

States urged to embrace alternatives to school discipline criminalizing kids

GOP state lawmaker who chairs group calls report 'wake up'

By Susan Ferriss   email 20 hours, 11 minutes ago Updated: 19 hours, 49 minutes ago

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A prominent state lawmakers' advisory group issued a major report Tuesday warning of the "school to prison" pipeline and offering multiple alternatives to harsh school discipline and police crackdowns on students.

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Released by the Council of State Governments — a nonpartisan national research group that advises legislators — the **"School Discipline Consensus Report"** encourages schools and lawmakers to embrace ideas such as conflict resolution and counseling — rather than suspensions, expulsions and forcing kids into juvenile court for infractions as minor as cursing or shoving matches.

"When suspended, these students are at significantly higher risk of falling behind academically, dropping out of school and coming into contact with the juvenile justice system," says the report. "A disproportionately large percentage of disciplined students are youth of color, students with disabilities and youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender."

In a conference call with reporters Tuesday, a Republican Tennessee state Senate leader — Sen. Mark Norris — spoke out in favor of the report's recommendations in his role as the elected chairman of the council.

"This is a wake up regardless of what side of the aisle you sit on," said Norris, who hails from Collierville, a Memphis suburb. "We're very worried about that pipeline to court."

Norris' own state has come under scrutiny from the U.S. Justice Department for **prosecuting and jailing accused truants** — including kids with mental-health difficulties — whose parents say they were **not afforded appointed attorneys in juvenile court** in Knox County, as the Center for Public Integrity recently reported.

If kids are derailed from school by harsh reactions to minor misbehavior, Norris said, they won't become productive members of a community and contribute to its economic well-being.

He said communities need a "bright light" on counterproductive discipline, including issues raised in the Center's report, such as accused truants facing prosecution in court without the appointment of legal counsel.

The School Discipline Consensus Report calls on state, community and school leaders to help reduce suspensions, expulsions and arrests of students and "provide conditions for learning wherein all students feel safe, welcome and supported."

A national network called **Dignity in Schools** — which has helped shape discipline reform in many cities — said interested educators can find viable alternatives in the report: "The strategies in the report are practical, innovative and are based on successful efforts that have been made in schools all across the country from Denver to Austin to Baltimore."

In 2011, the Council of State Governments released a longitudinal study finding that 60 percent of all Texas students had been suspended at least once, with punishment falling particularly **harshly on black and Latino male students**.

The vast majority of suspensions and expulsions — 97 percent — were due to discretionary or local "zero tolerance" policies, not federal policies mandating removal of students. Compared to peers, students with multiple suspensions disproportionately went on to get into trouble with the criminal justice system — not straighten out and get engaged in school.



The Council of State Governments Justice Center's *School Discipline Consensus Report*.

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Texas state Sen. John Whitmire, a Democrat from the Houston area, told reporters during the conference call: “Out-of-school suspensions rarely accomplish anything.”

As chair of the Texas Senate Criminal Justice Committee, Whitmire said he tells his colleagues in the legislature “you either pay now” to help kids stay in school, or “you pay later” with higher incarceration costs. Whitmire said kids in Texas have been accused of misdemeanors for infractions as minor as throwing an eraser.

To address behavioral problems, the report suggests that “each school should have a student support team (or teams) to oversee services for youth with behavioral health and related needs.”

Norris agreed that alternatives listed in the report can be “cost-effective” and that there are multiple options “so you can find what is relevant in your state.”

The report includes recommendations such as the use of “restorative” justice peer counseling. It also includes lengthy sections urging schools to define precisely what the role of police officers should be in a school.

“Police should not be engaged in routine classroom management,” the report recommends, “and whenever possible should use alternatives to arrest for students’ minor offenses that can be appropriately addressed through the school’s discipline system.”

The Center for Public Integrity has reported on how aggressive use of police and “zero tolerance” suspensions and expulsions have fallen disproportionately on black, Latino and low-income children, including middle-school students.

In Kern County, California, for example, **low-income farmworker kids** have been removed from regular schools for minor infractions and sent to alternative schools so far away that they languished at home, assigned to study on their own, **or dropped out**.

In Los Angeles, until recent reforms were enacted, the nation’s largest **school police force was ticketing** tens of thousands of inner-city children in low-income neighborhoods, about half of them 14 or younger.

Kids as young as 12 have been **arrested at Los Angeles schools** for playground fights with friends, and they developed juvenile records for assault as a result, the Center reported.

Since the Texas longitudinal study’s release in 2011, some of the Lone Star state’s school districts have implemented reforms that contributed to 10 percent overall reduction in suspensions and a 30 percent reduction in expulsions at last count, according to Michael Thompson, director of the Council of State Governments Justice Center, which produced the report.

More needs to be done, Whitmire said. He called it “nonsense” for a school in **Duncanville, Texas** to suspend and send home about 170 students in May for dress code violations that included not wearing a belt or a shirt with a collar. Principal Andre Smith told media that the school resorted to the suspensions to teach students to “meet expectations” in school and “outside of school as well.”

Thompson said the report released Tuesday represents “a consensus” and “a vision from the field” with alternatives to harsh discipline recommended by more than 100 educators, parent representatives, law enforcement and court officials and mental and social-welfare officials.

Local and state leaders will join representatives of the Council of State Governments in Austin, Texas, on Wednesday and in Los Angeles on Thursday to promote the strategies in the report.

The council’s report was prepared in part with funding from the California Endowment, Atlantic Philanthropies and the Open Society Foundations, which also funds independent reporting by the Center for Public Integrity.

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TX Rep. Alma Allen has introduced legislation for 8 years in a row to ban corporal punishment/paddling/spanking of students in schools, see HB 471 <http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/Houston-lawmaker-s-bill-would-stop-paddling-in-4327053.php>

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