



National Council on Crime and Delinquency  
1970 Broadway, Suite 500 • Oakland, CA 94612  
tel 510/208-0500 • fax 510/208-0511 • nccd-crc.org

## NCCD POSITION STATEMENT

In response to recent reports of increases in rates of school suspensions throughout the state,  
NCCD registers this comment to further the public discourse.  
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### **Stopping the School to Jail Pipeline**

Recent media accounts have reported on the rising rates of school suspensions in California. Clearly, the problem is statewide, but is worse in neighborhoods already stressed by high rates of violence and poverty. We seem to be staring directly down the “school to jail pipeline”—meaning that youth experiencing behavior issues in schools are often propelled by existing practices to the corrections system. Before we fall back on the hackneyed and disproven solution of more police (especially officers untrained to handle teens) or more punitive responses, we owe it to our youth to think carefully.

We have a right to ask a great deal of our schools; they must be safe, respond to the current realities of the families they serve, and strive for high student achievement. However, they need the tools and resources to do all we ask of them. School budgets are in dire straits. We have cut everything from music, sports, and after-school programs, to counselors and mental health services. Teachers lack training in handling difficult student behavior. They have less freedom to respond to the varied learning styles of their students and more pressure to conform to standardized tests.

We must not resign ourselves to an increasingly harsh school culture. There are other, better options. First, the whole concept of the suspension should be called into question. Instead of removing the student from the school for what may be an entirely unsupervised or unstructured 3 days in which the “new teachers” are neighborhood gangsters, we should build the capacity to focus even more on that student’s behavior. Keep the student in school and address behavior directly. While some of the prohibited behavior is quite dangerous, such as bringing guns to class, the vast majority of suspensions and expulsions occur due to acting-out behavior. Indeed, according to the Chronicle’s analysis, 51% of all suspensions statewide were for “disruption of school activities or willful defiance.” By contrast, 4% were for use of force or violence, and 2% were for firearms, knives, or other weapons. When you look at these cases carefully, you see that teachers lack the training to deescalate routine conflict situations. For example, a teacher questions a student’s dress style and the student responds with defensiveness and hostility, which is not uncommon in teenagers. The teacher, lacking skill on successfully resolving this situation, uses threats of sanctions that make things worse.

The process for detentions and suspensions should be examined for fairness and due process. Studies have consistently shown that children of color are more subject to suspensions and expulsions than white youth. Let's work toward eliminating the racial and ethnic bias that shows up in school disciplinary practice and juvenile justice systems. Objectively screening and assessing youth issues is crucial if we want real solutions to a problem situation. Due to their still-developing brains, teens sometimes engage in dangerous behavior without calculating the future consequences of their actions. The student with a gun in his backpack, brought to school to impress friends, may have a college scholarship in that same backpack. Our adult responses should be nuanced and measured, looking at the whole child.

A very positive alternative to pushing youth out of classrooms and to the streets are school health clinics. These can offer a range of services, and if well designed and well run, can be uniquely situated to address the immediate and compelling needs that young people have every day. There also are proven models for early interventions such as the Seattle Social Development Model, designed to begin as early as first grade to stop destructive and dangerous behavior. This program works simultaneously with teachers, parents and students. Research has demonstrated both the short- and longer-term positive effects on school conduct, academic success, and peer acceptance. California schools need to look into how to replicate this proven model from Washington State.

It takes creativity and political will to change the balance of school safety, and schools can't do it without support from families, legislators, districts, and the larger communities that surround them. Our research reveals that youth who disrupt schools and break the rules are often victims or witnesses of violence in the home or on the street. These youth too often suffer from the adverse effects of poverty, and they have not received the quality medical and mental health care they need. Although youth crime rates have been declining in California since 1995, school safety should concern us. We need a comprehensive approach that views these troubled and troublesome children as young adults who need to be embraced by the entire community, not banished to the mean streets or jail.

Contact information:

Barry Krisberg, PhD  
President  
510-208-0500 x311  
bkrisberg at aol.com