

IMPROVING SCHOOL CLIMATE: TRANSITIONS

Minimum Time Required: 45 minutes

Slide #2: Students in Every Grade Were Effectuated

This data comes from the CT State Department of Education's (CSDE) largest database, known as the ED 166 and tracks suspensions and expulsions that are required to be reported. It includes both in-school and out-of-school suspensions. The numbers represent "incidents," rather than students. So that, for example the 19 incidents reported in 1998 – 1999 for Pre-K students could represent 5 individual students, some of whom were suspended multiple times. This data is old, we realize this, but the first two years that this data was collected are the two years represented here and they were the only two years in which the categories did not get changed, so these are the only two years of data in the generation of collecting it that two school years can be placed side-to-side and compared. Know that recently, the data has only gotten worse...more suspensions and expulsions, not fewer.

What you can see in this data is that children at all grade levels are suspended and expelled and if you look specifically at the years in which more children in the state of CT transition from one school to another (half day to full day kindergarten, elementary to middle school and middle to high school) the numbers of suspensions and expulsions grow at a much greater rate. You will also notice that grade 9 is the year in which the greatest number of suspensions/expulsions occur. What can explain this? The answer is that many of those 9th grade numbers represent students who began being suspended and expelled years before and because of that may have been held back and eventually give up...they drop out. So, students do not magically get better in the final three years of high school, they just leave. This is a huge graduation/drop out problem; students dropping out because they have been suspended/expelled to the point of giving up. (These students tend also to be highly disconnected to school; see the School Connectedness module).

What might get a young student to be suspended or expelled? Things like hitting, biting, throwing things, having tantrums, etc. These are certainly not appropriate school behaviors. They are not OK. However, generally students have learned these behaviors from role models in their homes and communities and some of it is developmental. So, the answer is not to exit them, but teach and role model different ways of managing anger and solving problems.

Another important thing to understand about this data, from these early years to the present is that consistently over 70% of these incidents of suspension and expulsion are for “non-dangerous” behaviors. Students are routinely suspended for policy violations, dress codes, tardiness, skipping class, disrespect, etc. This point is not about “transitions” per se, but it is a piece of this complicated puzzle. Children who are connected to school obey rules and boundaries and are respectful and present.

Note: Much of the above information should be teased out from the participants by asking leading questions of them...What do you see in this data? What do you notice? Are there any years when there seems to be increased amounts of suspensions and/or expulsions? Why do you think that 9th grade has the greatest number of incidents?, etc.

Slide #3: Grade to Grade Transitions

Transitions are difficult for anybody. When students move from one structure to a very different one, such as these major school transitions, it is even tougher than the daily transitions.

Slide #4: Daily Transitions

Daily transitions are also difficult for many students; from class to class, from the bus to the school, from lunch to school work and even from math to specials. Some children have more difficult times with transitions than others and adults must anticipate this and be trained to be aware, and know how to supervise and support all students transitioning but especially those who have the most difficulty.

Slide #5: The Demographics of Suspension and Expulsion in CT

Although our current demographic statistics have changed (there are more students of color and fewer white students), in the two years represented here (1998 – 1999 and 1999 – 2000), this chart represents the demographics of this population suspended and expelled. Do some very rough math and you can see that although there were 71% white students only about half of the suspensions/expulsions were for white children. Proportionately more students of color are suspended and/or expelled. And, if the individual incidents of white children being suspended/expelled are reviewed, a great majority of them are children with special needs. Similarly, children with special needs are disproportionately suspended and expelled.

Slide #6: In Connecticut

What is also true of all of these suspensions/expulsions is that students of color and students with special needs are disproportionally being suspended and expelled.

Slide #7: Children Out of School

And, although this may be obvious, when children are not in instructional classrooms, they are not receiving instruction and becoming further behind academically, which can lead not only to increased levels of disconnectedness, but also to being held back to repeat a grade(s) which leads to eventually dropping out. And, if no intervention is provided that targets the root of the problem (preferably restorative and educative), the behaviors that were exhibited in the first place remain and often start the cycle all over. Also, when students are not in and connected to school, they are far more likely to engage in risky and criminal behavior and get enmeshed in the juvenile justice system. Students need to be in school and adults need to be responsible for setting the conditions for this to happen.

Slide #8: Transition Strategies Learning Task

In a small group, focus on one of the grade to grade or daily transitions.

To create a positive school climate, what supports do students and/or responsible staff need to navigate this transition successfully?

- ▶▶ Provide each group with a piece of flip chart paper and have them list the needed supports.
- ▶▶ Allow ample time for groups to discuss the transition and needed supports.
- ▶▶ Once groups have completed their lists, post the lists and facilitate a discussion on similarities and differences between the lists.