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A Study of Suspension Rates and Racial Disparities in Suspension Rates in an Urban School District

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A STUDY OF SUSPENSION RATES AND RACIAL
DISPARITIES IN SUSPENSION RATES
IN AN URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

Presented to the
Graduate Faculty
University of Nebraska
at Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Specialist in Education

University of Nebraska at Omaha
by

Gregory E. Emmel

August, 1990

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DEDICATION

To Betsy, Ashley, Mom and Dad

FIELD PROJECT ACCEPTANCE

Accepted for the faculty of the Graduate College,
University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree Specialist in Education,
University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Supervisory Committee

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Aug 29, 1990
Date

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Concern about discipline policies and practices in the nation's schools has reached new levels in the last two decades. Youth violence and crime continue to plague the schools and communities of America. The concern has been accentuated by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's and the desegregation of large urban public school districts which followed through the 1970's. Integration sustained by mandatory busing stirred much controversy in these districts, and a new wave of court decisions began focusing on discipline practices in desegregated schools (Sacken, 1989). The continued concern and controversy grew largely out of disparities between the number of minority students and the number of white students being suspended or expelled from school (Bickel & Qualls, 1980). Procedural and substantive due process cases increased in the court system, and as the courts rendered their decisions, school boards reacted by adopting prescriptive or uniform discipline codes.

A variety of factors play a role in suspension rates and the disparity issue. For instance, a reason

might be that disproportionate numbers of minority students are suspended because of individual and institutional racism present in public schools. Another reason might be that certain groups, such as males or blacks, are suspended more often simply because they misbehave more. Studies in the last 15 years have indicated that the issue is more complex and involves racial, cultural, and other social factors. The disparity in suspension rates can be viewed as a mismatch between middle class expectations of schools and the cultural norms of various subgroups of students (Radin, 1988). Lower socioeconomic status and academic deficiencies of students appear to be related to higher suspension rates. Black students are suspended more often than white students regardless of the number of minority teachers in a school. The attitudes and expectations of teachers and building administrators are also factors. The quality of school governance and school climate seem to be related to overall suspension rates, and variances in rates among schools within a district are not uncommon (Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982).

The controversy surrounding discipline policy and

practice in the public schools continues. Suspension rates remain high and the disparity among some ethnic groups also remains high, even though a variety of alternatives to suspension have been developed. School administrators continue to frequently use suspension as a disciplinary tool, in spite of the debate over its effectiveness in addressing the problems of youth and the fairness of its administration. In districts with uniform discipline codes, suspension is the prescribed punishment for many specific acts of student misbehavior. Consequently, building administrators have lost some flexibility in choosing alternatives when confronted with student misbehavior.

Some key discipline issues of the recent past continue to be the focus of controversy in urban districts today. Discipline policy development, consistency in the administration of discipline, suspension rates, and disparities in suspension rates were again brought to the forefront in the Omaha Public School District in the 1980's. The district had been placed under a court-ordered desegregation plan in 1976. In the fall of 1982 after nearly three years of debate, the Board of Education passed a uniform code of

conduct. Development and adoption of the prescriptive conduct code were in part due to national trends and court battles as well as local concerns expressed about inconsistencies in the administration of discipline (Whitesides, 1984). Such perceived inconsistencies were related to data reported from the Office of Civil Rights which for years has shown that black students were suspended at a much higher rate than white students (Radin, 1988).

Suspension rates, disparities in these rates, inconsistencies in the administration of discipline, and development of discipline policies have once again surfaced in the Omaha School District. In December, 1988, the Boston-based National Coalition of Advocates for Students published a report analyzing Office of Civil Rights survey data from 1986. The report asserted that Omaha ranked very high (22nd) among the 100 largest districts in the nation for disparities between black and white students who were suspended (National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1988). The report received much media attention and renewed concerns about fair treatment of black students. The superintendent published a "Position Statement on

Disparity" in March, 1989 (Omaha Public Schools).

Recommendations in the statement included reviewing behavior rules in each school and using suspension only as a last resort in attempts to modify student behavior. The school board had become involved in the issue and had also become aware that several of the high schools in the district were not following the guidelines in the Student Code of Conduct regarding fighting and the consequences attached.

Inconsistencies in the administration of this particular part of the code and concerns of high school principals and school board members resulted in a redefining of fighting and its consequences which took effect in August, 1989.

Since the adoption of the Student Code of Conduct in 1982, the school board has continued to add, specify, redefine, and refine infractions and corresponding consequences of its published discipline policy. Although implementation of discipline has been made more legalistic, public concerns about justice and fairness remain. The frequent use of suspension as a disciplinary tool to modify student behavior is also questioned.

In summary, discipline policy and the perceived disparities in the administration of the policy have been a continuing concern of the Omaha Board of Education, school administrators, and the school community. The purpose of this study was to examine suspension rates, disparity rates, and disparity rates for specific misbehaviors over the last decade. As the Student Code of Conduct continues to be debated and recommendations for change are made, the effects of these proposed changes on suspension and disparity rates should be better understood.

Statement of the Problems

1. Has the overall suspension rate in the district been increasing or decreasing in the last decade?
2. Has racial disparity in suspension rates changed significantly since desegregation occurred in the late 1970's?
3. For what specific misbehaviors are students being suspended, and what are the disparity rates within each of these violations of the code?

Hypotheses to Be Tested

1. There is no significant change in suspension

rates in the last decade.

2. There is no significant change in disparity rates during this time.

3. There is no significant difference in disparity rates for selected misbehaviors defined in the Code of Conduct in the years 1985 to 1989.

Significance of the Problem

Reduction of suspension and disparity rates is a stated goal of the district (Omaha Public Schools, 1989). Trends in these rates need to be determined as well as rates of suspension and disparity for specific misbehaviors defined in the code of conduct. An analysis of such data and trends will be useful in future discipline policy development as the Student Code of Conduct continues to evolve.

Assumptions

Assumption One - Student Personnel Assistants, who codify suspensions into behavioral categories before entry into the central data bank, do so with reasonable consistency and accuracy.

Assumption Two - Individual schools are allowed some latitude with regard to other written rules which may result in suspensions.

Assumption Three - These individual school rules can still be codified into the same behavioral categories as those identified using the code of conduct.

Limitations

Limitation One - The study is limited to secondary school students of the Omaha Public Schools.

Limitation Two - District data in the last decade has only been compiled on a biannual basis until the last two years.

Limitation Three - Testing of the first two hypotheses will include all offenses leading to student suspension. Testing of the third hypothesis will include only offenses in 12 selected categories.

Limitation Four - Suspension totals will include all races of students, but disparity rates will be examined only between black and white students, who make up approximately 95% of the secondary enrollment.

Definition of Terms

Code of Conduct - The written discipline policy of a school district delineating specific infractions and consequences for student misbehavior.

Suspension - The formal, documented removal of

students from their current school setting for zero or more days according to due process procedures in place at the time of the removal.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Related Research

The longstanding public concern about discipline in the schools of the last two decades may be linked to broader social causes and concerns. For 21 years the annual Gallup education polls have asked Americans to identify problems with which the public schools in their communities must deal. In the first 17 polls, "lack of discipline" ranked first 16 times. "Use of drugs" has been perceived as the biggest problem for the past four polls with "lack of discipline" in second place (Gallup & Elam, 1989).

The consistent placement of school discipline as a leading problem in the public's attitude toward public schools can be viewed against a societal backdrop in which youth violence and destructive and self-destructive behavior have been incrementally rising since the 1950's. The erosion of children's position in American society is undoubtedly closely tied to national trends in public safety, family cohesion, educational quality, out-of-wedlock births, and drug use. Family breakdown is frequently mentioned as the most important root of present social problems

that directly impact youth (Zinmeister, 1989). For many troubled youth, especially those who are victims of poverty, abuse, and neglect, the school may be the only caring, safe and orderly environment they know. Aside from support and love, few would argue there exists a greater need among children than order--including law and order in the streets as well as order in homes and schools.

Order in schools is related to discipline, and defining discipline and noting its purposes is important because discipline is a critical feature of all schools. Discipline in the schools is defined as a system of relationships and events that grow out of the functioning of the total school system (Hollingsworth, Lufler, & Clune, 1984). Discipline is a formal system involving school rules, who breaks them, and what punishments occur. Hollingsworth et al. note that discipline serves a variety of needs and purposes: 1) as part of the systematic development of maturing youth, 2) as part of the teaching of obedience and respect for authority, 3) as concomitant to in loco parentis legal theory, 4) as an element of an individual's legal entitlement to an education, and 5)

as support for the basic organizational function in schools.

The effectiveness of school discipline practices and policies are key topics of concern in establishing or maintaining safe and orderly schools. An orderly and safe school climate conducive to learning and teaching is one of five factors identified as differentiating effective from ineffective schools (Edmonds, 1982). Wynne (1980) pointed out ineffective policies and procedures that will hinder efforts to create an orderly climate: a lack of written rules about student conduct or vaguely phrased rules, rules which are not widely distributed, rules which are not enforced by teachers and/or administrators, rules which do not have clear provisions for punishment, punishment provisions which provide for ineffectual punishments, and policies which do not enlist the involvement of parents. Wynne acknowledged a variety of ways to positively affect school climate which may also moderate harmful youth conduct. One method, starting in the 1970's, was the creation of more effective systems of deterrence through the drafting, publishing, and circulation of uniform codes of conduct. Human

beings have a need for order, and such order necessitates reasonable constraints and boundaries that prohibit some forms of conduct.

The trend over the past decade and a half has been the creation of prescriptive discipline codes. In part, this can be attributed to problems caused by ineffectual discipline policies as they relate to increasing occurrences of student violence and misbehavior at school. The public outcry for improved discipline in the nation's schools is another factor; yet the adoption of uniform codes of conduct by local school boards could also be viewed as reasoned "risk aversion." School personnel are potentially subject to personal liability for civil rights and other due process violations, and the codes provide a modality of legalization which serves as a necessary protection against law suits (Sacken, 1989). Infractions in such codes are clearly delineated with corresponding logical, graduated consequences with minimum and maximum punishment for the first occurrence and continued occurrences. The result, according to Sacken, is a hierarchy of undesired behaviors written in a language which is legalistic in tone and structure

and which is keyed to maintaining institutional control and order.

Another manifestation of prescriptive school discipline has been routine, formal procedures to ensure student due process rights. Together with these procedures, the development of uniform codes of conduct indicates that many school districts have reached what Friedman (1986) described as the final stage ("absorption") of the "judicialization" process. Judicialization is defined as the process of converting disputes or conflicts into court cases, and absorption is the point where institutions have digested court-made doctrines and developed new grievance procedures.

Several key court decisions have established the importance of school personnel following procedural due process. In Epperson v. Arkansas (1968), the court indicated it would refrain from intervening in discipline processes unless a constitutional value were sharply implicated or procedural norms were ignored. Sullivan v. Houston Independent School District (1969) required fair warning through rules which "reasonably inform the student what specific conduct is

prescribed." In Goss v. Lopez (1975), the court declared that all exclusionary discipline must be preceded by some form of due process. Otherwise, school boards could be liable for damages in cases involving students' rights to due process (Wood v. Strickland, 1975).

Although courts have traditionally deferred on substantive due process issues, some exceptions are noteworthy. Substantive due process cases are usually fought in a highly discretionary arena, and the courts have generally not become involved (Rossow, 1984). For example, in Bethel School District No. 403 v. Fraser (1986), the court decided that educators must be permitted broad discretionary authority in deciding what conduct is disruptive to the school. However, the 1972 case of Cook v. Edwards established that excessive student punishments can be set aside on the grounds of due process of law. In this case, a student had been suspended from school indefinitely. The court concluded in Dixon v. Alabama State Board of Education (1981) that the power of a school to exclude a student is limited and cannot be arbitrarily exercised. Determining standards for substantive due process cases

involving student suspensions has come to be known as "fundamental fairness." The term is best defined in the court's opinion in the case of Rose v. Nashua Board of Education (1981). The severity of the punitive effect of the suspension is weighed against the severity of the conduct that occasioned the suspension.

The compatibility of due process and effective discipline is currently in general acceptance among school administrators. Studies which polled assistant principals, the front line disciplinarians in many schools, found the vast majority agreed that clearly defined rules in their student conduct codes represented a workable system to meet their responsibilities. They also believed they had ample authority to do their jobs (Tremper, 1987 & Goldsmith, 1982). Building administrators continue to maintain some flexibility in the application of penalties, and individual schools are permitted to adopt additional regulations because of the recognition that the needs, resources, and goals of schools within the same district may vary (Menacker, Hurwitz, & Weldon, 1988).

School administrators generally accept uniform codes of conduct tempered by student due process

rights, but the combination of the two still leads to controversy as well as potential benefits. Sacken (1989) has shown that within a district, the same policy system will bring markedly different results in schools in terms of effectiveness and suspension rates. The author goes on to suggest that district and school rule formation processes need more democratization and should include all interest groups: school board members, administrators, teachers, students, parents, and other members of the community. In spite of the legalization of school discipline, the basic core of student misconduct, unfortunately, appears undisturbed. Nevertheless, the positive aspects of the legalization process include the probability of the reduction of errors in handling student discipline through routine procedures, and the exposure and, hopefully, control of arbitrariness as well as discriminatory intentions.

The core of the controversy surrounding out of school suspension is an outgrowth of the civil rights movement of recent decades. As more urban school districts were implementing court-ordered desegregation plans in the 1970's, the courts were also becoming increasingly active in resolving due process issues in

public schools. "Second generation" desegregation issues began affecting schools, and they frequently focused on discipline practices in newly desegregated schools (Sacken, 1989). Although a popular belief of that time was that sharp increases in discipline problems and minority suspensions were inevitable consequences of court-ordered desegregation, the issue was raised whether minority students were receiving equitable treatment in disciplinary cases resulting in suspension (Bickel & Qualls, 1980). Since 1973, the Office of Civil Rights has required school districts nationwide to report suspensions and expulsions. Data from these reports has generated much controversy over the years and has resulted in many studies and publications critical of schools for the abuse of suspension as a disciplinary tool and alleged discriminatory practices because of disparities in suspension rates among ethnic groups.

Critics point to problems with policies and practices. Based primarily on parent reports of disciplinary actions, a frequently cited 1975 study of school suspensions indicated that 63% of suspensions were for offenses neither dangerous to persons or

property, 25% were related to truancy and tardiness, and only 3% were for destruction of school property, criminal activity, or drug or alcohol abuse (Children's Defense Fund). Menacker et al. (1988) pointed to predictable inconsistencies that exist among schools (even within the same district) over interpretations of serious misconduct, disruption, or consistent misbehavior over time. These inconsistencies are manifested in individual principal's decisions about suspension and its duration. Bickel and Qualls (1980) argued that sufficient evidence exists to establish a relationship between attitudes and behavior of school principals as they relate to schools differentiated as high or low-suspending schools.

Critics also note the harmful effects of frequent suspension on the youth. These effects have both immediate and long-range implications (Chobot & Garibaldi, 1982). The loss of instructional time can be particularly devastating to students who generally already have academic difficulties. Isolation from peers and personal feelings of failure and rejection may encourage suspended students to drop out of school. This feeling of alienation from the school may also be

felt by frustrated parents and contribute to a gradual eroding of the relationship among the youth, parent, and school. Putting young people out on the street will increase juvenile delinquency and crime and may increase social welfare costs due to unemployment based on educational deficiencies. Suspension usually fails to solve the problem of student misbehavior, and the damaging consequences to the student outweigh the potential disciplinary value (Wu, et al., 1982).

Although suspension continues to be a frequently used disciplinary tool, a variety of alternatives are also used in nearly all urban and suburban school districts. Menacker et al. (1988) believed that suspension creates barriers to future success. Educators need to search for ways to include the disruptive child in the regular life of schools rather than reinforcing resistance. Some commonly used or suggested alternatives to suspension out of school include in-school suspension, alternative schools, behavior contracting, use of positive peer pressure, social/cognitive skills training, parental involvement and support, and the use of school social workers (Radin, 1988 & Hare, 1988). Menacker noted that the

challenge remains to create bonds in schools which encourage students to participate in a positive way.

Proponents of suspension have developed numerous supportive arguments, although the literature is not nearly as prolific as that against suspension. Suspension may be viewed as an integral part of the teaching and learning process in school. It is needed for protecting individuals, school property, and the learning environment in the school. Suspension reduces the chance of recurrence of misbehavior, even if only for a short time. Suspension helps students develop self-control, learn what acceptable behavior is, and points out the seriousness of misconduct. Occasionally, suspension may get parents actively involved in efforts to solve the behavior problems of their children. Suspension acts as a deterrent to further misbehavior and provides instruction to other students on the consequences of misbehavior. The majority of students interested in learning should not have to suffer from the disruption of a few. Teacher morale may also be benefited by suspension as well as the learning atmosphere in classrooms with serious disrupters (Wu et al., 1982 & Menacker et al., 1988).

Studies of suspension rates in public schools have shown that black students are suspended at approximately twice the rate of white students (Bennett & Harris, 1982; Children's Defense Fund, 1975; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1988; Radin, 1988; Rossow, 1984). The likelihood of being suspended is also greater for urban students (suburban rank second and rural rank third), males, students whose fathers do not have jobs, students who are on a free lunch, and students who are academically deficient (Wu et al., 1982). Rationales for these disparities are many and varied, but the most controversial one remains the racial disparity. Programs to reduce disproportionate disciplinary actions against minorities have reduced the number of suspensions in a school, but not the disparity (Chobot & Garibaldi, 1982). The conclusion that minorities have been victims of personal and institutional racism in their treatment by school personnel is a commonly held argument (Children's Defense Fund, 1975 & Lemelle, 1988).

However, other studies have pointed to additional factors that play a role in this issue. The isolation of student and institutional variables which affect the

extent of disciplinary problems and suspension rates in schools have proven to be very complex (Bickel & Qualls, 1980). Out of necessity, research designs have tended to focus on a limited number of variables. Radin (1988) viewed the disparity largely as a mismatch between the middle class expectations of schools and the cultural norms of subgroups of students. Possible verbal and nonverbal sources of miscommunication between cultural groups that have recently been identified provide some insight into this notion (Taylor, 1989). Lemelle (1988) believed that blacks are discriminated against in the administration of justice because our social system is designed to keep black masculinity in its imprisoned place in American life. He then applied this concept to the administration of school justice. Wu et al. (1982) cited other factors in suspension rates: 1) academic records are a better explanation for suspension rates since most students frequently suspended are academically deficient, 2) higher rates are simply due to more misbehavior by certain groups, 3) lower socioeconomic status increases the probability of suspension, 4) school policy and practice with regard

to suspension are more important than student misbehavior in determining suspension rates, 5) black students are suspended more often regardless of the number of minority teachers in the school, 6) well-governed schools with firm, fair, and consistent rules and positive school climate suspend less frequently, and 7) schools where teachers are seen by students as relatively uninterested in them and where teachers believe that students are incapable of solving problems have higher suspension rates (Wu et al., 1982).

In summary, a review of the literature reveals that issues related to discipline in the schools as well as youth violence and crime in society at large continue to frustrate the schools and communities of this nation. The desegregation of urban schools and court decisions of the last 20 years have had a major impact on school discipline and have necessitated the legalization of disciplinary codes and practices in public schools. However, the legalization process has not resulted in either fewer out of school suspensions in schools or marked changes in suspension rates among various subgroups in schools. Suspension is a disciplinary practice frequently criticized except in

the more extreme cases of misconduct, and alternatives to suspension are in wide use in most school systems. The issue of racial discrimination continues to be raised because of disproportionate numbers of minority students that are suspended. The belief that suspension policies and practices in public schools are fair with due process procedures closely followed stands in sharp contrast to the argument that disparities in suspension rates are clear evidence of racial discrimination.

Studies and analyses of suspension data have revealed an array of possible factors involved in disparity rates as well as suspension rates in general. How to proceed in order to reduce suspension rates as well as disparities continues to be a focus of the controversy. Both opponents and proponents of suspension would agree that the reduction of suspension rates is a worthwhile goal. Wu et al. (1982) has suggested that this can occur in one of two basic ways: 1) by finding methods to reduce individual student misbehavior and to induce more socially acceptable behavior, or 2) by restructuring the schooling process to remove practices that are related to antisocial behavior and suspension.

CHAPTER THREE

Design of the Study

In order to test the three hypotheses, data were obtained from Student Personnel Services of the Omaha Public Schools. The data included: 1) secondary enrollment totals for selected school years from the last decade (1979-1989), 2) racial compositions of the secondary student populations, 3) secondary suspension totals, and 4) suspension totals by reason and by race for selected misbehaviors for the years 1985-86, 1987-88, and 1988-89. The researcher compiled data for the district for the 1988-89 school year. The raw data were obtained through Student Information Services at the request of the Director of Student Personnel.

To test the first hypothesis that there is no significant change in suspension rates in the last decade: 1) secondary school data from the years 1979-80, 1981-82, 1983-84, 1985-86, 1986-87, 1987-88, and 1988-89 were obtained showing enrollment numbers, numbers of students suspended, and the per cent of students suspended for these school years, and 2) the data were tested for significant differences in the frequency of students suspended each year by the chi-

square method.

To test the second hypothesis that there was no significant change in disparity rates during this time:

1) secondary school data from the above years were obtained showing enrollment numbers by race and the percent of students suspended by race, and 2) the disparity rates were tested for significant differences in the frequency of students suspended during these years by the chi-square method.

To test the third hypothesis that there was no significant difference in disparity rates for selected misbehaviors defined in the Code of Conduct:

1) secondary school data from the years 1985-86, 1987-88, and 1988-89 were obtained showing suspension totals by reason and by race for selected misbehaviors, and 2) the data were tested for significant differences in disparity rates for each selected misbehavior by the chi-square method.

All secondary suspensions were included in testing the first two hypotheses. To underscore another important consideration, the suspension totals included multiple suspensions of the same student. Data used by the Office of Civil Rights each year was based on

students suspended and did not include multiple suspensions of the same student. The null hypotheses will be accepted or rejected on the basis of $p < .05$.

Data from Student Personnel Services included 16 selected misbehaviors. The researcher combined the categories of 'verbal threatening' and 'vulgarity/namecalling' into a category entitled "verbal abuse." The two categories 'attendance/truancy/skipping' and 'tardiness' were combined into the category entitled "attendance." The category 'bus' was dropped because of a lack of use. This brought the total to 12 categories of misbehavior that were tested: 1) assault, 2) weapon, 3) indecent exposure, 4) theft/property damage, 5) alcohol/drugs, 6) fighting, 7) verbal abuse, 8) tobacco, 9) cumulative misconduct, 10) attendance, 11) refusal to cooperate, and 12) disruption of learning.

CHAPTER 4

Presentation and Analysis of Data

The purpose of this study was to examine suspension rates and disparities in suspension rates in the Omaha Public Schools during the last decade. Disparity rates from 1985 to 1989 for selected misbehaviors defined in the Code of Conduct were also examined.

The first hypothesis that there was no significant change in suspension rates in the last decade involved data from seven school years: 1979-80, 1981-82, 1983-84, 1985-86, 1986-87, 1987-88, and 1988-89. The total suspension rate is expressed as a frequency per 1,000 students rather than the number of students among the thousand who were suspended at least once.

The district's secondary student suspension rate ranged from a low of 88.7 suspensions per 1,000 students in the 1983-84 school year to a high of 149 suspensions in the 1988-89 school year. Table 1 shows the rates for all of the years considered.

Table 1.

Suspensions Per 1,000 Students for Selected School
Years

Year	Suspensions
1979 - 80	115.0
1981 - 82	92.6
1983 - 84	88.7
1985 - 86	127.0
1986 - 87	141.2
1987 - 88	146.7
1988 - 89	149.0

A chi-square value was obtained using the observed frequencies and a theoretical frequency of 121.4 (the mean for the selected years). Chi-square was equal to 31.01. Applying the chi-square test for significance, a significant difference of $p < .001$ existed in the suspension rates for the selected years. A decline in suspension frequency occurred from 1979-80 through the 1983-84 school year. Two years later (1985-86), the suspension rate had increased by nearly 50 per cent and since then has gradually increased (see Figure 1).

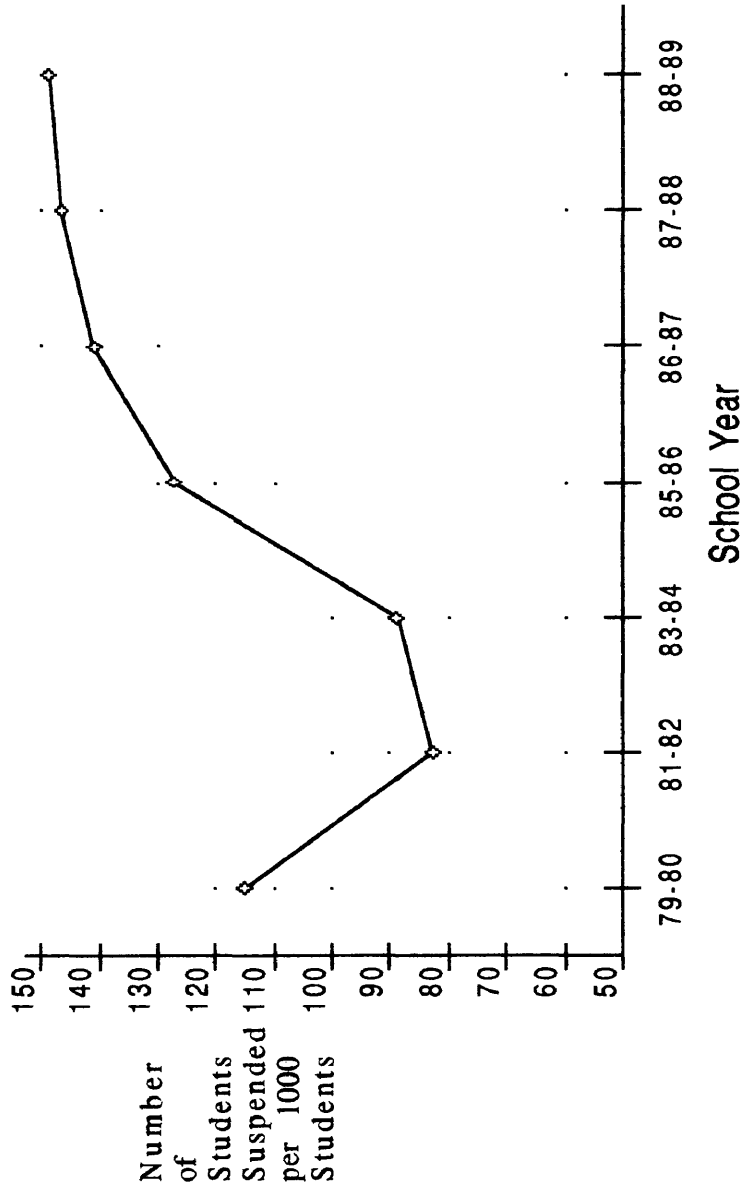


Figure 1. Suspensions per 1000 students for selected school years.

The second hypothesis that there was no significant change in disparity rates during this same time period was also tested by the chi-square method. Using enrollment and suspension totals for the seven selected school years, the average ratio of black to white suspensions was 2.05 black suspensions for every white suspension. Using this ratio and the enrollment and suspension totals for each year, theoretical frequencies per 1,000 students were established for both black and white students. A chi-square value of 3.695 was obtained. The chi-square test for significance showed $p < .10$.

Table 2 shows the black-to-white suspension ratio for these years.

Table 2.

Black to White Suspension Ratio for Selected School Years

1979 - 80	2.24
1981 - 82	2.32
1983 - 84	2.22
1985 - 86	2.06
1986 - 87	1.71
1987 - 88	1.91
1988 - 89	1.91

According to the data from the first two hypotheses, the decade of the 80's began with relatively high disparity rates and moderate suspension rates. Since the Student Code of Conduct has been in effect (1983-84), the disparity rate has edged downward as suspension rates increased significantly. The 1988-89 school year marked the third consecutive year that the disparity rate has been less than two black suspensions for each white suspension (see Figure 2). However, it also marked the fourth consecutive year of suspension rate increases and the third consecutive

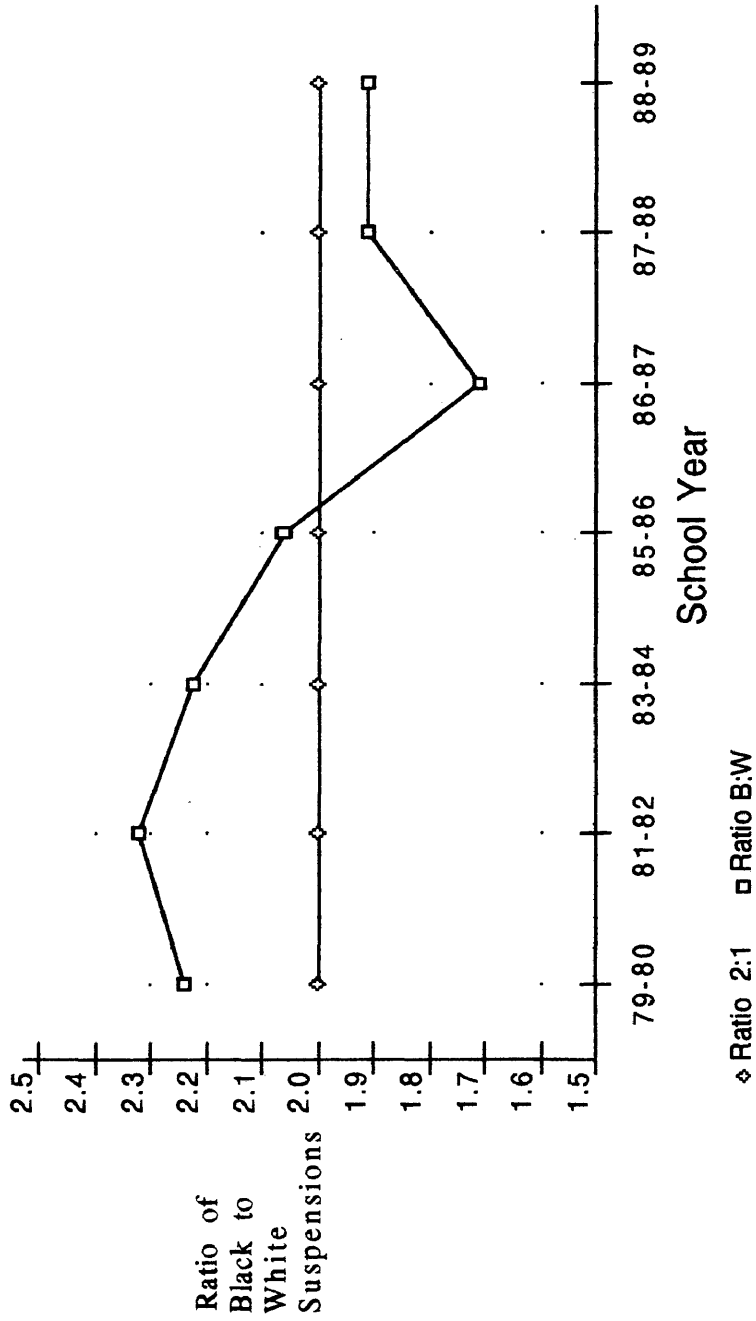


Figure 2. Ratio of black to white suspensions for selected school years.

year that the suspension rate has been over 140 per 1,000 secondary students.

The third hypothesis that there is no significant difference in disparity rates for selected misbehaviors defined in the Code of Conduct includes data from three school years: 1985-86, 1987-88, and 1988-89.

Secondary suspension totals by reason and by race for the 12 selected misbehaviors were tested for significant differences in disparity between black and white suspensions. Using average enrollment and suspension totals for the selected school years and suspension totals for each of the misbehaviors, an average frequency per 1,000 students was determined for blacks and whites for each of the 12 misbehaviors. Theoretical frequencies were established using the average total suspension rate of blacks and whites over the three school years in each category of misbehavior.

In 10 of the 12 categories, the black suspension rate was higher while the white suspension rate was higher in the categories of 'attendance' and 'tobacco' (see Figure 3). Chi-square values yielded a significant difference in 3 of the 12 categories of misbehavior: fighting, tobacco, and disruption of

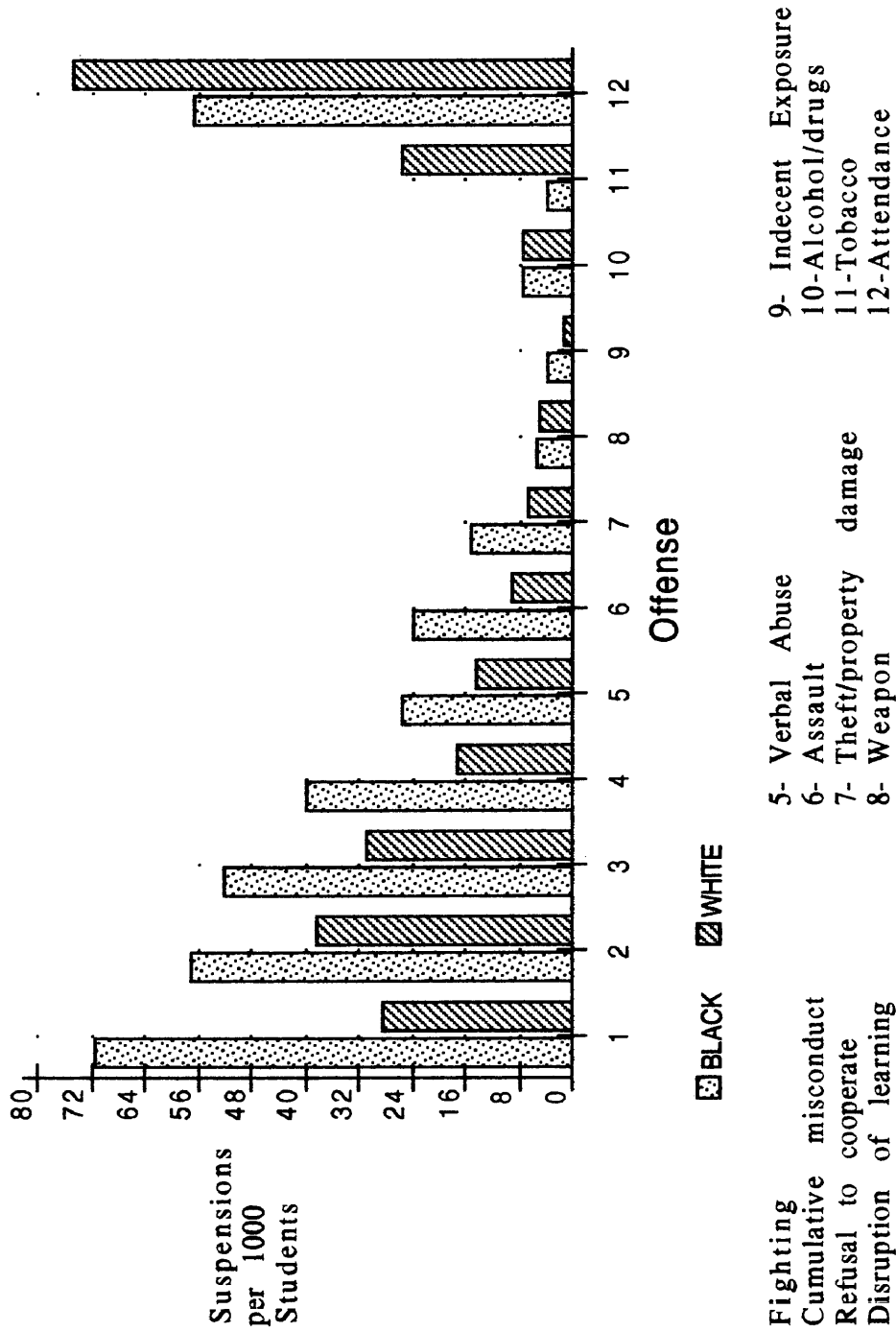


Figure 3. Average number of suspensions per year per 1000 black or white students for selected misbehaviors (1985-86, 1987-88, and 1988-89).

learning. No significant difference existed in 9 of the 12 categories: assault, refusal to cooperate, cumulative misconduct, theft/property damage, verbal abuse, attendance, indecent exposure, weapon, and alcohol/drugs.

Table 3 shows chi-square values and probability values for the selected misbehaviors.

Table 3.

Chi-square Values and Probability Values for Racial Disparity Rates in Twelve Categories of Misbehavior

<u>Category</u>	<u>Chi-square Value</u>	<u>p Value</u>
Fighting	9.479	p < .005
Tobacco	8.178	p < .005
Disruption of Learning	4.544	p < .05
Assault	3.458	p < .10
Refusal to Cooperate	2.770	p < .10
Cumulative Misconduct	1.876	p < .25
Theft/Property Damage	1.811	p < .25
Verbal Abuse	1.608	p < .25
Attendance	1.300	p < .50
Indecent Exposure	0.615	p < .50
Weapon	0.009	p < .95
Alcohol/Drugs	0.00003	p < .99

CHAPTER FIVE

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to examine suspension and disparity rates in the Omaha School District in the last decade in order to identify any changes or trends in these rates. Analyzing suspension rates by race for specific misbehaviors defined in the Student Code of Conduct may be useful in future discipline policy development. Since the adoption of the code in 1982, the Omaha Board of Education has continued to debate proposed changes to the Code of Conduct along with school administrators and the school community. Reduction of suspension and disparity rates are district goals that are in part related to revisions of the code which are adopted by the Board of Education.

Conclusions

The first hypothesis tested was that there was no significant change in suspension rates in the last decade.

1) The hypothesis is rejected because a significant difference existed in suspension rates during this time.

2) The suspension rate declined from 1979-80 through 1983-84 (the first full year the Code of Conduct was in effect).

3) From 1983-84 through 1988-89, the suspension rate increased significantly by 68% from 88.7 suspensions per 1,000 secondary students to a high for the decade of 149.0 suspensions in the 1988-89 school year.

The second hypothesis tested was that there was no significant change in racial disparity rates during the decade.

1) The null hypothesis is accepted because a significant difference did not exist in disparity rate changes between black and white students during the years tested.

2) After reaching a high for the decade of 2.32 black suspensions for each white suspension during the 1981-82 school year (the last year measured before implementation of the code), the disparity rate has shown an overall decline to a 1.91 ratio of black to white suspensions in the 1988-89 school year. The low for the decade was a 1.71 ratio of black to white suspensions in the 1986-87 school year.

The third hypothesis was that there was no significant difference in racial disparity rates for selected misbehaviors defined in the Code of Conduct in the years 1985 to 1989.

1) The hypothesis was accepted in nine categories of misbehavior: assault, refusal to cooperate, cumulative misconduct, theft/property damage, verbal abuse, attendance, indecent exposure, weapon, and alcohol/drugs.

2) In three categories of misbehavior the hypothesis is rejected because a significant difference existed in black/white disparity rates. These categories were: fighting, tobacco and disruption of learning.

3) Two of these three categories of misbehavior rated the greatest significant difference. Blacks were much more likely to be suspended under the category 'fighting' and whites for 'tobacco.' Blacks were also more likely to be suspended to a significant degree in the category 'disruption of learning.'

4) In other categories blacks were suspended more often for assault, refusal to cooperate, cumulative misconduct, theft/property damage, verbal abuse,

indecent exposure and weapon. Whites were suspended more often for attendance.

5) Suspension rates for black and white students in the category 'alcohol/drugs' were nearly identical for the three school years.

Recommendations

1. Suspension and disparity rates need to be monitored by the Omaha School District on an annual basis.
2. Suspension and disparity rates for specific misbehaviors should also be monitored annually.
3. Alternatives to out of school suspension need to continue to be used and further explored and expanded.
4. Revisions to the Code of Conduct should be weighed carefully against the district goals of reduction of suspension and disparity rates.
5. Secondary students who are suspended, and especially those with multiple suspensions, are at greater risk of failing and dropping out of school than those who are not suspended (Chobot & Garibaldi; 1982). Programs to reach these students and keep them involved in the school in a positive way need to continue to be developed.

Concluding Statement

The Omaha Board of Education began debating a new code of conduct early in the last decade. Parents, students, district personnel, and the school community were involved in the discussions which eventually led to the adoption of the Student Code of Conduct by the Board late in 1982. Continued debate over specific parts of the code and revisions have become an annual event.

Suspension and disparity rates involve complex factors. Data from this study show that a relationship existed between implementation of the Code of Conduct and an increase in suspension rates. Although concerns have continued to be expressed over racial disparity rates, data also show that a relationship existed between implementation of the Code of Conduct and a decrease in black/white disparity rates. Other variables, many of which are extraneous to the school environment, also affect suspension and disparity rates. Research has shown that these variables are often difficult to isolate or measure accurately. The challenge remains to unite the schools and community in their efforts to reduce student behaviors leading to

suspension as well as school practices that are related to misbehavior and suspension.

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