

**School Suspension/Expulsion Project  
Briefing Paper: February 2003**

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## **Characteristics of Maine High School Students Who Are Suspended, Expelled, and/or Referred to Alternative Education**

### **A. The Purpose of Suspension, Expulsion, and Alternative Education**

Suspension and expulsion occupy the most severe end of the school disciplinary continuum. Examples of less severe disciplinary interventions include student-teacher conferences, detention, and peer mediation. Suspension and expulsion are defined in [05-071 Department of Education 2, Chapter 101](#):

**Suspension (2.30):** Disciplinary action taken by an authorized School Administrator or School Board which results in the temporary discontinuation of education services and the removal of the student from educational opportunities.

**Expulsion (2.9):** Termination of all education services by a School Board for a student who has been deliberately disobedient, deliberately disorderly, or for infractions of violence or possession, furnishing of or trafficking of any scheduled drug as defined in 17-A MRSA Chapter 45. Nothing in this subsection 1995, c. 322, §5 (new), prevents a School Board from providing educational services in an alternative setting to a student who has been expelled.

Alternative education represents another avenue for working with youth with disciplinary problems while enabling the youth to remain in school. Alternative education programs cover a broad range including in-school and out-of-school programs, and may be as simple as a shorter school day or combining high school and vocational school components. Alternative education programs also include separate school facilities which may or may not be a part of an individual Local Education Agency (LEA).

### **B. Research Questions**

- 1) Who is suspended/expelled?
- 2) Why are they suspended/expelled?
- 3) What happens after the initial disposition?
- 4) What are the needs of suspended/expelled students?
- 5) What is the universe of Maine LEA suspension/expulsion policies?
- 6) What models exist to provide schools with intensive supervision resources to support high risk youth?

### **C. Data Sources and Limitations**

- 1) Maine Department of Education (DOE, 2002): Includes information on expulsion and the number of Maine youth who receive special education services by grade and gender. Data are limited to school expulsions.
- 2) Maine Safe and Drug Free Schools and Community Act (MSDFSCA) data collection system, Maine Department of Behavioral and Developmental Services, Office of Substance Abuse (2002): The most comprehensive Maine data source for long-term suspension, expulsion, referral to alternative education, and education status reported by MSDFSCA prohibited behaviors, gender, and grade level. The MSDFSCA data system collects information on K-12 students in Maine. The major limitation is that data are incident-based, not linked to individual students.
- 3) Muskie School of Public Service (MSPS): Data on 293 youth furnished by 40 Maine high schools. Includes disciplinary histories, attendance and academic performance data, and post-expulsion services. MSPS data do not constitute a representative sample due to low response rate (33%) and incomplete reporting for some students; however, these data provide a portrait of a sample of Maine youth who were suspended and/or expelled that are not available through any other data source.

**D. Maine Youth: Who is Expelled, Suspended, and Referred to Alternative Education?**

Expulsion is the termination of all educational services. MDSFSCA reported 168 expulsions during the 2000-2001 school year, while DOE reported 140 Maine youth were expelled during the 2000-2001 school year. Both MSDFSCA and DOE data show that males were expelled from school more often than females by a ratio of nearly 4:1. While LEAs are not required to provide educational services to expelled students, MSPS data show that tutoring was provided for 21 (53.8%) of 46 students who were expelled or withdrew from school during the 2000-2001 school year.

**Table 1: Expulsion by Gender (DOE, MSDFSCA)**

	Male	Female	Unknown	Male%	Female%	Unknown%	Totals
<b>MSDFSCA</b>	132	34	2	78.6%	20.2%	1.2%	168
<b>DOE</b>	110	30	0	78.6%	21.4%	0.0%	140

Long-term suspension is defined in two ways: 1. A single suspension of 10 or more days in length, and 2. A series of shorter suspensions that sum to 10 or more days. MSDFSCA data separate long-term suspensions into these two categories.

**Table 2: Long-term Suspension by Gender, Educational Status (MSDFSCA)**

Type of LTS (MSDFSCA)	Male	Female	Unknown	Male%	Female%	Unknown%	Totals
<b>1 Suspension =10 days</b>							
<b>Regular Ed</b>	70	37	1	64.8%	34.3%	0.9%	108
<b>Special Ed</b>	18	2	0	90.0%	10.0%		20
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>68.8%</b>	<b>30.5%</b>		<b>128</b>
<b>Sum of Suspensions =10 days</b>							
<b>Regular Ed</b>	96	35		73.3%	26.7%		131
<b>Special Ed</b>	61	10		85.9%	14.1%		71
<b>Total</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>45</b>		<b>77.7%</b>	<b>22.3%</b>		<b>202</b>

Referrals to alternative education programs made up the largest category (444, 47.2% of 940) of responses to prohibited behaviors reported by MSDFSCA data.

**Table 3: Referral to Alternative Education by Gender, Educational Status (MSDFSCA)**

Removal to Alt. Ed. Setting	Male	Female	Unknown	Male%	Female%	Unknown%	Total
<b>Regular Students</b>	278	105	0	72.6%	27.4%	0.0%	383
<b>Special Education Students</b>	49	10	0	83.1%	16.9%	0.0%	59
<b>Totals</b>	<b>327</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>74.0%</b>	<b>26.0%</b>	<b>0.0%</b>	<b>442</b>

The MSPS survey collected attendance data for youth who were suspended and/or expelled from school. The majority (59.7%) of the youth in this dataset had either fair or poor attendance histories.

**Table 4: School Attendance (MSPS)**

Attendance	Male	Female	Unknown	Total	Percent
<b>Excellent (0-5 Absences)</b>	42	5	3	50	18.3%
<b>Good (6-10 Absences)</b>	44	8	8	60	22.0%
<b>Fair (11-15 Absences)</b>	30	10	2	42	15.4%
<b>Poor (16 or more Absences)</b>	83	28	10	121	44.3%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>199</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>273</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

The MSPS survey collected data on the number of school days students missed due to suspension, as well as the total number of school days students missed through excused and unexcused absences and suspension. Days suspended from school were reported for 287 (98.0%) of the youth in the dataset. On

average, these youth missed 17.8 days (3.6 weeks) of school due to suspension. Total days missed were reported for 262 (89.4%) youth; these youth missed an average of 36.6 days (7.3 weeks) of school.

**Table 5: Days Out of School (MSPS)**

Suspension	Male	Female	Unknown	Total
Days Suspended (n=287)	18.1 (16.0)	16.3 (15.5)	18.3 (16.5)	17.8 (16.0)
Total Days Missed (n=262)	35.9 (31.0)	38.6 (36.0)	37.3 (30.5)	36.6 (31.0)

The MSPS survey collected data on the academic performance of youth who were suspended and/or expelled. Data were furnished for 182 (62.1%) students. Overall, the average academic performance level was 61.4, with a median level of 71.0. Excluding 0 scores from the calculations, the students overall average improved to 70.6, with the median increasing to 72.5. The research team divided these youth into quartiles based on average academic performance. The mean performance of these of these four groups ranged from 25.5 through 89.0. Note that 137 (75.3%) students had academic performances of 77 or lower.

**Table 6: Academic Performance Quartiles (MSPS)**

Quartile	Quartile Range	Quartile Mean	Number of Students
First Quartile	78-98	89.0	45
Second Quartile	71-77	74.3	46
Third Quartile	60-71	65.2	45
Fourth Quartile	0-60	25.5	46

The MSPS survey asked respondents, “Did the school refer this student to law enforcement at any point during the continuum of disciplinary actions for this student?” Ninety-four (32.1%) of the 293 students were referred to law enforcement as a result of incidents that occurred at school. Eighty-one (86.2%) of the 94 had a disciplinary history at school, while 13 (13.8%) of the 94 had no disciplinary history. A number of national authors, Adams (2000), Deridder (1991), and Hair & Edley (2000), point to the correlation between suspension and expulsion, poor school attendance and performance, the risk of dropping out, and the risk of juvenile justice involvement. Table 12 displays the disciplinary histories of students referred to law enforcement.

**Table 7: Law Enforcement Referral \* Disciplinary History (MSPS)**

Law Enforcement Referral	Disciplinary History	No Disciplinary History	Total
	81 (86.2%)	13 (13.8%)	94 (100%)

### **E. Maine Youth: Why Are Youth Expelled, Suspended, and Referred to Alternative Education?**

The MSDFSCA collects information on prohibited behaviors committed by Maine youth. Table 7 displays data on the 10 most frequent prohibited behaviors reported to MSDFSCA. The data include the prohibited act, the number of suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to alternative education associated with the prohibited act and the prohibited act category. Skipping School and Disorderly Conduct (274, 34.9%), both Other: Policy Violations make up over a third of the top 10 most frequent offenses. Fighting, Threat/Intimidation and Harassment: Other (248, 31.6%), all Personal Offense Violations, constitute the second largest offense category. The percentages in Table 7 reflect the proportion of a specific offense that resulted in each disposition, e.g. for Skipping School there were 16 (11.4%) incidents of long-term suspension and 124 (88.6%) referrals to alternative education, totaling 140 incidents. The 140 incidents of Skipping School comprise 20.1 % of the 698 incidents

**Table 8: 10 Most Frequent Offenses (MSDFSCA)**

Prohibited Act	Long Term Suspension	Expelled	Referred to Alt. Education	Total	Prohibited Act Category
Skipping school	16 (11.4%)	0	124(88.6%)	140 (20.1%)	Other: Policy Violation
Disorderly conduct	42 (31.3%)	22 (16.4%)	70 (52.2%)	134 (19.2%)	Other: Policy Violation
Fighting	43 (38.1%)	21 (18.6%)	49 (43.4%)	113 (16.2%)	Personal Offense Violation
Threat/intimidation	36 (33.3%)	14 (13.0%)	58 (53.7%)	108 (15.5%)	Personal Offense Violation
Tobacco possession	4 (9.8%)	3 (7.3%)	34 (82.9%)	41 (5.9%)	ATOD Violation
Alcohol use	36 (90.0%)	0	4 (10.0%)	40 (5.7%)	ATOD Violation
Marijuana use	14 (37.8%)	3 (8.1%)	20 (54.1%)	37 (5.3%)	ATOD Violation
Tobacco use	20 (62.5%)	6 (18.8%)	6 (18.8%)	32 (4.6%)	ATOD Violation
Harassment: other	18 (66.7%)	4 (14.8%)	5 (18.5%)	27 (3.9%)	Personal Offense Violation
Bomb Threat	5 (19.2%)	14 (53.8%)	7 (26.9%)	26 (37.2%)	Weapons Violation
Totals	234 (33.5%)	87 (12.5%)	377(54.0%)	698 (100%)	

**F. Maine Youth: What are the Needs of Youth Expelled, Suspended and Referred to Alternative Education?**

None of the datasets available to the project expressly asked for, or collected data on the needs of Maine youth who are suspended, expelled, or referred to alternative education.

Morrison et al (1997) describes the following key risk indicators:

- 1) Difficulty with school work
- 2) Behavioral problems that begin early in the student’s school history
- 3) Frequent school moves
- 4) Difficulty with peer and teacher relationships
- 5) Family problems

The research team used the MSPS and MSDFSCA datasets to construct proxies of students’ needs. Fifty (17.1%) of the 293 students in the MSPS dataset were referred to other resources during the 2000-2001 school year. These resources included counseling services (22 youth, 44.0%), substance abuse services (10 youth, 20%), and psychological evaluations (7 youth, 14%).

Table 8 contains a breakdown of all 940 MSDFSCA prohibited incidents by MSDFSCA category. Personal Offense Violations (320, 34.0%) point to a need for youth to restrain impulses and respect the rights of others. Other: Policy Violations (300, 31.9%), including Skipping School and Disorderly Conduct, reflect poor school attachment. ATOD violations (244, 26.0%) are indicative of substance use issues.

**Table 9: Violation Categories (MSDFSCA)**

Offense Category	Frequency
Personal Offense Violations	320 (34.0%)
Other: Policy Violations	300 (31.9%)
ATOD Violations	244 (26.0%)
Weapons Related	49 (5.2%)
Other: Criminal Acts	27 (2.9%)
Total	940 (100%)

**G. The Universe of Maine Suspension and Expulsion Policies**

MSDFSCA data allow the construction of rates per 1,000 students for expulsion, suspension, and referral to alternative education. Rates are reported by mean (average), median (the halfway point), and the high and low values for each disposition.

**Table 10: Removal Rates per 1,000 Students (MSDFSCA)**

MSDFSCA	Long Term Suspension	Refer to Alternative Education	Expulsion	Overall
Mean rate/1,000	11.3	7.2	5.3	13.3
Median rate/1,000	8.5	4.7	3.1	9.7
Range: High	86.8	39.6	34.9	89.8
Range: Low	1.0	0.8	0.8	1.3

The following quotes from Maine School Administrators present another perspective on the range of school practices and attitudes.

“We don’t expel unless it is a case of dealing drugs or something very serious like that. We try to find other means, go down other avenues before doing that.” (Maine High School Principal)

“We have a very low tardy and absentee rate. If a kid swears at a teacher, that’s an automatic suspension. Three suspensions equals going up for expulsion. My School Board is very supportive of me. If I bring them up for expulsion, the board expels them.” (Maine High School Principal)

### **H. Alternative Education in Maine**

The Institute for the Study of Students at Risk<sup>1</sup> has created a database of alternative education programs in Maine. Currently the database contains information on 134 programs and is searchable by town and county.<sup>2</sup> The database is not yet accessible through the Institute’s website, but the Institute plans to make the database publicly accessible as soon as possible.

Davis, Brutsaert-Durant, & Lee (2002) suggest that the two *most critical* factors of successful alternative programs are:

- 1) The sense of hope and empowerment that these programs provide to students
- 2) The “personal relationship” that exists between student and instructor.

### **I. What We Know**

- 1) MSDFSCA data show that 168 Maine high school students were expelled during the 2000-2001 school year.
- 2) DOE data show that 140 Maine high school students were expelled during the 2000-2001 school year.
- 3) The majority of disciplinary incidents that resulted in long-term suspension, expulsion, and referral to alternative educational settings were Personal Offenses (34.0%) and Other: Policy Violations (31.9%) (MSDFSCA).
- 4) The most frequent disposition for prohibited behaviors in the MSDFSCA dataset was referral to alternative education, 444 (47.2%) of all dispositions. Expulsion (168, 17.9%) was the least frequent disposition.
- 5) A sample of Maine youth (MSPS) who were suspended and/or expelled and/or referred to alternative education had poor academic achievement (Mean = 70.6), missed an average of 17.8 days of school due to suspension, and missed an average of 36.8 days of school due to the combination of excused and unexcused absences and suspension.

### **J. What We Do Not Know**

- 1) The number of Maine high school students expelled during the 2000-2001 school year.
- 2) Whether school referral patterns reflect the universe of youth needs.

<sup>1</sup> Institute for the Study of Students at Risk. <http://www.ume.maine.edu/cofed/research/atrisk.html>

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with Roxanne Lee, Institute for the Study of Students at Risk 12.18.2002.

- 3) We do not know much about alternative education programs in Maine. The Institute for the Study of Students at Risk at the University of Maine's database will be helpful when it comes on line.

### **K. Topics for Future Research**

What is the relationship between individual school policy language, administrator attitudes, and school removal rates? An examination of a small (5-10) number of schools comparing the rates of removal to school policy language and School Administrator attitudes would provide a sense of this relationship. This would be a labor intensive qualitative study that would require obtaining permission from the schools chosen for the sample.

Work with MSDFSCA staff to expand data collection to include:

- 1) Referral to law enforcement
- 2) Academic performance
- 3) School attendance
- 4) Resources offered to students

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