track suspension rates as a school district to learn which children are being suspended, for what type of infraction, and how often, so that discipline disparities can be identified and addressed [7].
-  Include OSS and ISS rates as a factor among other performance standards taken into account by the State Department of Education for determining the performance classification assigned to a school or district as part of the Mississippi Public School Accountability Rating System standards [5].
-  Conduct reviews at the school district level of School Handbook Discipline Policies and Codes of Conduct to ensure sufficient guidance and detail is provided to students and teachers about the types of student infractions, and their consequences, so that ambiguous codes don't lead to unfair and subjective punishments. Consider organizing discipline policies by students' age and school level and removing the suspension category of "willful disobedience" / "willful defiance" which can be broadly and subjectively defined and interpreted [3].
-  Rewrite Codes of Conduct and discipline policies so that they use a graduated approach such as a Discipline Ladder and ensure students cannot be suspended for minor offenses such as tardiness, truancy, and dress code violations [5]. A "Discipline Ladder" approach is used in the Corinth School District and its district handbook details various possible student infractions and designates a range of steps on a "Discipline Ladder" which serve as a range of possible punishments for the infractions. Less severe disciplinary actions are recommended to be taken before a student may be given OSS [11].
-  Focus on understanding the root problems which are triggering misbehavior and ensure school counselors are available and equipped to help address the emotions, feelings, and underlying issues which have prompted the misbehavior. Implement a school wide approach such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) which focuses on preventing negative behavior and supporting and rewarding positive student behavior [12].
-  Increase Professional Development and Pre-Service teacher and school personnel training on culturally relevant positive classroom discipline and classroom management [7].
-  Adopt "Restorative Justice" programs which hold offenders accountable for inappropriate and offensive behavior, make reparations to the victim, and seek to repair harm done to people and relationships [13].

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