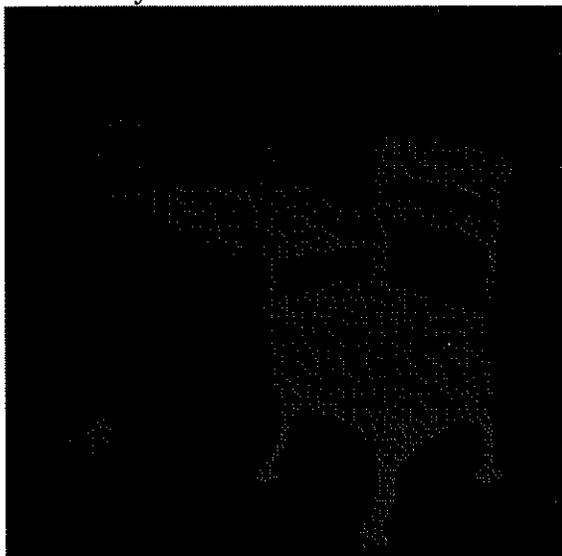


Education Lab is a project to spark meaningful conversations about education solutions in the Pacific Northwest.

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Contrary to popular belief, tossing 'bad' kids harms 'good' ones, too

Posted by Claudia Rowe



Paul Tong / Op Art

Traditionally, the thinking around school discipline has proceeded along these lines: Suspend a disruptive kid and, though that student may suffer academically, the rest of the class benefits.

But two Midwestern researchers have a new study suggesting that this thinking may be flawed. They tracked a Kentucky school district over three years and found that high levels of exclusionary discipline – that is, suspensions – actually harmed math and reading scores for all kids, even those who were never tossed.

Consider the context: School discipline practices nationally are both more invasive and more punitive than ever, with suspension rates doubling since the 1970s. (In 2010, more than 3 million children across the country were removed from class.) But there has been little research to test the academic rationale for this approach.

To get some answers, Brea Perry, a sociology professor at Indiana University, and Edward Morris, who teaches at the University of Kentucky, tracked 16,900 never-suspended middle- and high school students in metropolitan Kentucky. Over time, they found that scores for these

so-called “good” students dipped significantly if they attended nonviolent but highly punitive schools — dropping from the 54th percentile in reading down to the 33rd. There were nearly identical patterns in math.



Brea Perry. Courtesy photo.

“The more suspensions occurred in a given semester, the lower all students’ math scores,” said Perry in an interview. “What surprised us was that nobody had taken a look at this already.”

The effect was particularly marked in low-violence/high-punishment schools, and Perry hypothesizes that in such environments students become both constantly anxious and increasingly distrustful of educators who appear to level discipline unfairly.

In other words, she writes, punishment enacted too zealously undermines the legitimacy of school rules and those who enforce them, “creating a psychological wedge” between students and their teachers.

“It creates a problem with bonds,” she said. “So kids don’t buy into school.”

Conversely, during the time Perry and Morris conducted their research, one of the 17 schools they studied began to shift toward suspension alternatives. “All of their scores went up,” Perry said, both for disciplined students and those who were never in trouble.

Overly punitive environments are “toxic,” she said. “For everyone.”

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