

'Absolutely indefensible': Over 1,100 Pre-K to Second Grade Suspensions in 2019-20 School Year

State data shows nearly 100 districts issued at least one suspension for youngest students

by Lisa Backus

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Despite 2015 legislation that narrowly defined when young children can be suspended from school, state Education Department data shows more than 1,100 suspensions were issued to 670 students in prekindergarten through second grade in the 2019-2020 school year.

It's a problem that largely targets children of color with disabilities who are missing valuable class time to suspensions for behavioral issues that could be addressed with better teacher supports, advocates said.

"It's crazy, it's absolutely indefensible," said state Child Advocate Sarah Eagan. "The answer to this is not asking why are teachers suspending young children, but instead asking what supports are teachers getting in their classrooms?"

While the number of both in-school and out-of-school suspensions for children in kindergarten through second grade has decreased by 60% since 2015, nearly 100 districts and charter schools in the state issued at least one suspension for children in kindergarten through second grade in 2019-20, according to the state data.

Children of color make up about 70% of the suspensions, state officials said.

"The bottom line is, this has to change," Eagan said. "This is a violation of children's civil rights."

Hartford and Bridgeport led the state in the number of suspensions for children in second grade two or under with more than 50 each during the 2019-2020 school year. Bristol had 43 and Waterbury had at least 35 children suspended in the youngest grades. The bulk of the suspensions in each district were given to students in second grade, the data show.

However, the number of suspensions may, in fact, be higher due to how cases are reported to protect student privacy. If the number of suspensions was fewer than six for a particular grade level, a school district only has to indicate that it had at least one suspension.

Furthermore, all of the figures for the 2019-2020 school year are abbreviated since schools closed in mid-March and remained closed through the end of the school year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

For example, in Waterbury that year, the district reported 25 suspensions of students in second grade, nine first-grade suspensions and at least one suspension of a student in kindergarten. The number of Waterbury kindergarteners who were suspended could be as high as five due to the suspension reporting method.

New Haven schools had the fifth-highest tally with at least 22 suspensions of children in grade two or younger in the same school year.

Schools can only suspend children in second grade or below if the child's in-school behavior is "violent, endangers others or is of a sexual nature," according to state Department of Education documents.

But Eagan pointed out that in the 2015 law, violent behavior is "in the eye of the beholder." Eagan and other advocates led a push this session to ban suspensions of young children but the legislature took no action on the initiative.

Attorney Kathryn Meyer with the Center for Children's Advocacy, which lobbied for the 2015 law change, says the number of suspensions only tells part of the story. At the time, the center was dealing with a lot of parents who were being asked to pick up their child early, Meyer said.

“The parents were being asked so many times to come get their child that they were losing their menial jobs,” Meyer said.

Often, the incident was not called a “suspension” – which has to be reported to the state – but it was noted on the child’s disciplinary record, Meyer said.

Meyer said because the law leaves “violent behavior” up to subjective interpretation, “it could include any small child who is throwing a chair. That is something that needs to be dealt with but there are people who would say that behavior falls into the category of ‘violent,’” she said.

The end result is that young children, predominantly children of color, are missing instruction and opportunities for developmentally appropriate interventions, she said.

State education officials recognized that the number of suspensions of young children is too high and have tried to do something about it, according to Department of Education spokesman Eric Scoville.

Former Education Commissioner Dianna Wentzell sent a memo to all superintendents in 2017 to clarify the use of in-school and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions for young children.

“Young students who are expelled or are suspended are as much as 10 times more likely to drop out of high school, experience academic failure and grade retention, hold negative school attitudes and face incarceration,” Wentzell said in the memo, quoting a policy statement issued by the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education.

Wentzell said reducing “exclusionary discipline for young children is not only good policy, it is also a statutory obligation.”

As part of the push to increase awareness, the department targeted the 15 school districts with the most suspensions or expulsions for young children with a mandated webinar on positive school discipline for students in pre-K through second grade. Other interventions included data monitoring to craft support plans for districts with high disciplinary infractions and a school discipline collaborative advisory group, Scoville said.

But Eagan and Meyer say more could be done. Smaller class sizes and a higher ratio of adults to children would prevent some of the issues, they said. “There are teachers in high-needs districts with 25 to 30 kids in their class,” Eagan said.

Schools also need space and adults to oversee an area where children who are in crisis can de-escalate, Meyer said. “Sending a child home early does nothing to address the root cause of the behavior,” Meyer said.

She suggested that some federal pandemic funding could allow for expansion of pilot programs that train teachers how to deal with behavioral issues in young children.

“There is so much that can be done to keep kids in the classroom and keep them learning rather than exclusion,” Meyer said. “When a young child is suspended or expelled, it sends a strong message that you don’t belong here.”