



Education Suspended:

The Consequences of School Suspension on Student Dropout

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Suspension is an exclusionary discipline practice which has often become a preferred strategy for addressing unwanted behavior in many schools, especially with the introduction of zero tolerance discipline policies in the mid-90s.¹ Despite such trends, there is no evidence which shows that suspensions are effective in reducing unwanted behavior.^{2,3} Rather, research has shown that suspension is associated with negative outcomes such as lower academic achievement and higher risk of dropout.^{4,5} The negative effects of suspension are especially relevant in Mississippi which consistently ranks among the lowest of US states in educational outcomes.⁶ During the 2014-2015 school year, nearly a quarter (23.5%) of high school freshmen in Mississippi public schools received a suspension; this was the highest rate of any grade, K-12.⁷ What are the consequences of suspending students at various points in their high school careers?

Costs of High School Suspensions

An analysis of 34 school suspension studies showed a significant relationship at the school level between suspensions and achievement: the higher the suspension rate, the poorer the school achievements.⁴ The research also revealed a relationship between suspensions and school dropout: the higher the suspension rate, the higher the school dropout rate.⁴ A study of 20 schools with the highest dropout rates in Kentucky found a positive relationship between dropout and suspension rates and describes dropping out as a “cumulative process” of unsuccessful school experiences such as behavior and discipline problems, and academic failure, rather than a sudden “impulsive action.”⁸ The study suggests that some schools may actually be “perpetuating a failure cycle” when they rely on suspension and other exclusionary discipline practices, which result in students having fewer opportunities to learn and grow socially and academically.⁸ As Mississippi schools seek to increase graduation rates and decrease dropout rates, a close examination of school suspension rates could be a first step towards keeping students enrolled and on the path to successfully completing their high school degrees. To our knowledge there have been few, if any systematic studies which have documented the effects of suspension on dropout rates in Mississippi.

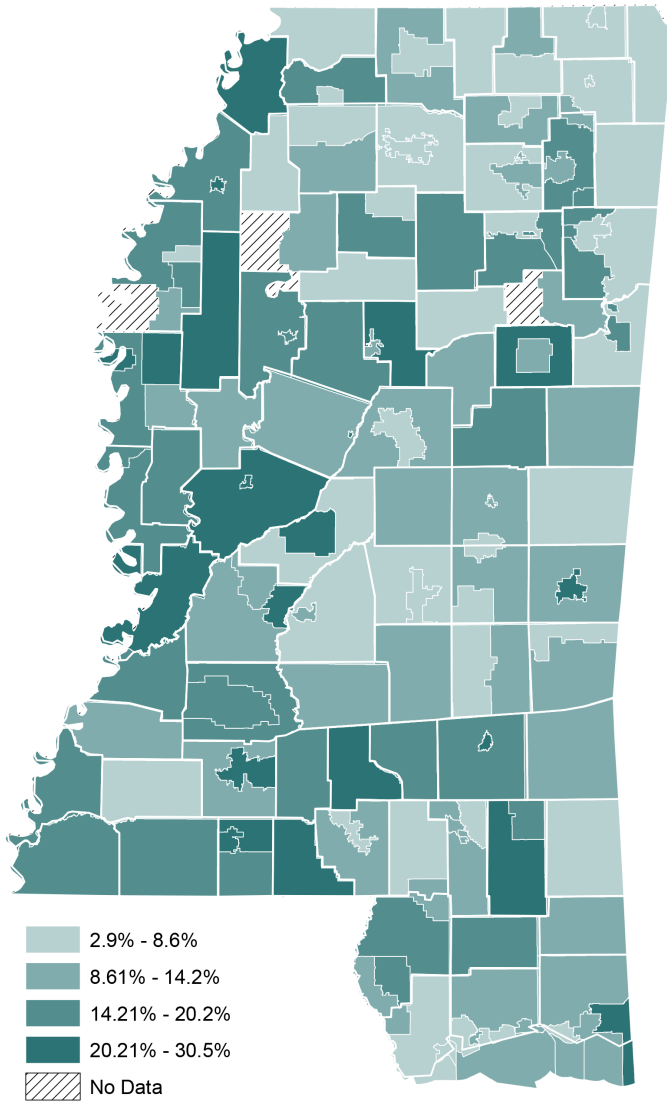
At the national level, a 2016 study estimated that suspensions in 10th grade alone produced more than 67,000 dropouts.⁹ The social and economic costs of dropping out of high school are huge, due to lost wages and taxes, higher welfare costs, poorer health, and increased crime.⁹ In 2006-2007, incarceration rates among individuals ages 16-24 were 63 times higher for dropouts than among college graduates.¹⁰ The intersection of race, educational attainment, and incarceration is striking; a 2014 study found a nearly 70% chance of an African American man without a high school diploma being imprisoned by his mid-thirties.¹¹ 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.⁹ From a cost savings perspective, there would be substantial economic benefits from reducing suspension rates. The study estimated that even a one percentage-point reduction in the national suspension rate would reduce the number of dropouts due to suspension, resulting in a fiscal benefit of \$691 million and a social benefit of \$2.2 billion.⁹ As the poorest state in the nation (ranked by median household income)¹² it is important to answer the question of how our zero tolerance exclusionary discipline policies are related to school dropout rates and Mississippi’s long-term fiscal and social costs.

This brief is the second in a series on school suspension. The previous brief in this series, *Education Suspended: An Overview of Student Suspensions in Mississippi’s Public Schools* (February 2017), found that compared to the national average of 6%, Mississippi had a higher rate of students receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions (OSS) during the 2013-2014 school year.⁷ Approximately 42,100 Mississippi students (K-12) or 8.3% of all public school students, were given one or more out-of-school suspensions. When disaggregating data from the 2014-2015 school year, we found that 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). Nationally, studies show that Black students are more likely to be suspended for infractions which are determined subjectively by the referring teacher such as insubordination, willful defiance, disrespect, excessive noise, threat, and loitering while White students tend to be referred for suspension due to offenses which can be objectively determined (obscene language, leaving without permission, smoking, and vandalism).^{1,13}

This brief follows up on this previous effort and summarizes information on the consequences of suspension on dropout, 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.

Mississippi Suspension Data Findings

Dropout Rates 2014 - 2015



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.¹⁴ As a result, school districts have 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.

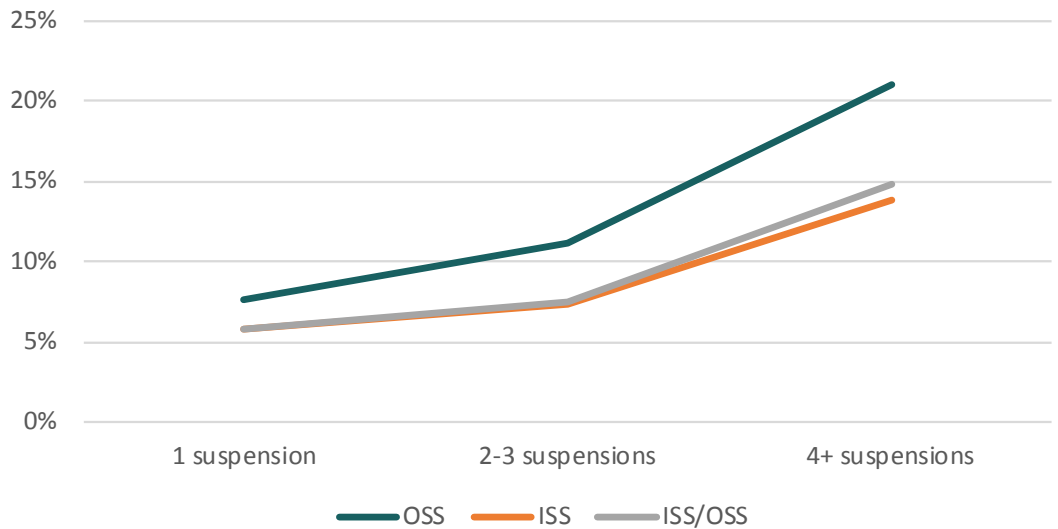
For the purposes of this brief, the term "suspension" is defined as: "the temporary denial of the privilege of attending school in [name of school district] imposed after due process upon any student of the district at the direction of the principal of the school in which the student is enrolled or the 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."¹⁵

The term "in-school suspension" (or ISS) is 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."¹⁵

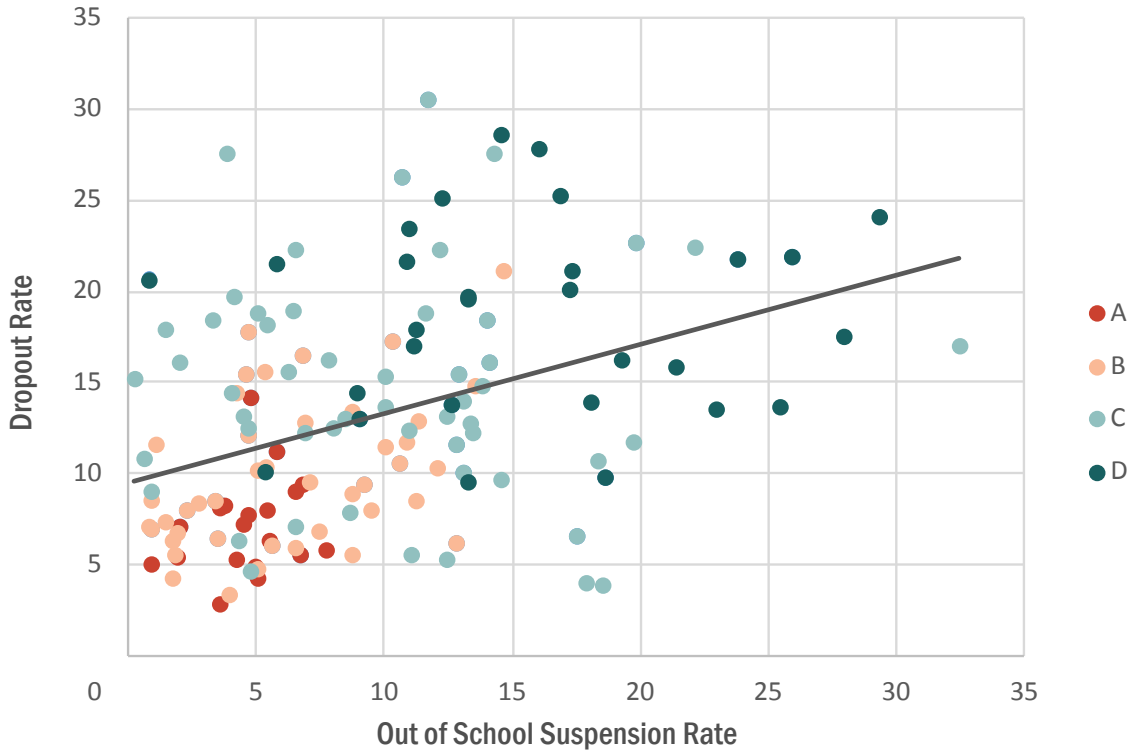
Analyzing student-level data provided from the Mississippi Department of Education, researchers from the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University note the following trends and outcomes for high school students (grades 9-12) being suspended from Mississippi schools:

Dropout by suspension: Students who have been suspended are more likely to dropout than those who have not been suspended. However, whether a student will dropout varies depending on both the number of suspensions that a student receives and the type of suspension, whether ISS or OSS. As shown in this figure, even a single suspension, whether ISS or OSS, increases the risk of dropout. However, the percentage of students who drop out rises sharply as additional suspensions are accumulated. This increase is especially apparent among students with two or more out-of-school suspensions.

Risk of Dropout by Number and Type of Suspension, 2014

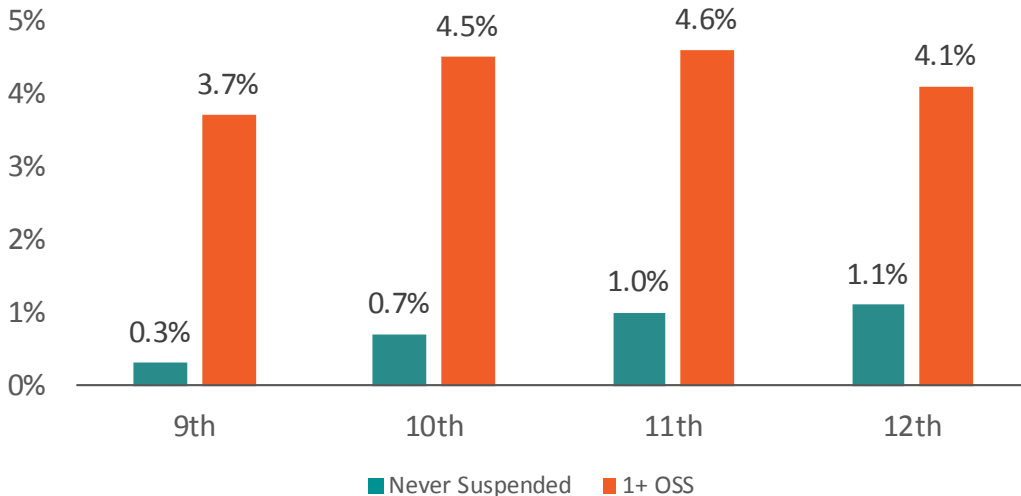


Dropout Rate vs. Suspension by District and Accountability Ratings, 2014 - 2015



Dropout Rates by District: Of students who entered into 9th grade for the first time in 2010 (graduating class of 2015), approximately 13% dropped out of school. Since the 2010-2011 school year, dropout rates have steadily decreased from 17% to 13% in 2014-2015. Despite such improvements for the state as a whole, rates in many districts remain high. In fact, 25 school districts have dropout rates greater than 20%. In order to show the relationship between suspension and dropout rates at the school level, we plotted school districts suspension rates (X-axis) against their dropout rates (Y-axis). As shown in the figure above, districts with higher rates of out-of-school suspension tend to have higher dropout rates. The districts shown in the figure were also color coded by their accountability rating. The Mississippi Statewide Accountability System rates schools and school districts with the letter grades A, B, C, D, and F. Districts rated “C” or “D” tend to be higher in suspension and dropout whereas districts rated “A” and “B” tend to be lower in suspension and dropout (lower left quadrant). For districts with high dropout rates, reducing the use of suspension may be one way for these districts to lower their dropout rates.

Dropout Rate by Grade and OSS, 2014



Dropout by grade and OSS Suspension: The risk of dropout tends to be higher in later grades. However, at any grade, the risk of dropout is several times higher for students with one or more OSS. For students entering high school in the 2014-2015 school year, 3.7% of those suspended dropped out of high school compared to less than one percent of those without a suspension.

Addressing High Suspension Rates and Exploring Alternatives to Suspension

- Track suspension rates at the school and district level to learn which children are being suspended (by race, gender, age, and disability status), which offenses lead to suspension, and the frequency of suspension, so that discipline policies and practices can be identified and addressed.^{16,17}
- 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.⁹
- Rewrite Codes of Conduct and discipline policies to include a graduated system of discipline, such as a Discipline Ladder, where consequences match the seriousness of the infraction.¹⁸
- Conduct a cost analysis of school discipline policies (including school suspensions) to students' academic achievement, graduation rates, and the state of Mississippi's economic well-being.
- Review Codes of Conduct and adopt alternative options such as "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.¹⁹

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Additional details about this report, including study methodology, are available at: www.msdataport.com
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