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Leonard Edwards: Suspensions hurt kids, schools and don't improve safety

By Leonard Edwards

Special to the Mercury News

Posted: 01/25/2013 01:18:32 PM PST

Updated: 01/26/2013 01:50:04 PM PST



Judge Leonard Edwards at his retirement celebration in 2006. (Patrick Tehan)

A student blows up at a teacher. The teacher's authority is challenged. Emotions rise -- the "F" word is used and the student is removed from class, sent to the principal's office and possibly suspended from school for a few days. A repeat performance will likely result in expulsion.

Sadly, this happens every day in schools across the country. In 2006 more than 3.3 million students were suspended out-of-school at least once and 102,000 were expelled. The majority of suspensions were for minor misbehavior such as "disruptive behavior," "insubordination," or school fights.

In 2008, 43 percent of all suspensions were for "willful defiance" or "insubordination." The suspension rate for students of color is disproportionately higher than for white peers.

California schools suspend 700,000 students a year, while Santa Clara and San Mateo counties suspend thousands of students and expel several hundred each year. Most suspensions are for insubordination and not for violence or drug-related crimes.

Suspensions are bad for students and bad for the community. Suspended students fall behind in their school work and are often unsupervised at home while parents work.

Schools with high suspension rates score lower on state accountability tests and rank lower in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) achievement ratings in mathematics, writing, and reading than schools with lower suspension rates.

Suspended students are twice as likely to repeat a grade, and suspension triples the odds of having contact with the juvenile justice system.

As Castle Redmond, a former teacher and case manager in Oakland Unified, said: "Suspending kids does not increase graduation rates, increase student health, or make schools safer.

Suspended kids come back, and when they do, they feel less connected to the school and more resentful to the adults on campus."

Suspensions and expulsions are not necessary. At least that was the conclusion of Garfield High in East Los Angeles, home of the famous movie, "Stand and Deliver," featuring Jaime Escalante. A couple of years ago the administrators at Garfield High decided not to suspend students from school. The planning took several years, but the results were impressive. Their suspensions decreased from 510 to one in 2010-11 and only one again in 2011-12. Graduation rates and academic achievement increased, and the school atmosphere improved significantly. (For details Google "Fix School Discipline -- Garfield High").

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Other schools have had similar if not as spectacular results. Lincoln High School in Walla Walla, Wash., modified its approach to student discipline. As the principal explained, "It sounds simple. Just by asking kids what's going on with them, they just started talking. It made a believer out of me right away." Lincoln's suspensions dropped from 798 to 135 in one year.

These schools and others present a challenge and an opportunity for our community. San Jose is famous for being the safest big city in the country. There is no reason why we should be suspending and expelling as many students as we are.

We can learn from Garfield High School and create more progressive and successful school suspension and expulsion policies. That will lead to even more success in our schools.

We can help by contacting principals and members of our local school boards to encourage change.

Leonard Edwards is a retired Santa Clara County Superior Court judge and co-chairman of the Vision Council of Kids In Common. He wrote this for this newspaper.