



Reducing Disparities in Exclusionary Discipline Practices in Arkansas

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This state case summary is part of a [series](#) produced with the support of the National Comprehensive Center to highlight connections between equity and state policy. This case summary aligns with the National Academies' [equity framework](#) within Domain G — Equitable Access to Supportive School and Classroom Environments, Indicator 15 — Disparities in Non-Exclusionary Discipline Practices.

As [reported](#) by the U.S. Department of Education, students missed over 11 million school days during the 2017-18 school year because of exclusionary discipline, which encompasses suspensions and expulsions. Nationally, during that same school year, approximately 12% of Black students and nearly 7% of Indigenous students were suspended at least once, compared to 5% of all students. These data [align with research](#) which shows that Black students, Indigenous students and students with disabilities are subject to exclusionary discipline practices at higher rates than their peers. Moreover, Black students with disabilities are suspended at disproportionately higher rates than their peers of other races with disabilities along with Black students without disabilities.

Historical trends have also shown that Latine and Pacific Islander students in secondary schools are more likely to be suspended than their white peers. These exclusionary discipline disparities are often due to subjective discipline decisions made by teachers and administrators.

[Research](#) has also shown negative impacts on academic performance and life outcomes for students experiencing exclusionary discipline. For example, [some studies](#) have found that students experiencing exclusionary discipline may be less likely to graduate on time and are more likely to withdraw from school before earning a diploma. These students may also have a higher likelihood of being impacted by the justice system. Additionally, [economic research](#) demonstrates increased financial costs for retaining students along with decreased economic output from students' delay in entering the workforce. Prompted by these negative impacts, states have worked to reduce exclusionary discipline disparities and usage.

State Policy Strategies in Arkansas

States have sought to reduce exclusionary discipline rates by limiting the use of suspensions and expulsions in pre-K and early elementary grades. States have also sought to eliminate the use of [zero tolerance](#) disciplinary policies alongside other approaches — e.g., [Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports](#) and [restorative justice](#) practices — to reduce the types of behaviors

that result in exclusionary discipline. In addition, states have provided implicit bias training for educators to reduce the likelihood of racial bias or subjectivity influencing recommendations for exclusionary discipline.

As an example, **Arkansas** has reduced the use of exclusionary discipline by implementing a blend of alternative discipline approaches, student supports and policies intended to reduce exclusionary discipline. In 2013, Arkansas enacted [Act 1329](#), which prohibits the use of suspension for truancy. There was some initial pushback and confusion from school administrators regarding the policy. However, the state was able to clarify that the intent of Act 1329 was to prevent students from missing additional classroom instructional time by engaging in further communication with administrators and offering implementation support. Since policy enactment, the use of exclusionary discipline for truancy has [decreased significantly](#).

Then, in 2017, Arkansas enacted [S.B. 609](#) to limit the use of exclusionary discipline in kindergarten through grade five, except in cases where there is potential harm to students or if a student's behavior causes a serious disruption that cannot be addressed in another way. Districts are instead required to use behavior intervention teams as a strategy to provide support to students before student behavior escalates to the point of requiring exclusionary discipline. However, districts are still allowed to administer in-school suspensions. While exclusionary discipline has not been fully eliminated in K-5, local education agencies often seek alternative forms of discipline that allow students to remain in school.

Outcomes and Progress

Over the past decade, Arkansas has made steady [progress](#) in reducing the use of exclusionary discipline by promoting alternative forms of discipline and has experienced a slight decline in exclusionary discipline disparities for Black students. Arkansas has also allocated American Rescue Plan funding to establish their [Arkansas Thrive](#) program, which supports districts in developing and sustaining a multi-tiered system of support. This system gives students access to the personalized academic, behavioral and mental health supports needed to be successful. This focus on whole child supports can help further reduce the need for exclusionary discipline.

An important consideration for data analysis is that the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to remote instruction makes comparing data about discipline approaches for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years difficult. As such, analysis of the effectiveness of the truancy and K-5 suspension policies is based on comparisons for the year prior to policy implementation and the 2018-19 school year. Further comparisons may be feasible with data from the 2022-23 school year when it becomes available since instruction was in person for this academic year.

Arkansas's overall goal was to shift from implementing punitive discipline practices to addressing underlying issues that lead to students' misbehavior. By limiting the allowable uses of exclusionary discipline and its application in the elementary grades, the state has seen movement toward their ultimate goal of using more equitable discipline practices. The state still has progress to make in reducing racial discipline disparities, but these steps show a commitment to a more equitable use of disciplinary practices.