

## THE DISTRICT

# Group finds high rates of school suspensions

BY EMMA BROWN

The District's traditional and charter public schools suspended about 10,000 children — more than one in 10 D.C. students — during the 2011-12 academic year, according to a coalition of advocacy groups seeking to reduce disciplinary measures that keep kids out of class.

The Every Student Every Day coalition released its analysis of school data Thursday in an effort to encourage city lawmakers, who have been pressing schools to reduce widespread truancy, to consider suspension and expulsion an equally important issue.

"Way too many children are missing school because they've been suspended or expelled, often for minor, nonviolent issues which could easily be dealt with," said Judith Sandalow, executive director of the Children's Law Center, a member of the coalition.

Researchers have found that students who are suspended once in ninth grade are twice as likely to drop out of high school as their peers who are not suspended. Still, some educators argue that suspension is a powerful tool to teach children that there are consequences for their behavior and to keep disruptive students from interfering with the ability of other students to learn.

Eduardo Ferrer of D.C. Lawyers for Youth, who wrote the report, said the coalition is not suggesting that students be allowed to be disruptive but that the city seek alternatives for dealing with misbehavior.

The D.C. Council recently passed an anti-truancy bill requiring the Office of the State Superintendent of Education to develop ideas for reducing suspensions and expulsions.

D.C. schools officials said it was too soon to comment. "We are continuing to review the report and its findings," spokeswoman Melissa Salmanowitz said.

During a speech Thursday that centered on education policy, Mayor Vincent C. Gray (D) said that removing students from school should be done sparingly.

"All publicly funded schools should meet a high standard for

supporting and intervening with a student before long-term suspension or expulsion becomes an option," Gray said.

The report found that 13 percent of D.C. students served a suspension during the 2011-12 school year, with some schools reporting suspension rates far higher than that average. The vast majority of the suspensions — about 96 percent — were for 10 days or fewer.

Students with disabilities were three times as likely to be suspended as their non-disabled peers, mirroring a national trend of disproportionately high suspension rates for kids with special needs. Children attending schools in wards with high poverty were also more likely to be suspended.

Traditional and charter schools suspended children at similar rates, although the traditional schools' figures include in-school suspensions and the charter schools' do not.

Expulsion rates differ significantly between charter and traditional schools, as The Washington Post previously reported. Charters removed 227 children for disciplinary offenses in 2011-12, while the city's traditional school system — which is legally obligated to serve all students — expelled just three.

The charter board began publishing school-by-school discipline data last year, arguing that such disclosure would persuade schools to reduce suspensions and expulsions without new and burdensome regulations.

Charter board officials said that approach appears to be working. As of the end of April, expulsions for the 2012-13 school year were down 31 percent compared with the year before.

"Our actions mirror the call by advocates for more transparency and accountability on discipline issues through data collection," said Theola Labbe-DeBose, the charter board's spokeswoman. "We agree that lost instructional time for any reason adversely impacts student learning and support our schools as they seek to minimize interruptions to learning with equitable discipline practices."

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