Opportunities to Promote Behavioral Health

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Concerns about school violence have heightened awareness of how schools maintain a safe and productive learning environment. Public discourse surrounding school safety has largely focused on security, including the presence of law enforcement on campuses. Yet every day in the United States, school discipline policies have short- and long-term consequences for students and the school community.

School climate is not only important to students’ academic achievement, but also to their healthy social and emotional development. Adolescence is a critical period of physical, emotional, and social growth; it is also a crucial time to recognize and address behavioral health needs. Although one-half of all chronic mental illness begins by age 14, many youth have undiagnosed or untreated mental health and substance use disorders (Kessler et al. 2005). Behavioral health issues may contribute to disruptive behavior but can also result or worsen from harsh disciplinary action.

School discipline practices vary by state and can take many forms, including suspension, expulsion, and school-related arrests. Recent data show that a considerable number of students are being suspended and that this number has increased significantly over the past 40 years. In fact, during the 2009-2010 school year over two million students were suspended and more than 2,600 secondary schools suspended over 25 percent of their total student body (Losen and Martinez 2013).

WHY IS SCHOOL DISCIPLINE IMPORTANT TO HEALTH PHILANTHROPY?

Vulnerable youth are disproportionately affected by punitive discipline policies. Suspensions disproportionately affect youth from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds and students with disabilities (Figure 1). Suspension rates for African-American and Latino students have more than doubled over the past 30 years (Losen and Martinez 2013). Students with disabilities, particularly those with emotional and behavioral conditions, are twice as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions (CRDC 2012).

The negative implications for behavioral health, academic achievement, and life success are significant. Students who are suspended are at increased risk of dropping out of high school, as well as entering the juvenile justice system. Suspensions may either overlook or exacerbate underlying behavioral issues affecting the student or school, such as bullying, substance abuse, or unmet mental health needs. Feelings of alienation and shame often associated with exclusionary school discipline may create or enhance negative mental health outcomes by distancing youth from healthy peer communities and increasing the likelihood of marginalization (Skiba et al. 2006).

Evidence shows that current disciplinary approaches are not working. Most suspensions are for disruptive behavior or...
Expanding School Mental Health Services – The Connecticut School-Based Diversion Initiative (SBDI) brings stakeholders together to reduce punitive school discipline and expand school mental health care. Implemented by the Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut, a subsidiary of the Children’s Fund of Connecticut, SBDI’s goals include: 1) reducing the frequency of out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and in-school arrests; 2) linking at-risk youth to school- and community-based supports; and 3) increasing the skills of school staff to manage behavioral health crises. SBDI’s approach involves school disciplinary policy consultation; training school personnel on mental health and classroom management strategies; and enhanced linkages to school- and community-based supports, including emergency mobile psychiatric services. Evaluation data show decreases in suspension, in-school arrests, and court referrals, with increased referrals for school emergency mobile psychiatric services (Bracey et al. 2013).

Scaling Up Models that Focus on Disproportionately Affected Students – The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) has integrated positive approaches to school discipline into the foundation’s work to improve the health, education, and employment opportunities of boys and young men of color. In July 2013 RWJF announced 10 community innovation grantees as part of its $9.5 million Forward Promise initiative. Several of the selected community-based programs are working to implement effective alternatives to suspension that promote positive behavior interventions and support the mental health needs of youth exposed to violence and trauma (RWJF 2013).

Helping School Leaders Implement New Approaches – As part of The California Endowment’s Health Happens in Schools and Boys and Men of Color campaigns, the Common-Sense School Discipline Initiative aims to reduce school suspension rates and build momentum for positive school discipline. In 2013 the endowment awarded a total of $1.1 million to nine Central Valley school districts to assist with the development and implementation of positive discipline approaches. Previously the endowment created the Leadership and Learning Network for Positive School Discipline to provide school leaders with information and resources to reform discipline policies. Roughly 20 school districts participate, and the endowment recently invested additional funding to support operations and increase membership (The California Endowment 2013b).

Supporting Research and Advocacy for Policy Change – Reforming school discipline policies is a signature grantmaking initiative of The Atlantic Philanthropies’ youth programming. Atlantic has supported grantees across the country working to reduce punitive school discipline through research and advocacy for policy change. Funding has supported grassroots advocacy campaigns, legal counsel and advocacy services, and research and dissemination of best practices (The Atlantic Philanthropies 2013).

HEALTH GRANTMAKER STRATEGIES

Philanthropy can play a vital role in educating parents, policymakers, and the public about the effects of school discipline policies. In addition to raising awareness about the importance of students remaining in school, health grantmakers can support positive approaches to school discipline that enhance social-emotional development by expanding school mental health services, scaling up models that focus on disproportionately affected students, helping school leaders implement new approaches, and supporting research and advocacy.
SOURCES


