

Great Lakes Center: Misleading report obscures school safety issues

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An NEPC Review funded by the Great Lakes Center

Key Takeaway: Report uses faulty interpretations and cherry-picked research in its attempt to portray the impact of suspension reforms on students.

EAST LANSING, MI (December 7, 2021) – A recent Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty (WILL) report suggests a relationship between school suspension rates and some students' perceptions of safety in Milwaukee schools. Its conclusion-which was examined in a new review-claims a causal chain that begins with unpunished misconduct in schools and ends with disruptive classroom environments that harm primarily African American students.

Kathryn E. Wiley and Kate Somerville of the University of Colorado Boulder [reviewed](#) *Suspended Reality: The Impact of Suspension Policy on Student Safety*. They found numerous concerns, including unsupported claims, misleading interpretations, and the use of racially criminalizing stereotypes of African American students.

Specifically, the report finds that following an agreement with the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, lowered suspension rates for African American students were associated with higher numbers of students reporting feeling unsafe. But the report doesn't stop at pointing to a correlation; it claims (in bold heading text) that this means, "Reduced Suspension for African American Students Resulted in Lower Reports of Safety."

The review of this report, however, explains not just this basic error of conflating correlation with causation. Wiley and Somerville also point out that the report

ignores substantial peer-reviewed research on its subject and oversimplifies relevant issues to arrive at its conclusions. Interestingly, the report includes a separate finding that-for the overall student population-as the suspension rate decreased, the percentage of students feeling unsafe also decreased. But this is not the finding that the report chooses to focus on.

Due to the report's flaws, its policy conclusions are not useful to policymakers as a basis for decisions about school discipline. Instead, policymakers would be better served by continuing to use peer-reviewed, evidence-based research on school discipline, racial disparities, and school climate interventions. Policymakers should also consider whether adequate supports are in place for schools to effectively implement alternatives to exclusionary discipline. As many experts have cautioned, merely reducing suspensions is not a comprehensive reform; well-implemented alternatives must be included.

Find the review, by Kathryn E. Wiley and Kate Somerville, at:

<https://www.greatlakescenter.org>

Find *Suspended Reality: The Impact of Suspension Policy on Student Safety*, written by Will Flanders and Ameillia Wedward and published by the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty, at:

<https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/SuspensionStudy.pdf>

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