

Suspension/Expulsion Program Evaluation

Executive Summary



Figure 1 Western University Logo

**Western University Centre for Educational Leadership,
Faculty of Education,
The University of Western Ontario**

Dr. Katina Pollock

Dr. Brenton Faubert

Cameron Hauseman

Paul Bakker

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In June 2015, the Ontario Ministry of Education and Western University's Centre for Educational Leadership entered a contractual agreement. This contractual agreement concerns "Education and Research Services" as related to an evaluation of the implementation of suspension and expulsion policy and programming in Ontario's public schools. The contract included several deliverables, including this final report, as well as recommendations for prevention, intervention, and suspension and expulsion programs in relation to these education and research services.

To evaluate suspension and expulsion programs and provide recommendations, this final report includes:

- An overview of suspension and expulsion policy and program implementation in Ontario's public schools;
- An evaluation of program implementation, including an assessment of program effectiveness;
- A summary of enablers and challenges to program delivery and implementation;
- A review of the funding allocations provided to school boards through the Safe and Accepting Schools Supplement, with a focus on the Safe and Accepting Schools Allocation; and
- A summary of key findings and recommendations.

We conclude that:

All school boards have suspension and expulsion programming available, and most school principals consider mitigating factors and alternatives appropriately, but addressing the needs of students with severe behavioural and mental health issues remains a challenge. Overall, the effectiveness of suspension and expulsion programming and different prevention, suspension, and expulsion initiatives varies with different students and different circumstances.

In terms of resourcing, across the school boards, respondents, on average, felt there were close to enough resources in terms of teaching staff and space for working with students. Regarding funding, paraprofessional staff, and time to work with at-risk, suspended, and expelled students, perception of adequacy seems dependent on board size: on average, respondents from boards with 20,000 students or fewer students were more likely to report having less than enough of these resources, while boards with student populations above 20,001 reported having nearly enough of these resources. It is also noteworthy that, on average, survey respondents did not report having *a lot less than enough* resources, which suggests that, if a resource issue exists, it is likely specific to certain resources and, possibly, school sites.

The expenditure data school boards are reporting to the Ministry does not always accurately reflect how funds are being spent in support of suspension and expulsion programming, which makes it difficult to know for certain how funds are being used. These broad findings are discussed in detail throughout the report, and summarized in Section 6.

To inform the recommendations presented in this final report, we drew on our analysis of the evidence gathered through:

- A Canadian and US literature review;
- A Pan-Canadian interjurisdictional scan;
- An online survey of teaching professionals and paraprofessional staff (e.g., social workers, child and youth workers, psychologists, attendance counsellors, and educational assistants) working in 68 school boards across the province;
- A thorough document analysis, including a review of related Ministry and school board programs and policies;
- Data on provincial suspension and expulsion rates provided by the Ministry;
- The total amount of funding allocated to school boards through the Safe and Accepting School Supplement, and the associated expenditure as reported by school boards; and
- Interviews with directors, supervisory officers, principals, vice-principals, parents, students, teaching professionals, and paraprofessional staff (e.g., social workers, child and youth workers, psychologists, attendance counsellors, and educational assistants).

Report Organization

This final report is divided into seven sections. In the first section, we discuss the suspension and expulsion policy and program context currently active within Ontario's K–12 public education system, and offer a brief description of the methodology used to conduct this evaluation (a full description of the evaluations methodology can be found in Appendix A. Section 2 describes the state of suspension and expulsion programming in Ontario public education. The third section focuses on suspension and expulsion program implementation; program effectiveness is discussed throughout Section 4. Section 5 discusses enablers and challenges associated with the delivery and implementation of suspension and expulsion programming in Ontario. In Section 6, we overview the categories, allocations, and expenditures for the Safe and Accepting Schools Supplement (SASS). The seventh and final section provides conclusions regarding the overall effectiveness of contemporary suspension and expulsion programming in Ontario, as well as recommendations for strengthening the program.

Findings Summary

In general, suspension and expulsion programming is being implemented across all school boards according to the Ministry's expectations outlined in PPMs 141, 142, and 145. Suspension and expulsion rates are declining. English-language public school boards tend to have higher suspension and expulsion rates than other types of school boards (English Catholic, French Public, and French Catholic). Another factor that can influence suspension and expulsion rates is school board size. With some exceptions (i.e., most French-language school boards), school boards with lower levels of student enrolment tend to report suspension and expulsion rates that exceed the provincial averages. This could be due to some of the unique challenges associated with delivering suspension and expulsion programs in school boards with low student enrolment, such as high transportation costs limiting options for program implementation and delivery. Students who are suspended or expelled come from a variety of economic and demographic backgrounds. However, it appears certain groups within student populations are being disproportionately suspended and/or expelled compared to their peers. Specifically, secondary school students are suspended and/or expelled more often than elementary school students; students who identify as Black and/or male, students who come from households with

low socioeconomic status, students who receive special education services, and/or students who experience mental health challenges are also more likely to be suspended or expelled.

In terms of program implementation, boards engage in a variety of prevention activities, and often or always consider alternatives to suspension. However, suspensions and expulsions still do occur—generally, students are being suspended or expelled for behaviours consistent with those described in Sections 306 and 310 of the provincial Education Act. There is a noted trend across all school boards—with a couple of big outliers—to avoid giving suspensions longer than five days; this practice potentially limits students’ access to supports that could help them with their mental health and/or behavioural challenges. Student Action Plans (SAPs)—plans that identify the academic and nonacademic supports for students who agree to participate in a program when they are suspended for more than five school days—are often not guiding programming for long-term suspensions as intended. School boards did report, however, attempting to provide services and supports consistent with the Individual Education Plans (IEPs) of students who participate in suspension and expulsion programs.

Our evaluation determined that, with only a few exceptions, school boards are implementing the Ministry’s suspension and expulsion related policies as intended. Educators felt that alternatives to suspension programs offered at their schools were sometimes or often effective at producing positive student outcomes. They also felt that the programming offered to suspended and expelled students sometimes or often effectively produces positive student outcomes. Generally, different programming options were more or less effective with different student needs and under different circumstances.

Participants named several enablers and challenges that impact the effectiveness of the suspension and expulsion programming at their school boards. These specific challenges and enablers include: (a) competing notions of progressive discipline; (b) addressing students’ social, emotional, mental health, and behavioural concerns; (c) student-to-teacher ratios; (d) communication between stakeholders; (e) development and maintenance of a positive school climate; (f) student enrolment; and (g) educators’ preparedness to deal with behaviours that can lead to suspension or expulsion. Generally, workers in the education sector regard progressive discipline as a concept and policy that, at times, can be difficult to translate fairly into practice; that said, promoting a positive and safe school climate was frequently cited as being effective at preventing student suspension and expulsion. Educators and students indicated that smaller student-to-teacher ratios were preferred when building trusting relationships and delivering programs connected to prevention, suspension, and expulsion. In terms of staffing, paraprofessionals can also effectively help students address emotional, mental health, and behavioural needs. Participating educators mostly felt prepared to deal with student behaviours that can lead to suspensions and expulsions; however, they expressed wanting to further their ability to support students with mental health concerns and to develop effective classroom management approaches they can use to deal with difficult behaviours. The promising practices that evaluation participants shared include: being honest and transparent with students, building relationships with students, and using team-based approaches.

Our research team examined the funding allocated to the province’s 72 school districts for the provision of suspension and expulsion programming and the associated expenditures, as reported by school boards. Between 2011–2012 and 2015–2016, the level of funding allocated through the Safe and Accepting Schools (SAS) allocation remained stable; in our view, this

reflects the Ministry's strong commitment to Safe and Accepting Schools. In 2015–2016, the provincial allocation for the SASS totaled \$46,919,820, of which \$38,802,767 (approximately 83%) was reportedly spent on activities directly supporting the aims of Safe and Accepting Schools. The bulk of the SASS funding is distributed to school boards through one of the two SASS allocations, referred to as the *Safe and Accepting Schools (SAS) Allocation and Urban Priority High Schools (UPHS) allocation*. The SAS Allocation is comprised of the Prevention and Program Support component and the Professional Staff Support component; school boards reported spending less on the former (only 55% of allocation) compared to latter (129% of the allocation). The second allocation, *UPHS*, distributed \$10,000,000 in funding to 34 selected schools in 12 school boards; the data indicate that the recipient schools spent 100% of their allocation consistent with the aims outlined in the annual action plans they submitted to the Ministry so as to receive the funding. For both the SAS and UPHS Allocations, district and school leaders are making resource allocation decisions that reflect the particular circumstances of their boards, including geographic circumstances; the specific needs of students in their schools; their school boards' commitment to the provision of individualized support at school sites; and, of course, budget constraints. Where funds are unenveloped (i.e., the SAS Allocation), it appears that some school boards are exercising their discretion to allocate the funds to other local priorities that could indirectly be supporting Safe Schools. The data are mixed on whether boards are adequately funded for the provision of suspension and expulsion programming. Overall, resources appear to be adequate, more or less, for the provision of basic suspension and expulsion programming (i.e., programming with a limited focus on prevention). All school boards are engaged in monitoring and budget reporting as part of the regular budget and audit cycle. A small number of senior board leaders described using monitoring mechanisms that go above and beyond monthly, quarterly, or annual reporting to examine the efficacy of the use of SAS funds and to use data to inform their resource decision-making. There are, however, indications that the SASS expenditure data being reported to the Ministry may not accurately reflect all aspects of the programs and services being offered for the provision of programming and the prevention of suspensions and expulsions in school boards.

We recommend:

- The Ministry continue to allow for policy and programming flexibility, including resource flexibility, to meet local student needs.
- The monitoring of school boards' program uptake rates; for those schools with low uptake rates, collaboratively explore, with all stakeholders, ways to increase uptake of suspension and expulsion programs.
- The use of OnSIS to collect and report data related to the race/ethnicity of students who are suspended or expelled. Without such data, it is not possible to say for certain if the education system is treating all students equitably.
- **The Safe and Healthy Schools branch consider building upon the work of the Ministry's Parent Engagement Strategy to help foster trusting relationships with parents, and work collaboratively with parents in prevention programs and/or to improve the successes of academic and nonacademic supports during suspension and expulsions.**
- Additional resources and supports (especially paraprofessional staff) be allocated at school sites to address student mental health and well-being concerns without a student having to commit a Safe School infraction.

- The Ministry continue to promote collaborative work across all four key areas (Mental health, Safe and Accepting Schools, Healthy Schools, and Equity and Inclusive Education) in an effort to meet students' mental health and well-being needs and reduce student suspension and expulsion.
- Additional professional learning opportunities made available for educators around early detection, preliminary intervention, and classroom management for students with mental health and well-being concerns. Educators can learn to de-escalate instances and situations that could lead to suspension or expulsion until other experts can provide more comprehensive interventions and supports.
- The Ministry reminds school boards not to avoid suspensions of six days or more (i.e., long-term suspension) if the infraction warrants such action. There is evidence that academic and nonacademic programming is helpful for students, and avoiding long-term suspension denies students access to these supports.
- The Ministry and school boards consider ongoing engagement with school- and community-level partners (e.g., during school staff and school councils meetings, etc.) to openly discuss understandings of progressive discipline, and how this approach is being taken up in their local contexts. During these meetings, the benefits of progressive discipline—and a collaborative approach that engages relevant staff and families as much as possible in the decision-making process—should be stressed. Specifically, efforts should focus on increased engagement of students, parents, school and board staff, and community agencies in planning and re-entry meetings to ensure a collaborative process.
- Continued professional learning for school and district leaders focused on Safe Schools policy and protocols—specifically because of rapid principal and vice-principal turn over and movement.
- Mobilizing the best practices identified in this report for effective behaviour management by informing administrators, professionals, and paraprofessionals working directly with suspended and expelled students.
- The Ministry use PPM 159, *Collaborative Professionalism*, as a vehicle to increase the use of team-based approaches.
- Where possible, develop SAPs for students who are at-risk, outlining both the academic and nonacademic supports that are needed and those currently being provided in the school. These SAPs could be used to help prevent suspension/expulsion. In the event that an at-risk student commits an infraction and is suspended for six days or more, the foundations for an SAP are already in place, making it easier to develop a plan and schedule the planning meeting.
- Consider providing additional funds to small/rural boards who do not have the benefit of community agencies or are facing declining enrolments. For example, the Ministry could enhance their contributions within one of the allocations of the Geographic Circumstances Grant.
- Engaging all school boards in a dialogue, possibly during the Fall Consultation meeting with school boards, to discuss changes to the GSN, about the level of staff and other supports that are required to ensure that all schools can fulfill the mandate of progressive discipline. The Ministry should give particular attention to matters of prevention (e.g., staff who can work with students and families to address mental health and complex behavioural challenges) and continued learning (e.g., staff available onsite to supervise a

student's academic work when suspended for fewer than six days for a nonviolent infraction instead being sent home with a homework package).

- The ESAB plans to conduct analyses in the future to provide further insight into the question of effectiveness of programs, and we continue to recommend that they do so.