

Suspensions

DEFINITION

Suspensions is the number of disciplinary actions per 100 students in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade in Rhode Island public schools. Students can receive more than one disciplinary action during the school year. Disciplinary actions include in-school suspensions and out-of-school suspensions.

SIGNIFICANCE

Effective school disciplinary practices promote a safe and respectful school climate, support learning, and address the causes of student misbehavior. Punitive disciplinary practices, including “zero tolerance” policies, are largely ineffective and even counterproductive.^{1,2} Despite this evidence, suspension is a widely used disciplinary technique, both nationally and in Rhode Island. Suspensions are used for minor offenses, such as use of electronics, and for more serious offenses, such as weapon possession.^{3,4}

Suspension usually does not deter students from misbehaving and may actually reinforce negative behavior patterns. Suspended students are more likely than their peers to experience academic failure, juvenile justice system involvement, disengagement from school, isolation from teachers and peers, and dropping out of school. Being suspended even once in ninth grade is associated with a twofold increase in the likelihood of dropping out.^{5,6} Suspended

students are also at greater risk of criminal victimization, criminal activity, and incarceration as adults.⁷

Schools and districts can improve school climate and discipline by developing and enforcing disciplinary policies that set high expectations for student behavior; providing clear, appropriate, and consistent consequences for misbehavior; encouraging the use of alternative disciplinary approaches, such as restorative justice; and ensuring the equitable, developmentally appropriate, and limited use of suspensions.⁸

Historically in Rhode Island and nationally, Black, Hispanic, Multiracial, and Native American students are more likely to be suspended than their white peers despite the fact that there is no evidence that these students have more serious patterns of rule breaking. In Rhode Island and nationally, boys and students with disabilities are also more likely to be suspended than their peers.^{9,10,11}

Of all disciplinary actions during the 2020-2021 school year, 23% (417) involved elementary school students (kindergarten-5th grade), 41% (753) involved middle school students (6th-8th grades), and 36% (664) involved high school students (9th-12th grades). For elementary school students, 77% of disciplinary actions were out-of-school suspensions. Kindergarteners received 46 disciplinary actions, including 41 out-of-school suspensions.¹²

Out-of-School Suspensions by Infraction, Rhode Island, 2020-2021

TYPE OF INFRACTION*	#	%	TYPE OF INFRACTION	#	%
Disorderly Conduct	250	20%	Obscene/Abusive Language	62	5%
Fighting	203	16%	Weapon Possession	47	4%
Alcohol/Drug/Tobacco Offenses	178	14%	Electronic Devices/Technology	34	3%
Insubordination/Disrespect	162	13%	Arson/Larceny/Robbery/Vandalism	23	2%
Assault of Student or Teacher	154	12%	Other Offenses	18	1%
Harassment/Intimidation/Threat	130	10%	Attendance Offenses	0	0%
Total			1,261		

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2020-2021 school year.

*Harassment offenses include hazing and hate crimes. Assault offenses include sexual assault.

◆ In 2016, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed a law that restricts the use of out-of-school suspensions to situations when a child’s behavior poses a demonstrable threat that cannot be dealt with by other means.¹³ From the 2019-2020 school year to the 2020-2021 school year, the number of out-of-school suspensions decreased by 79% from 6,076 to 1,261. More than half (58%) of out-of-school suspensions were for non-violent offenses. Decreases in suspensions during the 2020-2021 school year may be attributed to decreased use or underreporting of disciplinary actions during distance learning.^{14,15}

Disparities in School Discipline by Special Education Status and Race/Ethnicity, Rhode Island, 2020-2021

	% OF STUDENTS ENROLLED	% OF SUSPENSIONS
Students Receiving Special Education Services	17%	38%
Asian/Pacific Islander Students ⁺	3%	1%
Black Students	9%	8%
Hispanic Students	28%	22%
Multiracial Students	5%	7%
Native American Students	1%	2%
White Students	54%	59%

Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2020-2021 school year. % suspensions includes in-school and out-of-school suspensions. ⁺Data for Asian and Pacific Islander students is not disaggregated by ethnic group. National research shows large academic disparities across Asian ethnic groups. Detailed data by district is available at www.ride.ri.gov

◆ During the 2020-2021 school year, Rhode Island students receiving special education services represented 17% of the student population but represented 38% of suspensions. Historically, Students of Color are more likely to be suspended than their white peers.¹⁶

Table 53.

Disciplinary Actions, Rhode Island School Districts, 2020-2021

SCHOOL DISTRICT	TOTAL # OF STUDENTS ENROLLED	TOTAL # OF STUDENTS SUSPENDED IN-SCHOOL	TOTAL # OF STUDENTS SUSPENDED OUT-OF-SCHOOL	OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS PER 100 STUDENTS	TOTAL DISCIPLINARY ACTIONS	ACTIONS PER 100 STUDENTS
Barrington	3,361	*	10	<1	11	<1
Bristol Warren	3,041	17	103	3	120	4
Burrillville	2,088	*	57	3	62	3
Central Falls	2,751	0	*	<1	*	<1
Chariho	3,100	31	25	1	56	2
Coventry	4,321	51	95	2	146	3
Cranston	10,288	53	81	1	134	1
Cumberland	4,590	37	13	<1	50	1
East Greenwich	2,514	11	10	<1	21	1
East Providence	4,883	*	40	1	41	1
Exeter-West Greenwich	1,548	*	*	<1	*	<1
Foster	210	*	0	0	*	<1
Foster-Glocester	1,375	14	23	2	37	3
Glocester	516	*	*	<1	*	1
Jamestown	462	*	*	1	*	1
Johnston	3,032	*	40	1	46	2
Lincoln	3,194	0	25	1	25	1
Little Compton	212	*	*	1	*	3
Middletown	2,005	0	*	<1	*	<1
Narragansett	1,215	20	43	4	63	5
New Shoreham	147	*	*	1	*	4
Newport	1,976	0	34	2	34	2
North Kingstown	3,853	69	37	1	106	3
North Providence	3,513	41	40	1	81	2
North Smithfield	1,614	14	25	2	39	2
Pawtucket	8,441	*	33	<1	35	<1
Portsmouth	2,292	14	14	1	28	1
Providence	22,516	*	112	<1	114	1
Scituate	1,196	0	*	<1	*	<1
Smithfield	2,358	*	20	1	28	1
South Kingstown	2,704	19	18	1	37	1
Tiverton	1,656	*	40	2	46	3
Warwick	8,081	18	54	1	72	1
West Warwick	3,517	36	18	1	54	2
Westerly	2,411	*	40	2	44	2
Woonsocket	5,711	56	115	2	171	3
<i>Charter Schools</i>	<i>9,681</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>58</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>78</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>State-Operated Schools</i>	<i>1,810</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>*</i>	<i><1</i>	<i>*</i>	<i><1</i>
<i>UCAP</i>	<i>124</i>	<i>*</i>	<i>*</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Four Core Cities</i>	<i>39,419</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>266</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>326</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Remainder of State</i>	<i>87,268</i>	<i>490</i>	<i>923</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1,413</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Rhode Island</i>	<i>138,303</i>	<i>573</i>	<i>1,261</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1,834</i>	<i>1</i>

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Education, 2020-2021 school year.

The out-of-school suspension rate per 100 students is the total number of out-of-school suspensions for the school district at all grade levels (Pre-K through 12th grade), multiplied by 100, and divided by the student enrollment (“average daily membership”).

The disciplinary actions rate per 100 students is the total disciplinary actions for the school district at all grade levels (Pre-K through 12th grade), multiplied by 100, and divided by the student enrollment (“average daily membership”).

Schools and districts only report suspensions of one day or longer. If an incident involves more than one infraction, schools and districts are asked to code the incident as the most serious type of infraction (e.g., violent offenses involving weapons and offenses involving drugs and alcohol are considered more serious than other offenses). The type of infraction resulting in disciplinary action varies according to school district policy. The type of disciplinary action used for each type of infraction also varies according to school district policy.

*Fewer than 10 students are in this category. Actual numbers are not shown to protect student confidentiality. These numbers are still counted in district totals and in the four core cities, remainder of the state, and state total.

Core cities are Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.

Charter schools include: Achievement First Rhode Island, Beacon Charter High School for the Arts, Blackstone Academy, Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academy, Charette Charter School, The Compass School, Paul Cuffee Charter School, The Greene School, Highlander Charter School, Hope Academy, International Charter School, Kingston Hill Academy, The Learning Community, Rhode Island Nurses Institute Middle College Charter School, RISE Prep Mayoral Academy, Segue Institute for Learning, Sheila C. “Skip” Nowell Leadership Academy, SouthSide Charter School, Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts, and The Village Green Virtual Public Charter School. State-operated schools include William M. Davies Jr. Career & Technical High School, DCYF Schools, Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center, and Rhode Island School for the Deaf. UCAP is the Urban Collaborative Accelerated Program.

(References are on page 190)