

Rethinking school suspensions: School climate offers a clue

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A 2012 study by the Everyone Graduates Center at John Hopkins University found that when a high school freshman receives a single suspension, their chances of dropping out of school can increase by a third. Furthermore, only 49 percent of students with three or more suspensions graduate high school. That's nearly a flip of a coin on whether a student receives a diploma or not.

Now, researchers at the University of Missouri and the University of Virginia have found that when educators and administrators focus on creating a positive [school](#) climate, the likelihood of a [student](#) being suspended decreases by approximately 10 percent. To put this in context, more than 2.75 million K-12 students were suspended during the 2013 to 2014 school year. A 10 percent reduction would have meant 275,000 more students staying in class and learning.

"A positive climate is one where educators and administrators create clear expectations for students, practice consistent discipline and display supportive behavior," said Francis Huang, associate professor in the MU College of Education. "This creates a positive school environment for students because they know what is expected of them, they feel respected and supported, and they expect that they will be treated equally and fairly."

In addition to presenting clear rules to students and enforcing them consistently throughout the school, Huang said a positive school climate features an environment marked by supportive student-teacher

relationships.

Huang and co-author Dewey Cornell, a professor of education at the University of Virginia, analyzed school climate survey responses from more than 75,000 students from 310 middle schools in the state of Virginia to determine the relationship between student behaviors, the likelihood of suspensions and overall school climate. They found that while behaviors like fighting and bullying were the most powerful predictors of receiving a suspension, a positive school climate was associated with a reduction in a student's likelihood of receiving a suspension, no matter their race, [economic status](#) or behavior in school.

"Research shows that overwhelmingly, the students who are most at risk of receiving a suspension are either male, non-white, of [low socioeconomic status](#), have a disability or a combination of these characteristics," Huang said. "This study suggests that a positive school [climate](#) can be helpful for all students, regardless of their background."

More information: Francis L. Huang et al, The relationship of school climate with out-of-school suspensions, *Children and Youth Services Review* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.08.013](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.08.013)

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