

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

Reflecting an overall policy shift in Oregon and nationwide, Oregon passed laws in 2013 and 2015 aimed at changing the way school discipline is applied in grades K–12. The 2013 legislation directed districts to replace zero-tolerance policies with an emphasis on preventing and reducing unnecessary student suspensions and expulsions. Suspensions and expulsions are often referred to as exclusionary discipline because they remove students from classroom instruction. The new legislation also narrowed Oregon’s requirement for mandatory expulsion for weapons violations by limiting it to incidents involving firearms. The 2015 legislation limited the use of out-of-school suspensions in grades K–5 to situations that pose a risk to the safety of students or school employees. This study examined suspension and expulsion rates in Oregon over a nine-year period (school years 2008/09–2016/17) to determine whether these reforms in school discipline policy were associated with changes in practice, after other factors, such as pre-policy trends and district characteristics, were adjusted for.

Key findings

- *Exclusionary discipline declined from 2008/09 to 2016/17, especially for grades 9–12 and 6–8, but additional analyses were needed to determine whether the decline was associated with Oregon’s policy reforms.*
- *After pre-policy reform trends, seasonality, and district characteristics were adjusted for, Oregon’s policy reforms were associated with some short-term reductions in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, but these reductions reverted or began to revert toward pre-policy trends within a few years. Specifically, the policy reforms were associated with the following outcomes:*
 - For grades 9–12 and 6–8 there were reductions in the number of out-of-school suspensions per student right after the policy reforms, but these suspensions reverted toward pre-policy trends in later years.
 - For grades 6–8 and K–5 there were reductions in the number of expulsions per student.
 - For grades 6–8 and K–5 there were reductions in the number of out-of-school suspensions per student for minor infractions.
 - In all grade spans there were reductions in the number of out-of-school suspensions per student for aggression right after the policy reforms, but these suspensions reverted toward pre-policy trends in later years for grades 9–12 and 6–8.
- *The state policy reforms were not associated with reductions in in-school suspensions in any grade span after other factors, such as pre-reform trends and district characteristics, were adjusted for.*
- *The state policy reforms were associated with a reduction in the number of out-of-school suspensions for weapons possession for grades 6–8 but not with changes in exclusionary discipline for grades 9–12, after other factors were adjusted for.*

While the declining rates of exclusionary discipline are encouraging, the upward post-policy trends in rates of out-of-school suspensions suggest the need for further monitoring and support. For example, continuing 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.