



Lost Class Time

The State of Suspensions in Bridgeport Schools

Do suspensions do more harm than good?

Out-of-school suspensions are meant to remove disruptive or potentially dangerous students from school for a few days, as punishment for serious disciplinary offenses. Often, however, this form of suspension is used to punish students for school policy violations such as disrespect, profanity, or skipping class. Doing so can cause students to fall behind academically, and does nothing to address the underlying cause of the problem or promote better behavior.

For students who don't want to be in school, suspensions can provide a way to earn an excused absence. This reinforces negative behavior and encourages repeat suspensions. Out-of-school suspensions can also set in motion a process of gradual disengagement with school, leading to a student's dropping out or not graduating on time. Even worse, because many suspended students are unsupervised while out of school, they may become involved with the juvenile justice system. Thus, some research studies question the practice of excluding students from school as an effective form of discipline.

Is out-of-school suspension really the answer?

In the 2006-07 school year, Bridgeport exceeded all other Connecticut school districts in having the highest number (4,765) and percent of students (22% of total enrollment) suspended out-of-school. During that year, these students lost almost 28,000 school days while they were suspended. Often, students suspended from school are those who can least afford to be absent from the classroom. This is a major concern in Bridgeport where out-of-school suspensions are still used more frequently than any other type of disciplinary measure and where student performance on state academic proficiency tests needs to improve, the dropout rate reduced, and graduation rates increased.

Efforts to limit suspensions

To reduce the high suspension rates of 2006-07, the district began monitoring each school's disciplinary data more closely and accelerated the implementation of Positive Behavior Supports (PBS), a nationally recognized approach to school discipline now being used in 22 of the district's 34 schools. Improvement is already showing. Out-of-school suspensions dropped by nearly one-third in 2007-08 and by an additional 16% in 2008-09. BCAC applauds this progress, but remains concerned that, system-wide, too many students are still being excluded from class.

Thousands of school days lost to suspensions

| Out-of-school suspensions | School days lost by suspended students | Number of students* given out-of-school suspensions | Percent of all students suspended |
|---------------------------|--|---|-----------------------------------|
| 7,651 | 19,674 | 3,347 | 16% |

Bridgeport Schools, 2007-08

*Each student was counted only once, even if the student had been suspended more than once during the school year.

Lost Class Time

Concern over out-of-school suspensions

BCAC's Education and Early Care Task Force undertook this study because it was concerned about the large number of out-of-school suspensions in the Bridgeport schools and how the pending state law restricting the use of out-of-school suspensions would be implemented. The Connecticut State Department of Education supplied suspension data for the 2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08 school years, and the Bridgeport school system provided data for 2008-09. To supplement the numbers, BCAC interviewed the principals of all three high schools, four PreK-8 elementary schools, and several administrators.

State law, but recession delays implementation

In 2007, the Connecticut General Assembly passed a law to ensure that school disciplinary practices do not hinder academic performance. The law limits the use of out-of-school suspensions to behavior that is a danger to others or a major disruption to learning. Under the law, school administrators retain the authority to decide when students need to be excluded from school, but in-school suspension or alternative forms of discipline will now be the norm for less serious offenses.

The original effective date of the law was July 1, 2008, but that date was postponed to July 1, 2009, to allow school districts to prepare for its implementation. As this report went to press, the legislature was discussing a further delay because of the recession's impact on school budgets.

Declining out-of-school suspensions but increasing in-school suspensions

In light of the new state law that will limit the use of out-of-school suspensions, Bridgeport schools have begun making greater use of in-school suspensions. While this shift is in line with the intent of the law, Bridgeport's severe budget constraints make implementation a challenge. In-school suspension programs that work require dedicated academic resources, teacher training, and behavioral supports currently not available.

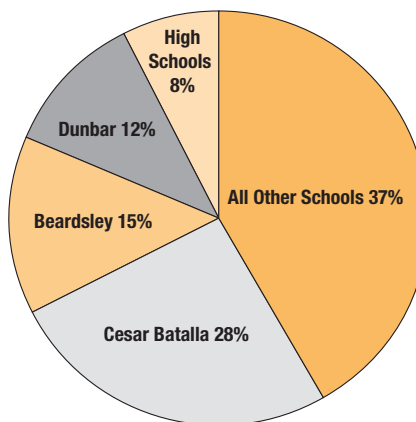
Out-of-school suspensions decreasing but in-school suspensions increasing

| Bridgeport Suspensions | 2005-06 | 2006-07 | 2007-08 | 2008-09 | % change 05-06 to 08-09 |
|------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|-------------------------|
| Out-of-school | 10,493 | 11,242 | 7,651 | 6,439 | - 39% |
| In-school | 2,551 | 3,021 | 2,110 | 3,695 | + 45% |
| Total | 13,044 | 14,263 | 9,761 | 10,134 | - 22% |

Three schools lead in using alternative forms of discipline

A number of Bridgeport schools have begun using alternative disciplinary measures, such as conferences with students and parents, detention, warnings, community service, mediation, and conflict and anger management. These schools showed a drop in out-of-school suspensions in 2007-08. However, of the 1,100 instances when alternative discipline was used, more than half took place in just three schools. The City's three high schools accounted for just 8% of the total.

Three schools lead in alternative discipline



Alternative Disciplinary Measures used in Bridgeport Schools, 2007-08

The State of Suspensions in Bridgeport Schools

Why the disparity for African Americans?

As the chart below shows, African American students are more likely to be disciplined than students of other races and ethnicities. Researchers have struggled to understand the reasons for these disparities because there is no evidence that African Americans are more disruptive than other students. Until such disparities in discipline are addressed, African American students will be at greater risk of being suspended from school and losing valuable academic time that would help close the achievement gap.

African American students disciplined at high rates

| Students in Connecticut's Largest Cities | Number of Students Disciplined 2007-08 | % Overall Enrollment 2007-08 |
|--|--|------------------------------|
| Bridgeport | | |
| African American | 53% | 42% |
| Latino | 41% | 46% |
| White | 5% | 9% |
| Other | 1% | 3% |
| Hartford | | |
| African American | 51% | 40% |
| Latino | 46% | 52% |
| White | 2% | 6% |
| Other | 1% | 2% |
| New Haven | | |
| African American | 65% | 51% |
| Latino | 29% | 36% |
| White | 5% | 12% |
| Other | <1% | 1% |

Most students suspended for school policy violations

In 2007-08, school policy violations accounted for two-thirds of out-of-school suspensions and three-quarters of in-school suspensions. With limits on the use of out-of-school suspensions for such violations, Bridgeport could significantly reduce the number of students excluded from their classes as a form of discipline.

Two out of three students suspended out-of-school for violating school policy

| School Policy Suspensions | Out-of-School Suspensions 2007-08 | In-School Suspensions 2007-08 |
|---|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Skipping class | 997 | 81 |
| Insubordination/disrespect | 917 | 393 |
| Breach of Peace/disorderly conduct | 640 | 379 |
| Failure to attend detention or in-school suspension | 580 | 111 |
| Obscene language/profanity | 494 | 131 |
| All other school policy violations | 1,409 | 456 |
| Total school policy-related suspensions | 5,037 | 1,551 |
| Total suspensions | 7,651 | 2,110 |
| Percent of school policy-related suspensions | 66% | 74% |

Who gets disciplined?

In 2007-08, certain groups of Bridgeport students were disciplined in numbers disproportionate to their share of school enrollment. Of the 4,177 students who were suspended, expelled, or received an alternative type of discipline, there were disparities in gender, race, and disability. Since 90% (3,763) of these students received one or more suspensions, it is reasonable to assume that the subgroups listed below were suspended in disproportionate rates as well.

- 1. Male students:** Twice as many male students as female students were disciplined in 2007-08. Because suspensions make up 90% of all disciplinary actions, BCAC estimates that twice as many males as females were suspended, with males making up two-thirds of all student suspensions.
- 2. African American students:** African American students are much more likely to be disciplined than other students. In 2007-08, African American students in Bridgeport comprised 42% of the enrollment, but they received 53% of all the disciplinary actions. BCAC estimates that African American students are *more than one and a half times more likely to be suspended* than other students. In 2007-08, BCAC estimates that 1.3 African American students were suspended for each Latino student who was suspended.
- 3. Students with disabilities:** In 2007-08, Bridgeport students with disabilities were *almost twice as likely* to be disciplined – and therefore suspended – as students without disabilities. Students with disabilities represented only about 13% of total school enrollment, but these students comprised 27% of all students who were disciplined in 2007-08. While this disparity is significant, it presents a substantial improvement over the previous year, when 41% of students with disabilities were disciplined. BCAC estimates that the suspension rate in 2007-08 for students with disabilities was 27%, compared to 19% for regular education students.

Lost Class Time

Why the variation in suspension rates?

An analysis of school size, class size, and turnover of principals, teachers, and students in Bridgeport schools found no significant relationship to school suspension rates in 2007-08. Research on urban districts has identified a number of factors that contribute to the suspension rate. These include:

- Quality of the school discipline plan – rules and consequences for negative behavior
- Effectiveness of teachers' classroom management techniques
- Principals' attitudes toward discipline
- Level of understanding of school rules and consequences by students and parents
- Involvement of parents throughout the disciplinary process.

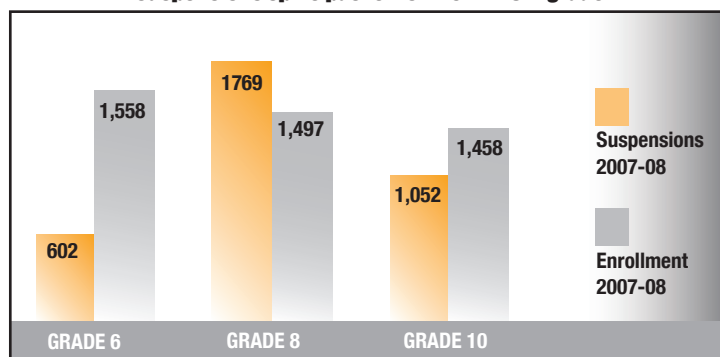
Can high school suspensions be predicted by elementary school patterns?

In 2007-08, students in Bridgeport K-6 schools had far lower out-of-school and in-school suspension rates than those in K-8 schools. Because these forms of discipline often cause students to fall behind in their schoolwork, a pattern of disengagement begins in grades 7 and 8 that continues into high school. Thus, practices begun in elementary school are an important indicator of whether these same students will be suspended when they reach high school.

- **SUSPENSION RATE IN K-6 SCHOOLS:** 8%
- **SUSPENSION RATE IN K-8 SCHOOLS:** 23%
- **SUSPENSION RATE IN HIGH SCHOOLS:** 29%

Research shows that students suspended in grade 8 are highly likely to be suspended in high school. At the elementary school level, Bridgeport's seventh and eighth graders receive the most suspensions. In fact, the number of grade 8 suspensions exceeded the total student enrollment in that grade because so many eighth graders had multiple suspensions.

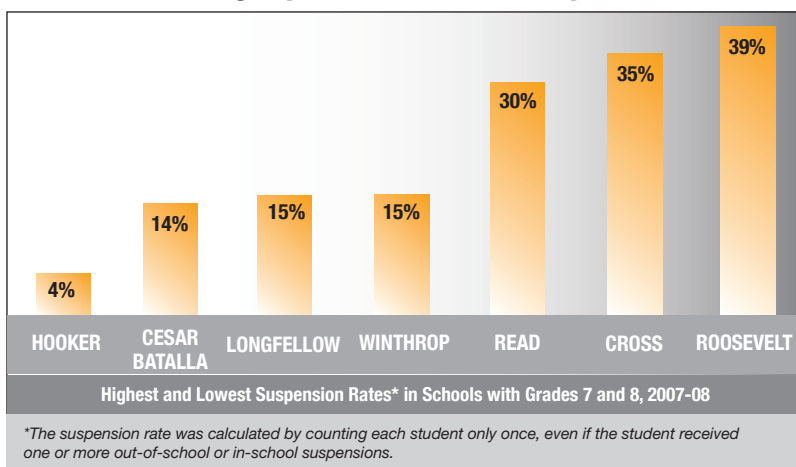
Suspensions spike past enrollment in 8th grade



Wide variation in suspension rates

There will always be variation in how suspensions are applied, particularly across a large and complex urban school district like Bridgeport's. But when extremely high rates of suspension are found in individual schools – such as Roosevelt, Wilbur Cross, and Read – factors beyond student behavior are likely to be involved.

Alarming suspension rates at 3 elementary schools



The State of Suspensions in Bridgeport Schools

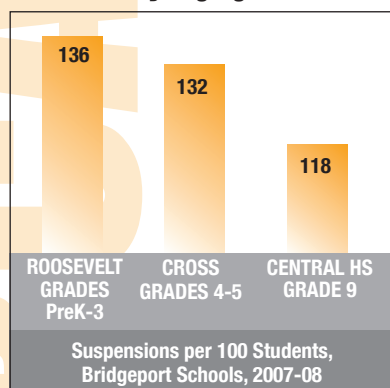
Very young students given far too many suspensions

Recent studies have found that suspending children in early grades is not an effective practice. Assessing young students with problem behavior and providing targeted intervention can help address issues early, before they become even more serious. Providing support to help teachers develop strategies to manage challenging and disruptive behavior can also help decrease suspensions in younger grades.

Too many suspensions put Bridgeport's youngest students at risk for school failure. Students at two Bridgeport elementary schools are being suspended at rates even higher than at the high schools.

The suspensions per 100 students in grades PreK-3 at Roosevelt School and in grades 4 and 5 at Wilbur Cross School are higher than the suspensions per 100 students in 9th grade at Central High School — the grade with the highest suspension rate among all three Bridgeport high schools.

Too many suspensions in younger grades

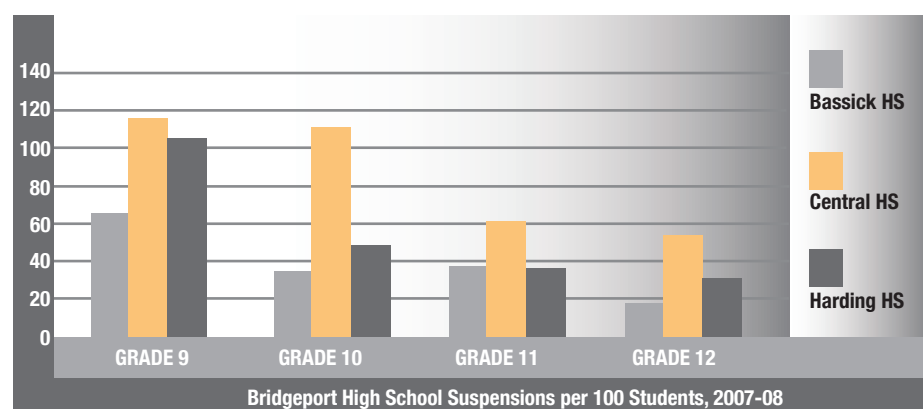


In high school, most suspensions are in grade 9

Among the City's three high schools, Central High had the highest rate of suspensions in 2007-08. Overall, 34% of Central High School students were suspended, compared to 23% at Bassick and 26% at Harding.

At all three high schools, suspension rates in grade 9 are the highest. Freshmen are adolescents in the midst of making a transition from elementary to high school, which puts them at risk for behavior problems. High schools bring together students coming from a variety of different elementary schools, which adds to the complexity of the transition as they struggle to establish themselves in a new environment. Many arrive having a history of suspensions in elementary school.

Suspension rates peak in grade 9

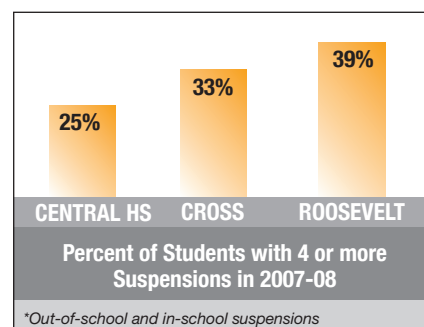
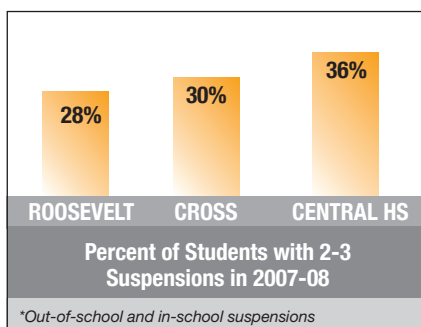


For students suspended once, a better than 50-50 chance of being suspended again ... and again

More than half of Bridgeport students received more than one suspension in 2007-08. One in three (33%) received two to three suspensions. One in five (21%) received four or more suspensions. Of the 282 students suspended at Roosevelt School in 2007-08, 39% received four or more suspensions.

With so many students receiving multiple suspensions, many of which are for non-violent behavior, it is likely that suspensions no longer serve as a deterrent and have lost their effectiveness as a consequence for poor behavior.

Too many students suspended too many times at 3 Bridgeport schools



Lost Class Time

What is PBS?

Positive Behavior Supports (PBS) is a national program for preventing and responding to discipline problems. PBS uses a comprehensive approach to discipline. It is based on the belief that when schools set and enforce clear behavioral expectations and consequences, serious behavioral problems will drop and the school's overall learning environment will improve.

Research shows that effective implementation of PBS has consistently resulted in:

- Improved school climate
- Decreased behavior problems
- Increased instruction time for all students
- Decreased administrator time spent on discipline problems
- Efficient and effective use of scarce resources at the school level
- Increased school safety
- Sustainability through a consistent team approach by all school personnel.

PBS has three main components that, when applied simultaneously, make sustained positive change possible.

- **Prevention:** Clear behavioral expectations are accompanied by a reward system for appropriate behavior, such as compliance with school rules, respectful student interactions, and academic effort.
- **Continuum of discipline:** A consistent continuum of disciplinary consequences is used along with more intensive supportive re-teaching of students with problem behavior, with more intense efforts with students showing the greatest need.
- **Data-based decision-making:** Accurate information about student behavior is used to develop the most effective preventive and supportive strategies for students.

What's been done to limit suspensions in the Bridgeport schools

With the highest number and percent of students suspended out of school of any school district in Connecticut in 2006-07 and with the pending implementation of law to tighten the use of out-of-school suspensions, the district has been under pressure to reduce suspensions. While progress has been made, there is still more work to be done.

District-wide steps to reduce school suspensions

- Setting a target date for reducing the total number of suspensions and students with out-of-school suspensions by 15% by the end of the 2010-11 school year
- Increasing monthly monitoring of suspensions and expulsions by the end of the 2010-11 school year
- Began revising the Code of Conduct to include a continuum of disciplinary consequences that do not exclude students from class and can be used as alternatives to in-school and out-of-school suspensions
- Expanding PBS to 22 schools and two alternative education programs
- Providing professional development to teachers, and training programs for school resource officers, to help schools deal with crisis prevention and develop strategies for de-escalating disciplinary challenges

Promising steps some Bridgeport schools have taken to reduce suspensions

These examples were found at schools visited in researching this report that have been successful in limiting the use of out-of-school suspensions:

- Using more alternatives to suspensions, such as parent conferences, loss of privileges, and detention
- Using a team approach to determine what alternative types of discipline to use with students
- Introducing peer mediation with students helping other students solve problems, as well as mediation by teachers and administrators
- Empowering teachers at one school to develop grade level discipline plans with rewards for good behavior, consequences for poor behavior, and specific interventions, making discipline more consistent and more predictable to students
- Involving parents in the disciplinary process to help determine consequences for their child's behavior problems
- Substituting in-school suspension for out-of-school suspension.

The State of Suspensions in Bridgeport Schools

Reducing out-of-school suspensions, but due to lack of resources, still not doing it right

In 2008-09, Central High School reduced the number of out-of-school suspensions from the previous year by over 70% by substituting about 1,500 in-school suspensions for out-of-school suspensions. Between 12-18 students a day were assigned to an in-school suspension program. However, no one person was responsible for the class on a day-to-day basis or for establishing and maintaining consistent policies. Instead, teachers from different disciplines came in to cover the class throughout the day. Many students did not have their regular class assignments to work on during the suspension class because there was not enough time for teachers to get assignments to students given in-school suspensions.

The cost

An effective in-school suspension classroom could cost \$170,000 or more per school per year.

As many as 25-30 classrooms might be needed, district-wide, for an effective in-school suspension program. Costs could range from \$2-5 million per year.

Best Practices: Essentials of an effective in-school suspension program

Best practices have been adopted by and proven successful at reducing out-of-school suspensions in large urban districts, such as Los Angeles, and in many schools in Indiana. These include:

- Dedicate a specific classroom for in-school suspensions
- Staff it with the same experienced teacher on a consistent basis
- Limit the number of students in an in-school-suspension room to 8-12 per day to ensure individual attention by staff
- Provide counselors to help students with behavior problems and paraprofessionals to help tutor students and supervise behavior
- Require classroom teachers to provide students with current assignments, and require suspended students to complete their work each day
- Equip in-school-suspension classrooms with educational resources, such as books, computers, and other materials
- Keep files on each student to track behavioral progress
- Ensure that an in-school-suspension staff member follows up with regular teachers to see if behavior is improving
- Educate school personnel on how in-school suspension works and the outcomes expected
- Involve parents and/or guardians during and after the student's time in in-school suspension.

Top Ten Alternatives to Suspension

- **Problem-solving and contracting:** Use negotiation/problem-solving to help student identify alternative behavior choices. Develop a contract that redirects thinking and reaction patterns, and includes explicit expectations for and consequences of behavior.
- **Written apology:** Assign student a reflective written exercise or to write a letter home to explain what happened and what action the student should have taken instead.
- **In-kind restitution:** Allow student to restore or improve the school environment.
- **Mini-courses:** Provide short courses or self-study modules related either to the student's misbehavior or to the desired behavior — after school or on Saturday.
- **Mediation:** Attempt to resolve differences through mediation with peers, teachers, or school administration.
- **Parent involvement:** Call parents and alert them about their child's behavior. Enlist parent participation in developing a coordinated behavior-change plan.
- **Community service:** Allow student to fulfill a required amount of supervised community service – outside of school hours.
- **Behavior monitoring:** Monitor behavior and academic progress through self-charting of daily “behavior report cards,” or regular feedback sessions.
- **Alternative scheduling:** Provide short- or long-term changes in the student's schedule, classes, or course content, or offer the option of participating in an independent study or work-experience program.
- **Coordinated behavior plans:** Create a structured behavior plan tailored to the student's needs, based on previous data and the poor or problematic behavior. Determine the purpose of the student's behavior and teach alternative behavior.

Adapted from work by Reece Peterson, Ph.D., University of Nebraska-Lincoln.



Bridgeport can and must do more RECOMMENDATIONS

District

- **Prevention:** Secure funding to continue and expand PBS to the remaining six elementary and two high schools. Provide additional support to schools to ensure that PBS is fully implemented.
- **Accountability:** Find out why PBS has not helped limit suspensions at some schools, why some schools use so few of the alternative types of discipline, and why so many suspensions are used for school policy violations. Find out what kinds of disciplinary supports schools need.
- **Target Schools with Grade 8:** To lower suspensions in the high schools, target interventions in PreK-8 schools with high suspension rates.
- **Target Schools with High Rates of Suspension in the Lower Grades:** Identify the additional supports needed in these schools.
- **Develop Effective In-School-Suspension Programs:** Secure funding and resources necessary to develop effective in-school-suspension programs in schools where they are needed.
- **Share Best Practices:** Bring principals together to share disciplinary strategies.
- **Code of Conduct:** Finalize the draft Code of Conduct and develop user-friendly versions, in English and Spanish, for elementary students, high school students, and parents.

Schools

- **Problem-Solve as a Team:** Principals bring teachers together to develop strategies for improving classroom management techniques, grade level discipline plans, and behavioral management strategies for cafeteria, hallways, etc.
- **Teach Discipline:** Teach behavioral expectations and consequences over and over. Use positive reinforcement when students act appropriately.
- **Use Disciplinary Alternatives:** Whenever possible, use the continuum of disciplinary options before resorting to suspension. Limit the use of suspensions to disciplinary offenses that pose a danger or major disruption to learning.
- **Involve Parents:** Call parents, alert them about behavior problems, and elicit their support in the disciplinary process. Involve parents at every stage in the disciplinary process.

Parents

- **Become Involved:** Develop a strong relationship with teachers and school administration so that if behavioral problems arise, you can collaborate with them on appropriate consequences.
- **Demand Accountability:** Make sure the school your child attends is working hard to limit suspensions.

Thanks to the Anne S. Richardson Fund for its support for this report and special thanks to Linda Brewster, who researched and wrote this report for BCAC. Also, thanks to the State Department of Education for providing the data.