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EFP Takeaways

Getting Tough? The Effects of Discretionary Principal Discipline on Student Outcomes

Background

Principals often have wide discretion over their schools' disciplinary practices, such as student suspensions and expulsions. While principals attempt to use disciplinary policies to create a safer learning environment, parents and educators may be concerned about potential negative consequences of aggressive disciplinary practices. Using data from North Carolina, Lucy C. Sorensen, Shawn D. Bushway, and Elizabeth J. Gifford examine the impact of principal-driven disciplinary decisions on middle school student outcomes. Their work is published in vol. 17 issue 2 of *EFP*.

The Study

The authors leverage longitudinal administrative records of public middle school students from the North Carolina Education Research Data Center between 2008 and 2016, matched with later educational attainment, juvenile justice records, and adult conviction records from the North Carolina Department of Public Safety. The authors specifically focus on instances of exclusionary discipline, which includes removal from a school through mechanisms like expulsion or transfer to an alternative school.

For more details:

- View the [full issue](#).
- See the [full article in *Education Finance and Policy*](#).
- [Sign up here to receive future *EFP Takeaways*](#).
- Summary of: Sorensen, L., Bushway, S., & Gifford, E. (2022). Getting Tough? The Effects of Discretionary Principal Discipline on Student Outcomes. *Education Finance and Policy*, 17 (2): 255-284.

Findings

The authors find that school principals act very differently in their propensity to suspend students, even for students with identical disciplinary histories committing the exact same type of offense. Middle school students under a harsh principal are less likely to misbehave, but also less likely to graduate high school and more likely to receive a juvenile justice referral, than similar students at the same school under a lenient principal.

Harsher principal discipline has particularly negative impacts on the subset of students that commit minor offenses such as “disruptive behavior” or “insubordination,” significantly increasing their absenteeism and grade retention, while reducing test scores. Principals who assign suspensions more frequently for Black students than White students for the same type of offenses are also creating school environments with larger performance gaps by student race—in test scores, absences, grade retention rates, and high school graduation rates.

