

## Making Sense of Charter School Discipline Studies | A Reporter's Guide

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Summer 2015

Exclusionary discipline is a rising concern in public schools. Schools need to maintain safe, productive learning environments, but there are concerns that suspensions and expulsions are used more often than necessary in some district and charter schools and that exclusionary discipline is disproportionately applied to certain groups of students. The effects of exclusionary discipline appear to be pervasive in students' lives, correlating with high school dropouts, encounters with the criminal justice system, and decreases in lifelong employment and earnings.

High suspension rates in some charter schools have raised questions about whether “no excuses” and other high-performing charter schools, in their commitment to maintaining a focused learning environment and rigorous expectations, have been too quick to suspend or expel students. Though part of the public school sector, charter schools can set their own discipline standards and penalties for infractions. Some also question whether charter schools obtain positive results by systematically excluding students who pose challenges.<sup>1</sup>

This guide is designed to aid reporters in evaluating the quality of studies that draw comparisons between exclusionary discipline practices in the charter and traditional public school sectors. As we've learned from student achievement studies, we need to be careful about the data and methods researchers use to make these comparisons. The guide draws from the [findings of a consensus panel](#) comprised of academic researchers convened by the Center on Reinventing Public Education.

The panel determined that currently available national school discipline data do not allow for reliable comparisons. With few exceptions, this is true of state and local data as well. The panel made recommendations for methodology and analyses going forward to enable accurate school discipline comparisons. When evaluating discipline studies that compare charter and district schools, we recommend reporters carefully consider the research methodology in light of the questions outlined below.

### How School Discipline Data Are Reported

The largest national database about exclusionary disciplinary practices in schools is collected biennially from local education agencies by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR), housed in the U.S. Department of Education. Data collected by OCR for the 2011–2012 school year (released in 2014) include every public school in the U.S. This is the first complete representation of traditional public school and charter school data on school discipline. Prior to 2011–2012, only the largest charter schools were included. These data are reported at the school level, rather than the student level, which limits their ability to be used for rigorous cross-sector comparison. For example, while the OCR's national data do include both the total number of suspensions and the number of unique students suspended (thereby offering, for instance, an indication of whether a small group of students are responsible for the majority of a school's suspensions), the data tell us little about what led to those students being disciplined. Relatedly, the OCR disaggregates suspension rates by certain student subgroups (e.g., by race/ethnicity and disability status), but does not disaggregate rates in other ways, such as by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch, grade level, and classroom or teacher characteristics. Additionally, *all* public schools—including charter schools—have only recently been required to report their discipline rates to the OCR, making it impossible to know whether a snapshot of recent data is representative of trends over time.

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<sup>1</sup> Natalie Lacireno-Paquet, Thomas T. Holyoke, and Michele Moser, “Creaming Versus Cropping: Charter School Enrollment Practices in Response to Market Incentives,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 24, no. 2 (June 20, 2002): 145-158.

States also report discipline data and, in some cases, provide student-level information that can help explain the reasons for disciplinary action. In many cases, however, state discipline data are unevenly collected and are subject to the same interpretation problems as the national OCR data.

Reporters are familiar with the many ways student test scores can be misreported or misinterpreted when making comparisons between charter and district schools.<sup>2</sup> Analyzing discipline data can be even trickier. Even when data on disciplinary actions are included in longitudinal datasets that allow researchers to follow individual students over time, researchers often don't have previous measures of discipline or behavior (unlike achievement data, which is regularly compiled for all students in certain grades and for certain subjects and can be used to establish a baseline or control for unobserved factors related to a student's ability or achievement) because many students who are suspended have not been suspended before. Students' records leading up to their first exclusionary event can only tell us that a student hasn't previously been suspended or expelled. However, this kind of information does exist and could be better utilized by researchers. In particular, indicators that may be routinely collected for all students, such as attendance records or surveys of students' attitudes or experiences, could produce more fine-grained measures of behavior or other student experiences prior to the measurement of suspension or expulsion. Moreover, definitions of what behavior merits suspension or expulsion—or even what constitutes a suspension or expulsion vary widely. School discipline policies and practices are known to be inconsistent within states, across school types (district versus charter), within a district, and even within a school.

In sum, without taking advantage of more nuanced—and particularly, longitudinal—student-level data and research methods, it is very difficult to know whether higher discipline rates are a reflection of the student population or of disproportional use of suspensions and expulsions in a given school or sector.

### Critical Questions to Ask When Making Sector Comparisons:

- Does the report compare apples to apples?
- Are infractions and disciplinary actions defined the same way?
- Does the report take into account other factors beyond the school or sector?

### Does the report compare apples to apples?

Reports about the impact of charter schools are hard to interpret when they don't draw a good comparison to other schools operating in similar environments and serving similar students. Making good comparisons in studies that compare charter schools to district schools are particularly difficult because families typically opt in to charter schools, and families making school choices are likely different in meaningful ways than families that aren't making school choices. A study's design affects the reliability of its findings, and one of the most important design factors is the comparison group. Randomized experiments are the "gold standard" of evaluation because they ensure that students in the schools being compared are alike, except for the school they attend. Properly done, this kind of study design approaches an apples-to-apples comparison.

However, "gold standard" studies are expensive and time consuming and students cannot legally (or ethically) be randomly assigned to charter schools. For that reason, studies of charter schools must rely on other methods that try to control for self-selection. The more sophisticated methods use student lotteries as a comparison group, or complex statistical methods.<sup>3</sup>

Because even the best methods cannot make perfect comparisons between charter and district schools, reporters examining any research findings about discipline rates across sectors should consider the plausibility of the comparisons and whether differences in reported outcomes could be attributed to factors other than school discipline practices.

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<sup>2</sup> Charter School Achievement Consensus Panel, *Key Issues in Studying Charter Schools and Achievement: A Review and Suggestions for National Guidelines* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the various methods, see Lydia Rainey, *Making Sense of Charter School Studies: A Reporter's Guide* (Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2015).

## Do the schools being compared use common definitions to describe infractions and disciplinary actions?

There is no common standard for classifying infractions or disciplinary actions, so even the definition of a suspension can vary depending on the school, school district, or state. When making cross-sector, district-by-district, or state-by-state comparisons, it is important to know whether the entities being compared collect and capture discipline data the same way and use common and consistent definitions to classify infractions and disciplinary actions.

## Does the report consider contextual factors that might influence discipline rates across sectors?

Discipline policy is a complex and emerging issue that is still underexplored. In addition to examining differences in suspension and expulsion rates among schools and sectors, important research that is worth media attention will also explore the difficult tensions and different contexts that are associated with suspension and expulsion practices.

Many charter schools, for example, prioritize a very strict student behavior code so that learning can take place in an orderly environment. Reporters may want to interview charter and district leaders, teachers, families, researchers, and others to discuss this tension. They may want to seek out examples of school leaders who have discouraged the use of suspension or expulsion without sacrificing an orderly learning environment.

Reporters may also want to consider whether the use of suspension and expulsion changes throughout a school's life cycle: for example, do new or newly reconstituted schools apply exclusionary discipline to establish order, but use it less as the school matures? What impact do teacher training and teacher turnover have on exclusionary discipline rates?

It is also worth considering how outside policies affect school-level actions on discipline policy. Reporters might consider how district or charter management organization oversight influences a particular school's use of exclusionary discipline. Charter schools tend to have high levels of autonomy, but that is not always the case. In some cities, like New Orleans, there are now policies that govern the student discipline process.

Finally, reporters may want to look for examples of proactive steps charter and district schools have taken to either effectively reduce discipline rates or ways that schools have helped students who experience suspensions catch up on their schoolwork and re-integrate into classrooms.

## Expert Resources

Sometimes it is hard to tell whether a study is reliable or newsworthy. In those instances, reporters can ask whether a study was subject to independent peer review and can also turn to experts for aid in interpreting the study's findings. Sources to contact might include:

- The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) at the University of Washington Bothell – Betheny Gross, Senior Research Analyst / Research Director; Sarah Yatsko, Senior Research Analyst  
Visit: [crpe.org](http://crpe.org) | Email: [crpe@uw.edu](mailto:crpe@uw.edu) | Phone: 206.685.2214
- [Anne Gregory, PhD](#) – Associate Professor, Applied Core Faculty, University of California Berkeley  
Email: [annegreg@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:annegreg@rci.rutgers.edu) | Phone: 848.445.3984
- [Karega Rausch, PhD](#) – Vice President of Research and Evaluation, National Association of Charter School Authorizers  
Email: [karegar@qualitycharters.org](mailto:karegar@qualitycharters.org) | Phone: 312.376.2371

## For More Information

U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, [Civil Rights Data Collection – Data Snapshot: School Discipline](#)

## About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

Through research and policy analysis, CRPE seeks ways to make public education more effective, especially for America's disadvantaged students. We help redesign governance, oversight, and dynamic education delivery systems to make it possible for great educators to do their best work with students and to create a wide range of high-quality public school options for families.

Our work emphasizes evidence over posture and confronts hard truths. We search outside the traditional boundaries of public education to find pragmatic, equitable, and promising approaches to address the complex challenges facing public education. Our goal is to create new possibilities for the parents, educators, and public officials who strive to improve America's schools.

CRPE is a nonpartisan, self-sustaining organization affiliated with the University of Washington Bothell. Our work is funded through private philanthropic dollars, federal grants, and contracts.