



## **Improving School Discipline Practices and Reducing School-Based Arrests in Connecticut**

Last week, Attorney General Eric Holder and Education Secretary Arne Duncan issued the first-ever [national guidelines for school discipline](#) in public schools, in an effort to keep more students in class and reduce racial disparities in punishment. The federal guidelines address the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices in schools, including the use of arrests, expulsions, and out-of-school suspensions, as responses to relatively minor and non-violent behavioral incidents. A growing body of research demonstrates the harmful effects of exclusionary discipline on the long-term academic, social, emotional, and behavioral functioning of youth.

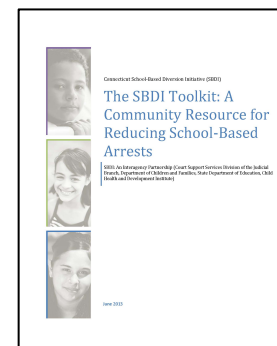
There is an important link between behavioral health needs and exclusionary discipline. Young people with behavioral health needs experience rates of exclusionary discipline that are among the highest of all disability groups.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 50% of students age 14 and older who have mental health needs drop out of high school<sup>2</sup> and 65-70% of youth in juvenile detention have a diagnosable behavioral health condition.<sup>3</sup> Research also indicates that exclusionary discipline tends to occur more frequently among African American and Hispanic males.<sup>4</sup> These data suggest that initiatives for reducing exclusionary discipline must build schools' capacity to meet students' mental health needs and must also address racial and ethnic disproportionality.

### **Important Progress in Connecticut: The School-Based Diversion Initiative**

As the public becomes increasingly aware of this issue, it is important to take stock of the policies and practices that have been effective in reducing the use of exclusionary discipline in schools. For example, Connecticut's School-Based Diversion Initiative helps reduce exclusionary discipline by building schools' capacity to connect students with behavioral health needs to services as an alternative to arrest, suspension and expulsion.

Since 2009 the [School-Based Diversion Initiative \(SBDI\)](#) has worked with 21 schools in 10 Connecticut school districts to provide training to school professionals, linkage to community-based mental health services and supports, and enhancements to disciplinary policies and practices. Schools that participated in SBDI in the 2012-2013 school year reduced arrests by an average of 20%, with some schools reducing arrests by over 90%. Schools also increased utilization of Emergency Mobile Psychiatric Services (EMPS) by 64% and strengthened partnerships with other school- and community-based mental health services and supports.

Schools participating in SBDI developed new policies for addressing school discipline and signed formal agreements with local law enforcement and community-based mental health agencies. Examples of these policies and agreements, as well as other resources to help connect schools to mental health and community supports, are available in a free self-guided [SBDI Toolkit](#). The toolkit and a recent CHDI IMPACT, "[Improving Outcomes for Children in Schools: Expanded School Mental Health](#)," are important resources designed to help guide schools, communities and policy makers in Connecticut.



## **Other Connecticut Initiatives**

In addition to SBDI, Connecticut has a number of other initiatives contributing to significant progress on this issue.

- **Reform efforts at the Court Support Services Division (CSSD):** The Juvenile Probation division at CSSD is the gatekeeper to the juvenile court system. In the last few years, supervisors within Juvenile Probation instituted a new intake process that allows them to send back inappropriate court referrals for alternative, non-judicial responses. The new policy has resulted in hundreds of court referrals originating from schools being sent back for in-school discipline.
- **Systems Coordination at The Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance (CTJJA):** CTJJA was established in November 2001 as a statewide collaboration of stakeholders interested in juvenile justice system reforms. In the last few years, CTJJA has led the way in building statewide support for juvenile justice reform by providing support to local school districts and communities, media outreach, public awareness campaigns, development of school-police MOAs, and hosting state forums on school arrest and exclusionary discipline.
- **Office of Policy and Management Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee (JJAC):** The JJAC is a group appointed by the Governor to prevent delinquency and improve the state's juvenile justice system through oversight of federal juvenile justice funding. Over the last several years, the JJAC has developed trainings and technical assistance for schools and communities to address issues of juvenile justice reform and to improve collaboration between police and communities. The JJAC has funded pilot programs, developed and disseminated a model memorandum of agreement between schools and police, and promoted the development of graduated response models for school discipline.
- **Disproportionate Minority Contact (DMC) Network:** The Center for Children's Advocacy has led efforts in Connecticut to address the reality in Connecticut that children from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds experience disproportionately higher rates of contact with the juvenile justice system. They have engaged community, law enforcement and school leaders in Hartford, Bridgeport and New Haven to implement reforms and create a more equitable and effective juvenile justice system.

## **Conclusion**

The federal government has urged schools and states to take a hard look at their approach to school discipline and make necessary reforms to ensure fair and equitable school discipline practices. Connecticut is well positioned to meet this challenge and provide guidance to other states. Our state has developed and tested model programs, such as SBDI, that improve school discipline practices and connect students to services to support their long-term healthy development. Now, the challenge for Connecticut is to expand these programs to meet the needs of all schools and students across the state.

For more information, visit [www.chdi.org](http://www.chdi.org) or contact Jeffrey Vanderploeg, Ph.D. at [jvanderploeg@uchc.edu](mailto:jvanderploeg@uchc.edu).

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<sup>1</sup> Krezmien, M.P., Leone, P.E., & Achilles, G.M. (2006). Suspension, race, and disability: Analysis of statewide practices and reporting. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 14, 217-226.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Education (2001). Twenty-third annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Washington, D.C.

<sup>3</sup> Shufelt, J.L., & Coccozza, J.J. (2006). Youth with mental health disorders in the juvenile justice system: Results from the Multi-State Prevalence Study. Research and Program Brief, National Center for Mental Health and Juvenile Justice. Retrieved from [www.ncmhjj.com](http://www.ncmhjj.com)

<sup>4</sup> Losen, D.J. & Martinez, T.E. (2013). *Out of School & Off Track: The Overuse of Suspensions in American Middle and High Schools*. The UCLA Center for Civil rights remedies at The Civil rights Project. April, 2013.