

Stated Briefly

# Suspension, expulsion, and achievement of English learner students in six Oregon districts



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This study uses 2011/12 data from the Oregon Department of Education to examine whether English learner students in six Oregon districts received exclusionary discipline more often and were suspended for more instructional days than non-English learner students. The study also identifies the most common reasons for exclusionary discipline for English learner students and non-English learner students and compares proficiency rates on state assessments in reading and math between English learner students who received exclusionary discipline and those who did not.

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## **Why this study?**

There is growing national concern about disciplinary practices that result in lost instructional time and that affect some student subgroups more than others. Lost instructional time is especially a concern for students who already face barriers to learning, such as students eligible for special education, students who begin school relatively unprepared to learn, and students with limited English proficiency.

Schools and districts across the country are seeking accurate information on the effects of their disciplinary practices and looking for ways to address concerns about those practices. In 2013 Oregon enacted legislation that amended the state's school discipline code. Among other things, the law emphasizes disciplinary actions that keep students in school and in class—minimizing exclusionary discipline such as

This Stated Briefly report is a companion to the full report: Burke, A. (2015). *Suspension, expulsion, and achievement of English learner students in six Oregon districts* (REL 2015–094). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest. That report is available at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

suspension and expulsion—and calls on school administrators to ensure that discipline is imposed without bias based on gender, race/ethnicity, or special education status.

This study builds on a previous Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest study that used 2011/12 data from the Oregon Department of Education to examine disciplinary practices in six Oregon school districts (Burke & Nishioka, 2014). That study did not report results specifically for English learner students, who are the fastest growing subgroup in the state. This study provides that information.

### **What the study examined**

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This study uses data from the Oregon Department of Education to examine whether English learner students in six districts were suspended or expelled at a similar rate and were suspended for a similar number of instructional days as non-English learner students. The study also identifies the most common reasons for suspension or expulsion among English learner students and non-English learner students and compares proficiency rates on state assessments in reading and math between English learner students who were suspended or expelled and those who were not. See box 1 for definitions of key terms used in this brief.

### **What the study found**

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The study found differences between English learner students and non-English learner students in rates of suspension and expulsion and days lost to suspension. Differences were small in elementary school but more pronounced in middle school and high school. In addition, English learner students and non-English learner students tended to be suspended or expelled for the same reasons. Finally, English learner students

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#### **Box 1. Key terms**

**Average total length of suspension.** The average number of instructional days suspended among students receiving at least one in-school or out-of-school suspension (see below). It is calculated as the number of school days suspended summed over all suspended English learner students and non-English learner students separately in each grade span divided by the total number of students in each group who were suspended. This statistic shows the average number of instructional days lost across the entire year—not the average length of an individual suspension.

**English learner students.** Students who are unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English, who often come from non-English-speaking homes and backgrounds, and who typically require specialized or modified instruction in both the English language and in their academic courses.

**Exclusionary discipline.** Discipline imposed by school administrators that removes a student from classroom instruction or school. This study reports results for in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion.

**Expulsion.** Discipline that removes a student from school for the remainder of the school year or longer.

**In-school suspension.** Temporary removal of a student from his or her regular classroom or classrooms for disciplinary purposes. The student remains in school under the direct supervision of school personnel.

**Out-of-school suspension.** Temporary removal of a student from his or her regular school to another setting (for example, home or a behavior center) for disciplinary purposes. For students in special education this includes removals in which no special education services are provided because the removal is less than 10 days cumulatively, as well as removals in which the student continues to receive special education services according to an individualized education program.

**Proficiency rate.** The percentage of students achieving the state standard for proficiency on state assessments in reading or math.

**Source:** Adapted from Burke & Nishioka (2014) and Great Schools Partnership (n.d.).

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who were suspended or expelled achieved proficiency on state assessments at a lower rate than English learner students who were not suspended or expelled.

**English learner students were suspended or expelled at a similar rate as non-English learner students in elementary school but at a higher rate in middle school and high school**

Across all grades, English learner students and non-English learner students were suspended or expelled at a nearly identical rate. English learner students were suspended or expelled at a slightly lower rate than non-English learner students in elementary school (3.0 percent versus 3.2 percent) but at a higher rate in middle school (18.4 percent versus 10.4 percent) and high school (13.8 percent versus 7.6 percent).

**Suspension types.** When in-school and out-of-school suspensions were considered separately, across all grades, English learner students received in-school suspension at a higher rate and out-of-school suspension at a lower rate than non-English learner students.

**Length of suspension.** In elementary school and middle school English learner students and non-English learner students who received one or more suspensions during the 2011/12 school year were suspended for a similar amount of time: in elementary school the average was 1.9 days for English learner students and 2.3 days for non-English learner students, and in middle school the average was 3.5 days for English learner students and 3.3 days for non-English learner students. But in high school English learner students were suspended for almost a full day more than non-English learner students (4.9 days versus 4.1 days).

**Across all grades, aggression and insubordination/disruption were the most common reasons why both English learner students and non-English learner students were suspended or expelled**

Aggression and insubordination/disruption were the most common offenses leading to suspension or expulsion; offenses involving tobacco, alcohol, or drugs, property-related offenses, and criminal offenses were generally less common. In elementary school English learner students were suspended or expelled at a slightly lower rate than non-English learner students for aggression or insubordination/disruption. In middle school and high school, English learner students were suspended or expelled at rates up to twice as high as those for non-English learner students, for both aggression and insubordination/disruption.

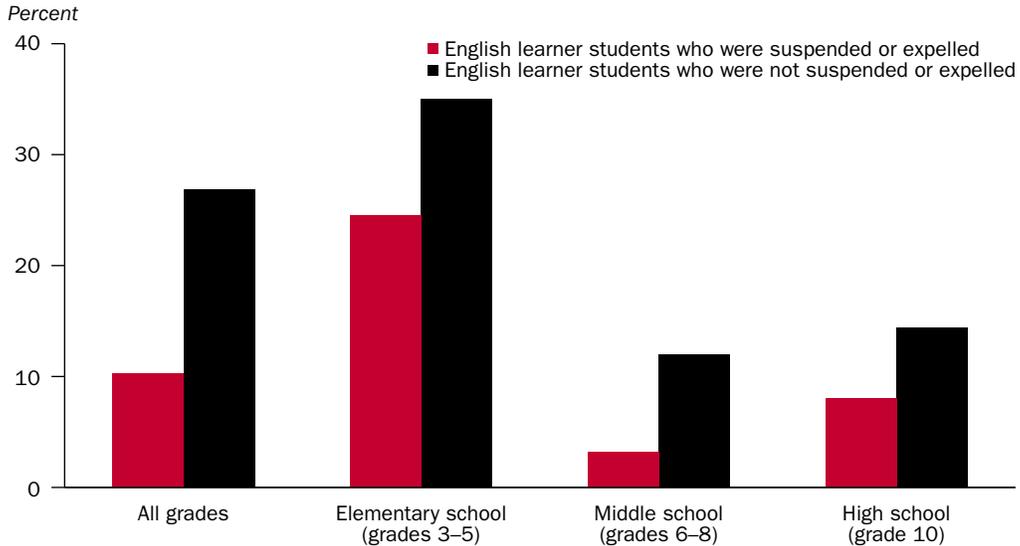
**On average, English learner students who were suspended or expelled had lower achievement on state assessments in reading and math than English learner students who were not suspended or expelled**

Averaged across all tested grades and for each grade span, English learner students who were suspended or expelled during the school year achieved proficiency in reading and math at a substantially lower rate than English learner students who were not suspended or expelled. The gap between the two groups of students did not vary by grade span.

**Reading.** In elementary school the proficiency rate was 29 percent lower for English learner students who were suspended or expelled than for those who were not. In middle school the proficiency rate was 75 percent lower for English learner students who were suspended or expelled than for those who were not. In high school the proficiency rate was 43 percent lower for English learner students who were suspended or expelled than for those who were not (figure 1).

**Math.** In elementary school the proficiency rate was 40 percent lower for English learner students who were suspended or expelled than for those who were not. In middle school the proficiency rate was 65 percent lower for English learner students who were suspended or expelled than for those who were not (figure 2). (Proficiency rates were not calculated for high school to protect student confidentiality because of small sample size.)

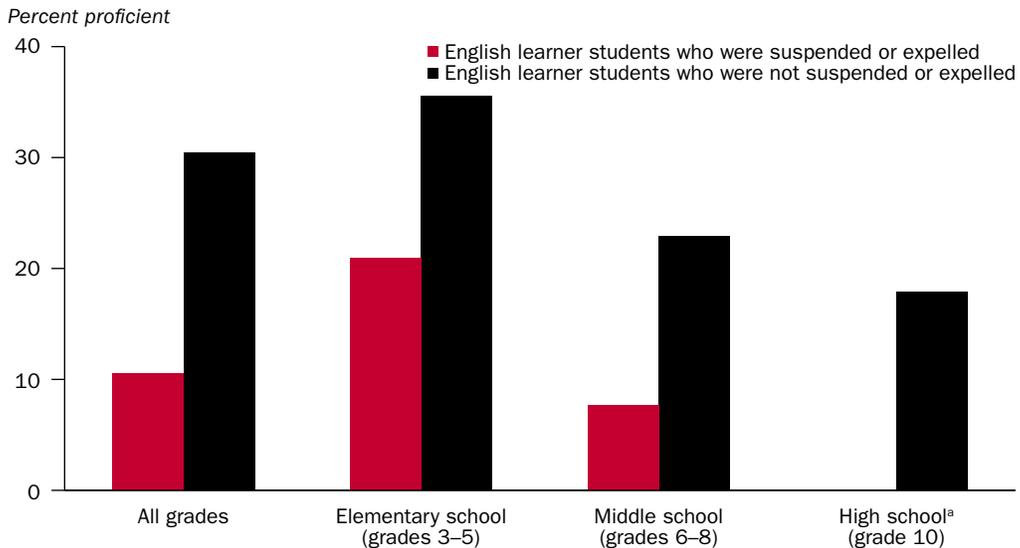
**Figure 1. English learner students who were suspended or expelled achieved proficiency on state assessments in reading at a substantially lower rate than English learner students who were not suspended or expelled, 2011/12**



**Note:** State assessments are conducted only in grades 3-8 and grade 10.

**Source:** Author's analysis of data from the Oregon Department of Education cumulative average daily membership database, discipline incidents database, and assessment database.

**Figure 2. English learner students who were suspended or expelled achieved proficiency on state assessments in math at a substantially lower rate than English learner students who were not suspended or expelled, 2011/12**



**Note:** State assessments are conducted only in grades 3-8 and grade 10.

**a.** Percent proficient for English learner students who were suspended or expelled are not shown to protect student confidentiality because of small sample size.

**Source:** Author's analysis of data from the Oregon Department of Education cumulative average daily membership database, discipline incidents database, and assessment database.

## **Implications of the study findings**

Oregon and other states have placed a high priority on improving the achievement of English learner students. Integral to accomplishing this goal is reducing suspension and expulsion rates among these students. This study provides evidence that above grade 5, English learner students in Oregon are suspended or expelled at a higher rate than non-English learner students. In addition, English learner students who are suspended or expelled achieve proficiency on Oregon state assessments at a substantially lower rate than English learner students who are not suspended or expelled. Whether suspension or expulsion lowers achievement is important but is outside the scope of this study. In addition, causality may run in the opposite direction: it might be that students who struggle academically experience stress that increases misbehavior and results in disciplinary action.

Policymakers, educators, and others concerned about these findings can consider several actions to improve outcomes for English learner students:

- Find alternatives to suspension and expulsion.
- Examine policies and procedures concerning student discipline and determine whether they pose a disadvantage for English learner students.
- Monitor and assess school and classroom learning environments to ensure that they support all students.
- Provide suspended English learner students with intensive follow-up and support to reduce the chance that they will be suspended again.
- Provide academic support to English learner students who return to school after having been suspended or expelled.

Other states and localities may wish to conduct a similar study comparing suspension and expulsion rates for English learner students and non-English learner students. They could then examine the reasons behind any differences, including whether English learner students are disciplined more often than non-English learner students for offenses that are identified through administrator discretion.

This is a descriptive study and is not designed to test hypotheses about the causes and consequences of suspension and expulsion. In addition, the participating districts were not selected randomly from the population of Oregon districts, so the results do not generalize beyond the districts that were studied.

## **References**

Burke, A., & Nishioka, V. (2014). *Suspension and expulsion patterns in six Oregon school districts* (REL 2014–028). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest. <http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED544799>

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