



COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE
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Report on Student Suspensions for the 2021-2022 School Year

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PURPOSE:

1. To present the annual report on student suspensions for the 2021-2022 school year.

STRATEGIC LINKS:

2. Examination of student suspension data informs the implementation of actions/initiatives which are designed to enhance safety and support the cultural, emotional, and physical well-being of students and staff, as outlined in the [2023-2027 strategic plan](#).

Disaggregation of suspension data by student demographics and identity is also a key indicator in the *Importance of Identity* section of the [Indigenous, Equity, and Human Rights Roadmap, 2020-2023](#) where part of the goal is to identify and disrupt systemic and structural barriers to address disproportionate access, opportunities and outcomes for students who identify as Indigenous, Black and minoritized.

CONTEXT:

3. Regular monitoring of student suspension data is undertaken by the System Principal of Safe and Caring Schools. The Research, Evaluation and Analytics Division (READ) supports this work by preparing annual district level summary reports of student suspension data that are used by superintendents to inform strategy and system guidance, and by the Board to monitor progress towards creating safe spaces for students to learn.

This report primarily focuses on data for 2021-2022 and measures change over time. The data shows a decline both in the number of suspensions issued and overall suspension rate. Although this decline is reflected in most identity groups, disproportionate representation for some groups of students (i.e., multilingual learners, males, those who self-identify as Indigenous, students with special education needs (excluding gifted), those who reside in lower income neighbourhoods, and those who identify as being from racialized/minoritized communities) still exists.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

4. Legislative Requirements

Section 314.5 of the *Education Act* requires all publicly funded school boards in Ontario to submit annual reports of suspensions and expulsions to the Ministry of Education. This information is collected through the 30 June OnSIS submission. Suspension rates are calculated as a percentage of the October 31 enrolment and include suspensions issued over the full course of the year (i.e., between the first day of school in September and the last day of school in June). At the provincial level, suspension data is disaggregated by panel (elementary, secondary), gender (male, female), and for students with special education needs, excluding gifted, as a whole.

Effective 31 July 2020, the Ontario Ministry of Education introduced a new regulation ([O. Reg.440/20](#)) which removes the principal's discretion to suspend students enrolled in Kindergarten to Grade 3 for activities listed in subsection [306\(1\) of the Education Act](#). This is a consideration when comparing data before and after the implementation of this regulation.

OCDSB Policy P.026.SCO Student Suspension and Expulsion requires annual reporting of student suspension data. [Report 20-085](#) (and [accompanying appendix](#)) is the most recent report published which incorporated analysis of identity data gathered in 2019-2020 under the *Anti-Racism Act (ARA; 2017)* and associated [Data Standards](#).

5. Collection, Analysis and Reporting of Identity-Based Data

Disaggregation and reporting for specific groups of students is done using two datasets. One is district-level reporting based on information available for the full population of students in the student information system. The other is for the subset of students who participated in the *Valuing Voices - Identity Matters! Student Survey* in 2019-2020. For survey participants, reporting groups are based on self-reported information from one of four questions related to Indigenous identity, race, gender identity, and disability. Despite the multidimensional nature of identity, this update focuses only on those four aspects of identity that were included in the previous report and does not take into account intersectionality (e.g., race x gender).

The use of survey data in years subsequent to its collection is predicated on its continued reliability and validity. At the time of *Valuing Voices* collection, parents

of children in K-6 completed the survey on behalf of their child (response rate of 32%), while students in grades 7-12 completed their own survey (response rate of 63%). It is important to note that some aspects of identity may change over time (e.g., gender identity, disability) and in relation to who is providing the information. As a result, caution is warranted when interpreting results based on this reduced sample. Further, the calculation of disproportionality may be influenced by something other than the elimination of barriers and/or biases (e.g., the number of students in a reporting group/population, changes in aspects of identity over time, who provided the information, loss of data over time as students progress through the education system). From a statistical perspective, caution is advised when interpreting disproportionality indices derived from data where there are fewer than 30 total students and/or fewer than 10 students being reported for a particular outcome.

6. Students Learning from Home

An important consideration when examining the 5-year trend is the impact that the pandemic had on the nature of schooling, particularly in 2020-2021. For this reason, comparisons to pre-pandemic years are most meaningful. It is also worth noting that the continued option for students to learn from home through Ottawa-Carleton Virtual School may be a factor which continues to influence the most recent data.

7. Summary of Main Findings

Results from 2021-2022 show:

- 1.5% of OCDSB students were suspended during the 2021-2022 school year (1,083 out of 74,477 students), a rate that is lower than pre-pandemic years;
- Suspensions rates continue to be higher in the secondary panel than they are in elementary;
- More than $\frac{3}{4}$ of students who were suspended were suspended one time;
- Nearly $\frac{2}{3}$ of suspensions issued were one-day suspensions;
- 80% of all suspensions were discretionary, however the majority of suspensions lasting for five or more days were of a mandatory nature¹;

These findings are highlighted in Appendix A, with detailed tables in Appendix B.

8. Representation of Identity Groups in Suspension Data

For the portion of students who were issued a suspension in 2021-2022, identity-based data exists for 35%. For transparency, data for the subset of students for whom there is identity-based data are provided in Appendix B. The following summarizes key observations:

- The overall decline in suspensions compared to pre-pandemic years is mirrored in most groups;

¹Mandatory suspensions are issued when a student has engaged in activities posing a significant safety concern, such as: weapons related offenses, trafficking drugs, physical assaults that cause bodily harm requiring treatment by a medical practitioner, robbery, extortion, sexual assault, repeated bullying, etc.; whereas discretionary suspensions are issued in response to bias, prejudice, or hate.

- Multilingual learners, students who reside in lower income neighbourhoods, males, students who self-identify as Indigenous, and those with special education needs (excluding gifted) continue to be suspended at a higher rate than all students;
- For the subset of students for whom *Valuing Voices* identity-based data is available, the groups suspended at a higher rate include those who identified as Black, Middle Eastern, Latino, First Nation, having a disability (Autism, Developmental, Learning, Mental, and Speech Impairment), and/or in gender diverse ways (Gender Fluid, Non-Conforming, Non-Binary, Questioning, Trans Boy/Man, Trans Girl/Woman, and Two Spirit).

9. Creating Safe Spaces and Conditions for Learning

The rate at which discretionary suspensions are issued, particularly those that last for only one day, point to systemic issues that contribute to lack of student engagement and threats to feelings of safety and sense of belonging. Behaviour that is deemed to be inappropriate should be viewed as an opportunity to understand the underlying needs of the student. Rather than using suspensions to manage student behaviour, the focus of our work is shifting towards creating learning environments for students where they: are comfortable expressing themselves without fear of retribution; are engaged in developmentally appropriate learning tasks; and see themselves reflected in the curriculum and in the staff who are responsible for supporting their learning and well-being while in school. It is through these actions and the use of a progressive discipline approach that we teach children the skills necessary to regulate their own behaviour and facilitate the understanding of their actions.

An Exclusion/Pause for Safety might be employed where progressive discipline is deemed inappropriate after reviewing mitigating and other factors and where the student's infraction poses a significant physical and/or mental safety risk of students to themselves and others and cannot be mitigated by other available supports. A Pause for Safety is only employed after all other strategies have been tried. This is a non-disciplinary measure while a plan is put in place to promote the student's timely return to school. This is different from a suspension and as such, that data is not captured as part of this report. Beginning 5 September 2023, the OCDSB will be implementing a system to track student exclusions across the district in real time. It will assist schools and the system in monitoring the length of time a student is away from school as a result of the pause for safety. Our goal is to have the student return to school as soon as possible.

Relationships are critical and form the foundation of this work. A collaborative approach with the Safe Schools team, Equity Team, Mental Health Lead, Indigenous Education Department, and Learning Support Services, emphasizing the conditions that support student well-being and academic achievement: safety, regulation, belonging, positivity, engagement, identity, mastery, and meaning.

10. Tools and Training Moving Forward

Twenty four principals and vice-principals across the District were selected as Safe and Caring School Leads to support schools through the use of proactive strategies that assists staff and students in implementing structures and techniques to best meet the needs of all students. Safe and Caring Leads received training and support during the school year. This learning will be ongoing and continue to benefit all school communities.

The District is also revising its Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan with a renewed focus on restorative practices, strategies to elicit student voice paying particular attention to students who may not historically have had the opportunity to share their perspectives and experiences.

Staff are also engaged in learning about equity-centred trauma-informed practices that will improve staff capacity to identify and address the impact of harm, hurt and trauma on students.

The OCDSB's use of an anonymous reporting tool provides students with an opportunity to report their concerns about the health, well-being, and safety of themselves or others in an anonymous manner, which allows schools to use this information to assist with increased safety and support for students.

The bi-annual School Climate Surveys for students, staff, and parents/guardians/caregivers are also important tools to help inform the ongoing work that is happening at the school level. Last year, parents and educators participated in school climate surveys, and [results were shared](#) with schools in Spring 2023. This fall, school teams will be exploring their school data in more depth to inform tailored strategies for supporting student well-being.

In addition, both the [OCDSB Strategic Plan 2023-2027](#) and the [Indigenous, Equity and Human Rights Roadmap](#) outline some of the key work for moving us forward. With the renewal of the roadmap being undertaken this year, we are working to promote more safe and inclusive learning spaces for students. Some of this work includes:

- the establishment of foundational mandatory professional learning for school and District staff in Diversity and Inclusion Fundamentals, Unconscious Bias, anti-racism, anti-oppression and human rights; and
- redesigning course content (e.g., Social Studies, History and Geography; Grade 9-12 English) to include and represent Indigenous, Black and minoritized histories perspectives and ways of knowing.

Staff will also continue to work with the community and system to identify additional strategies and supports to help address these issues of inequity.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

11. Since 2018-2019, the District has received \$344,510 through Transfer Payment Agreements to support the collection, analysis and reporting of identity data up to August 2023. These funds were used to hire research staff and consultant services for the facilitation of focus groups and community partner meetings, and ongoing analysis and reporting of identity data in relation to student outcomes and access to programs and services.

Since January 2021, staff (READ, Learning Support Services, Strategic Business Analyst) have been engaged in learning through *We All Count*. This has included a full day of professional learning in applying a data equity framework to project planning and implementation and more than 20 hours of strategic consultation/discussion sessions with the founder, allowing us to go deeper in our understanding and application of the work. Costs associated with this portion of the work were approximately \$12,500 and absorbed by the operating budget.

COMMUNICATION:

12. The information presented in this report is an important component of District level monitoring efforts to eliminate barriers and biases in disciplinary practices and create safe spaces for students to learn. District level results also provide important context against which school level efforts can be measured.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

The following questions are provided for discussion purposes:

- How do we understand the decline in suspension data in the past five years?
- How can we help the community better understand student suspensions and how we use suspension data?
- Do our next steps help to inform a path forward?

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