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Maryland bills would ban, study early childhood suspensions

By **Brianna Rhodes**|AP February 7 at 3:18 PM

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — Students of color and students with disabilities in prekindergarten through second grade are disproportionately suspended at a higher rate than their peers, according to a state schools report.

Sen. Will Smith, D-Montgomery, is sponsoring an early childhood suspension and expulsion prohibition bill, which will ban prekindergarten through second grade suspensions.

Limited exceptions include a student who brings a firearm to school or possesses one while at school.

During the 2015-2016 school year, 2,363 students from grades prekindergarten through second grade were suspended out of school or expelled from public schools in the state -- a 17.5 percent increase from the previous year, according to the 2015-2016 Maryland Public School Suspensions, Expulsions, and Health Related Exclusions report.

African-American students represented 64.2 percent of the total students suspended and expelled that school year, but make up 34.4 percent of the total student population, according to the report.

African-American public prekindergarten children in the U.S. are 3.6 times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions as white students,

according to a U.S Department of Education Office for Civil Rights 2016 report.

Also, students with disabilities represented 25.5 percent of all out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, but represented 11.9 percent of the total school population statewide, according to the Maryland schools report.

Members of the Maryland Black Caucus announced in early January that one of their main priorities for the year was to ban pre-K suspensions because the practice disproportionately affects children of color and students with disabilities in the state.

“When you look at the data that was presented to us, overwhelmingly those students who are suspended are students of color and I don’t believe that any students ought to be suspended at such a young age,” said Delegate Cheryl Glenn, D-Baltimore, chair of the black caucus. “There needs to be ample amount of services. That’s a horrible way to start the education of our young people.”

Smith said that the legislation will mandate a strong look at the policies and practices that suspend young and vulnerable students, and make an effort to prohibit the practice.

Students are mostly likely being suspended for threats, disrespect, disruption, fighting, and hitting a teacher, Smith said.

Smith also said that suspensions are more prevalent in Baltimore City and Prince George’s County and implicit bias also contributes to the number of suspensions.

“It doesn’t mean that students of color are acting out necessarily, but there are implicit biases that all of us carry and it shows that basically that the teachers were paying more attention to students of color,” Smith said.

Studies show that children suspended at an early age are at a greater risk of being suspended again later in their educational career.

These experiences can lead to disengagement from school, antisocial behaviors, academic failure, and entry to a school-to-prison pipeline, according to the American Bar Joint Task Force on Reversing the School-To-Pipeline 2016 report from the University of Florida.

“All of the studies show that when you are suspended out of school, you’re going to have the propensity to have more behavioural problems and you’re missing out on academic enrichment,” Smith said. “Also, especially for families who have lesser means, it’s going to be a strain to accommodate that suspension out of school because parents will have to take time out of work.”

“The students could be abused or even homeless,” Glenn said. “The children may be hungry. All kinds of issues our students face. Don’t suspend them or kick them out of school. You might be sending them into the same problematic situation that’s making them act out in school.”

Smith suggested developing resources and restorative practices that will replace suspensions, such as counseling.

Similar legislation has passed in California, Connecticut, New Jersey and Oregon.

In a related measure, Sen. Barbara Robinson, D-Baltimore proposed legislation for a state task force to study African-American prekindergarten students’ suspension rates.

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The study would determine whether African-American students are suspended at a higher rate in prekindergarten than students of other races

and, if so, the reasons and measures that are needed to address the issue.

Robinson’s legislation could justify whether suspensions for younger students should be banned if the study shows that it significantly affects African-American children.

Since Smith presented the bill to the Maryland Black Caucus over the summer, he has received support from other organizations, including individuals in the disability community, teachers unions, the NAACP, and school superintendents, he said.

“We’ve worked on this issue all summer and I think we’re going to have a good product and a bill...and make a significant impact,” Smith said.

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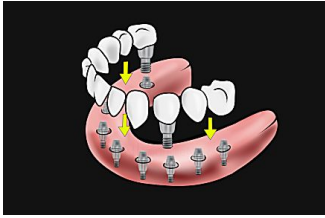
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