



Keep more kids in the classroom

Ohio bill would limit exclusionary discipline practices in early grades while fostering social, emotional development

by Ohio Sen. Peggy Lehner (sd06@senate.state.oh.us)

Ever since introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act, policymakers have watched with increasing frustration as achievement gaps in our states' schools persist.

Whether we are looking at kindergarten readiness, third-grade reading, high school graduation or college attainment, we see that disparities based on race, economic status or disability remain virtually unchanged. In all of these realms, achievement gaps of 20 percent or more are the norm.

In response, policymakers have focused most of their attention on academic-oriented reforms such as teacher quality, accountability, assessments and school choice. Not to disparage the value of any of these reforms, but when it comes to the achievement gap, very little has changed.

We have become very good at measuring differences in academic achievement via federally mandated testing, but remain virtually impotent when it comes to even narrowing the gaps.

I would suggest that we need to start paying more attention to another set of statistics — namely, inequitable discipline practices. It strikes me as no coincidence that along with a 30 percent kindergarten readiness gap among economically disadvantaged students, we see equally dramatic differences in the number of suspensions among the same children.

Could it be the behaviors that lead a child to be suspended are the very same behaviors that are preventing them from learning?

Build soft skills, limit child trauma

When it comes to the workforce, everyone is aware of the importance of “soft skills” — those essential qualities employers seek in their new hires such as the ability to show up on time, work well with others, follow directions and be an active problem solver.

Many employers can train workers to do specific job-related tasks, but if an applicant lacks these most basic skills, he or she will not be hired (or retained).

Most soft skills are not something we learn in high school or in preparation for our first job. Rather, many children learn these skills very early in life, well before they even enter school. Take self-regulation, for example. In the workforce, this means being able to show up on time each and every day. In kindergarten, it means being able to sit quietly in class and listen to the teacher. It is a skill first taught at home.

If a parent doesn't possess the skill, or perhaps is overly burdened by poverty and all that is associated with it, the likelihood that he or she will pass it onto a child is slim at best.

It is widely recognized that a child who is never read to before coming to school is going to struggle to learn to read. We would never suspend

a child for struggling to read, but we suspend hundreds of young children every day for not knowing how to behave.

In Ohio last year, more than 34,000 children under age 8 were suspended from school; 90 percent of them were economically disadvantaged.

Research tells us that exclusionary discipline practices such as suspension and expulsion are not only counterproductive in addressing student behavior, but are also extremely detrimental to young children.

Children who live in poverty are exposed to a broad range of adverse childhood experiences, from homelessness and hunger, to violence and addiction. School may be the only safe place in their life, and to be excluded from it can have lifelong devastating consequences, actually becoming yet another adverse childhood experience.

Encourage a new disciplinary model

These factors led me to introduce SB 246, also known as the Safe Act. The purpose of this legislation is to move Ohio away from the widespread use of exclusionary discipline practices and instead to build a school climate which develops the social and emotional skills that a child needs to be successful in school and in life.

I have seen schools like this in action, and have seen what a profound impact they can have not only on children, but teachers as well. Rather than spending their time disciplining children, teachers are able to teach. As one school principal proudly told me, “We haven't lost a single teacher in two years.” Academically, that same school has the highest test scores in its district — in spite of being the most economically disadvantaged.

Key to this success is broad buy-in from faculty and staff, as well as professional training in trauma-informed practices, cultural competency, and social and emotional learning. Many schools are adopting various social and emotional learning curricula to help develop a schoolwide culture.

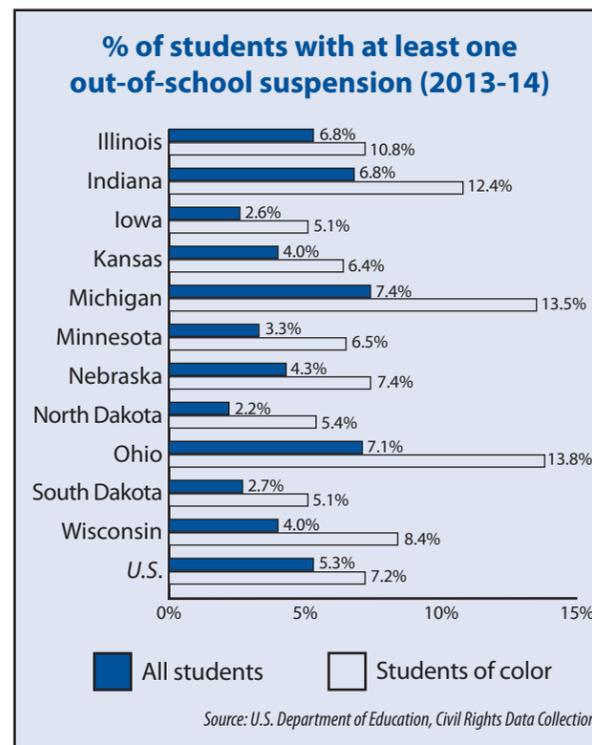
SB 246 recommends this approach for schools but does not require it. (For more information about such programs, check out casel.org).

However, the legislation, if passed and once fully implemented, would limit out-of-school suspensions and expulsions for children, from pre-kindergarten through third grade.

Schools will be given three years before they are expected to be fully compliant, allowing teachers time to be trained. Startup funds for professional development are included in the bill as well.

Ohio schools are already required by rule to have a Positive Behavior Intervention and Support framework in place; however, only about half have done so and only a handful are fully implementing it.

We must and will do better under the Safe Act. I



do recognize that at times, it is necessary to remove a child from a classroom in order to protect the safety of classmates, teachers or the child himself or herself. But I am also equally certain that such situations do not occur 34,000 times per year among our youngest students.

Under the Safe Act, some suspensions will continue to happen, but only under very limited circumstances. (Violent behavior and threats toward others would still make a student eligible for suspension or expulsion.)

The Cincinnati Public Schools district has had this type of limited-suspension policy in place for several years. To my knowledge, it is the only Ohio district with such a policy in place. It should also be noted that Cincinnati is Ohio's highest academic-performing urban district.

I hope our bill is a positive step toward the creation of a system that supports our youngest and most vulnerable students so they too can take advantage of critical opportunities to grow up to be a part of the next generation's workforce.

Ohio Sen. Peggy Lehner serves as chair of the Ohio Senate Education Committee. She is a 2010 graduate of CSG Midwest's Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development (BILLD).

Submissions welcome

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