

COMMUNITY REPORT: TOO YOUNG TO SUSPEND

Protecting North Carolina's youngest learners from early grade suspension



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Duke
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REPORT SUMMARY

Each year in North Carolina, thousands of young children are suspended from public schools. These suspensions have immediate and long-lasting impacts on children, as well as their families and broader communities. There is no evidence that these suspensions are effective at stopping misbehavior or making schools safer.

This report examines the practice of suspending young children in North Carolina, focusing on the formal suspension of public school students in pre-Kindergarten through second grade (“early grade suspension”). The report starts by summarizing research on the practice of early grade suspension, highlighting local and statewide suspension data for K-2nd grade students, and reviewing the perspectives of directly impacted parents.

The report also looks at policy efforts by states and local North Carolina districts to limit the use of early grade suspension. Three case studies are highlighted as potential models for local school district action.

Finally, the report outlines overall findings and recommendations for reducing early grade suspension in North Carolina, emphasizing the importance of community involvement and ongoing data collection, monitoring, and oversight.



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THE PROBLEM

What Is Early Grade Suspension?

In this report, the term “early grade suspension” refers to a public school’s suspension of a young child in preK through 2nd grade for disciplinary reasons.

This report focuses on this type of suspension because:

1) There is data on these suspensions, making them easier to study; and 2) There are promising policy efforts focused on limiting these types of suspensions, providing models for reform. However, the report’s focus on early grade suspension does not mean other types of suspension should not be studied and targeted for reform. These include the following:

Suspensions in early childhood programs

Suspension is also a problem in public and private early childhood settings (e.g., daycares, preschools). However, there is limited data on suspension in North Carolina’s early childhood programs because they are not required to report it. Because of these limitations, this report focuses on suspensions in public schools where data is available.

Suspensions of older students

This report focuses on preK–2nd grade suspensions in North Carolina’s public schools because this is where the cycle of suspension often begins and can cause the most harm. However, most of the arguments against early grade suspension are true for all suspensions. Ending early grade suspension is a starting point. All North Carolina students should be protected from the harm of suspension and provided with effective alternatives that help them overcome their behavior challenges.

In-school or informal suspensions

This report focuses on formal out-of-school suspensions, but young children also experience informal suspensions that cause similar harms. This includes in-school suspensions or time-outs that remove the child from their classroom and regular educational activities. Further, sometimes schools ask a parent to pick their child up early or keep their child home due to behaviors. Unfortunately, there is less data available on these informal suspensions since they are rarely documented.

Ultimately, the problem of early grade suspension is bigger than the limited data shows. Policy change recommendations must include more accountability for North Carolina’s early childhood programs and address both the formal and informal ways that schools exclude students for disciplinary reasons.

In 2022–2023, NC public schools gave out

19,672

short-term suspensions to children in preK through 2nd grade

In 2022–2023,

Grades 1 and 2 had the biggest increases in short-term suspensions



Why Is Early Grade Suspension a Problem?



1 Suspension Harms Young Children

Suspension can cause educational, economic, and social harms to children. Young children are especially vulnerable because their brains are still developing and heavily influenced by negative experiences. Young students who get suspended are more likely to receive failing grades, drop out of high school, feel negatively about school, and be incarcerated later in life.

2 Suspension Ignores Root Causes

Misbehavior can have many causes, including trauma, disability, or other environmental factors. Suspension doesn't solve the underlying issues. It just removes the child from school without exploring why the behavior is occurring. If root causes aren't addressed, the student will come back to school with the same challenges, as well as the additional harms caused by suspension.

3 Young Children Rarely Have Serious or Violent Behavior

It is important to address misbehavior at school. However, the vast majority of misbehavior by young children does not create a serious risk to school safety or order. Despite this, young children are often suspended for minor offenses that could be better handled through in-school interventions that actually correct the behavior.

4 Suspension Doesn't Improve Overall School Safety

School safety is critical, but suspension doesn't actually make schools safer or improve student outcomes. Studies show that schools with higher rates of suspension have more negative school climates and lower academic achievement. Further, suspension is linked to increased future misbehavior, which decreases overall school safety.

5 Suspension Is Costly

The negative outcomes linked to suspension result in increased costs for all. Researchers have calculated that a 10th grade California student who drops out because of suspension could end up costing the public \$175,120 in lost tax revenue, increased health care, and criminal legal system expenses over the student's lifetime. When a young child is suspended, there can also be immediate economic impacts on the child's family if a parent has to miss work to stay home with the child.

6 Suspension Harms Some Young Children More Than Others

Some groups of young children are more likely to be suspended, including Black and Native children and children with disabilities. Often, these suspensions are due to bias. For example, though Black children are not more likely to misbehave, they are 3.6 times more likely to be suspended from preschool compared to white children, according to national studies. Early exposure to suspension puts young children on a negative path and increases their risk of getting suspended again in the future.

How Big Is the Problem in North Carolina?

North Carolina law does not put any limits on early grade suspension. As a result, thousands of young children are suspended each year in North Carolina. Even though the rate of suspension for young children is usually lower than it is for older students, it is still extremely high. Further, the rate of suspension for early grades is on the rise, with certain groups of young children even more at risk.

NC preK-2nd grade
students missed

21,609
school days

due to early grade
suspension in 2021-2022

WHICH GROUPS OF YOUNG CHILDREN ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE SUSPENDED?



BLACK STUDENTS

2.8x

more likely
than white
students



STUDENTS WITH
DISABILITIES

3.1x

more likely
than students
without
disabilities



MALE STUDENTS

4.6x

more likely
than female
students



ECONOMICALLY
DISADVANTAGED
(ED) STUDENTS

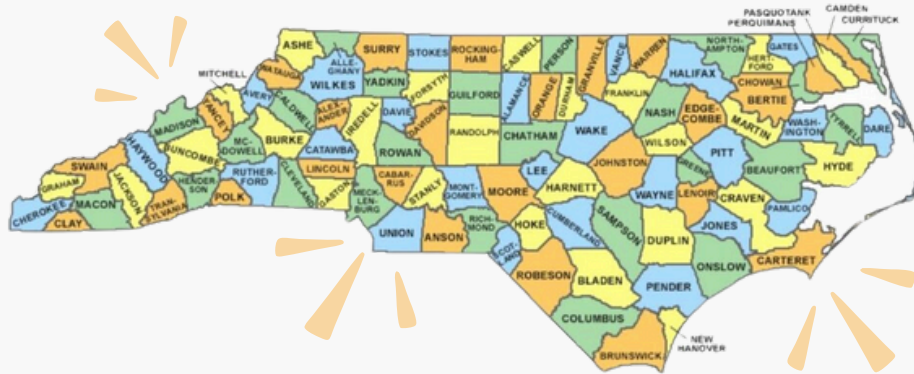
2.9x

more likely
than non-ED
students

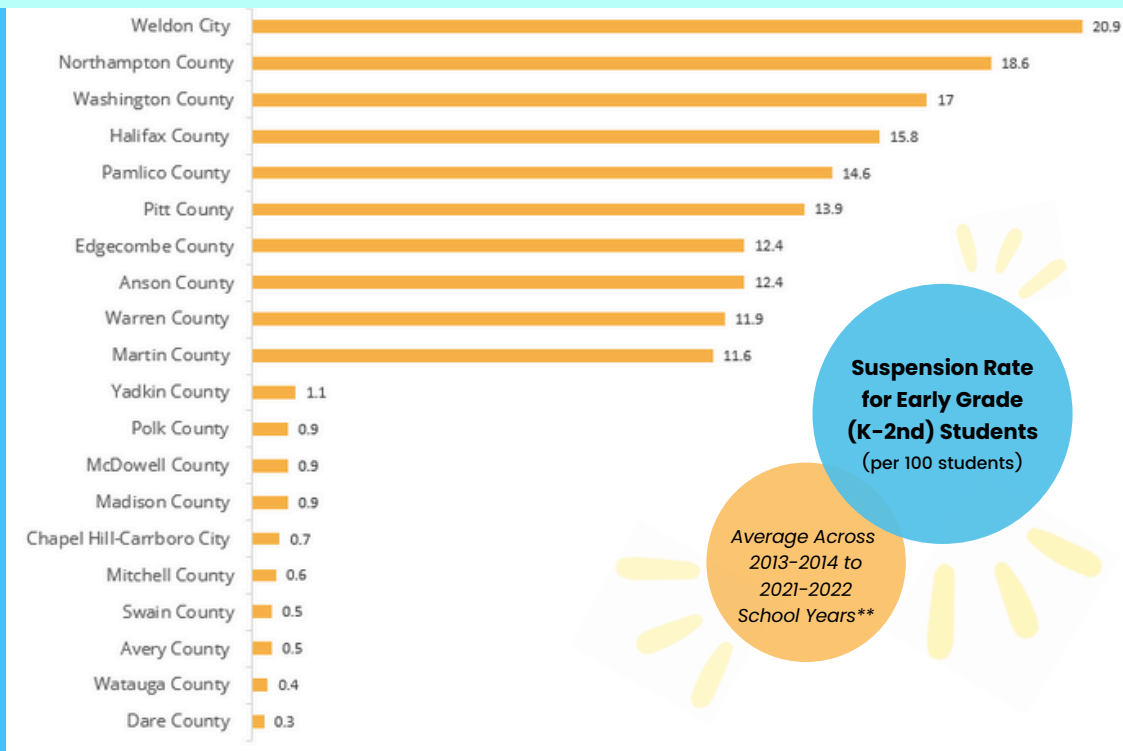


Inconsistency in the State

North Carolina has 115 traditional school districts and over 200 public charter schools. Since there is no state law that limits early grade suspension, each district and charter school can choose how it disciplines young children. Because of this, there is inconsistency throughout the state and even within schools in the same community. Some schools rarely suspend young children, while others have high rates of early grade suspension.



School Districts with Highest & Lowest Rates of Early Grade Suspension*



*While charter schools are public schools subject to almost all the same requirements as traditional school districts, charter schools are not included in this analysis due to limited data available.

** Data from the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years is excluded due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school operations.

Comparing North Carolina's Largest School Districts

In the 2021–2022 school year, 2.9% of K–2nd students in North Carolina received a short-term suspension (10 days or less). That's over 9,000 young children!

That same year, some large school districts suspended a higher percentage of K–2nd students, while other large districts suspended a smaller percentage. Early grade suspension is not just a problem in large districts, but because large districts serve so many children, they have the ability to make a big impact depending on how they choose to handle discipline for their youngest students.

Percentage of K–2nd Students who Received Short-Term Suspensions by District (2021–2022)

Large Districts with Higher %

Winston–Salem/Forsyth
6%

Cumberland
5.5%

Johnston
4.4%

Wake
2.2%

Large Districts with Lower %

Charlotte–Mecklenburg
0.3%

New Hanover
1.1%

Durham
1.5%

Guilford
1.8%



What Do Parents Think?

Background: In Fall 2024, parent researchers working with Education Justice Alliance conducted a survey of parents and guardians to better understand their awareness, opinions, and experiences with suspension in early childhood and elementary education settings. **Parent perspectives are critical to understanding the problem of early grade suspension and developing effective solutions.**

Results: The survey results indicate a strong concern among parents and guardians about the use of suspensions in early childhood and elementary education. There is a clear desire for more information, alternative approaches, and changes to current policies. The findings suggest a need for increased awareness, parental involvement, and the development of supportive, non-exclusionary practices to address behavioral challenges in young children.

KEY SURVEY FINDINGS

1

Awareness of Suspension Policies

- Approximately half of respondents were not aware of specific policies regarding suspension in early childhood education or early school grades (K-3rd) in NC.
- There was variation in respondents' understanding of the minimum age for suspension, ranging from under 3 years old to over 8 years old.

2

Perception of Exclusionary Practices

- Most respondents defined "exclusionary practices" as those that remove or exclude a child from their regular educational setting.
- A few viewed these practices as including all children in the educational setting, indicating confusion or differing interpretations of the term.

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KEY SURVEY FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

3 Frequency of Suspensions

- Estimates of suspension frequency varied widely, with responses ranging from 0–5% to more than 30% of the time.
- The most common estimate was 0–5%, followed by 6–10% and 11–20%.

4 Impact of Suspensions

- The majority of respondents believed suspensions have a significant impact on children, ranging from "some" impact to "through high school."
- Common concerns about the impact of suspension included:
 - Negative effects on self-esteem and self-perception
 - Missing important learning content and falling behind peers
 - Long-term impacts on academic performance and motivation
 - Potential for increased behavioral problems
 - Trauma and feelings of exclusion

5 Alternatives to Suspension

- Most respondents expressed interest in learning about alternatives to suspension.
- Suggested alternatives included:
 - Social-emotional learning programs
 - Counseling and therapy sessions
 - Meditation rooms or designated calm-down areas
 - Peer mediation and mentorship programs
 - Parental involvement and training
 - In-school work days or separated learning environments
 - Positive behavioral intervention and support

6 Support for Children with Challenging Behaviors

- Opinions were mixed on whether early childhood programs and elementary schools provide adequate support for parents/guardians with children exhibiting challenging behaviors.
- Many disagreed or strongly disagreed that current support is adequate.

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KEY SURVEY FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

7

Parental Involvement and Teacher Mental Health

- The vast majority of respondents believed that parents should be involved in developing disciplinary policies for early childhood programs.
- Most thought teacher mental health plays a role in suspensions.

8

Desired Information and Changes

- Respondents showed strong interest in learning more about suspension policies and alternatives.
- Popular topics of interest included:
 - Long-term effects of suspensions
 - Building social-emotional skills in children
 - Learning about alternatives to suspension
 - Understanding suspension policies
- The majority of respondents believed changes are needed in current suspension policies and practices in early childhood education and early school grades (K-3rd).
- Most respondents considered it important or very important to reduce suspensions in early childhood programs and early school grades.

Who Was Surveyed?

- **Total Number:** 34 parents and guardians
- **Race:** 62% Black, 26% white, 6% Asian, 6% Multi-Racial/Other
- **Ethnicity:** 94% Not Hispanic or Latino, 6% Hispanic or Latino

THE SOLUTIONS

Nationally, some states and local school districts have adopted policies to limit or stop the practice of early grade suspension. This section gives an overview of the different state laws that have been passed. It also highlights three North Carolina school districts, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, New Hanover, and Winston-Salem/Forsyth, that have passed local policies limiting early grade suspension.



State Laws Limiting Early Grade Suspension

More than half the states have adopted laws that aim to limit early grade suspension. However, different states take different approaches:

- Some states explicitly ban most suspensions for younger age groups and grades.
- Some states only allow suspensions for students in older age groups or grades in certain situations (implicitly limiting suspension of younger children).
- Some states have created programs and procedural safeguards (e.g., extra levels of appeal or review) for early grade suspension..



Local School District Policies Limiting Early Grade Suspension

Currently, North Carolina law does not limit early grade suspension. However, at least three North Carolina school districts, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), New Hanover County Schools (NHCS), and Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools (WSFCS), have adopted local policies aimed at limiting early grade suspension. These policies are highlighted later in this section.

STATE LEGISLATION

States with Bans on Early Grade Suspension*

- Arkansas
- California
- Colorado
- Connecticut
- Illinois
- Kentucky
- Maryland
- Minnesota
- Nebraska
- Nevada
- New Jersey
- Maine
- Ohio
- Oregon
- Texas
- Vermont
- Virginia
- Washington, D.C.

E.g., Nebraska bans most suspensions in preK through 2nd grade. However, students can still be suspended for bringing a deadly weapon to school.

States with Increased Procedural Safeguards for Early Grade Suspension

- Georgia
- Massachusetts
- New Jersey
- Texas

E.g., in Georgia, students in preK through 3rd grade cannot be suspended for more than five days during a school year unless they first receive “multi-tiered system of supports” to address the behavior.

What about North Carolina?

Currently, NC does not limit early grade suspension. In 2024, a bill (HB1027) was introduced that would have banned suspensions in 1st through 3rd grade except for serious drug or safety offenses. Unfortunately, it was referred to a Committee and never voted on.

States that Only Allow Certain Suspensions in Older Grades

- Arizona
- California
- Colorado
- Louisiana
- Michigan
- Nevada
- Wisconsin

E.g., California allows for suspensions for sexual harassment only for students in 4th grade or higher.

** States vary in the terms they use to describe disciplinary removals from school (e.g., suspension, expulsion, exclusion). Additionally, states vary in the age or grade span used to define “early grade” suspension.*

LOCAL DISTRICT POLICIES

Advocating for change on the local level is key to limiting early grade suspension. In North Carolina, three school districts have adopted local policies with the goal of reducing early grade suspension. Each district took a different approach, but both are helpful case studies for other districts interested in addressing the problem of early grade suspension.

Case Study # 1

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS)

The CMS policy requires the Superintendent's office to review and approve all short-term suspensions for students in prek through 2nd grade. The CMS Board of Education (BOE) approved the policy in 2017 after lengthy debate.

Case Study # 2


New Hanover County Schools (NHCS)

The NHCS policy bans out-of-school suspensions for students under age 8 or below 3rd grade with limited exceptions. The NHCS BOE approved the policy in 2022 in response to an extensive community-led campaign.

Case Study # 3

Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools (WSFCS)

The WSFCS policy prohibits out-of-school suspensions for students under grade 4 with limited exceptions for more serious behavior. The policy also requires an Area Superintendent to approve all suspensions for students under grade 4. The WSFCS BOE adopted the policy in 2024 with support from the Superintendent and community partners.



Case Study #1

THE ROAD TO POLICY CHANGE IN CHARLOTTE-MECKLENBURG

Step One: Awareness

In 2016, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS) suspended almost 1,000 students in preK through 2nd grade the prior year, and the CMS Policy Committee wanted change. A 2017 article stated that “board members and administrators have all acknowledged the race gap in suspensions” and discussed “the need to keep students in school after minor infractions.”

Step Two: Debate and Dialogue

Some CMS board members advocated for a ban on early grade suspension. Some board members worried that a ban would restrict schools’ decision-making and decrease teacher retention. For many months, board members debated the pros and cons of an early grade suspension ban.

Step Three: Compromise

One CMS board member, Rhonda Lennon, spent weeks discussing the pros and cons of a new idea with colleagues: a policy requiring superintendent review of suspensions for young students. The idea gained traction among other board members.

Step Four: Board Approves the Policy!

The new policy requires that any short-term suspension of a student in preK through 2nd grade be reviewed and approved by the Superintendent. The policy took effect at the start of the 2017–2018 school year.

THE OFFICIAL CMS POLICY

Section III.D of CMS's "Suspension, Exclusion and Expulsion of Students" policy (S-SUSP) states:

"[T]he Board directs that any short-term suspension of any student in the pre-kindergarten program, kindergarten, first grade, or second grade shall first be reviewed and approved by the Superintendent prior to being enforced against the student. The Superintendent's decision shall be final and may not be appealed to the Board.

On a monthly basis, the Superintendent shall send to each Board member a report containing the number of pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, first grade, and second grade students suspended each month by school and the reason for suspension."

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE CMS POLICY

Potential Benefits

More Careful Decision-Making

The policy requires schools to involve more time and decision-makers in the process. This allows for more thoughtful decision-making, which can reduce the likelihood of hasty or unnecessary suspensions. Also, principals may not recommend suspensions that are unlikely to get approved, further reducing suspensions.

Increased Accountability

By consolidating approval for suspensions in the Superintendent's office and requiring monthly data reporting to the Board, the policy allows district leadership to have a bird's-eye view on all early grade suspensions, creating potential for large-scale perspective and change.

Potential Challenges

Too Much Discretion

The policy does not explicitly limit suspension. The effectiveness of the policy is entirely dependent on the Superintendent.

Burdensome Work

The policy creates a bigger administrative workload that may become burdensome or unrealistic.


Alternatives Unclear

The policy does not require schools to try alternatives to suspension, and it is unclear what alternatives are available. This could lead to the underlying behavior going unaddressed and decreased buy-in from school staff.

Did the Policy Make an Impact?

In the two school years after the policy change, for Kindergarten through 2nd graders in CMS:

- The likelihood of suspension **decreased by 56%**
- The Black-white suspension gap **decreased by 79%**
- The male-female suspension gap **decreased by 65%**



Case Study # 2

THE ROAD TO POLICY CHANGE IN NEW HANOVER

Step One: A Data-Driven Petition

In 2021, the New Hanover NAACP submitted a petition to the New Hanover County Schools (NHCS) BOE requesting a ban on preK-5th grade suspensions. The petition highlighted racial disparities in suspensions and the relationship between high suspension rates and poor academic performance. In March 2021, the BOE voted 7-0 against banning elementary school suspension, but a public conversation about early grade suspensions in the district begins.

Step Two: Community-Led Advocacy

A local organization, Love Our Children, launched an advocacy campaign to ban early grade suspension in New Hanover. The campaign included public comments at board meetings, pins and T-shirts, community meetings, one-on-one conversations with BOE members, and a media push including social media, radio, flyers, and a billboard. The Board said that Love Our Children was “taking up all of [their] time.”

Step Three: Getting the Necessary Votes

After over a year of vocal community advocacy, many BOE members agreed that policy change was needed. Still, the majority of the BOE and the Superintendent were reluctant to adopt a ban. In April 2022, after extensive debate among BOE members, the BOE unanimously voted to adopt a new policy banning early grade suspensions except in limited circumstances.

Step Four: Board Approves the Policy!

The new policy places a general ban on out-of-school suspensions for students under age 8 or below 3rd grade. The policy took effect at the start of the 2022-2023 school year.

THE OFFICIAL NHCS POLICY

NHCS Policy Code: 4351 Short-Term Suspension

“Teachers and students deserve school environments that are safe, supportive, and conducive to learning. Creating a supportive school climate -- and decreasing suspensions -- requires close attention to the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of all students. School administrators will utilize positive behavior support alternatives to suspensions and only use out of school suspensions as a last resort.

No student under age eight (8) or under grade three (3) will be suspended out of school except in response to incidents involving violations of Policy 4325 (Drugs and Alcohol), Policy 4331 (Assaults and Threats), and Policy 4333 (Weapons, Bomb Threats, Terrorist Threats, and Clear Threats to Safety). The principal or designee has the authority to determine when a short-term suspension is an appropriate consequence and to impose the suspension, so long as all relevant board policies are followed.”

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE NHCS POLICY

Potential Benefits

Clarity

Because the policy explicitly bans early grade suspensions—and clearly defines exceptions only for drugs and alcohol, assaults and threats, and weapons and other threats to safety—it may be more easily understood and effectively implemented.

No Extra Steps

The policy still gives Principals power to impose suspensions, with no additional paperwork or review. This reduces the administrative burden and may create more buy-in from school staff.

Potential Challenges

No Oversight

Without additional levels of review or reporting, there are no mechanisms to make sure the new policy is implemented consistently.

Alternatives Unclear

While the policy mentions alternatives to suspension, it is vague about what alternatives are available or what steps staff should use in considering what interventions are appropriate. This could lead to the underlying behavior going unaddressed and decreased buy-in from school staff.

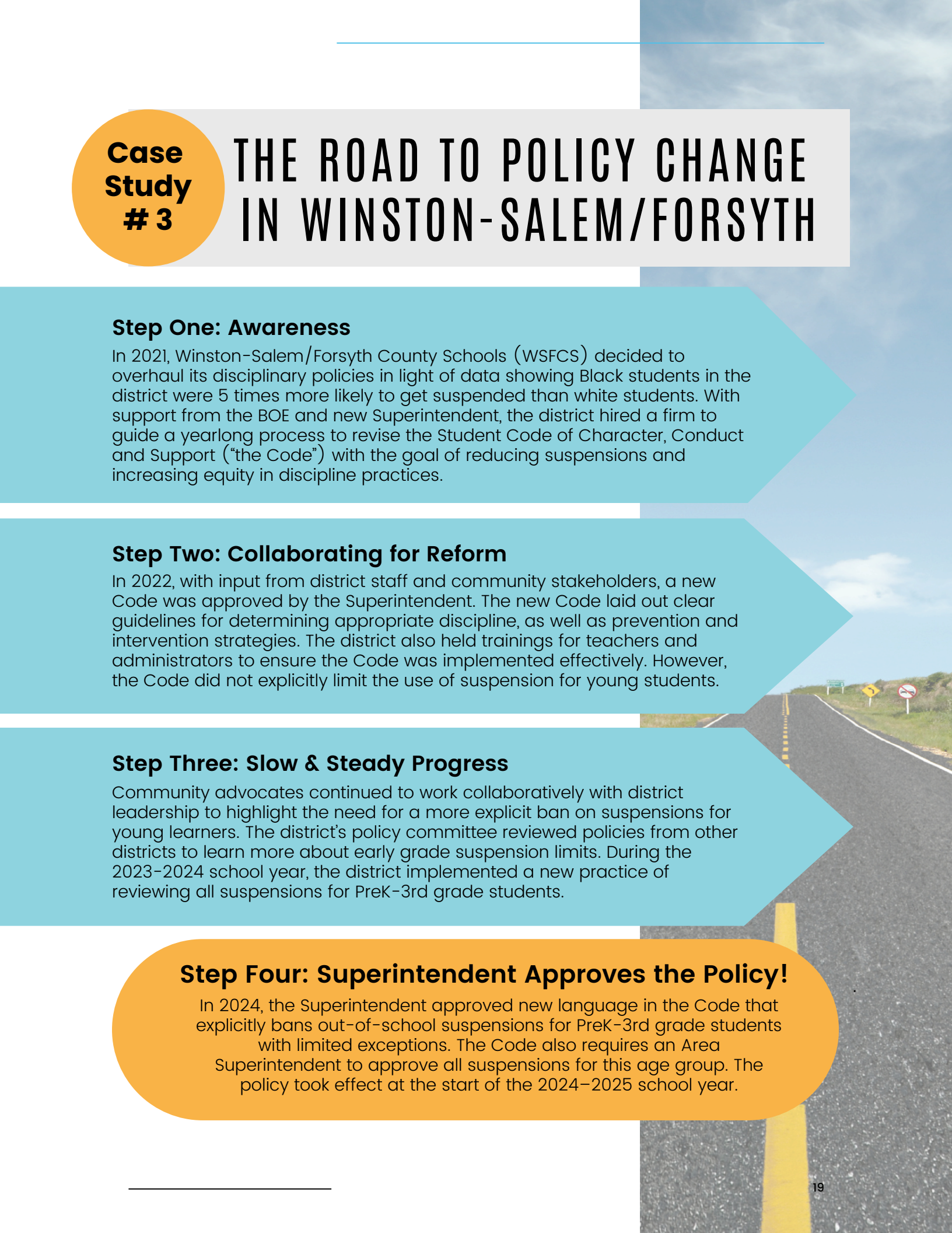
Did the Policy Make an Impact?

In the two school years after the policy change, for K-2nd graders in NHCS:

- Suspensions **decreased** the first year (74 to 70), but **increased** the second year* (to 83)
- Suspensions **continued to be given** for violations that did not qualify for suspension under the new policy (e.g., inappropriate behavior, disrespect)**
 - 57 unauthorized suspensions in the first year and 43 in the second year

* Second year data only through April 2024

** NHCS has stated that the "unauthorized" suspensions were the result of miscoding



Case Study # 3

THE ROAD TO POLICY CHANGE IN WINSTON-SALEM/FORSYTH

Step One: Awareness

In 2021, Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools (WSFCS) decided to overhaul its disciplinary policies in light of data showing Black students in the district were 5 times more likely to get suspended than white students. With support from the BOE and new Superintendent, the district hired a firm to guide a yearlong process to revise the Student Code of Character, Conduct and Support (“the Code”) with the goal of reducing suspensions and increasing equity in discipline practices.

Step Two: Collaborating for Reform

In 2022, with input from district staff and community stakeholders, a new Code was approved by the Superintendent. The new Code laid out clear guidelines for determining appropriate discipline, as well as prevention and intervention strategies. The district also held trainings for teachers and administrators to ensure the Code was implemented effectively. However, the Code did not explicitly limit the use of suspension for young students.

Step Three: Slow & Steady Progress

Community advocates continued to work collaboratively with district leadership to highlight the need for a more explicit ban on suspensions for young learners. The district’s policy committee reviewed policies from other districts to learn more about early grade suspension limits. During the 2023–2024 school year, the district implemented a new practice of reviewing all suspensions for PreK–3rd grade students.

Step Four: Superintendent Approves the Policy!

In 2024, the Superintendent approved new language in the Code that explicitly bans out-of-school suspensions for PreK–3rd grade students with limited exceptions. The Code also requires an Area Superintendent to approve all suspensions for this age group. The policy took effect at the start of the 2024–2025 school year.

THE OFFICIAL WSFCS POLICY

WSFCS Code of Character, Conduct, and Support, Age and Developmental Considerations

“School administrators will utilize positive behavior support alternatives to suspensions and only use out of school suspensions as a last resort. **No student under grade 4 will be suspended out of school** except in response to incidents involving (1) unauthorized substances – drugs, alcohol, etc.; (2) assaults; (3) threats involving firearms, powerful explosives, or weapons against the school community, (4) possession of firearms and/or weapons (5) sexual misconduct.

A school administrator **must receive approval from the Area Superintendent** prior to suspension. In addition, a reentry conference should take place prior to the student’s return to school. This plan should focus on addressing the underlying causes of the behavior, repairing harm, and restoring relationships within the school community. Parents/guardians must be invited to be directly involved in the development of the intervention plan to support their child’s success.”

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE WSFCS POLICY

Potential Benefits

Clarity

Because the policy explicitly bans early grade suspensions—and clearly defines the exceptions—it may be more easily understood and effectively implemented.

Part of a Bigger Picture

The early grade suspension ban was part of a wider effort in WSFCS to reduce suspension and support alternatives. This resulted in more training and resources to support implementation.

More Careful Decision-Making

The policy requires principals to get approval prior to suspending a young student. This allows for more thoughtful decision-making, which can reduce the likelihood of hasty or unnecessary suspensions. Also, principals may not recommend suspensions that are unlikely to get approved, further reducing suspensions.

Alternatives Clear

The policy emphasizes the importance of using evidence-based alternatives to suspensions. If a suspension is imposed, it requires a reentry conference and intervention plan to address the root causes of the behavior. The parent must be invited to help develop the plan.

Potential Challenges

Burdensome work

The policy creates a bigger administrative workload—one that, depending on the year, may become burdensome or unrealistic.

Not official policy...yet

The policy is part of the Student Code but not yet official Board policy, so it could be overturned more easily.

Did the Policy Make an Impact?

In the first 8 weeks the policy was in effect, for PreK–3rd graders:

- Suspensions **dropped drastically**
 - From 154 in first 8 weeks of 2023–2024 to 31 in first 8 weeks of 2024–2025
- Racial disparities for Black & Hispanic students **decreased**

REPORT FINDINGS

1

Research shows early grade suspension is harmful and ineffective.

Thousands of young children are suspended from NC public schools each year, often for minor misbehavior. These suspensions cause direct and long-lasting negative impacts to the child and their family. There is no evidence suspension improves school safety or academic achievement. Further, some children, including Black children and children with disabilities, are more likely to be harmed by this practice.

2

The full scope of the problem is unknown due to lack of public data.

Too many people are unaware of the problem of early grade suspension, including parents, educators, and policy makers. One issue is the lack of public suspension data broken down by grade for schools and districts. Further, suspensions in early childhood programs (e.g., preschools, daycares) are not tracked or monitored.

3

Unlike many other states, NC does not limit early grade suspensions.

Almost half of states have laws that limit early grade suspensions. However, North Carolina has not taken any statewide action. Although state legislation that would limit this practice has been introduced, it has not passed.

4

School districts have successfully limited early grade suspensions through local policy reform.

At least three NC districts have adopted policies aimed at limiting early grade suspensions. Each district took a different path to policy reform, but some key criteria for success have emerged. These include: parent and community input at every stage; buy-in from district leadership; clear policy language prohibiting suspension and defining exceptions; additional levels of review before the suspension is imposed; ongoing data collection and monitoring; and training for schools on implementation.

5

More local and state advocacy is needed!

There is more work to do to ensure parents, educators, and policymakers understand the problem of early grade suspension and the possible solutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Increase Public Access to Data on Early Grade Suspension

Many parents, educators, district leaders, and community stakeholders do not know how many young children are suspended each year in their school or district. The lack of information leads many to assume early grade suspension is not a problem in their community. However, the data often tells another story. Access to current data on early grade suspension that is broken down (by grade, district, race, offense, etc.) is critical to understanding the scope of the problem and monitoring reforms.

NEXT STEPS

- Public school districts and charter schools already collect and report detailed suspension data to the state. In its annual report of discipline data, the state should include more data on early grade suspension, including data that is disaggregated by school, grade, offense, race, disability, and other factors that help the public better understand the use of early grade suspension in their community.
- Individual school districts and charter schools should also proactively release their detailed suspension data to the public for community review.
- The state should require early childhood programs, including private preschools and daycares, to collect and report data on their use of suspension.



2 Include Parents, Educators, and Community Stakeholders

When examining the issue of early grade suspension or developing potential reforms, parents, educators, and community stakeholders should be meaningfully involved at every step. Their input is critical to fully understanding how early grade suspension impacts students, schools, and families. It is also key to developing policy reforms that actually address the underlying problems that lead to the use of early grade suspension.

NEXT STEPS

- Districts and schools should involve parents, educators, and community stakeholders in regular reviews of their current discipline policies and practices to identify potential areas of concern.

An example of this is in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, where the Superintendent led a multi-year review of the district's discipline policies. The review process involved research on best practices in discipline, conversations with local organizations and leaders, listening sessions with teachers, and regular reviews of data to monitor implementation. This review process led to the policy reforms on early grade suspension discussed in Case Study #3.



3 Organize

In some communities, local district and school leadership may be resistant to proactively tackling the problem of early grade suspension. In these communities, it will be important for parents, educators, and community advocates to collaborate and organize around the issue. By collectively and strategically voicing concerns, community members can raise public awareness of the problem and create pressure on district and school leadership to address the problem of early grade suspension.

NEXT STEPS

- Local advocacy on early grade suspension could include convening concerned stakeholders to discuss the problem and potential action steps, making comments at Board of Education meetings, requesting meetings with elected officials or district leaders, or using traditional or social media to raise awareness.

An example of this is found in New Hanover County Schools, where local advocacy groups led a multi-year campaign to pressure the school board to adopt a policy prohibiting early grade suspension. This campaign and the resulting policy change is discussed in Case Study #2.



4 Adopt Effective Policies that Prohibit Early Grade Suspension

As explored earlier in this report, there have been many state and local efforts to adopt policies that limit the use of early grade suspension. These efforts can be used as models for potential reform. Successful policies should include the following:

NEXT STEPS

- Explicit language prohibiting the use of early grade suspension. The scope of the prohibition – including the applicable age/grade range and types of exclusion prohibited, as well as any exceptions to the prohibition – should be clearly defined in the policy.
- Additional layers of review before the suspension can be implemented. *For example, as discussed in Case Study #1, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools requires the Superintendent to approve all preK-2nd grade suspension prior to being enforced.*
- List of the alternatives to suspension that are available in the district. Funding should be provided to ensure there are effective alternatives, such as restorative justice, social-emotional learning, and trauma-informed practices.
- Require training for educators on alternative approaches to discipline. Equipping educators with these tools can reduce reliance on exclusionary discipline and support students in more meaningful ways.
- Regular data collection and review of disaggregated data to ensure effective and consistent implementation of the policy.



APPENDIX

About the Authors

This report's primary authors are:

- 1) Staff and parent researchers of the Education Justice Alliance (EJA), a Triangle-based coalition of parents, students and community-based organizations working for a reduction in the number of public school students pushed off the academic track through unfair suspensions, harsh discipline policies, and academic failure. Through EJA's "Too Young to Suspend" campaign, EJA has focused efforts explicitly on the issue of early grade suspension, seeking not only reduce the number of elementary school suspensions, but also to reduce the racial disparities in elementary school suspensions.
- 2) Duke Children's Law Clinic, a free legal clinic housed at Duke Law School providing legal advice and representation in cases impacting the health and well-being of children, including education cases. Through individual client representation in suspension cases and broader research and policy work on school discipline, Clinic faculty have identified early grade suspension as a harmful practice that should be targeted for reform.

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As noted below, much of the information in this report, as well as the overall findings and recommendations, are heavily influenced by the work being done on the ground by directly impacted parents and community advocates across North Carolina. This report is intended to build on the existing community-based advocacy work aimed at ending early grade and early childhood suspension in North Carolina.

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The Problem

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 - Although there is no systemic data collection for suspensions in North Carolina’s early childhood settings, more information on the use of exclusionary discipline in these settings can be found here: North Carolina Preschool Exclusionary Discipline Pilot Study: Final Report, Wake County Smart Start & UNC School of Social Work (September 2024), available at https://issuu.com/wakesmartstart/docs/final_nc_preschool_exclusionary_discipline_pilot_s.
- Why Is Early Grade Suspension a Problem?
 - Suspension Harms Young Children
 - Studies have established a link between exposure to exclusionary discipline and a wide variety of educational, economic, and social impacts. U.S. Dep’t of Educ. Key Policy Letters (Jan. 8, 2014), <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/secletter/140108.html>.
 - Young children are especially vulnerable to these harms as their brains are developing rapidly and heavily influenced by their positive and negative experiences. U.S. Dep’t of Health & Hum. Servs. & U.S. Dep’t of Educ., Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings 3, <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2020/07/policy-statement-ece-expulsions-suspensions.pdf>.
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- How Big Is the Problem in North Carolina?
 - Data contained on pages 4–6 of report were obtained from the North Carolina Education Research Data Center (NCERDC). For more information about these data, see <https://childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/north-carolina-education-research-data/>.
 - For "Which Groups of Young Children Are More Likely to Be Suspended?" on page 4, data contain information on all kindergarten through second grade students enrolled in North Carolina public schools during the 2021/22 school year. Reported rates are calculated at the state level using data on enrollment and out-of-school suspensions. Students with disabilities are defined all students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).
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- What Do Parents Think?
 - Parent researchers surveyed 34 people. Key demographics include:
 - Respondents were primarily from zip codes in North Carolina, with a few from neighboring states.
 - The majority of respondents identified as Black or African American, followed by White, with a few Asian and mixed-race participants.
 - Most respondents were not Hispanic or Latino.
 - Household sizes ranged from 2 to 7 people, with most having 1–3 children between 0–18 years old.
 - The majority of respondents had at least one child attending an early childhood program or elementary school.

The Solutions

- State Legislation
 - Some states explicitly ban most suspensions for younger age groups and grades.
 - Ark. Code Ann. § 6-18-507(b)(2) (2017); Cal. Educ. Code § 48900(k)(2) (2020) (prohibiting K-5 suspensions for willful defiance); Colo. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 22-33-106.1(2) (2019); Conn. Gen. Stat. Ann. § 10-233c(g) (2024); 105 Ill. Comp. Stat. Ann. 5 / 2-3.71 (2018); Ky. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 158.150(9) (2006); Md. Code Ann., Educ. § 7-305.1(b)(1) (2021); Minn. Stat. § 121A.425 (2023); Ohio Rev. Code Ann. § 3313.668(B) (2018); Or. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 339.250(2)(d) (2019); Neb. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 79-265.01(1) (2023); Nev. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 392.466 (2023); N.J. Stat. Ann. § 18A:37-2a (2016); Me. Rev. Stat. Ann. tit. 20-A, § 1001(9) (2021); Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 37.005(c) (2017); Vt. Stat. Ann. tit. 16, § 1162(d) (2021); Va. Code Ann. § 22.1-277(B) (2018); D.C. Code Ann. § 38-236.04(a)(1) (2019) (prohibits short-term and in-school suspensions of students in kindergarten through 4th grade that are longer than ten cumulative school days during any academic term).
 - Some states only allow suspensions for students in older age groups or grades in certain situations.
 - Ariz. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 15-841(B) (2000); Cal. Educ. Code § 48900.2 (1992); Cal. Educ. Code § 48900.3 (1994); Cal. Educ. Code § 48900.4 (1994); Colo. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 22-33-105(5)(a) (2007); La. Stat. Ann. § 17:224 (1990); La. Stat. Ann. § 17:416(B)(1)(b)(ii)(cc) (2021); La. Stat. Ann. § 17:416(A)(1)(b)(iii) (2021); Mich. Comp. Laws Ann. § 380.1311a (1999); Nev. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 392.466 (2023); Wis. Stat. Ann. § 120.13(1)(c)(2) (1999).
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 - Sandy Eyles, NC Education Justice (interview on April 9, 2024)
 - Kristina Mercier, retired educator and advocate (interview on April 10, 2024)
 - Barbara Anderson, retired educator and advocate (interview on April 16, 2024)
 - Stephanie Walker, NHCS Board of Education (interview on April 23, 2024)
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 - Dionne Jenkins, WS/FCS General Counsel (interview on October 18, 2024)



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