

Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty: Study: Obama-era Education Department policy hurts Wisconsin students

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The Department of Education's one-size-fits-all softer suspension policies are negatively impacting students

Milwaukee, WI – Today the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty issued a groundbreaking new study showing that Obama-era suspension policies have hurt academic performance in Wisconsin K-12 public schools.

The report, *Collateral Damage: The Impact of Department of Education Policies on Wisconsin Schools*, is the first of its kind, using 7 years of data from over 2,000 Wisconsin public schools to provide a comprehensive analysis of the effect of the Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) system on student test scores and suspension rates. PBIS, a federally funded program the Obama Administration pressured districts to implement, encourages softer discipline policies to address student behavior, such as pro-active interventions, rather than suspensions.

Since the Obama administration's executive action, there has been little academic research about the effectiveness of PBIS. There is evidence, however, that PBIS hurts the classroom climate, making teachers feel helpless and students less safe.

The new study, co-authored by WILL Research Director Will Flanders and Research Fellow Natalie Goodnow, makes clear that softer suspension policies implemented through PBIS have hurt academic performance in Wisconsin public schools. The findings include:

Mathematics and reading proficiency are lower in Wisconsin schools that implement PBIS. This negative effect is strongest in suburban and rural public schools.

In Milwaukee, there are negative effects on proficiency in English/Language Arts.

Schools with large numbers of African American students have seen their suspension rates drop. Schools with small numbers of African American students have seen an increase in suspension rates.

“While the Obama administration may have been well-intentioned in their advocacy for PBIS, they usurped local authority by pushing this one-size-fits-all discipline policy on school districts across the country,” said WILL Research Director Will Flanders. “This study shows that while these policies may have accomplished their goal in decreasing suspensions among African American students, the policies appear to have unintended consequences on the education climate.”

“Whatever the merits of PBIS, school discipline policies ought to be determined by school boards, district administrators, and teachers, not the federal Department of Education,” said WILL Research Fellow Natalie Goodnow. “The Obama-era guidance ought to be immediately rescinded by Secretary DeVos, leaving it up to school districts to decide for themselves whether PBIS, and its consequences, best serve their teachers and students.”