

According to the Baltimore City School District, the current attitude towards disciplinary measures for students is that, “Disciplinary responses focus on promoting positive relationships, intervention strategies, and the use of suspensions only as a disciplinary measure of last resort.”¹ In 2003, Baltimore public schools handed out a peak record of 26,300² out of school suspensions, the vast majority of which were for non-violent offences. The suspension practices in Baltimore had been established, since at least 1994, to be racially biased towards black students³. Recognizing this issue the Maryland state school board began to review current suspension protocol and disciplinary guidelines in 2009. In that year, Fredrick Douglass High School in Baltimore gave out 206² out of school suspensions. Once reform practices began to go into effect that number dropped to 112² in the 2009-2010 school year, and by 2014, the district suspension number had dropped from 26,300 to less than 9,000².

In the years following policy changes at Frederick Douglass High School, they report that they saw lower drop out rates as well as higher state test scores, attendance, and graduation². The conscious reform of disciplinary measures in Baltimore has been successful so far in improving the effectiveness of the students’ education in producing more graduates.

Prior to reform, Baltimore exercised a no-tolerance policy similar to many other school districts around the nation, including Seattle, wherein any sort of misstep can be seen as grounds for suspension. Now the reigns have been loosened and a more compassionate stance has been adopted. An example of new disciplinary methods includes Restorative Justice, where conflicts between students are handled amongst peers by conversation and active listening. This leads to better problem solving and communication skills that can help to lower the chance of repeat clashes between students in the future. Community-school Partnerships is another method used in Baltimore that works to create more active connections between students and their community through targeted service meant to support the student and the families needs. Baltimore has also implemented a disciplinary system that becomes stricter with age and with number and nature of offenses. Before a child can be suspended, unless their actions pose physical harm to other persons, alternate solutions must be attempted. Since the initiation of suspension reform in Baltimore, African-American boys have seen a 59% decrease in dropouts, as well as a 16% increase in graduation rates⁴. This demographic focused statistic is important because of the skewed rate of discipline that leads to higher suspension rates in non-white students.

As of 2013, one in four African-American middle school students was being suspended in the Seattle Public School District each year⁵ and from 2003 to 2013 suspension rates for white elementary school students stayed constant whereas suspension rates for black elementary school students tripled⁶. Out of school suspension is a problem, not a solution. It has been clearly shown in other school districts such as Baltimore City School District that alternate disciplinary methods are much more effective and beneficial to the community environment both within the school and around it.

1. <http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/Page/25270>
2. http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2014-01-09/news/bs-ed-school-discipline-20140109_1_school-discipline-state-discipline-school-suspensions
3. http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1994-10-26/news/1994299093_1_school-suspensions-black-males-middle-schools
4. https://law.duke.edu/childedlaw/schooldiscipline/downloads/instead_of_suspension.pdf
5. <http://blogs.seattletimes.com/educationlab/2013/11/19/guest-baltimore-provides-model-for-school-discipline-reform/>
6. <http://www.npr.org/2013/03/07/173739119/federal-probe-targets-uneven-discipline-at-seattle-schools>