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An early exit from school

High rate of suspensions, expulsions plagues state

Our position:
Developing alternatives to suspending and expelling students would help reduce Indiana's high dropout rate.

LEFT BEHIND
A STAR EDITORIAL BOARD SERIES

If you think Indiana ranks number one in the nation in the rate of out-of-school suspensions and among the top 10 in expulsions because it has hordes of violent, drug-dealing students, Jim Killen has a message for you: It isn't so.

More often than not, says Killen, executive director of the Indiana Youth Services Association, students are kicked out of school for being late for class, for skipping school or "getting fresh with a teacher." Each of those behaviors must be confronted, but alternative punishments can be effective in addressing problems and can reduce the odds a student will quit school altogether.

Often, suspensions and expulsions are not meted out equally among students. Black students are suspended far more often than whites no matter whether they're middle class or poor. A truant from one school may be suspended while one from another school is expelled because state law doesn't dictate a specific penalty, meaning punishment isn't always equal or fair.

More likely to drop out

Researchers have found that the more often a child is kicked out of school, the greater his chances of dropping out, ending up in poverty or in prison. University of South Florida researcher Linda Raffaele Mendez, for instance, concluded in a 2003 report that frequently suspended students are less likely to graduate or "experience school success."

Jim Killen

Such consequences should caution principals to suspend or expel only the most dangerous and unruly students. Yet a Star Editorial Board analysis of state education data shows that many schools, including several in Indianapolis' suburban townships, suspend and expel students at rates significantly higher than the state average. And remember, Indiana leads the nation in the rate of suspensions:

■ Several Marion County middle schools had suspension rates several times the state rate of 14 per 100 students during the 2004 school year. The former South Wayne Junior High (now Lynhurst 7th and 8th Grade Center), with a suspension rate of 105 per 100, ranked among the 10 highest-suspending schools in the state.

■ Some schools expelled more than 2 percent of students, more than double the state average of less than 1 percent. Three IPS schools, including Julian Coleman Middle School, expelled as many as 5 percent of their students, ranking them among the state's 20 highest-expelling schools.

Statewide, 8,800 students were expelled in 2004, a 20 percent increase from 2000.

■ Black students are more likely to be suspended or expelled than whites, no matter their grade level or socioeconomic status.

In 2003-2004, blacks at Lawrence Central High were suspended at a rate of 78 per 100 students — three times the rates of whites — even though they accounted for only 34 percent of enrollment. At largely white Franklin Central High, blacks were suspended at a rate of 138 per 100 students.

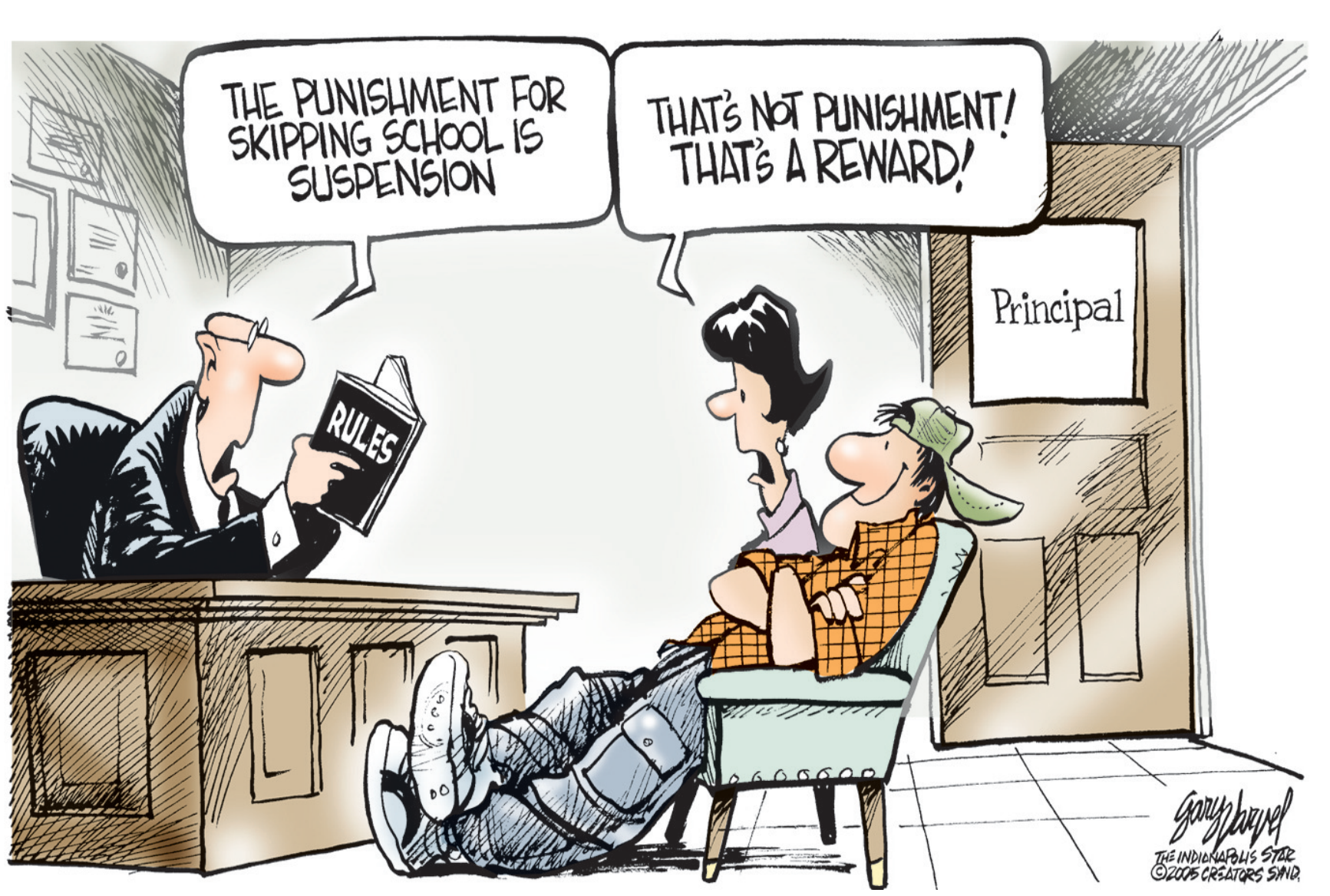
The racial disparity is a long-running pattern. The Indianapolis Commission on African American Males found similar discrepancies a decade ago.

■ Few suspensions or expulsions were handed down for possessing firearms, drugs or alcohol. In fact, 95 percent of suspensions statewide — and the top reasons for suspensions in nearly every Marion County school district — were for subjective charges such as "disruptive behavior" or "other," a catchall that includes truancy and tardiness.

■ Use of suspensions and expulsions varies wildly between and even within districts. Suspensions in Warren Township rose 23 percent between 2000 and 2004, even as suspensions in Washington Township — which shares similar demographics — fell 17 percent in the same period. Within Lawrence Township, Lawrence Central High's 2004 suspension rate was 42 per 100 students, twice that of sister school Lawrence North.

Parental concerns over headline-grabbing incidents such as the Columbine massacre have partly driven the overuse of suspensions. Societal fears have grown even as in-school homicides across the nation fell by 50 percent between 1993 and 2000. Franklin Central Principal Kevin Koers says there is pressure from "one extreme where they want zero tolerance on everything."

Yet, administrators' approach to school discipline, along with issues of classroom management, also is to blame.



Choosing the easy route

The fact that most teachers are white and female can set up cultural clashes, especially for black males. Large class loads, along with poor training, mean teachers sometimes don't have the tools they need to resolve issues in the classroom before they escalate. So they hand off problems to a dean of discipline or assistant principal to resolve. For some, according to Lawrence Central Principal Edward Freije, who took over the school during the 2004 school year: "It's the easiest thing to do, 'kick them out, kick them out.' "

Edward Freije

That attitude can be reinforced by school principals, who are given much leeway in administering discipline, even if it's contrary to approaches prescribed by the district.

State law used to restrict removing students by listing the types of infractions that merited suspension or expulsion. But the state abolished the list in 1995 to allow principals and districts more flexibility. That decision has led to even greater disparities in discipline. A student in Lawrence Township can be suspended for "knowingly possessing or using" a cell phone on school grounds; a student in Washington Township would be suspended only if it's "misused" during class.

The challenge of increasing attendance due to its listing as a key metric in the No Child Left Behind Act also comes into play. Admits Gaylon Nettles, the state Education Department's chief attendance officer: "The only way a school can get a truant off their accounting is to expel them."

Test score correlation

Yet, high rates of suspensions and expulsions don't necessarily lead to an improvement in a school's academic performance. Indiana University researchers Russ Skiba and M. Karega Rausch found that higher-suspending schools tend to have ISTEP passing rates of 48 percent versus 62 percent for those that suspend less frequently.

Kevin Koers

What happens to suspended students once they're out of the school? Killen, of the Youth Services Association, says that sending a student home during the day, where he won't have adult supervision, is simply "an invitation for trouble."

More important, suspensions and expulsions don't address underlying issues behind problem behavior. Those issues range from the need for a small school environment to a student acting out to hide an inability to read.

Once a student is kicked out of school, there are few alternative means of education for many. Expelled students usually can't attend alternative schools or study for the General Education Development diploma because they haven't officially withdrawn from school. Many of them drop out as a result.

Curbing the suspensions

Some districts, such as Washington Township, have found a way to keep suspended students engaged in learning with temporary alternative schools. There they go through character-building exercises along with completing class assignments. A similar program helped Lawrence Central High cut its suspensions by half last school year, according to Freije.

Russ Skiba

Flexible disciplinary programs such as a six-step system launched by Indianapolis Public Schools this fall also could help retain more students.

But, as pointed out by Washington Township student programs director Steve Keith, schools have to change the way teachers and principals manage classrooms.

One important step is for teachers and administrators to form stronger personal relationships with students and their families. Educators say that if a student knows that someone at the school cares about them, it can go along way toward resolving behavioral problems before they escalate. The position of dean of discipline either needs to be eliminated or structured so that teachers work closely with the person handing out punishments.

A nontraditional solution can be found at the KIPP Indy School in Haughville, a branch of the national Knowledge Is Power Program of charter schools. Misbehaving students there aren't suspended, but put "on the bench," which may include losing the use of a chair and desk. Students who are "on the bench" must carry milk crates from class to class as replacement seats. They are welcomed back into the school community once they show a change in behavior. The system teaches students consequences for their actions without tossing them out of school.

Students certainly can't be allowed to run wild in class. Some suspensions and expulsions are unavoidable if a school is to remain safe. But the overuse of suspensions sets back students who often are in need of the most help in catching up with their peers.

About one-third of students in Indiana high schools drop out before earning a diploma. Developing effective and consistent forms of discipline is vital to helping more young people stay in school and succeed.

KICKED OUT OF THE CLASSROOM

Rates of suspensions and expulsions in middle and high schools vary widely even when taking into account enrollment, race and ethnicity, and poverty. Data are from the 2003-2004 school year.

MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Schools with 300-500 students, 70 percent or more free lunch and 90 percent minority

School/District	Enrollment	Suspensions	Rate	Expulsions	Rate
Julian D. Coleman/IPS	387	N/A	N/A	19	4.9%
Margaret McFarland/IPS	365	1	0.3%	5	1.4%
Merle Sidener/IPS	306	N/A	N/A	2	0.7%
West Side Jr. High School/East Chicago	473	815	172.3%	14	3%

Schools with 1,000-1,400 students, 50-60 percent free lunch and 52-53 percent white students

School/District	Enrollment	Suspensions	Rate	Expulsions	Rate
Stonybrook/Warren	1027	314	30.6%	9	0.9%
Chapel Hill 7th and 8th Grade Center/Wayne	1315	348	26.5%	15	1.1%
Belzer/Lawrence	1419	619	43.6%	26	1.8%

Schools with 688-960 students, 70 percent or more free lunch and 90 percent minority students

School/District	Enrollment	Suspensions	Rate	Expulsions	Rate
H.L. Harshman/IPS	770	568	73.8%	5	0.7%
Shortridge/IPS	910	523	57.5%	22	2.4%
Crispus Attucks/IPS	795	208	26.2%	25	3.2%
Dunbar-Pulaski/Gary	688	119	17.3%	13	1.9%
Henry W. Eggers Elem-Middle/Hammond	960	1268	132.1%	15	1.6%

HIGH SCHOOLS

Schools with 2,200-3,500 students, 60-75 percent paid lunch and 53-61 percent white students

School/District	Enrollment	Suspensions	Rate	Expulsions	Rate
Warren Central/ Warren	3263	1011	31%	17	0.5%
Lawrence Central/ Lawrence	2245	949	42.3%	109	4.9%
Lawrence North/ Lawrence	2707	473	17.5%	92	3.4%
Ben Davis/Wayne	2617	435	16.6%	12	0.5%

Schools with 1,100-1,700 students, 75-86 percent paid lunch and 91-93 percent white students

School/District	Enrollment	Suspensions	Rate	Expulsions	Rate
Franklin Central/ Franklin	1682	565	33.6%	25	1.5%
Shelbyville High/ Shelbyville Central	1107	142	12.8%	17	1.5%
William Henry Harrison/ Tippecanoe	1468	292	19.9%	70	4.8%

Schools with 2,000-2,700 students, 70-75 percent paid lunch and 62-72 percent minority

School/District	Enrollment	Suspensions	Rate	Expulsions	Rate
Merrillville High School/ Merrillville	2054	494	24.1%	20	1%
Pike High School/ Pike	2695	1168	43.3%	84	3.1%

Source: Indiana Department of Education MICHAEL CAMPBELL / The Star