

Scrutiny put on BPS suspensions

Jule Pattison-Gordon | 4/13/2016, 11:55 a.m.

Out-of-school suspensions came under fire on Monday night, with especially strong criticism reserved for suspensions administered to young children and for minor offenses.

During a hearing on Boston Public School discipline, convened by City Councilors Annissa Essaibi-George and Tito Jackson at the First Church of Roxbury, students and education professionals largely denounced the practice as worse than ineffective. Many said suspensions alienate children from the school community, impede their learning and are administered disproportionately to minorities and special education students.

Better methods, several speakers said, shift the focus from punishment to uncovering the root cause of misbehavior and repairing relationships.

Tough on kindergarten

Tim Nicolette is president of the Up Education Network, a nonprofit that operates and aims to turnaround low-performing district schools. The network-run Up Academy Holland in Dorchester made news in February for its practice of suspending kindergarteners. In the 2014-2015 school year, it accounted for 10 percent of the suspensions given to three- and four-year-olds statewide, sending young kids home 68 times. Tito Jackson cited this practice as one reason for calling the hearing.

“Your practices leave our young people damaged by the types of suspension rates that we see at your school,” Jackson told Nicolette.

According to the application Up Academy submitted to the city, the philosophy behind high use of suspensions is similar to the broken windows theory of policing. Nicolette said at the hearing that the school comes down hard on small behavioral problems to nip them in the bud, and that doing so helps create a safe environment for all students to learn.

“We need to create environments that are conducive to learning,” he said. “We sweat the small stuff because sweating the small stuff can really make the difference between a student being able to read on level or not [We] focus on small behaviors so they don’t lead to bigger problems and, more importantly, loss of learning time.”

However, as WBUR was reporting on Up Academy's kindergarten suspension rates in February, the school abandoned the practices. Nicolette said the decision was made last spring, following a review of the policy's impact.

Excessive suspensions

Elizabeth McIntyre, an Equal Justice Works Fellow with Greater Boston Legal Service, represents BPS and charter students in school discipline disputes. She told hearing attendees that she has seen children suspended for trivial misbehaviors, such as a five-year-old kicking open the wheelie backpack of a kid who teased him, or a nine-year-old who told her teacher that she "needed to get a brain that worked." Too often, suspensions are the first — not last — resort, McIntyre said.

In Boston, as in many cities, minorities and children with disabilities are disproportionately suspended for non-criminal, non-violent and non-drug-related offenses, testified Matt Cregor, education project director for the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights and Economic Justice. In one BPS school, a third of the out-of-school suspensions were handed to students with disabilities. None of the suspensions for a nonviolent, noncriminal, non-drug related offense was given to a white student.

Effectiveness question

In some cases, said Elizabeth McIntyre, the causes for suspension are more serious. She has worked on cases where worked-up young children were running through the halls, yelling. When staff approached, the kids bit and kicked.

But, she added, suspending them did not solve anything.

"That will not change that problem," she said. "The student will come back and exhibit the same behavior," she said.

Suspensions are a temporary halt to disruptions, but fall short of revealing and addressing the cause of the behavior or forcing the child to consider why what she or he did was problematic.

Dangerous message

Suspension can even promote misbehavior. Removing a child from school can convey the message that the child is bad, and make them and their families feel rejected by the school and disciplining teacher, said Kimberly Small, the assistant director of Charlestown High's Diploma Plus Program.

"What often happens when you use traditional discipline practices is you're saying, 'I don't want to deal with this issue, go home,'" Small said during the hearing. "When kids are suspended they feel they are unwanted in school. When they come back to the teacher that got them suspended, they feel the teacher no longer likes them"

High use of suspension may also cause parents to feel the school is not on their side, she added.

“When you are suspending children, most of times their parents did not have a good time in school, so their parents feel like it’s being done again: ‘You didn’t want me there, you don’t want my kid there.’ The trust is broken.”

The alienation stemming from heavy use of discipline can put children on the school-to-prison pipeline, Cregor said.

“Out-of-school suspension is found to predict dropout rates and involvement in the criminal justice system,” he said.

Discipline also can shape a child’s views of school and learning, making kindergarten suspensions especially dangerous. They create negative associations with school that lasts for years to come.

“Discipline can make or break a child’s experience in school,” Essaibi-George told attendees. “It can make or break a child’s spirit.”

Punished with ignorance

Removing a child from school denies them instruction, something that clashes with many education reformists’ calls for extended learning time as a powerful tool for reducing the education gap. Fania Joseph, a student from Boston Community Leadership Academy, reported at the hearing that one Up Academy student said in a survey that he was suspended 52 times by grade 5. He had missed so much material that he was kept back from graduating.

Restorative justice

As an alternative to suspensions, many praised “restorative justice,” a discipline strategy focused not on punishing perpetrators but on helping them understand what they have done wrong and repair their relationships with those they have affected. The misbehavior is addressed without removing the perpetrator from the community and discussion is used to help explore what prompted the behavior so it can be prevented in the future.

The offending student is able to have his or her voice heard as well as hear from the victims how they feel they have been harmed. Diploma Plus’s assistant director said they may ask the perpetrator to answer questions designed to make them reconsider the situation, such as “What did you do to harm the other person?” and “Have you ever been harmed in this way before?”

This helps to create a sense of a community and trust at the school, so that children care about their community and how they affect it, said Sung-Joon Pai, the director of DP.

“Nobody wants to restore harm that they’ve done if they don’t care about the community,” he said.

To help foster this, DP staff have weekly school meetings to discuss any issues on students’ minds — from problems at home to events in the news or that students have encountered online.

Bringing reform

Amalio Nieves, the assistant superintendent for socioemotional learning and wellness for BPS, told hearing attendees that discussion has begun on implementing more restorative justice practices and other reforms across the system.

“We’re going to bring everyone together and really map out a plan for providing restorative practices all throughout Boston Public Schools,” he said. “When students misbehave, our philosophy is we have to help students to learn from their mistakes.”

Superintendent Tommy Chang has taken dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline as a focus, with a March listening session on the matter and a leadership and stakeholder group to be formed to further explore it, Nieves said. BPS officials also met recently with members of the Department of Youth Services to discuss how to smoothly transition juvenile offenders back into the school system

However, implementing reforms entails expenses, such as providing training to teachers and staff in the techniques. Nieves said he expects some of that funding to come from BPS but fully implementing restorative practices will require external support as well.

On the web

Boston Students’ Rights: <http://www.bostonstudentrights.org/#/app/home>

More on restorative justice: <http://www.otlcampaign.org/sites/default/files/restorative-practices-guide.pdf>