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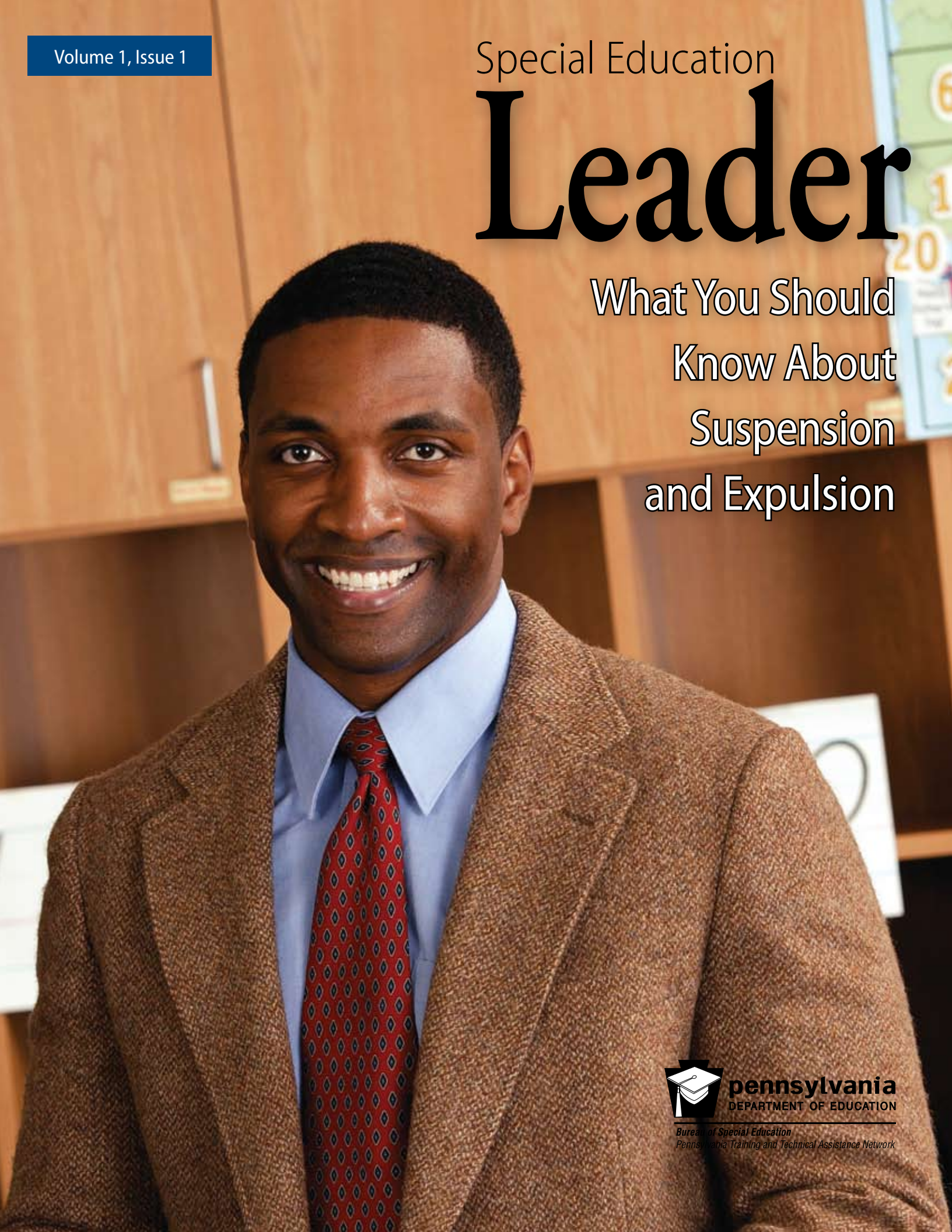
Special Education

Leader

What You Should Know About Suspension and Expulsion



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Between the years 2000 and 2009, in Pennsylvania…

- The number of suspensions has increased by 84 percent
- The number of expulsions has increased by 17 percent
- Referrals to alternative education placements has increased 184 percent – from 2,956 to 8,356
- The number of school-based arrests has increased by 260 percent – from 4,563 to 11,703
- Students who are African-American are four times more likely to receive a disciplinary sanction than students who are White-American

Source: Dignity in Schools. (2010). *School discipline and graduation fact sheet for Pennsylvania.* [Online]. Available: www.dignityinschools.org

Most disciplinary systems are developed with the following instructional and organization purposes: to ensure the safety of students and teachers; to create a climate conducive to learning; to teach students the skills needed for successful interaction in school and society; and to reduce rates of future misbehavior (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Unfortunately, school districts have developed an over reliance on suspension and expulsion as the primary school disciplinary tools. These interventions, by their very nature, pose risks to educational success because they remove students from the opportunity to learn, while being relatively ineffective at addressing the purpose of school discipline.

School leaders have the challenge of creating and sustaining school cultures that effectively address positive school climate, discipline with dignity and equity, and high achievement for all students.

Research shows…

- Students who are suspended or expelled are more likely to drop out of school or graduate late. A student with three or more suspensions by his/her sophomore year is five times more likely to drop out than any other student (Dignity in Schools, 2010).
- Suspended students miss class time and are more likely to do poorly in school. Students who have been suspended score an average of five grade levels behind in reading skills after two years (Dignity in Schools, 2010).
- Suspension and expulsion are not reserved for the most serious offenses (Skiba & Rausch, 2006).
- Suspension and expulsion are not primarily a response to student misbehavior (Skiba & Rausch, 2006).
- Racial and socioeconomic disparities exist in the use of suspension and expulsion (Skiba & Rausch, 2006).
- Zero tolerance suspensions and expulsions do not improve student behavior (Skiba & Rausch, 2006).
- Suspension and expulsion do not improve school climate (Skiba & Rausch, 2006).

What Can School Leaders Do?

Two of the most critical responsibilities of the school leader are: 1) to establish and maintain a safe and healthy instructional climate for students and, 2) to reduce the frequency of negative student behaviors.

Resist and discourage pushout

Pushout happens when youth are removed (or remove themselves) from regular school settings as a result of policies and practices that discourage them from remaining in classrooms (Dignity in Schools, 2010). To resist pushout, school leaders must:

- Reserve zero tolerance disciplinary removals for only the most serious and severe of disruptive behaviors, and define those behaviors explicitly
- Replace one-size-fits-all disciplinary strategies with disciplinary systems that promote equity and that are positive, based on a core set of values, consistent, and meaningful for all students

- Improve collaboration and communication among schools, parents, juvenile justice, and mental health to develop an array of alternatives for meeting the disciplinary challenges of students

Create and maintain a healthy school environment

Create a safe, personalized learning environment that values each student, providing students with the comprehensive services they need to succeed academically and involving families and communities in their children's education in meaningful ways. School leaders can create a safe school environment by:

- Making sure that school discipline is a part of the educational process to support students' full development
- Implementing preventative measures that can improve school climate for all students and reconnect alienated students
- Replacing punitive discipline strategies with positive approaches to discipline

Use positive approaches to discipline that improve school climate and learning

Schools should use positive approaches to discipline rather than punitive consequences. Positive approaches have significant, positive impacts on student behaviors, as well as on academic achievement. School leaders should consider using the following:

- Restorative Practices – Build a sense of school community and resolve conflict by repairing harm and restoring positive relationships. Restorative practices are about schools doing things **with** students, rather than **to** them or **for** them. (International Institute for Restorative Practices – www.iirp.org)
- Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) – A system/framework for improving school climate and preventing and reducing disciplinary incidents. School-wide discipline plans are developed to include core values for the school community; the use of positive behavior support strategies to recognize and reward positive student behavior, using positive interventions when disciplinary issues occur, and using data to monitor and improve discipline policies to meet the needs of students and teachers. (Pennsylvania Positive Behavior Support – www.papbs.org)

Increase teachers' and students' instructional and learning time

Disruptive and/or aggressive behavior in the classroom and the resulting suspensions and/or expulsions can be a barrier to learning. Student behavior and academic achievement are inseparable – they should be addressed simultaneously in order to create higher achieving schools. School leaders can have a positive impact on student achievement by engaging in the following practices:

- Expanding the array of options available for dealing with disruptive or aggressive behavior by supporting the use of alternatives to suspension and expulsion and keeping students in school
- Ensuring that classroom teachers and staff receive training in conflict de-escalation and classroom management strategies that provide them with the tools they need for handling misbehavior at the classroom level
- Allowing teachers the time and flexibility to develop and teach behavior expectations and to integrate these expectations into the culture of the classroom

Establish culturally-responsive practices for dealing with discipline with culturally-diverse students

School leaders can reduce the likelihood of the occurrence of socioeconomic and racial disparities by establishing culturally-responsive practices, such as:

- Establishing social equity by identifying those students at risk of educational failure and providing them with the extra time, resources and other supports they need to meet the high standards expected of them
- Addressing behavior and discipline in a culturally meaningful way – inviting input from students, teachers, families and the school community

- Using data to regularly examine student behavior and to evaluate and make changes in policies and practices in a nondiscriminatory, objective manner
- Creating a caring and welcoming school environment where everyone feels valued, respected, and that they are a meaningful part of the school community

A safe and secure school environment has always been the prerequisite to learning and school discipline continues to be a major concern for education. School leaders have the challenge of creating and sustaining school cultures that effectively address positive school climate, discipline with dignity and equity, and high achievement for all students. This challenge is being met with success for school leaders who:

- Are willing to use data to drive decisions about discipline
- Create safe school environments for all students using positive behavior support programs
- Implement a variety of alternatives to suspensions and expulsions to support student behavior
- Collaborate with outside agencies and the school community to support students and families

For more information, visit the PaTTAN website at www.pattan.net or simply scan the QR code with a smartphone.

Resources

Dignity in Schools Campaign. (2010). *School discipline and graduation fact sheet for Pennsylvania* (PDF document). Retrieved from http://www.dignityinschools.org

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