

Background

Data from the North Carolina State Board of Education reports that one out of every ten students in the state's public schools was suspended (either short-term or long-term) during the 2005-06 school year. Overall, there were 302,303 short-term suspensions and 3,949 long-term suspensions, affecting more than 150,000 students and resulting in approximately one million days of instruction lost. Seventy percent of long-term suspended students are placed in alternative learning programs, leaving thirty percent without access to any educational services.

Students who are suspended from school often find themselves at a crossroads between learning from their mistakes and further establishing a pattern of negative attitudes and problem behavior. Research studies have consistently found strong correlations between suspensions and students ultimately deciding to drop out of school. This same research ties suspension and dropping out of school to later delinquency and criminal behavior. According to information presented at the Harvard Civil Rights Project's School to Prison Pipeline Conference, states with higher rates of school suspension are also more likely to have higher rates of juvenile incarceration.

According to the 2005 Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (DJJDP) Annual Report, 59% of the juveniles assessed report experiencing "serious" problems in school, and 94% of males committed to DJJDP had been suspended from school at some point during that school year.

In 2001, state leaders intensified their efforts regarding the educational needs of suspended students. During that year, the North Carolina General Assembly passed legislation designed to establish up to five pilot programs that would place all students who are suspended for up to ten days (short-term suspension) in alternative learning programs. In addition, several state agencies have taken the lead in implementing efforts to address out-of-school suspensions.

DJJDP – Center for the Prevention of School Violence (DJJDP – Center) has spearheaded three grant projects designed to reduce suspension and expulsion rates. Project EASE (Educational Alternatives to Suspension and Expulsion) focused on identifying and implementing promising strategies to reduce suspensions and expulsions. The goal of the DisMISS (Disproportionate Minority Involvement of Suspended Students) Project was to provide intensive technical assistance to schools during the implementation of promising strategies. Information on Projects EASE and DisMISS are available on the Tool-Kit website at www.cpsv.org/toolkit/. Lessons learned from these projects guided Project ReSET (Reducing Suspension and Expulsion Trends). Through Project RESET, community awareness sessions and technical assistance were provided to school districts. Studies by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) in coordination with North Carolina Central University identified various alternatives to short-term and long-term suspension programs. Additionally, DPI continues to actively address the issue of disproportionate long and short-term suspensions. More than twenty sites throughout North Carolina were awarded twelve community service grants and

eleven grants were awarded to summer programs to establish programs for long-term suspended students. These programs promote community service through collaboration with local agencies in order to continue educational opportunities for students while on long-term suspension.

Past efforts have not ensured that suspended students have access to educational services during the time they are suspended. Although previous efforts have shown some progress in reducing the number of suspensions, more work needs to be done. Many alternative learning programs were unable to meet the legal criteria of the original 2001 legislation. Attorney General Roy Cooper, in collaboration with DJJDP, along with support from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, held a statewide forum to gain information useful for making effective decisions about short-term suspension programs. Forum attendees heard speeches from various state and community leaders, including Governor Mike Easley. The forum gathered local school superintendents, juvenile justice professionals, and legislative leaders to hold a dialogue regarding the needs of short-term suspended students.

The forum revealed the absence of a comprehensive instrument to assist communities and local schools with creating, enhancing, and maintaining alternative to short-term suspension programs. The Tool-Kit is a result of the statewide forum, other statewide initiatives, and a desire to disseminate lessons learned from DJJDP – Center experiences. The Tool-Kit's design allows local officials from various backgrounds (i.e., juvenile justice, law enforcement, mental health, and schools) to collaborate with one another in order to provide alternatives to suspension. These programs will allow short-term suspended students with opportunities to continue academic instruction, address behavioral issues, and perform community service.