

Alternatives to School Suspensions for Use and Possession of Commercial Tobacco Products

School policies regulating the use and possession of commercial tobacco products often contain punitive measures for student violations. Suspension and expulsion are sometimes used to enforce these policies. However, suspensions are counterproductive and harmful.¹

Intentionally addictive products

Commercial tobacco products, like cigarettes, vapes, and chew, contain nicotine, which is highly addictive. The tobacco industry spent decades intentionally and strategically marketing its products to young people. Once addicted, it can be extremely difficult to quit. This is why students may continue to use these products in schools despite policies that prohibit their use and possession.

Why suspensions are counterproductive

Research shows students who receive one or more suspensions a year are more likely to experience mental health issues, use drugs and alcohol, and exhibit antisocial behavior.^{2, 3, 4, 5}

School years are critical for the physical, social and educational development needed for success both in school and in life. Research shows penalties like expulsion and suspension contribute to negative educational and life outcomes, undermining schools' goals for supporting healthy student development.^{6, 7, 8, 9}

In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) issued a report, "Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline." That report finds that some of the harms from suspension and expulsion include a decreased likelihood of graduating on time, increased drop-out rate, and an increased likelihood of involvement with the criminal court system.¹⁰

The negative consequences of using expulsions and suspensions are not limited to the expelled or suspended student. High rates of school suspensions are associated with lower scores on standardized tests and overall academic achievement of the entire student body.¹⁰ The DOE recommends that "schools should... explicitly reserve the use of out- of-school [punishments] for the most egregious disciplinary infractions that threaten school safety," such as bringing a firearm to school.¹⁰

Minnesota has some of the worst racial discipline disparities in the nation. This includes disparities by race and disability in the use of exclusionary discipline in schools.^{11, 12, 13, 14} Using alternatives to suspension can improve student outcomes and reduce racial disparities in schools.

Addressing the underlying issue of addiction

Using suspension and expulsion to penalize prohibited commercial tobacco use may not be reasonable considering tobacco targeted marketing, science of addiction, and long-term consequences associated with expulsion and suspension. School policies should attempt to address the underlying addiction to tobacco in lieu of punitive measures, which may exacerbate the problem and not deter future use.

While schools have an interest in prohibiting behavior that is disruptive and harmful to health, schools may consider weighing the severity of the infraction with the consequences and effectiveness of the punishment. According to CDC, the most effective approaches to helping youth quit tobacco use are

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through counseling and education.¹⁵ In general, non-exclusionary discipline has been shown to have positive effects.^{16, 17, 18}

Overwhelming evidence shows from the 1950s to present, the tobacco industry intentionally and strategically studied and marketed tobacco products to people under the age of 21 in order to recruit “replacement smokers” to stay in business.¹⁹ Recently, for example, e-cigarette manufacturers and sellers advertised youth-appealing flavors like candy, advertised heavily on social media, and offered college scholarships.²⁰ Once addicted, it may be incredibly difficult for youth to quit. This often explains why addicted students continue to use these products in school despite policies prohibiting their use and possession.

Learn more about commercial tobacco use prevention and treatment at health.mn.gov/tobacco.

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¹ American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force. (2008). *Are zero tolerance policies effective in the schools?: An evidentiary review and recommendations*. The American Psychologist, 63(9), 852-862.

² Dong, B., & Krohn, M. D. (2020). *Sent home versus being arrested: The relative influence of school and police intervention on drug use*. Justice Quarterly, 37(6), 985-1011.

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⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Health risk behaviors among adolescents who do and do not attend school—United States, 1992*. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep. 1994;43:129–132

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⁸ Rosenbaum, J. (2020). *Educational and criminal justice outcomes 12 years after school suspension*. Youth & Society, 52(4), 515-547.

⁹ Committee on School Health. (2003). *Out-of-school suspension and expulsion*. Pediatrics, 112(5), 1206-1209.

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- ¹² Minnesota Department of Human Rights. (2018). *Minnesota Department of Human Rights Finds Suspension and Expulsion Disparities in School Districts Across the State*. https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MNDHR/2018/03/02/file_attachments/967458/MDHR%2BSuspensions%2BDisparities%2BNews%2BRelease%2B3.2.18.pdf
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