

Practical Findings from the Virginia High School Safety Study

How are suspension rates related to dropout rates?

Issue 7

In Issue 6, we reported that suspension rates vary greatly in Virginia high schools and that only about half of the variance across schools could be explained by student demographics, such as school size, student poverty rate, and minority composition. In this Issue, we report that schools that use suspension most frequently tend to have high dropout rates. Using the new Virginia standards for determining dropout rates, we examined average dropout rates for 2 years (2006-07 and 2007-08) in 287 Virginia high schools. For example, the scatterplot chart below shows how the average drop-out rate is correlated ($r = .50$) with the short-term suspension rate. Using hierarchical multiple regression, we found that a school's suspension rate (including short- and long-term suspension and expulsion) was consistently predictive of dropout rates for the whole school, and that there were similar effects for White and Black students considered separately. The effect of suspension rates on dropout rates was statistically significant even after controlling for the influence of school demographics (percentage of students eligible for free/reduced price meals, percentage of minority students, urbanicity, and average per pupil expenditure). Recognizing that some schools may deal with more challenging populations of students, we also controlled statistically for the influence of student attitudes that can lead to disciplinary infractions by using measures of student attitudes toward the use of aggression and belief in following school rules (two scales from our school climate survey administered to 9th grade students). In sum, the frequent use of suspension as a disciplinary practice is predictive of higher drop out rates for both White and Black students, and is not explained by other school demographics or by student attitudes that are associated with breaking school rules.

Practical Suggestions. Students choose to drop out of school for a variety of personal as well as educational reasons. Undoubtedly, students at risk for dropping out of school could benefit from individualized counseling and academic support to help them finish high school. However, schoolwide policies and practices could also be helpful in creating a school environment that helps keep at-risk students in school. Our results suggest, but do not prove, that schools may be able to reduce their dropout rates by placing less emphasis on suspension as a disciplinary consequence and using alternative consequences that do not involve school removal. Many Virginia high schools have low suspension rates despite student demographics and risk factors that are present in schools with high suspension rates. As we noted in Issue 6, there is a body of educational research indicating that school suspension is not an effective way to improve student behavior and often leads to declining behavioral and academic outcomes for students. Schools with high suspension rates may be engaging in a counterproductive practice.

Study Overview. The Virginia High School Safety Study was designed to identify effective policies and practices in Virginia public high schools. This is a correlational study that can support, but not prove, causal relationships. The VHSSS was conducted by Dewey Cornell, Anne Gregory, Xitao Fan, and Peter Sheras of the Curry School of Education in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Center for School Safety of the Department of Criminal Justice Services. The findings in this Issue are derived from a doctoral dissertation by Talisha Lee. The study was funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Study conclusions do not necessarily reflect policies or recommendations of these state and federal agencies. For more information, see the website for the Virginia Youth Violence Project: <<http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>>.

