

# Are State Policy Reforms in Oregon Associated with Fewer School Suspensions and Expulsions?

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# Are State Policy Reforms in Oregon Associated with Fewer School Suspensions and Expulsions?

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In 2013 and 2015 Oregon enacted legislation that shifted school discipline policies from a zero-tolerance approach to one that emphasizes preventing behavioral problems and reducing unnecessary suspensions and expulsions. Suspensions and expulsions are often referred to as exclusionary discipline because they remove students from classroom instruction. This study examined the association between state-level policy reforms and suspension and expulsion rates for grades K–12 in Oregon public schools. The findings suggest that the policy shift has led to some short-term progress on two of the state’s main goals—reducing unnecessary removal of students from classroom instruction for disciplinary reasons and reducing exclusionary discipline for weapons offenses that do not involve firearms.

Across all grade spans the use of exclusionary discipline declined from school year 2008/09 to 2016/17, with greater reductions for grades 9–12 and 6–8 than for grades K–5. Oregon’s policy reforms were associated with short-term reductions in some forms of exclusionary discipline after pre-policy trends and other factors were adjusted for. For example, the 2013 policy reforms were associated with short-term reductions in the number of out-of-school suspensions per student for grades 9–12 and 6–8, and the 2015 policy reforms were associated with a reduction in out-of-school suspensions for grades K–5. For grades 6–8 and K–5 the policy reforms were also associated with reductions in the number of expulsions per student. However, many disciplinary actions reverted—or appeared to be reverting—toward pre-policy trends within a few years. Meanwhile, for all grade spans the policy reforms were not associated with reductions in the use of in-school suspensions after other factors were adjusted for.

The declining rates of exclusionary discipline indicate progress, but growth in out-of-school suspensions in recent years suggests the need for further monitoring and additional support. For example, strengthening efforts to reduce suspensions for minor infractions, especially for grades 9–12 and 6–8, could reduce unnecessary suspensions overall—a priority of Oregon’s school discipline policy reforms.

## Why this study?

Oregon policymakers and education leaders identified reducing unnecessary suspensions and expulsions as critical to achieving the state’s education goals (Oregon Education Investment Board, 2013). Suspensions and expulsions—referred to as exclusionary discipline because they remove students from the classroom—are costly to both students and educators (see box 1 for definitions of key terms used in the report). This study was conducted at the request of Oregon and Washington stakeholders who participate in the Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest’s Equity in School Discipline Collaborative. They were especially interested in learning how exclusionary discipline changed after Oregon enacted its new state policy guidelines and whether the change was associated with reduced use of suspensions (Drinkwater, 2014).

## *The detrimental effects of exclusionary discipline*

Among students who experience exclusionary discipline, removal from classroom instruction increases the risk of chronic absenteeism, academic failure, and additional school disciplinary problems (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013). In the long term, exclusionary discipline increases the risk for school dropout, delinquency, and substance abuse (Balfanz et al., 2015; Fabelo et al., 2011; Hinze-Pifer & Sartain, 2018; Noltemeyer et al., 2015).

For additional information, including background on the study, technical methods, supporting analyses, and other analyses, access the report appendixes at <https://go.usa.gov/xG4sq>.

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## Box 1. Key terms

**2013 policy reforms.** Oregon enacted legislation in 2013 to reduce unnecessary suspensions and expulsions. The 2013 law requires school administrators to consider a student’s age and past behavior and the circumstances of the discipline incident when assigning suspension or expulsion and to use evidence-based approaches to reduce future occurrences. The legislation also sought to reduce unnecessary expulsions by changing discipline practices for weapons violations that do not pose a threat to the safety of others. The study defined the pre-policy years as 2008/09–2012/13 and the post-policy years as 2013/14–2016/17.

**2015 policy reforms.** Oregon enacted legislation in 2015 limiting the use of out-of-school suspensions or expulsions in grades K–5 to incidents that pose a direct threat to the health or safety of others or when required by federal law. Schools must consider a student’s age and past pattern of behavior before imposing suspension or expulsion. The use of out-of-school suspension or expulsion was limited to clearly specified circumstances. The study defined the pre-policy years as 2008/09–2014/15 and the post-policy years as 2015/16–2016/17.

**Behavioral infraction.** Student behavior that results in exclusionary discipline. In this report, behavioral infractions are organized into five categories:

- *Minor infractions.* Behaviors that do not pose a direct threat to the physical safety of others, including disorderly conduct, insubordination, obscene gestures, and violations of school rules. This category also includes attendance infractions such as tardiness to class and not attending school or classes as required.
- *Aggression.* Verbal threats, fighting, harassment, sexual harassment, physical altercations, and intimidation causing fear of harm.
- *Property or drug infractions.* Theft, trespassing, burglary, vandalism, and possession or use of alcohol, tobacco, and drugs.
- *Major offenses.* Behaviors that pose a risk to the safety of others, including possession of weapons, arson, battery, sexual offenses, robbery, manufacturing or delivery of a controlled substance, arson, kidnapping, and school threat.
- *Other infractions.* Disciplinary problems that do not match the other behavioral infraction definitions.

**Exclusionary discipline.** Discipline action that removes a student from regularly scheduled classroom instruction. Forms of exclusionary discipline examined in this study are out-of-school suspension, in-school suspension, and expulsion.

**Expulsion.** Discipline action that removes a student from regularly scheduled classroom instruction generally for the remainder of the school year or longer, in accordance with district policy.

**Incidence rate ratio.** Ratio comparing the number of exclusionary discipline incidents per student (number of exclusionary discipline incidents divided by the number of students enrolled) between the pre-policy period and the post-policy period. A ratio equal to 1 indicates no difference in exclusionary discipline rates before and after the policy, after other factors, such as seasonality and district characteristics, are adjusted for; a ratio greater than 1 indicates a higher exclusionary discipline rate after the policy reforms than the projected pre-policy trend; and a ratio less than 1 indicates a lower exclusionary discipline rate after the policy reforms than the projected pre-policy trend.

**In-school suspension.** Discipline action that temporarily removes a student from regular regularly scheduled classroom instruction to another location within the school, under the direct supervision of school personnel.

**Out-of-school suspension.** Discipline action that temporarily removes a student from regularly scheduled classroom instruction to another setting outside the school (for example, home or a behavior center).

**Suspension days.** Number of school days assigned for in-school or out-of-school suspensions. Partial suspension days are rounded to the nearest half day in the discipline data. This study examined both the average number of suspension days per student and the average number of suspension days per suspended student.

**Unnecessary suspensions and expulsions.** Exclusionary discipline for conduct that does not pose a threat to the health or safety of students or school employees and is not required by federal law.

Note: Definitions are based on the Oregon Department of Education’s Discipline Incidents Collection Manual (Bateman & Foutch, 2019; Mahoney, 2012).

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Even among students who do not directly experience exclusionary discipline, it may be associated with negative outcomes. For example, students who are not suspended but who attend schools that have high suspension rates also have lower academic achievement and report lower levels of safety (Lacoe, 2013; Perry & Morris, 2014; Steinberg et al., 2011). Among elementary school students, those who are in classrooms with disruptive peers are more likely to report feeling unsafe and to have lower academic achievement than those who are not in classrooms with disruptive peers (Carrell et al., 2018; Kinsler, 2013). In addition, suspensions for more serious misconduct were associated with small reductions in academic achievement for nonsuspended students (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019). Further, there is evidence that among elementary students, those in classrooms with more positive behavioral supports report higher ratings of classroom order and more positive relationships with teachers and peers than those in classrooms with fewer positive behavioral supports and greater use of exclusionary discipline, after student, classroom, and school characteristics are adjusted for (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013).

Among educators, schoolwide suspension rates are one of several factors associated with higher burnout in high schools and elementary schools. School discipline is associated with low job satisfaction, safety concerns, and high work-related stress for teachers (Aloe et al., 2014; Moore, 2012; O’Brennan et al., 2017). Demographic characteristics, such as the teacher’s race, age, and gender, may also affect the likelihood that student discipline will contribute to teacher stress (Aloe et al., 2014; Liu & Ramsey, 2008; Moore, 2012).

Finally, schools, families, and society may pay an economic price for exclusionary discipline because of the administrative time required to process disciplinary referrals, lost work or additional childcare costs for parents or guardians of students who are disciplined, and the costs associated with dropping out of school (Marchbanks et al., 2015; Rumberger & Losen, 2016; Scott & Barrett, 2004). (Additional background information on exclusionary discipline policies in Oregon and nationally is in appendix A.)

### *The shift in Oregon’s school discipline policies*

In response to a tragic school shooting in 1998, Oregon lawmakers passed zero-tolerance legislation in 2001 that mandated the expulsion of students who brought or used firearms and other “weapons” to school regardless of the student’s age and ability level or the circumstances of the discipline incident (Or. Rev. Stat. § 339, 2001). The 2001 law broadened the definition of weapons to include “instruments that may have the effect of causing physical harm to individuals and/or property. Included are knives, clubs, nunchakus, and other martial arts instruments and materials” (Mahoney, 2012, p. 5). The 2001 law also allowed school administrators broad discretion in the suspension or expulsion of students for nonviolent offenses, including willful disobedience, defiance, or use of profane language.

Fifteen years later, however, researchers and practitioners alike began to point to the negative and often unintended consequences of these zero-tolerance policies, as discussed above. (American Psychological Association, 2008; Losen & Martinez, 2013). In 2013 Oregon responded with legislation that called for “reducing unnecessary suspensions and expulsions” (H.R. 2192, Or. 2013). For example, the 2013 law requires school administrators to consider a student’s age and past behavior and the circumstances of the discipline incident when assigning suspension or expulsion and to use evidence-based approaches to reduce future occurrences (Drinkwater, 2014).

Policymakers also sought to reduce unnecessary expulsions by changing discipline practices for weapons violations that do not pose a threat to the safety of others. As mentioned, the 2001 legislation offered a broad definition of what constituted a weapon, and many school districts took that definition even further, with many including look-alike weapons such as toy versions of guns, knives, and other weapons (Melton, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Districts

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1. The use of exclusionary discipline for possession of weapons that did not present a risk to the safety of others was not restricted to Oregon. A 2014 review of 428 articles on research studies involving suspensions and expulsions for weapons offenses found many examples of exclusionary discipline for situations in which the student simulated a weapon or brought an item to school that resembled a weapon (Losinski et al., 2014). Three of the many examples reported in the study include pointing a finger at a classmate in a way that imitates a gun, bringing a fake drill-team rifle to school, and bringing a toy gun to school.

also had broad discretion in how to address the circumstances in which a weapon was used, attempted to be used, or threatened to be used. For example, Portland Public Schools implemented policies that called for the suspension or expulsion of students for situations involving deadly or dangerous weapons, as well as possession of “articles that resemble, but are not, knives, guns or other weapons” (Portland Public Schools, 2016, p. 18).

Besides possibly leading to unnecessary expulsions, the variation in definitions of weapons could compromise the accuracy of state discipline data and, in turn, reduce the ability to use the data to inform policy and practice decisions. For example, districts that define weapons as “articles that *resemble* [emphasis added], but are not, knives, guns, or other weapons” (Portland Public Schools, 2016, p. 18) could allow exclusionary discipline for possession of toy guns or knives. These districts could report exclusionary discipline due to weapons at higher rates than districts that define weapons as “a weapon, device, instrument, material, or substance, animate or inanimate, that is used for, or is readily capable of, causing death or serious bodily injury” (Bateman & Foutch, 2019, p. 7). Monitoring Oregon’s progress on reducing suspensions and expulsions requires accurate and consistent discipline data on the rates, intensity, and potential threat of weapons violations to school safety.

The 2013 legislation removed mandatory expulsion for weapons violations. Oregon defines “possession of weapons” as “possession of an instrument or object to inflict harm on other persons,” such as firearms, knives, sharp objects, substances used as a weapon, and other objects such as chains, brass knuckles, or pellet guns (Bateman & Foutch, 2019, p. iv). The 2013 policy reforms more closely align Oregon policy to the federal Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, which requires a mandatory one-year expulsion only for “firearms” violations, unless the superintendent decides otherwise for a particular student. Thus, the type of disciplinary consequence and length of suspensions or expulsions for other types of weapons violations are at the discretion of the district. In 2015 Oregon lawmakers enacted a second change to state discipline policy for grades K–5, limiting the use of out-of-school suspensions or expulsions to incidents that pose a direct threat to the health or safety of others or when required by federal law (S. 553, Or. 2015). Similar efforts to reform discipline practices are occurring across the country (AASA & Children’s Defense Fund, 2014; Capatosto, 2015; Steinberg & Lacoé, 2017). As of 2019, 16 states and the District of Columbia had enacted laws related to suspensions and expulsions (Rafa, 2019).

Despite these efforts, few studies have examined whether state policy reforms can reduce the use of exclusionary discipline. This study’s findings on any changes in discipline practices associated with state policy reforms are likely to interest state policymakers in Oregon and nationally, based on the growing number of states that have implemented or are considering reforms that are similar to Oregon’s (Steinberg & Lacoé, 2017). (Additional information about why this study is important and about Oregon’s school discipline policies is in appendix A.)

## Research questions

The study addressed three research questions for the period 2008/09–2016/17:

1. What were the changes in the number of discipline incidents per 100 students, percentages of students who received exclusionary discipline, and number of suspension days per 100 students?
2. Were the changes associated with the timing of the school discipline policy reforms, even after other factors that might have changed over the study period were adjusted for?
3. What were the changes by categories of behavioral infractions that resulted in exclusionary discipline, especially for minor infractions and possession of weapons, after other factors were adjusted for?

Data sources, sample, and analytic methods are described in box 2. Additional information about the study methods is in appendix B.

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## Box 2. Data sources, sample, and methods

**Data sources.** The study used data from two sources. District and student-level demographic information was retrieved from the Oregon Department of Education Cumulative Average Daily Membership collection. Student-level data include gender; race/ethnicity; grade level; attending district; and eligibility for special education or Section 504 services, English learner services (Section 504, 2017), and the national school lunch program (a proxy for low-income status). School discipline data were retrieved from the Oregon Discipline Incident Collection, which includes the student's school and district, date of the discipline incident, type of offense, type of exclusionary discipline, and number of suspension days for each exclusionary discipline incident. Data were linked across the two sources by matching the state-issued student identification number. For each source, data were obtained for the nine-year period 2008/09–2016/17.

**Sample.** Of the 197 districts (including charter school districts) in the state, the analysis included 175 districts serving grades K–5, 170 districts serving grades 6–8, and 177 districts serving grades 9–12. Districts were excluded from the study if the grade spans of interest (K–5, 6–8, and 9–12) enrolled 10 or fewer students or if the district did not report any exclusionary discipline incidents for the nine-year study period. The analysis did not include non–public school settings such as residential treatment centers, juvenile corrections facilities, or other treatment programs serving students with specialized needs who were removed from their public school setting.

**Methodology.** This study examined the association between enactment of Oregon's school discipline policies in 2013 and the use of exclusionary discipline for all grade spans (K–5, 6–8, and 9–12). For grades K–5 the study examined a second policy shift in 2015 that limited suspensions to situations that presented a serious risk to the safety of the student or others.

The discipline outcomes were the number of exclusionary discipline incidents per student, the percentage of students who received exclusionary discipline, the number of suspension days per student, and the number of suspension days per suspended student. Examination of research question 1 consisted of descriptive analyses of the statewide annual numbers of exclusionary discipline incidents per 100 students from 2008/09 through 2016/17. Using the percentage change formula  $(2016/17 \text{ outcome} - 2008/09 \text{ outcome}) / 2008/09 \text{ outcome} \times 100$ , a 25 percent change or higher was considered substantial, a 15–24 percent change was considered moderate, and a 5–14 percent change was considered small. Examination of research question 2 consisted of regression analyses to determine whether the state policy reforms were associated with changes in the use of out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions, and expulsions, after pre-policy trends, seasonality, and district characteristics were adjusted for. Examination of research question 3 consisted of similar regression analyses of the association at the district level between the state policy reforms and changes in the use of exclusionary discipline by category of behavioral infraction. Similar regression analyses were conducted for weapons violations for grades 9–12 and 6–8 only. Regression analyses for weapons violations were not conducted for grades K–5 because of the low number of incidents.

The regression analyses examined the association between the 2013 and 2015 policy reforms and changes in the use of exclusionary discipline by comparing the expected rates of school discipline outcomes based on trends in exclusionary discipline before the policy reforms with the actual rates after the policy reforms (Bloom, 2002). All regression analyses adjusted for prior trends, seasonality, and district characteristics (Penfold & Zhang, 2013; Wagner et al., 2002). The district characteristics, which varied by year, were annual percentage of male students; percentage of racial/ethnic minority students (all students except White students); percentages of students eligible for special education services, English learner services, and the national school lunch program; and district student enrollment. The analyses also include district identifiers that effectively adjust for all district characteristics that do not change over time. For research questions 2 and 3 data were aggregated to the district level for each month of the 10-month school year (September through June), a total of 90 monthly observations per district for the nine-year study period.

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## Findings

This section reports findings by research question, beginning with the results of descriptive analyses of the changes over time in the annual number of discipline incidents per 100 students for out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions, and expulsions (research question 1). Next, regression results are reported for changes in

the number of exclusionary discipline incidents per student that were associated with the state policy reforms after other factors were adjusted for (research question 2). Then regression results are reported for the association between the state policy reforms and changes in the number of exclusionary discipline incidents per student by category of behavioral infraction for minor infractions, aggression, and possession of weapons after other factors were adjusted for (research question 3). (More detailed results for both descriptive and regression analyses are in appendix C. Additional descriptive and regression results for changes in the percentage of students who received exclusionary discipline and the number of suspension days per student are in appendix D.)

***Exclusionary discipline declined from 2008/09 to 2016/17, especially for grades 9–12, but downward trends for some grade spans appeared to be reverting toward pre-policy trends in later post-policy years***

Descriptive analyses were used to report on the amount of and trends in exclusionary discipline. These analyses alone cannot determine whether changes in exclusionary discipline were associated with the state policy reforms. Other factors, such as pre-policy trends, the time of year, and district characteristics, also may have affected the number of exclusionary discipline incidents.

For grades 9–12 and 6–8 all forms of exclusionary discipline began to decline before the 2013 policy reforms. Trends after the policy reforms differed by grade span and type of discipline. For grades K–5, in-school suspensions and expulsions were declining before the 2013 policy reforms, but the use of out-of-school suspensions remained about the same. (Detailed descriptive results for all key outcomes are in tables C1–C3 in appendix C.)

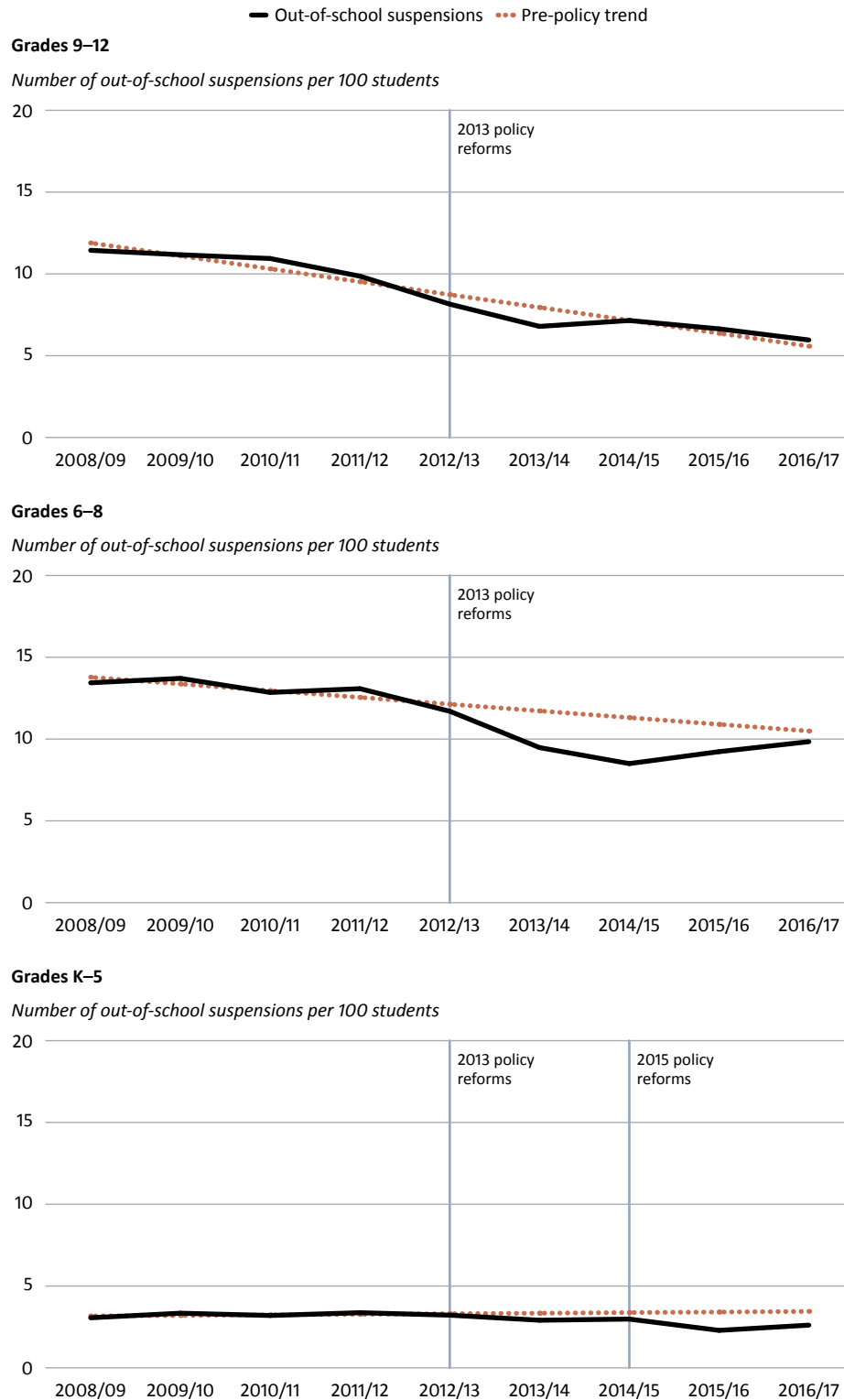
*For grades 9–12 and 6–8 the number of out-of-school suspensions per 100 students began to decline before the state policy reforms, and there was a reduction right after the 2013 policy reforms, but the downward trends reverted toward pre-policy trends in the post-policy years.* The number of out-of-school suspensions per 100 students declined from 2008/09 to 2016/17 across all grade spans. For grades 9–12 short-term declines in out-of-school suspensions per 100 students right after the 2013 policy reforms were substantial (a more than 25 percent change), at around 48 percent (from 11.4 per 100 students to 6.0; figure 1). For grades 6–8 short-term declines were also substantial right after the 2013 policy reforms, at around 27 percent (from 13.4 per 100 to 9.8), while for grades K–5 reductions were small, at just under 15 percent (from 3.1 per 100 to 2.6).

For grades 9–12 and 6–8 the trend in the number of out-of-school suspensions per 100 students (black lines in figure 1) dipped below the pre-policy trend (red dotted lines) at about the same time that the 2013 school discipline policy reforms were implemented. The continuation of the pre-policy trend lines into the post-policy period show what the outcomes would have been had the pre-policy trends continued, without adjustment for other factors. During the post-policy years the downward trends in out-of-school suspensions reverted toward the pre-policy trends. For grades K–5 the number of out-of-school suspensions per 100 students dipped below the pre-policy trend at about the same time as implementation of the 2015 policy reforms and appeared to be reverting toward the pre-policy trend in subsequent years.

*For grades 9–12 and 6–8 the number of in-school suspensions per 100 students began to decline before the state policy reforms but trended upward for grades 6–8 during the post-policy years.* The number of in-school suspensions per 100 students declined from 2008/09 to 2016/17 across all grade spans, with substantial reductions (a more than 25 percent change) for grades 9–12 and 6–8 (figure 2). The number of in-school suspensions per 100 students dropped 50 percent (from 11.0 per 100 students to 5.5) for grades 9–12, 36 percent (from 16.7 per 100 to 10.7) in grades 6–8, and 9 percent (from 2.3 per 100 to 2.1) for grades K–5.

For grades 9–12 the downward trend in the number of in-school suspensions per 100 students (black line in figure 2) after the 2013 policy reforms was about the same as the projected pre-policy trend (red dotted line) from 2008/09 to 2016/17. For grades 6–8 the number of in-school suspensions began to rise in 2014/15 during the

**Figure 1. Reductions in the number of out-of-school suspensions per 100 students in Oregon public schools were substantial for grades 9–12 and 6–8 but small for grades K–5, 2008/09–2016/17**

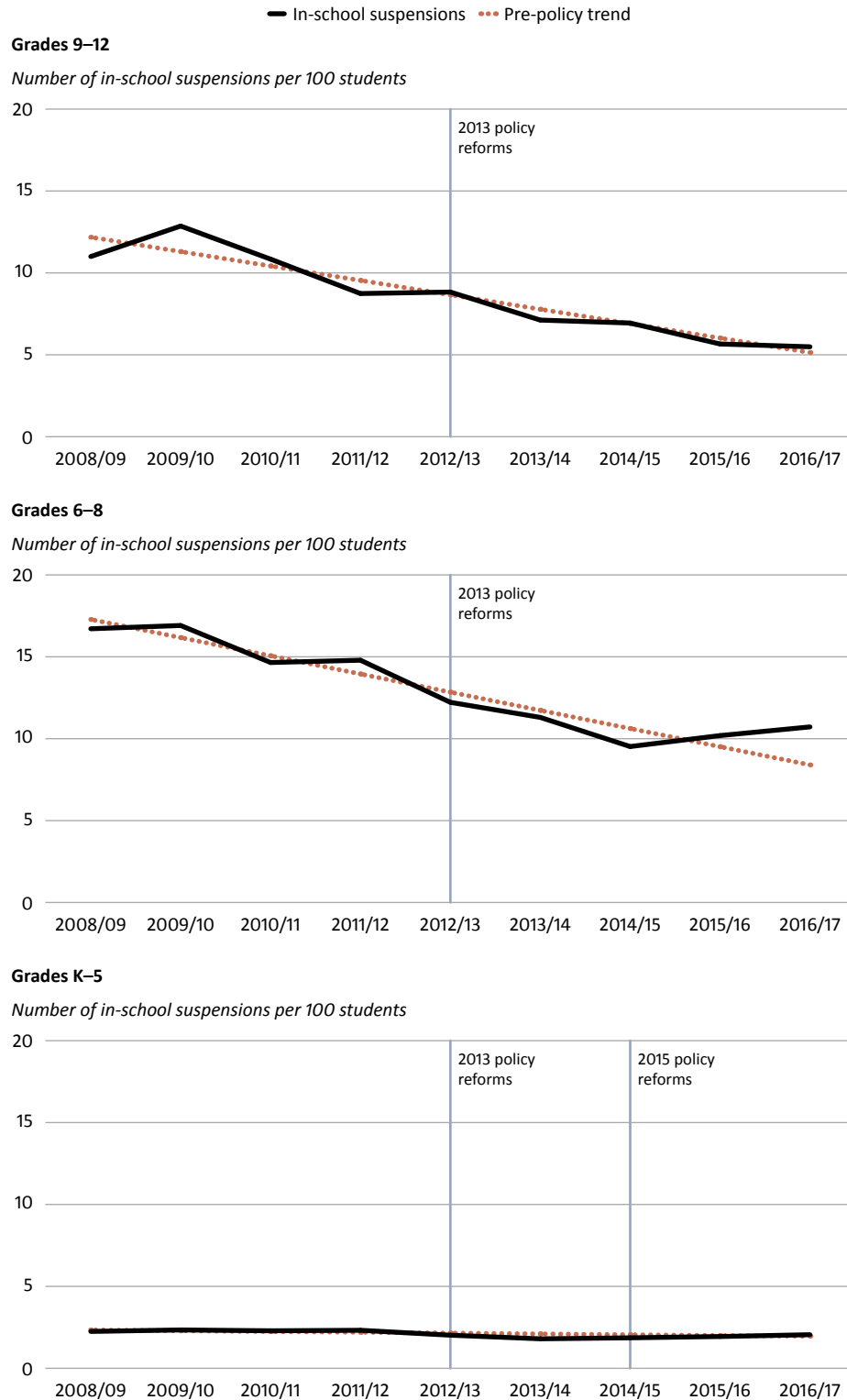


Note:  $n = 177$  districts in grades 9–12, 170 in grades 6–8, and 175 in grades K–5. The annual statewide number of out-of-school suspensions per 100 students was calculated by dividing the number of out-of-school suspensions by the total number of enrolled students in a given year and multiplying by 100. Annual rates were calculated separately for each grade span. The pre-policy trend lines are based on a linear regression of the pre-policy period outcomes on time and an intercept. The post-policy trend lines extend the pre-policy trend lines into the post-policy period, assuming no change in slope. See tables C1–C3 in appendix C for underlying data and table C4 for related regression results, after additional background factors are adjusted for.

Source: Authors' analysis of Oregon Department of Education data for 2008/09–2016/17.



**Figure 2. Reductions in the number of in-school suspensions per 100 students in Oregon public schools were substantial for grades 9–12 and 6–8 but small for grades K–5, 2008/09–2016/17**



Note:  $n = 177$  districts in grades 9–12, 170 in grades 6–8, and 175 in grades K–5. The annual statewide number of in-school suspensions per 100 students was calculated by dividing the number of in-school suspensions by the number of enrolled students in a given year and multiplying by 100. The pre-policy trend lines are based on a linear regression of the pre-policy period outcomes on time and an intercept. The post-policy trend lines extend the pre-policy trend lines into the post-policy period, assuming no change in slope. See tables C1–C3 in appendix C for detailed results and table C4 for related regression results, after additional background factors are adjusted for.

Source: Authors' analysis of Oregon Department of Education data for 2008/09–2016/17.

post-policy years and moved above the pre-policy trend, while for grades K–5 the number was fairly stable across the study period.

*For all grade spans the number of expulsions per 100 students declined.* Reductions in the number of expulsions per 100 students from 2008/09 to 2016/17 were substantial (more than a 25 percent change) across all grade spans (figure 3). The number of expulsions per 100 students fell 46 percent (from 0.57 per 100 students to 0.32) for grades 9–12, 51 percent (from 0.39 per 100 to 0.19) for grades 6–8, and close to 100 percent (from 0.02 per 100 to nearly 0) for grades K–5. (Detailed results are in tables C1–C3 in appendix C.)

For grades 9–12 and 6–8 the number of expulsions per 100 students (black lines in figure 3) dropped around the time of the 2013 policy reforms. Although the decline began to level out, the number of expulsions per 100 students remained below the projected pre-policy trend (red dotted lines). For grades K–5 the number of expulsions per 100 students declined slightly before the 2013 policy reforms and dropped below the pre-policy trend right after the 2015 policy reforms.

*Oregon’s policy reforms were associated with short-term reductions in out-of-school suspensions for all grade spans, but for grades 9–12 and 6–8 the use of these discipline actions increased in the post-policy years, after pre-policy trends, seasonality, and district characteristics were adjusted for*

Other factors that could have influenced the use of suspensions or expulsions over time included pre-policy trends, seasonality or variations in exclusionary discipline across the school year, and district characteristics. Thus, to determine whether the state policy reforms were associated with differences in exclusionary discipline outcomes, the study team used regression analyses that adjusted for these factors.

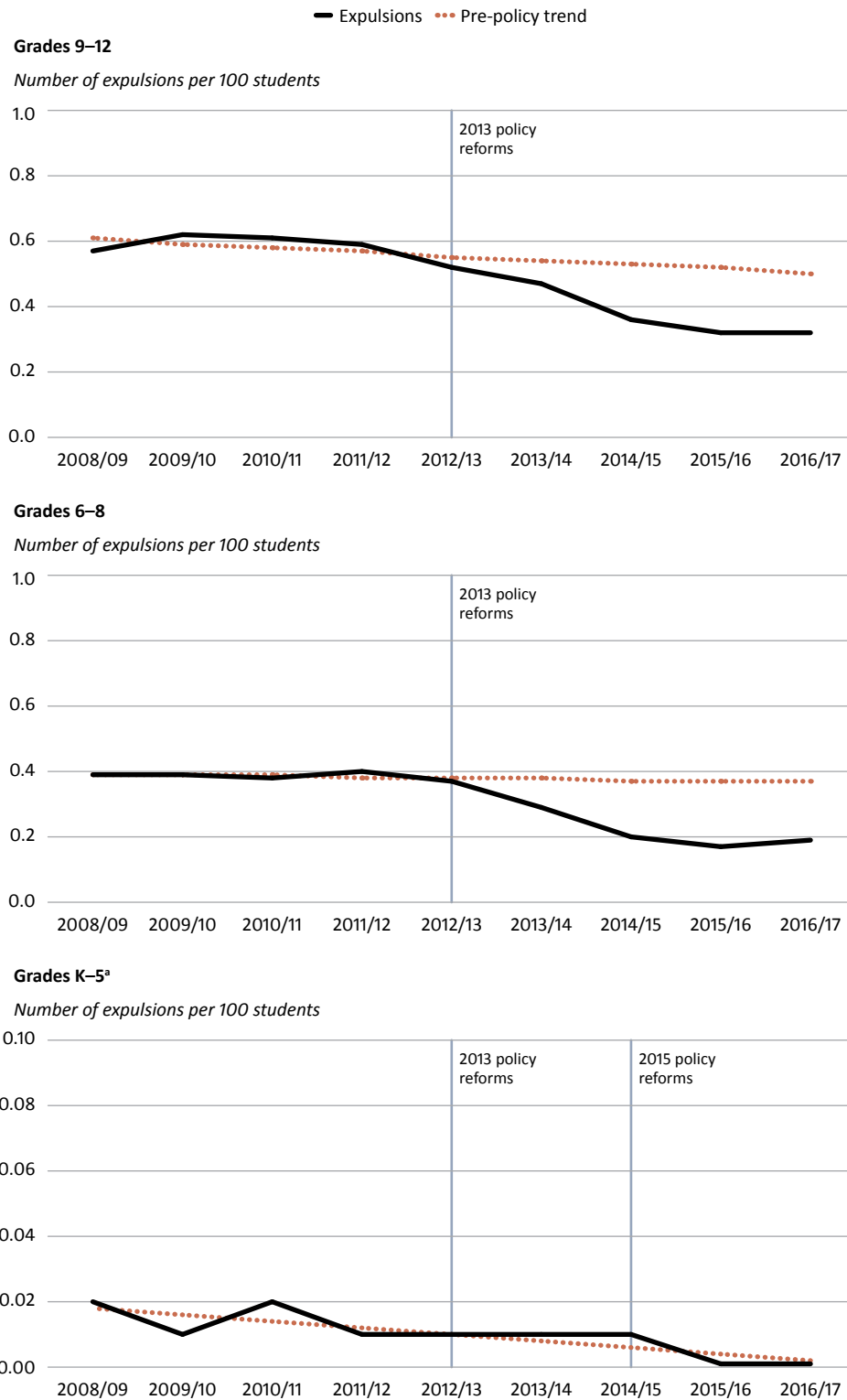
For grades 9–12 and 6–8 the 2013 policy reforms were associated with short-term reductions in the number of out-of-school suspensions per student, after pre-policy trends, seasonality, and district characteristics were adjusted for (see the *2013 policy* row in table 1). For example, the 2013 policy incidence rate ratio (see box 1) for grades 9–12 of 0.880 was less than 1, indicating that after these other factors were adjusted for, the number of out-of-school suspensions per student was lower than the pre-policy trend.

For grades 9–12 and 6–8 the short-term reductions in the number of out-of-school suspensions per student were not sustained, and the numbers during the post-policy years were higher than the expected pre-policy trend after pre-policy trends, seasonality, and district characteristics were adjusted for (see the *2013 policy × time* row in table 1). For instance, the *2013 policy × time* incidence rate ratios of 1.004 for grades 9–12 and 1.006 for grades 6–8 are greater than 1, indicating that the numbers of out-of-school suspensions per student were higher after the policy reforms than the projected pre-policy trends.

For grades K–5 the 2015 policy reforms but not the 2013 policy reforms were associated with short-term reductions in the number of out-of-school suspensions per student. Although the number of out-of-school suspensions per 100 students increased during the post-policy years, the change was not statistically significant.

*Across all grade spans the state policy reforms were not associated with changes in in-school suspensions after other factors were adjusted for.* For grades 9–12 and 6–8 the 2013 policy reforms were not associated with reductions in the number of in-school suspensions per student from 2008/09 to 2016/17 after pre-policy trends, seasonality, and district characteristics were adjusted for (see table 1). For grades K–5 neither the 2013 policy reforms nor the 2015 policy reforms were associated with changes in the number of in-school suspensions per student.

**Figure 3. Reductions in the number of expulsions per 100 students in Oregon public schools were substantial for all grade spans, 2008/09–2016/17**



Note:  $n = 177$  districts in grades 9–12, 170 in grades 6–8, and 175 in grades K–5. The annual statewide number of expulsions per 100 students was calculated by dividing the number of expulsions by the number of enrolled students in a given year and multiplying by 100. The pre-policy trend lines are based on a linear regression of the pre-policy period outcomes on time and an intercept. The post-policy trend lines extend the pre-policy trend lines into the post-policy period, assuming no change in slope. See tables C1–C3 in appendix C for detailed results and table C4 for related regression results, adjusting for additional background factors.

a. For grades K–5 the scale in the figure was set to 0.00–0.10 expulsion per 100 students to better show the changes over time.

Source: Authors’ analysis of Oregon Department of Education data for 2008/09–2016/17.



the findings across different measures of exclusionary discipline further supports the study's main findings. It also provides evidence that the use of exclusionary discipline did not change in unexpected ways, such as reducing the number of suspensions while increasing the number of suspension days assigned for each suspension. (Detailed descriptive results are in tables D1–D6 in appendix D, and regression results are in tables D7 and D8.)

***The state policy reforms were associated with reductions in the number of out-of-school suspensions for aggression for all grade spans, but the associations varied for changes in the number of discipline incidents for minor infractions, property or drug infractions, major offenses, and other infractions***

One motivation for changing Oregon's school discipline policies was to reduce the use of unnecessary exclusionary discipline, especially for minor behavioral infractions. To examine progress on this policy goal, the association between the state policy reforms and changes in exclusionary discipline was analyzed for five behavioral categories: minor infractions, aggression, property or drug infractions, major offenses, and other offenses (see box 1). Regression results are reported for minor infractions that do not pose a direct threat to personal safety and for aggressions that are not considered a major offense, the two behavioral categories that might result in unnecessary exclusionary discipline. (Detailed descriptive results are in tables C5–C7 in appendix C and regression results are in tables C8–C10.)

*The state policy reforms were associated with reductions in out-of-school suspensions for minor infractions for grades 6–8 and K–5 but not for grades 9–12.* For grade 6–8 the 2013 policy reforms were associated with a reduction in the number of out-of-school suspensions per student for minor infractions, and for grades K–5 the 2015 policy with a reduction in the number of out-of-school suspensions per student for minor infractions, after pre-policy trends, seasonality, and district characteristics were adjusted for (table 2). For grades 9–12 the 2013 policy reforms were not associated with changes in the number of out-of-school suspensions for minor infractions. For all grade spans the state policy reforms were not associated with changes in the number of in-school suspensions or expulsions per student for minor infractions. (Detailed regression results are in tables C8–C10 in appendix C.)

*For all grade spans the 2013 state policy reforms were associated with reductions in out-of-school suspensions students for aggression, but for grades 9–12 and 6–8 the use of out-of-school suspensions reverted toward pre-policy trends during the later post-policy years.* For grades 9–12 and 6–8 the 2013 policy reforms were associated with short-term reductions in the number of out-of-school suspensions per student for aggression, but after pre-policy trends, seasonality, and district characteristics were adjusted for, these suspensions reverted toward pre-policy trends in the later post-policy years (table 3). For grades K–5 the 2013 policy reforms were also associated with reductions in the number of out-of-school suspensions per student for aggression. Although the numbers increased in the post-policy years, the increases were not statistically significant. (Detailed regression results for all grade spans are in tables C8–C10 in appendix C.)

For grades 6–8 the 2013 policy reforms were associated with a reduction in the number of in-school suspensions per student for aggression, after pre-policy trends, seasonality, and district characteristics were adjusted for. For grades K–5 the 2013 and 2015 state policy reforms were not associated with reductions in the number of in-school suspensions per student for aggression, but an upward trend in the number of in-school suspensions per student during the post-policy years after the 2015 reforms was statistically significant. Because the 2015 policy limited the use of out-of-school suspensions or expulsions to incidents that pose a direct threat to the safety of others, the increased number of in-school suspensions could be associated with districts using this form of discipline for less serious aggression.

For grades 6–8 the 2013 policy reforms were associated with reductions in the number of expulsions per student for aggression. For grades K–5 the state policy reforms were not associated with reductions in the number of

**Table 2. For minor infractions the state policy reforms were associated with reductions in the number of out-of-school suspensions per student for grades 6–8 and K–5 in Oregon public schools, after other factors were adjusted for, by grade span and type of exclusionary discipline, 2008/09–2016/17 (incidence rate ratio)**

Grade span and parameter <sup>a</sup>	Out-of-school suspensions per student	In-school suspensions per student	Expulsions per student
<b>Grades 9–12</b>			
2013 policy	0.920	0.909	1.145
2013 policy × time	1.004	1.001	0.985
<b>Grades 6–8</b>			
2013 policy	0.806*	0.894	1.386
2013 policy × time	1.005	1.006	0.997
<b>Grades K–5</b>			
2013 policy	1.051	0.958	0.889
2015 policy	0.509*	0.739	0.376
2013 policy × time	0.992	1.003	0.977
2015 policy × time	1.012	1.011	1.021

\* Significant at  $p = .05$ .

Note:  $n = 15,930$  observations in grades 9–12 (177 districts times 90 months), 15,300 observations in grades 6–12 (170 districts times 90 months), and 15,750 observations in grades K–5 (175 districts times 90 months). The incidence rate ratio compares the exclusionary discipline rate (number of exclusionary discipline incidents divided by the number of students enrolled) between the pre-policy period and the post-policy period. A ratio equal to 1 indicates no difference in exclusionary discipline rates before and after the policy, after other factors, such as seasonality and district characteristics, are adjusted for; a ratio greater than 1 indicates a higher exclusionary discipline rate after the policy reforms than the projected pre-policy trend; and a ratio less than 1 indicates a lower exclusionary discipline rate after the policy reforms than the projected pre-policy trend. The regression models included district-level controls for percentage of male students; percentage of racial/ethnic minority students (all students except White students); percentages of students eligible for special education services, English learner services, and the national school lunch program; and district student enrollment. See tables C8–C10 in appendix C for detailed regression results.

a. The *2013 policy* and *2015 policy* variables examine whether the overall number of exclusionary discipline actions per 100 students in the post-policy years differs from the number of exclusionary discipline actions per student in the pre-policy years. The *2013 policy × time* and *2015 policy × time* variables examine whether there is a change in the trend of the discipline outcome during the post-policy years. For the school discipline policy reforms of 2013, covering all grade spans, the pre-policy years are 2008/09–2012/13, and the post-policy years are 2013/14–2016/17. For the school discipline policy reforms of 2015, covering grades K–5, the pre-policy years are 2008/09–2014/15, and the post-policy years are 2015/16–2016/17.

Source: Authors' analysis of Oregon Department of Education data for 2008/09–2016/17.

expulsions per student for aggression, but there was a statistically significant increase in the number of expulsions per student for aggression after the 2013 policy reforms.

*Associations between the state policy reforms and property or drug infractions, major offenses, and other infractions varied.* For grades 9–12 the 2013 policy reforms were associated with the number of out-of-school suspensions per student for property or drug infractions (see table C8 in appendix C). For grades 9–12 the 2013 state policy reforms were not associated with changes in the number of out-of-school suspensions per student for major offenses or other infractions or with the number of in-school suspensions per student and expulsions per student for property or drug infractions, major offenses, or other infractions.

For grades 6–8 the 2013 reforms were associated with reductions in the number of out-of-school suspensions per student for major offenses, number of in-school suspensions per student for major offenses and other infractions, and expulsions for property or drug infractions (see table C9 in appendix C). However, reductions in the number of in-school suspensions per student for other offenses and expulsions for property or drug infractions were short term and reverted toward pre-policy trends during the later post-policy years. The state policy reforms were not associated with reductions in out-of-school suspensions per student for property or drug infractions or other infractions, in-school suspensions for property or drug infractions, or expulsions for major offenses or other infractions.

**Table 3. For aggression the 2013 state policy reforms were associated with reductions in the number of out-of-school suspensions per student in all grade spans and reductions in the number of in-school suspensions and expulsions per student for grades 6–8 in Oregon public schools, after other factors were adjusted for, by grade span and type of exclusionary discipline, 2008/09–2016/17 (incidence rate ratios)**

Grade span and parameter <sup>a</sup>	Out-of-school suspensions per student	In-school suspensions per student	Expulsions per student
<b>Grades 9–12</b>			
2013 policy	0.783***	0.843	0.865
2013 policy × time	1.007***	1.000	0.998
<b>Grades 6–8</b>			
2013 policy	0.762***	0.806**	0.642*
2013 policy × time	1.006*	1.006	1.004
<b>Grades K–5</b>			
2013 policy	0.827*	0.904	1.476
2015 policy	0.685	0.739	0.038
2013 policy × time	0.995	0.992	0.944***
2015 policy × time	1.011	1.019*	1.106

\* Significant at  $p = .05$ ; \*\* significant at  $p = 0.01$ ; \*\*\* significant at  $p = .001$ .

Note:  $n = 15,930$  observations in grades 9–12 (177 districts times 90 months), 15,300 observations in grades 6–12 (170 districts times 90 months), and 15,750 observations in grades K–5 (175 districts times 90 months). The incidence rate ratio compares the exclusionary discipline rate (number of exclusionary discipline incidents divided by the number of students enrolled) between the pre-policy period and the post-policy period. A ratio equal to 1 indicates no difference in exclusionary discipline rates before and after the policy, after other factors, such as seasonality and district characteristics, are adjusted for; a ratio greater than 1 indicates a higher exclusionary discipline rate after the policy reforms than the projected pre-policy trend; and a ratio less than 1 indicates a lower exclusionary discipline rate after the policy reforms than the projected pre-policy trend. The regression models included district-level controls for percentage of male students; percentage of racial/ethnic minority students (all students except White students); percentages of students eligible for special education services, English learner services, and the national school lunch program; and district student enrollment. See tables C8–C10 in appendix C for detailed regression results.

a. The 2013 policy and 2015 policy variables examine whether the overall number of exclusionary discipline actions per 100 students in the post-policy years differs from the number of exclusionary discipline actions per student in the pre-policy years. The 2013 policy × time and 2015 policy × time variables examine whether there is a change in the trend of the discipline outcome during the post-policy years. For the school discipline policy reforms of 2013, covering all grade spans, the pre-policy years are 2008/09–2012/13, and the post-policy years are 2013/14–2016/17. For the school discipline policy reforms of 2015, covering grades K–5, the pre-policy years are 2008/09–2014/15, and the post-policy years are 2015/16–2016/17.

Source: Authors' analysis of Oregon Department of Education data for 2008/09–2016/17.

For grades K–5 the 2013 policy reforms were associated with reductions in the number of in-school suspensions per student for property or drug infractions (see table C10 in appendix C). The 2013 policy reforms were also associated with reductions in the number of in-school suspensions for other infractions right after the policy reforms, but the numbers reverted toward pre-policy trends during the later post-policy years. The 2015 policy reforms were associated with a reduction in the number of expulsions per student for property or drug infractions. The reforms were not associated with reductions in the number of out-of-school suspensions per student for property or drug infractions or major offenses, the number of in-school suspensions per student for major offenses, or the number of expulsions per student for major offenses.

***While the 2013 state policy reforms were associated with reductions in some forms of exclusionary discipline per student for weapons possession, the short-term reductions in out-of-school suspensions for grades 6–8 appeared to be temporary***

In addition to reducing unnecessary exclusionary discipline, the 2013 policy reforms were intended to reduce unnecessary exclusion of students for weapons violations that do not present a risk to the safety of others (Drinkwater, 2014). Thus the 2013 legislation changed mandatory expulsion (zero tolerance) from the broader category of “weapons” to possession or use of “firearms,” as stipulated by the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994.

For all grade spans and all study years students received every form of exclusionary discipline for weapons violations. Most weapons violations that resulted in out-of-school and in-school suspensions were for possession of knives longer than 2.5 inches, and most expulsions were for possession of other types of objects or substances that were intended to harm others. Possession of firearms accounted for very few weapons violations. (Descriptive results by type of weapon are in tables C11–C13 in appendix C.)

For grades 6–8 the 2013 state policy reforms were associated with short-term reductions in out-of-school suspensions per student for possession of weapons, but the reductions disappeared within a few years when pre-policy trends, seasonality, and district characteristics were adjusted for (see table C14 in appendix C). For grades 9–12 and 6–8 the state policy reforms were not associated with changes in the number of out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions, or expulsions for weapons possession per student. Regression analysis was not conducted for weapons violations for grades K–5 because of the low number of infractions.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the study findings do not support causal inference about the effect of the exclusionary discipline policy reforms.

Second, the study did not collect information about implementation of the state policy reforms, and therefore the findings do not explain why an association exists or does not exist between the policy reforms and changes in exclusionary discipline. In other words, the study cannot explain why the policy reforms are or are not related to incidents of exclusionary discipline. In addition, the study did not examine factors other than the policy reforms (competing interventions) that might be related to the use of suspension or expulsion, such as implementation of restorative justice practices, teacher professional development on behavior management, or implementation of schoolwide systems of behavioral interventions and support.

Third, the available data may not include enough time points to understand the long-term relationship between the 2013 and 2015 policy reforms and discipline practices. For example, the study could not determine whether any statistically significant associations were due solely to the 2015 policy reforms, to both the 2013 and 2015 policy reforms, or to other unknown factors. Analysis of the association between the 2015 policy reforms for grades K–5 and changes in exclusionary discipline should be interpreted with caution because only two years of post-policy data were available. In addition, Oregon’s exclusionary discipline data may not provide information that is sensitive to the intensity of the behavioral infractions resulting in exclusionary discipline or to important differences among them. Finally, the study findings relate to one state, Oregon, and cannot be generalized to other states that have changed school discipline policies.

## Implications

The study findings provide evidence that Oregon’s policy reforms are associated with short-term changes in the use of exclusionary discipline that did not appear to persist, suggesting that districts may need continuing support to fully implement the reforms. The findings also point to several actions that state and local education agencies, policymakers, and researchers might consider for reducing the use of exclusionary discipline.

- *Monitoring trends in exclusionary discipline and adjusting interventions to ensure progress in reducing unnecessary removals of students from classroom instruction.* Across all grade spans the decline in the number of out-of-school suspensions ended and, in some cases, suspensions began to trend upward during the post-policy years. Continued monitoring of annual statewide discipline outcomes is needed to determine whether the



observed increases in the use of exclusionary discipline are temporary or mark the beginning of an upward trend that requires further investigation and additional support.

- *Investigating the potential benefits of in-school suspension to determine whether the observed decline leads to better student academic performance outcomes.* There is evidence that in-school suspensions might be preferable to out-of-school suspensions in cases where exclusionary discipline is determined to be the appropriate disciplinary response (Anyon et al., 2014). For example, in-school suspensions involve adult supervision of students, which might not be available with out-of-school suspensions. Depending on resources and school practices, in-school suspensions might also provide opportunities to offer individualized academic support or teach social and emotional learning skills that might prevent future disciplinary problems. Unlike decisions to impose out-of-school suspensions, decisions to impose in-school suspensions depend on available resources, including space, furnishings, and staffing. Further investigation of the effects of in-school suspensions on student outcomes, the circumstances in which in-school suspensions provide the greatest benefits, and the resources needed to administer these interventions might inform practice and policy decisions.
- *Implementing strategies that will reduce unnecessary suspensions for minor infractions that could be managed in other ways.* Across all grade spans most suspensions were assigned for minor infractions, with the highest rates of suspension for minor infractions for grades 9–12. This finding is concerning for several reasons. Schools that frequently suspend students tend to have lower student academic achievement, even after student demographics are adjusted for. Students who are expelled or suspended are more likely than other students to become disconnected from school, fail courses, repeat grades, and drop out of school (Fabelo et al., 2011; Lacoë & Steinberg, 2019; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). In Florida, students who were on track to graduate were twice as likely to drop out if they received one suspension compared with students without any suspensions, and the risk of dropping out increased by 20 percent for each additional suspension (Balfanz et al., 2015).
- *Helping districts implement alternative discipline practices—such as referrals to school counselors, conferences with students and parents, and restorative justice approaches—that are associated with lower rates of suspension and better outcomes for suspended students and their nonsuspended peers* (Anyon et al., 2014; Lacoë & Steinberg, 2019; Payne & Welch, 2010; Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002). Providing students with additional academic instruction, individualized behavioral support, or social and emotional learning skills is associated with lower district rates of suspension (Cornell et al., 2012; Eitle & Eitle, 2004; Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002). Schools in which teachers receive professional development, coaching, or consultation for addressing classroom discipline have lower rates of out-of-school suspension (Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002; Vincent & Tobin, 2011).
- *Investigating exclusionary discipline practices to identify root causes and contextual factors that will help districts select and implement appropriate interventions.* For example, understanding whether an exclusionary discipline problem is statewide or is isolated to a few districts or certain settings or specific groups of students or educators would be helpful (Nishioka, 2017). Details about the situations that lead to exclusionary discipline (for example, what happens before and after the discipline incident or whether discipline incidents occur more often at certain times of the day, in particular locations, or during specific events) could also inform improvement decisions. Finally, examining current practices to determine whether any expectations, routines, or staff attitudes unintentionally disadvantage certain groups of students or create cultural misunderstandings that contribute to bias in discipline action decisions could help schools identify interventions to improve equity.

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