

WHAT TO SAY ABOUT SCHOOL SUSPENSION LEGISLATION (H 5383/S 0299)

What the legislation does. The bill prohibits use of suspensions *unless* the child is a physical risk, or a serious disruption that cannot be dealt with by other means. The legislation also requires school districts to evaluate the discipline data they already collect annually, identify any racial, ethnic or disability disparities, and come up with a plan to reduce any disparities.

Suspensions are bad for all children. Kids suspended from school even once are up to ten times more likely to repeat a grade or drop out of school. Children who have been suspended even once are significantly more likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system, either because of the referral of children to school resource officers or other law enforcement personnel, or because of the behaviors children engage in when they are suspended, unsupervised, from school. Last year, the federal government issued guidance encouraging schools, because of this lifetime of consequences, to limit suspensions only to the most serious problems.

Children are not suspended because they are dangerous or unmanageable. More than half of suspensions in Rhode Island last year were for Disorderly Conduct or Insubordination/Disrespect, catch-all terms that can encompass everything from talking back to teachers, to failing to put cell phones away in time, to dress code violations.

Suspensions are levied against the youngest children. During the 2013-2014 school year, 1,371 elementary school students were suspended from school; 145 of these students were in just the first grade.

Suspensions disproportionately affect children of color, children with disabilities, and LGBT children. Suspension rates for children of color have reached their highest point in a decade. Black children in Rhode Island are suspended 2.18 times more often than would be expected given their representation in the population. Black children in elementary school are six times more likely than white children to be suspended. Virtually every school district and charter school oversuspended black children last year.

Sometimes, a child may need to be suspended. When a child is a risk to the safety of those around them, or when their behavior has not been successfully managed by other means, schools may need to remove a child from school for a day or two. But removing a child as the first line of defense brings a potential lifetime of harm for the child, and helps nobody. Out-of-school suspensions should not be allowed unless the child is a physical risk to others, or other means of addressing their behavior have failed.

Schools already have the data to identify racial, ethnic, and disability disparities. Schools are already required to annually report their discipline data to the Department of Education, so examining that data annually for disparities does not require them to collect data they do not already have. Working with the school community to determine how best to address those disparities is critical to finding the right solution. What works for Providence will not work for Barrington.

**Children misbehave. One bad day shouldn't cost them their future.
Please support H 5383/S 0299.**