

WILL: Fewer suspensions, more students report feeling unsafe after federal intervention in Milwaukee Public Schools

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The News: A Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty (WILL) review of the impact of a federal intervention in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) on school discipline policy finds suspensions dramatically fell while more students reported feeling unsafe at school. The results, reported in [Suspended Reality: The Impact of Suspension Policy on Student Safety](#), suggest MPS school discipline policy is sacrificing student safety in an effort to reduce racial disparities in suspension rates.

Background: The Obama administration issued a [directive](#) to public schools in 2014 to decrease student suspension rates for minority students and students with disabilities. They did so through a guidance document, not a regulatory or statutory requirement that would have resulted in oversight by Congress. While the Obama-era guidance was [rescinded](#) in 2018 under the Trump administration, Milwaukee Public Schools was strong-armed into an agreement with the federal government to address racial disparities in suspension rates. The Biden administration is expected to consider and implement similar Obama-era school discipline policies.

Diving Deeper: WILL Research Director, Will Flanders, PhD, and Policy Intern, Ameillia Wedward, used Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) school suspension data and multi-year survey data from UW-Milwaukee on school safety to draw some conclusions on the effect of the 2018 federal intervention on MPS discipline policy and school safety. The results indicate that attempts to reduce racial disparities in suspensions are resulting in unsafe schools.

- MPS suspension rates dramatically declined following the 2018 agreement with the federal Department of Education. While suspension rates increased in Milwaukee for several years, there was an immediate decline in suspensions

for all students following an agreement between MPS and the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Education.

- Reduced suspension rates for African American students resulted in higher rates of students reporting they feel unsafe. When suspension rates for African American students fell, the share of students reporting that they feel unsafe in their school's hallways went up.
- Because African American students are heavily concentrated in schools with other African Americans (nearly half of MPS schools are 80% African American), the results suggest it is other African American students bearing the brunt of lax discipline practices.
- Among all students and Hispanic students, higher suspension rates occurred in schools where students report feeling less safe. This finding is more consistent with the expectation that schools with more instances that result in school discipline would have students feeling less safe.

Conclusions: School discipline policy and student safety are in delicate balance. The evidence suggests that when policymakers force a top-down solution to reduce racial disparities in school suspensions, it is school safety that is being sacrificed as a result. That is an unacceptable outcome that serves to punish students and teachers with an unsafe school environment.

Read More:

- [Suspended Reality: The Impact of Suspension Policy on Student](#), Will Flanders and Ameillia Wedward, October 2021
- [Feds in the Classroom II: The Implications of Federal Intervention on IDEA Discipline for States](#), June 2019
- [Collateral Damage: The Impact of Department of Education Policies on Wisconsin Schools](#), January 2018
- [Feds in the Classroom: The Impact of the Obama Administration's Discipline Policy on Wisconsin's Public Schools](#), October 2017