Middle school suspensions raise questions of fairness

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Swearing at a teacher or punching a classmate leads to suspension at Carpentersville Middle School, but so can lesser infractions, such as carrying a pager or throwing a pencil on the school bus.

This academic year the Kane County school doled out almost 500 suspensions—nearly one for every two pupils, and an unusually high total for any middle school. Even the administrators who levy the suspensions are dismayed by the number. But how else, they wonder, can they tame the volatile atmosphere that permeates the hallways?

Across the nation, school administrators face a similar dilemma: Parents and politicians want tough discipline, with little or no tolerance for violence, drugs, threats and even disrespect. But suspension, one of the few tools at the disposal of school officials, is becoming increasingly controversial.

Taking children out of the classroom as punishment, some experts say, creates more problems than it solves, for learning and for discipline. Others decry a racial disparity in suspensions that has been documented in studies year after year:

And still others feel suspens-
sion is a blunt weapon suitable for some offenses, but wildly inappropriate for others.

Nationally, the number of suspensions has almost doubled over the last two decades. Nearly 130,000, or 6.45 percent of all Illinois pupils, were suspended last year. Since the Chicago Public Schools instituted a zero-tolerance policy in 1995, out-of-school suspensions jumped 14.5 percent, to 37,130 last year.

Suspensions at area middle schools similar in size to Carpentersville ranged this year from five to 80. High schools tended to give more, with East Leyden High School in Franklin Park issuing 873.

The issue of discipline-by-removal flared into an ugly controversy last year when several high school students who were videotaped fighting at a football game in Decatur, Ill., were expelled. While Rev Jesse Jackson led marches and protests, Kenneth Arndt, head of the Decatur Public School District, argued that he could not tolerate violence.

In July, Arndt will take a new job—as superintendent of District 300, which includes Carpentersville Middle School.

"The problem is, what do you do with children who cause behavioral problems?" said Arndt. "That's the $64,000 question. What do you do with these problems? Because you can't ignore them. If you do, then everyone's learning will suffer."

A study released last month by Indiana University's Safe and Responsive Schools Project found little evidence that zero-tolerance expulsions and suspensions improve school safety or a child's behavior.

Instead, it found the discipline strategy raised serious questions about fairness.

At Carpentersville, angry parents of African-American pupils—who make up 10 percent of the student body, but account for more than a quarter of all suspensions—argue that the process is biased and bad for education.

Of the 493 suspensions reported at Carpentersville Middle School between August and mid-April, 137 were handed out to African-American pupils. Hispanics, who make up 43.5 percent of the school, account for a proportionate number of suspensions. But white pupils, who make up 44.7 percent of the school, got just over a quarter of the suspensions.

Principal Steve Renne can't explain the racial disparity, but he acknowledges the high rate of children being sent home hurts learning. "The bottom line is we are doing too many suspensions and we need to find a better way," he said.

Administrators the school blame the high numbers on a precarious mix of racial tensions, crowded hallways, inexperienced teachers and at-risk children who see no value in education.

Gwen Fox says her son, Jamar, an honor-roll student from 1st through 5th grade, was never suspended until he became a 6th grader at the middle school this year. She has fought Carpentersville's efforts to place the 12-year-old in a special education class.

"Every other day he was being kicked out of school, and they never sent him a work sheet or a book," said Fox, a single mother who was forced to find someone to stay at home with her son during his suspensions while she worked. "Now he's getting Fs."

Jamar was suspended 17 times this year. He recounts one occasion in which a white classmate said Jamar should drink Slim Fast and then smacked him on the hand. Jamar said he slapped the classmate across the back of his head.

Jamar said the white pupil stayed in class, while he was suspended for two days.

Velma Hooks, whose 14-year-old son, Leomnt Dobbins, is one suspension shy of expulsion, admits the boy is no angel. But she says he has been given harsher punishment than schoolmates who did the same things.

"He's not the only one who should get kicked out," she said. "If two kids get involved in something, both should get kicked out."

School administrators will not discuss individual punishments, citing privacy. But they say pupils are treated equally if they violate rules.

Researchers such as Russ Skaia, director of Indiana University's Safe and Responsive Schools Project, have found that suspensions lead to drop-outs, and African-American children tend to be sent home from
Tim Loversky spends his day tackling a backlog of written complaints from staff and periodic calls from teachers. He's part judge and part counselor, listening and then helping kids understand why their behavior was unacceptable. "I hate suspensions," he said. "It's the lowest common denominator and it doesn't work, but it's the only one we have to work with."

Fights lurk at every corner here and led to one-third of this year's suspensions. A racially motivated melee last March between Hispanic and African-American youths in the school's entryway sent pupils scurrying for cover as rocks and pickles were hurled. Ten kids were sent to the nurse's office with cuts and bruises and the five boys involved in the fight were suspended.

The school has nearly 1,200 6th through 8th graders from five elementary schools scattered throughout Carpentersville. The town is largely white, with the African-American and Hispanic communities concentrated in two pockets.

More than half the children come from low-income families and communities where drugs and violence are common.

Skiba believes suspension will always be part of school discipline. The trick, he said, is to find alternatives leading up to suspension that will make the point without removing students from the classroom.

"The message is not that we should never suspend or expel kids," he said. "The problem is that we have kids kicked out of schools rather than improving student behavior."

Jamar Fox, a 6th grader at Carpentersville Middle School, raises his hand while his aunt, Debbie Pettiford, observes from the back of the room because he has been suspended many times.