



Improving Attendance by Reducing Suspensions

A Practice Guide



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Introduction

Combating school absenteeism has been a challenge for school leaders for years. Attendance improvement became more challenging post-COVID when **chronic absenteeism more than doubled** in some states (Welsh, 2024). Chronic absenteeism is generally defined as any student in grade K-12 who misses 50 percent or more of the instructional day for any reason for 10 percent or more of the enrollment period (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017). Out-of-school suspension days are typically treated as absences and count toward the chronic absence of an individual student. While out-of-school suspensions are infrequent in some schools and districts, they are much more frequent in others and must be considered a cause of high chronic absenteeism rates (Singer, 2023). The challenge for school leaders is to analyze local suspension practices and data to determine if discipline and suspension practices contribute to truancy and determine the action steps needed. This practice guide offers a practical process for analyzing suspension practices and taking the most effective actions.

Suspension from school is a long-standing and frequently used consequence of disciplinary infractions. Approximately 2.5 million students in the United States receive out-of-school suspensions each year. This figure has remained relatively stable over recent years, with 2,510,919 students suspended during the 2017–18 school year (NCES, 2024). Suspensions affect minorities and students with disabilities at a higher rate than their peers. In 2017–18, more than one in eight Black students (12%) received one or more out-of-school suspensions, compared to 5% of all students nationally (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022).

This subjectivity in suspension practices often leads to inconsistent application, disproportionately affecting certain groups of students for relatively minor infractions. For example, in California public schools during the 2011–12 school year, "nearly half of all suspensions issued were for 'willful

defiance,' a category of student misconduct that includes refusing to remove a hat or turn off a cell phone, or school uniform violations” (Steinberg & Lacoë, 2017).

Before considering easing suspension practices to improve attendance, it is important to note that school safety and a school climate in which learning can occur must be preserved. Dangerous students and students who significantly disrupt the learning environment must sometimes be removed from the mainstream school, but ideally with therapeutic assistance, and return to the traditional school as soon as possible.

Definitions and Terminology

It is important to note that the meaning of the terms “suspension”, “short-term suspension”, “long-term suspension”, and “expulsion” may be different from state to state and may be used differently at the local level.

School disciplinary actions typically fall into two main categories: suspension and expulsion. Suspension involves removing a student from regular school for one to ten days and can take two forms: out-of-school suspension and in-school suspension. Out-of-school suspension completely removes the student from campus and counts as an absence, often lacking instructional support. While some schools offer virtual instruction or take-home assignments for suspended students, others have policies that prohibit students from making up missed academic work. In contrast, in-school suspension allows students to remain on campus without being marked absent, isolating them from the mainstream environment in a confined area with close supervision and continued instruction. Though not universal, effective in-school suspension programs often include behavior improvement components like reflective activities or counseling.

Expulsion, typically reserved for severe behavioral infractions, involves removal from school for more than ten days and may result in students being marked as absent or withdrawn from enrollment, though many expelled students are reassigned to alternative schools or programs. In all cases, schools should directly communicate with parents to both inform them and enlist their support in preventing future infractions.

Impact of Suspension on Chronic Absentee Rates

Of these various forms of disciplinary school removal, out-of-school suspension has by far the greatest impact on absence and truancy. North Carolina's 2023 state-wide data shows that 164 out-of-school suspensions occurred per 1,000 students while there was less than one long-term suspension per 1,000 students and less than one expulsion per 1,000 students. There were 179 in-school suspensions per 1,000 students, but those did not impact the absentee or truancy rates (Consolidated Data Report, 2022-2023 - NC DPI 2024).

In the 2021-2022 school year among South Carolina's more than 750,000 students, approximately 14% had an in-school suspension, which did not count as an absence. However, nearly 96,000 students (13%), were suspended from school, which did count as an absence. A relatively insignificant number, 1,422 students, were expelled state-wide (Truancy, Suspension and Expulsion Data - SC).

In 2023, North Carolina's chronic absenteeism rate was 27%, up from 15% in 2018. Before the 2020-21 school year, chronic absenteeism rates in North Carolina were above the state goal of 11%, but considerably lower than they have been in the years following the pandemic (MyFutureNC, 2024). In 2022, the rate hit a high of 31%. For South Carolina in 2021, the chronic absenteeism rate was 25% (Truancy, Suspension, and Expulsion Data - SC).

The relationship between suspension data and chronic absenteeism rates is complex due to differences in reporting methods. Chronic absenteeism rates track individual students, while suspension data is typically reported as total incidents, number of students suspended, or cumulative suspension days within a school system. Since state-wide suspension data is rarely tied to specific students, it cannot be directly correlated with chronic absenteeism rates.

Using educator logic, we can draw some likely conclusions about the relationship between suspension and chronic absenteeism. For example, if 31% of the students from a state were chronically absent, and 16% were suspended, probably for an average of 2 or 3 days per incident, it is likely that

the suspension days accounted for a noticeable portion of the chronic absenteeism.

Application of Suspension

It should be remembered that suspension of an individual student for a disciplinary offense occurs at the school level, not at the state or district level. An individual suspension incident is typically determined by a campus administrator such as an assistant principal. The decision to suspend is typically made to comply with a district- or school-level discipline code or policy and often involves a degree of subjective judgment by the administrator. Ray McNulty, former President of the National Dropout Prevention Center, stated, “Misbehavior is a student decision but suspension from school is an adult decision.”

We know suspensions occur more frequently and at higher rates at some schools than at others. We also know that suspensions occur at higher rates among some sub-groups of students than others. In 2022-23 in North Carolina, for example, Black students received 51% of all short-term suspensions while Black students made up 25% of the state’s total student population. Different frequencies of suspension for different sub-groups may occur for a variety of reasons. It may be that some sub-groups tend to violate rules more frequently, rules may be locally applied differently to different subgroups, or for a combination of reasons, but these differences cannot be ignored (Consolidated Data Report, 2022-2023 - NC DPI 2024).

Why Address Suspension

There are several powerful reasons for addressing suspension as a cause of truancy. We understand that increased time at school improves learning and student achievement which is also positively correlated with student engagement (Yeşil Dağlı, 2018). School ratings and accountability metrics reflect attendance rates, usually represented as the percentage of chronically absent students. The highest impact reason for considering suspension as contributing to truancy, however, is the graduation rate.

According to the 2023-24 Alabama Attendance Manual, ninth-grade students who are chronically absent have a less than 20% eventual graduation rate. If

suspensions did contribute to some absences of these students, it is worth addressing.

State and local mandates are also a reason to consider alternatives to suspension. Beginning with Michigan in 1970, there has been a gradual movement for states and some local districts to limit suspension practices, typically referred to as Exclusionary School Discipline (ESD). Currently, 32 states and the District of Columbia have enacted some limitations on out-of-school suspensions with most restricting suspension in early grades and for minor offenses (Center for Gender Justice & Opportunity, 2024). To the extent that ESD is limited by legislation and local policy, schools must conduct a deeper analysis of local practices and expand the use of other options like in-school suspension and alternative school placement.

Steps to Address Suspension as It Impacts Attendance

The first challenge for school and district leaders is to determine if, and to what extent, suspensions contribute to local chronic absentee rates.

It's important to note that suspension rates vary significantly across different states and demographic groups. For instance, in the 2017–18 school year, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Washington, D.C., had suspension rates as high as 15% among secondary school students, while states like California and Connecticut had rates around 5% (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022).

Suspensions contribute to high chronic absenteeism rates in some schools and districts but to a lesser degree or not at all in others. If it is determined that suspensions are not an attendance issue, no actions or modifications of disciplinary practices are warranted. If, however, it is locally determined that suspensions significantly contribute to chronic absentee rates, then actions to change disciplinary and suspension practices should be considered.

Step One: *Is there a suspension issue?*

To determine if suspensions do, or do not, significantly contribute to the local absentee problem, an analysis of individual student school-level data is

required. The following are two relatively simple methods for assessing the impact of suspensions on local absentee rates.

Option One: Determine the percentage of absences caused by suspensions.

What percentage of total absences is due to suspension and expulsion? This is determined by dividing the total number of suspension and expulsion days, for a given cohort of students in a specific period, by the total number of absent days for the same cohort of students for the same period.

Example: If a high school population had 100 suspension and expulsion days in a given school year and had a total of 1,000 days absent, then the percentage of absentee days attributed to suspension is 10%.

Option Two: Identify specific students whose chronic absentee status is due to suspension.

A deeper look at suspension as a cause of chronic absenteeism can be achieved by simple data representation. First list all students from a given group, such as a grade cohort, who were chronically absent during the past attendance period and list the number of total absences and total suspension days for each of those individual students. Second, identify those individual students for which the number of suspension days caused them to exceed the number of absences required to be classified as chronically absent.

Example: If the chronic absence is 18 or more days of a 180-day school year, and if Student A missed 22 days but has one suspension day, then suspension did not directly cause Student A to be chronically absent. If Student A missed 20 days but had 5 suspension days, then suspension did directly cause Student A to be chronically absent.

Table 1: Two of 10 chronically absent students were chronically absent due to suspension. Twenty percent (20%) of the chronically absent population (Students D and E) was impacted by suspension, which may or may not indicate that suspension practices should be addressed.

Table 2: Five of 10 students were chronically absent due to suspension. Fifty percent (50%) of the chronically absent population (Students D, E, F, H, and I)

was impacted by suspension, which indicates that suspension practices should be addressed.

Table 1

Student	Days Absent	Suspension Days
Student A	18	0
Student B	22	2
Student C	19	0
Student D	18	3
Student E	22	8
Student F	21	0
Student G	19	0
Student H	24	1
Student I	23	2
Student J	18	0
Student K	19	0

Table 2

Student	Days Absent	Suspension Days
Student A	18	6
Student B	22	2
Student C	19	0
Student D	18	3
Student E	22	8
Student F	21	5
Student G	19	0
Student H	24	4
Student I	23	7
Student J	18	0
Student K	19	0

Conducting this process for all chronically absent students for a given cohort will yield a percentage of the chronically absent students for which suspension puts them into the chronically absent category.

Step Two: Consider policy, practice, and beliefs.

Efforts to reduce suspensions should not be undertaken without first assessing the district and campus suspension culture. An attempt to move directly to replace suspension with other alternative discipline strategies is unlikely to succeed if there are policies, practices, and beliefs that support current suspension practices. As stated by Dr. Bill Daggett, Founder of the Successful Practices Network, “Culture trumps strategy every time.”

Suspension Policy

The first step is to inventory district- and school-level policies that recommend or mandate suspension.

The 2024-25 Student Disciplinary Code of one Georgia high school specifies a five-day out-of-school suspension for the first offense of “possession, use, or distribution of vape products (Lumpkin County High School 2024-25 Student Disciplinary Code 2024). If a school with such a policy has a significant number of suspensions for vape offenses, and if it desires to improve attendance by reducing these suspensions, a policy change must be made.

It is important to note that district policies are created and maintained by school boards and that school-level policies and rules are usually created by administrators. Additionally, policies and rules are typically supported by stakeholders that include board members, district leaders, building administrators, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. Changing policies and rules that mandate suspension will require the support of these stakeholders, which may necessitate conversations and information campaigns if suspension policies and rules are to be changed.

Suspension Practices

Even when suspension is not mandated by policies and rules, the practice of assigning suspension days for certain infractions may be established and commonly assumed at local schools. Examples are not difficult to find.

“A Rhode Island student smashed a ketchup packet with his fist, splattering an administrator. Another ripped up his schoolwork.” Both offenses were treated as destruction of school property and the students were suspended out-of-school (Butrymowicz et al., 2024). Similarly, “*disrespect*” and “*disobedience*” are usually subjectively defined by teachers and administrators. For these types of offenses, local administrators usually try to adopt consistent interpretations and try to impose consistent consequences that often include out-of-school suspension.

Before attempting to replace out-of-school suspensions with alternative practices, it is important to take inventory of existing infraction interpretations and common suspension responses of disciplining administrators. As with policies and rules, conversations will need to occur, and understandings established to ensure the willingness of practicing administrators to alter current suspension practices.

Suspension Beliefs

Because out-of-school suspension has been utilized for so long and is so common, it is no surprise that many school board members, administrators, teachers, and parents widely espouse the practice. Where belief in suspension is strong and widespread, it is an integral element of school culture. In these situations, no strategy to implement alternatives to suspension is likely to succeed until that culture is altered. As Peter Drucker stated, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast."

To address this issue, educators must somehow assess the degree to which out-of-school suspension is accepted, assumed, and believed in by board members, administrators, teachers, and parents. This can be accomplished by surveys, focus groups, and individual conversations. Once the strength of beliefs in suspension is determined, and which groups of stakeholders believe in suspension, these beliefs must be confronted and hopefully changed. Belief change may be addressed by conversations, discussion of research and readings, and sharing data on suspension's local impact on truancy.

The arguments for and against suspension are extensive and debate of the issue can be prolonged. The best way to address and change beliefs in suspension must be locally determined, but some of the most common arguments are worth mentioning.

Arguments Supporting Suspension:

- Suspension is effective because it deprives the offending student of peer and social contact.
- Suspension deprives the student of enjoyable school activities.
- Suspension is simple to administer and less expensive than other consequences.
- Suspension prevents disruptive and high-maintenance students from detracting others from learning and teachers from their work.
- Suspension gains attention and support from parents.

Arguments Against Suspension:

- Suspended students may not want to be at school, so removal is not a real punishment.
- Suspension interrupts instruction and reduces academic achievement.
- Suspension assumes concerned and involved parents, who are not always present.
- Suspension removes the student from school engagement.
- Suspension contributes to truancy.

Step Three: Consider, select, and implement alternatives to suspension

Once it is determined that suspension practices are contributing to chronic absenteeism, and once policies, practices, and beliefs are addressed, school leaders should consider and select the best alternative disciplinary actions for the local school and/or district. This step may be most effectively accomplished by a team that represents concerned stakeholders. This type of team is likely to take ownership of their decisions and can represent the new discipline strategies to others.

It should be recognized that most possible alternatives to suspension will require more time, energy, creativity, and resources than traditional suspension. Some alternatives like in-school suspension will require designated space and additional personnel. When alternative strategies are considered and selected, it is also important to develop implementation plans that will include timelines, resources, stakeholder information with professional development, and ways to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of new strategies.

The following are some of the most considered alternatives to suspension with a brief description of each.

1. Restorative Justice Practices

This category of practices focuses on repairing harm through mediated dialogue between the offending student and those affected, fostering accountability and conflict resolution. Restorative practices encourage students to reflect on their actions and positively take responsibility. Specific restorative practices may include things such as writing apology letters, student projects that focus on a category of offenses, or community service that links to the specific offense.

2. In-School Suspension (ISS)

This strategy allows students to stay in school but removes them from the mainstream to a supervised, isolated setting where they can continue learning while reflecting on their behavior. ISS programs can include counseling or behavior-control learning components to address the root causes of misbehavior.

3. Behavior Contracts

This strategy, most used in cases of minor behavior infractions, involves individualized agreements between the student, parents, teachers, and administrators that outline expected behaviors and future consequences, as well as incentives for positive behavior. Ideally, behavior contracts include specific goals for improvement, regular check-ins, and positive reinforcement.

4. Peer Mediation and Conflict Resolution

Peer mediation is well-suited for addressing moderate and nonviolent conflicts between individual students. It requires training of selected students as peer mediators and then carefully assigning them to guide offending students to satisfactory resolution of differences. Peer mediation encourages communication, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence. Some schools have found that the most effective peer mediators are students who, themselves, benefit from both the training and the act of mediating others. It should be noted that peer mediation does not apply to all discipline infractions and always requires close supervision.

5. Counseling and Mental Health Support

This strategy provides offending students with counseling services or school-based mental health professionals to address behavioral issues related to the root causes of infractions. While important in many situations, counseling and mental health support are not a disciplinary consequence but a treatment to hopefully improve future behavior. Some schools have found it more effective

than offering a traditional punitive consequence such as in-school suspension. This strategy can be paired with social skills training and intervention programs to target underlying issues. It should be noted that counseling and mental health as a strategy is personal intensive, is not usually a quick fix, and usually needs to be sustained with individual students over time.

6. Community or School Service

Instead of removing students from the school environment, the assignment of a service task can serve as a consequence and benefit the school and/or community. Service tasks assigned may be more directly punitive, such as cleaning up trash on the roadside, or it may be more instructionally linked such as reading to younger students or writing letters for elderly nursing home patients. Service therefore promotes a sense of responsibility and contribution rather than maintaining a punitive mindset. It should be noted that to be effective, service consequences must be carefully structured and will require supervision.

7. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

PBIS, while not a direct consequence or punishment for misbehavior, is a school-wide or cohort-wide proactive approach to school discipline improvement. PBIS focuses on consistently reinforcing positive behaviors through recognition, rewards, and structured interventions. PBIS programs may identify at-risk students early and provide tiered support for improving their behavior and positive school engagement. It should be noted that implementation of PBIS requires professional development of all staff and ongoing monitoring to maintain consistent staff responses to certain behaviors.

Assessing School Readiness to Implement Alternatives to Suspension

The following self-assessment instrument is designed to assist school and district leaders in determining readiness to implement suspension alternatives. A high level of readiness is indicated by honest “yes” responses and/or comments that will achieve positive answers.

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Self-Assessment Instrument

#	Domain	Question	Yes	No	Some-what	Comments Next Steps
1	Data	Have you reviewed attendance and suspension data to determine if, in fact, suspension practices significantly contribute to the attendance problem?				
2	Data	Have you formulated a logical explanation of how, and the extent to which, suspension contributes to the attendance problem?				
3	Policy	Have you reviewed school and district policies, rules, and procedures to identify those policies, rules, and procedures that specify suspension or expulsion?				

#	Domain	Question	Yes	No	Some-what	Comments Next Steps
4	Policy	Have you identified specific policies, rules, and procedures that will need to be changed if alternatives to suspension are to be implemented?				
5	Policy	Have there been recent discussions with governance and policymakers to consider truancy implications of policies and procedures that specify suspension or expulsion?				
6	Practices	Have you identified the existing infraction interpretations and common suspension practices of school-level administrators regarding the imposition of suspension?				
7	Practices	Have you had the conversations with school-level administrators that are necessary to accomplish changes in current suspension practices?				
8	Beliefs	Have you inventoried and analyzed the prevailing assumptions and beliefs about suspension and expulsion?				

#	Domain	Question	Yes	No	Some-what	Comments Next Steps
9	Beliefs	Have you assessed the current district, community, and school cultures to determine the extent to which suspension is an assumed and accepted practice?				
10	Beliefs	Have you had conversations with staff and parents about the need to redefine and repurpose suspension and expulsion?				
11	Alternatives	Have you, with stakeholders, considered alternatives to suspension?				
12	Alternatives	Have you, with stakeholders, selected and planned for the implementation of alternatives to suspension?				
13	Alternatives	Have you determined that there is a sufficient level of stakeholder buy-in to implement the selected alternative(s) to suspension?				
14	Alternatives	Are sufficient resources (staff, funding, space) allocated for the selected alternative(s)?				
15	Alternatives	Do you have a plan for assessing the impact of selected suspension alternatives on the attendance problem?				

The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) offers this Practice Guide and the recommended self-assessment process to support local schools and districts. NDPC also acknowledges that local circumstances relative to suspension, limited personnel, limited time, and limited resources may sometimes require the assistance of external behavior and attendance experts. NDPC employs many experienced behavior and attendance specialists who can assist local schools and districts in addressing this complex issue. NDPC's support for attendance improvement, while always customized to meet local needs, may include:

- Professional development for leaders, teachers, and other stakeholders on suspension and attendance improvement practices.
- Guidance and coaching to apply this Practice Guide
- Facilitation of Suspension and Attendance Task Force work to develop new and more effective strategies and action steps.
- Expert evaluation of current and new suspension initiatives and reports of findings.
- Analysis of local behavior, suspension, and truancy problems and recommendations for improvement.
- Ongoing guidance and coaching of the local Suspension and Attendance Task Force to monitor, improve, and sustain local initiatives.

For support or more information, email NDPC at ndpc@dropoutprevention.org

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