



Reducing School Suspensions and Expulsions in Michigan

The Michigan Department of Education faced a challenge:

Statewide suspension rates were high, and discipline policies in many schools were in direct conflict with its priority of reducing barriers to learning. For example, Michigan school districts represented two of the 10 districts in the United States that suspended the most elementary students. The Department and stakeholders were also concerned about the disproportionate use of exclusion discipline (chiefly suspension and expulsion) against students of color.

In secondary schools, statewide suspension rates for black students were more than triple those for white students (28 percent vs. 8 percent), and schools even suspended 50 percent more black elementary students than white secondary students (12 percent vs. the 8 percent from above). Exclusion from school too often sets the stage for student disenfranchisement, academic failure, dropout, and potential criminalization—a school-to-prison pipeline.

Our Work

With support from the Great Lakes Comprehensive Center (GLCC), funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the Department formed the Michigan School Discipline Task Force in 2013. The Task Force included members of the Michigan Department of Education and other state-level departments, local school administrators, teachers, law enforcement and court officials, and community representatives.

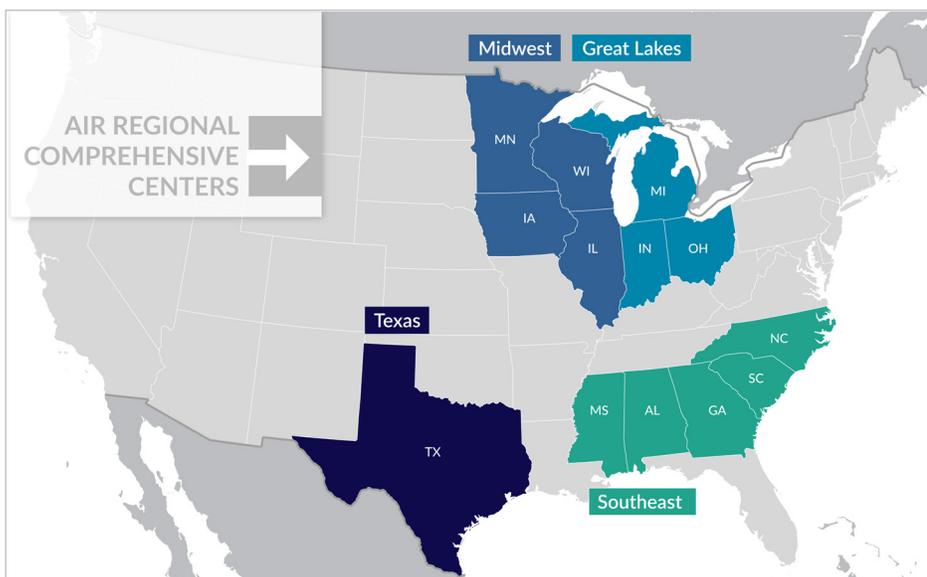
The Task Force's charge was to develop:

- A model policy on reducing suspensions and expulsions using alternative discipline strategies
- A revised model student code of conduct
- A user-friendly online toolkit for schools and districts on how to implement the new policy and code

The Center supported the process every step of the way. Center experts reviewed and analyzed state and national suspension and expulsion data, researched suspension and expulsion policies in other states, and connected the Task Force with restorative justice and social-emotional learning experts. Through facilitation and planning, Center experts supported the Department in drafting and revising the models, enabling education leaders to make informed decisions and identify clear action steps.

Center experts drew on a body of research suggesting that alternative discipline policies like the restorative justice model improve the school environment and reduce schools' reliance on detention and suspension. For example, a study of 19 schools throughout the United Kingdom found that restorative practices enhanced student learning. Another study of 18 schools in Scotland showed improved student perceptions of safety and respect. In the United States, three schools in Pennsylvania saw reduced disruptive behavior and disciplinary actions. And in a striking pilot study in Oakland, California, suspensions dropped from 30 percent of the student population down to 10 percent.

The restorative justice approach focuses on healing rather than punishment. It expects and helps those who cause injuries to make things right with those they've harmed and with the community.



In addition to researching the evidence base, the GLCC team brought together key stakeholders to ensure that the new policy would include their experience and perspectives. Then, once the Task Force developed a draft policy, Center experts conducted focus groups to collect feedback from Department staff, teachers, principals, parents, students, and other stakeholders. While this work was underway, Center experts developed an online tool for gathering additional public comment on the drafts.

The Results

Approval and publication happened quickly: the Michigan State Board of Education approved the Model Policy on Reducing Student Suspensions and Expulsions in May 2014, and approved the revised Model Code of Student Conduct in August 2014. The related toolkit was also published online; it provides guidance to all Michigan schools on creating culture change and addressing behavioral concerns using non-exclusionary methods. The toolkit is available here: www.Michigan.gov/mdealternativestoolkit.

The policy and code were not legally mandated at first—under Michigan’s “local control” system, schools could choose to adopt any or all of the recommendations as they saw fit. But the message was clear: these new discipline approaches benefit all students. Many school leaders and school boards incorporated elements into local policies, seizing the chance to increase students’ social and emotional learning, improve school culture, and provide early substance-abuse interventions.

By April 2016, the state passed a school aid budget bill that reflected the new Model Policy—districts were required to reduce the number of expulsions and suspensions. If a district fails to lower these numbers, it will now forfeit part of its state funding, starting in the 2017–18 school year.

And in December 2016, the Michigan governor signed bipartisan legislation that further integrated the new approach into the state’s laws—Michigan schools must now consider several factors before suspending or expelling any student for any reason:

- The student’s age and disciplinary history, and whether the student has a disability
- The seriousness of the violation, and whether it threatened anyone’s safety
- Whether a “lesser intervention” would “properly address” the behavior
- Whether “restorative practices” will be used to address the behavior

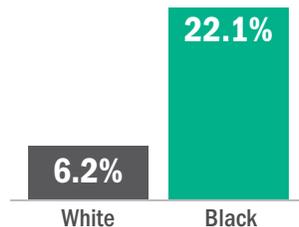
The law also explicitly addresses the use of “restorative practices” in addressing bullying, and loosens Michigan’s previous “mandatory expulsion” requirements. When the law goes into effect in 2017–18, huge numbers of students across the state will be helped by the alternative disciplinary strategies now built into it.

The Task Force and the internal network of education experts it created have also led to additional activities. For example, GLCC developed a website for public feedback—anyone could post feedback and comment on other comments. The site was so successful that it is now being used for other Department initiatives.



MICHIGAN SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS

Percentage of students who were suspended, by race (2009–10)



Source: Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2009–10



MICHIGAN SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS



Black students are more than **3½ times more likely** to be suspended or expelled than their White peers

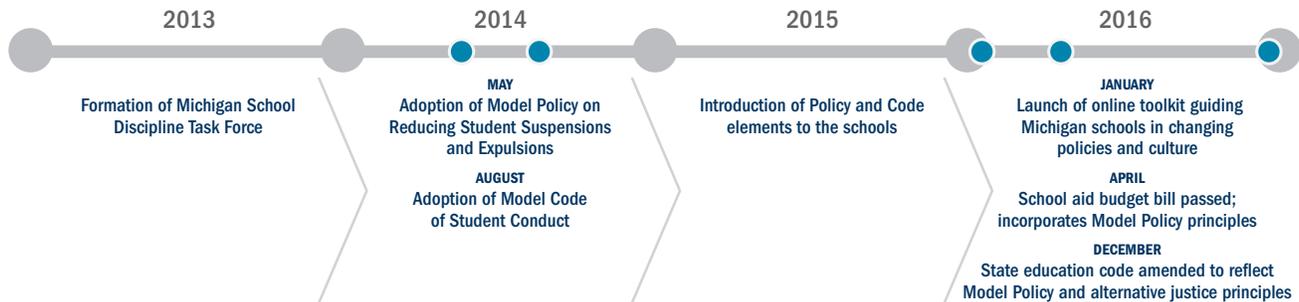
Source: Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2009–10

“This was very timely,” said one former Department staff member. “With the focus on Michigan’s high suspension and expulsion rates and the high disparities we see, urban schools in particular were looking for ways to stem that tide and make differences in their buildings. They didn’t know how to do it.”

Next Steps

The Michigan Department of Education and the Center team will focus on building state and district capacity to analyze existing discipline and attendance practices and policies, with a view toward increasing equality and bringing the policies in line with the new regulations. The partners will also continue to co-develop and co-host presentations on the new requirements and on how to take advantage of the online toolkit.

Timeline



To learn more about the Great Lakes Comprehensive center, visit <http://greatlakes-cc.org>.

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