

Mass. Had Hundreds Of Suspensions Last Year — In Kindergarten And Pre-K

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By: [Peter Balonon-Rosen](#) | February 3, 2016



On the front porch, Dashon watches for his school bus with his mother, Dolores Michel. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

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BOSTON — Massachusetts public and charter schools suspended kindergarten and pre-kindergarten students 603 times in the 2014-15 school year, a WBUR analysis of state data shows.

Students in their first year of school were sent home for offenses that included hitting, disrupting, disrespecting, throwing things and fighting.

Dolores Michel's son Dashon got one of those 603 punishments. He was suspended from school before he could read, write or tie his shoes.

"Oh, the first time was incredible ... that was early last year," Michel says. "They call me and tell me that my son had done this and done that and you need to come and pick him up right away. And I'm saying, 'What did he do?'"

When Michel got to her son's school in Dorchester, she found out. After Dashon got off the bus, he pushed to the front of a line. He wanted to be the first student in class.

"The teacher didn't want him to cut in front of the other student, so the teacher [had] him wait outside," Michel says.

And the 5-year-old Dashon did not like that. Michel says he banged on the classroom door and ran into other classrooms. When a teacher stepped into a doorway to block him, Dashon slammed the door. The teacher's hand got caught.

"They did an X-ray," says Michel. "They say it's a hairline fracture on the finger."

And Dashon's punishment? Suspension from kindergarten.

Young, Disabled, Black And Traumatized

"I understand he should not have swung the door," Michel says. "But he's a kid. He doesn't know that was gonna hurt the teacher like that."

At first, the school's principal wanted to suspend Dashon for three days for assaulting a staff member. After Michel spoke with a lawyer, the punishment was reduced to one day. Either way, Michel says, Dashon didn't completely process what the suspension *meant*.

"He did not understand why he did not have to go to school. He [wanted] to be in school," Michel says. "So how fair is that? That's stopping him from learning what he could have learned."

The principal at Dashon's former school, Lee Academy, did not return a call for comment.

There's a handful of factors that put Dashon at higher risk for suspension.

First, he has mild autism. Last year, students with disabilities were suspended at more than twice the overall rate: One in 16 was sent home.

Second, he's black. Black students are suspended almost four times as often as their white classmates.

And there's another thing. Dashon has experienced trauma. Dashon's mom says she had an ugly split with his dad when Dashon was little. And Dashon saw it.



Dashon, now in first grade, signs and dates his homework assignment with his mother, Dolores Michel, before leaving for school. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

Experts say trauma makes suspension more likely — and more damaging.

“What a traumatized child craves the most is connection. Feeling connected, having relationships with that educator who can really help the child feel safe,” says Susan Cole, director of Boston’s Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative. “When a school responds by actually removing a child, it has quite a devastating effect.”

She says kids often behave badly as a way of saying, “Help, I’ve been traumatized.” And, she says, they shouldn’t be suspended.

But others say suspension can be necessary. Even in kindergarten.

UP Academy Holland, a school in Dorchester, dealt out 68 kindergarten suspensions last year. That’s the most in the state. And over three times more than any other school.

UP Education Network spokeswoman Victoria Criado defends the suspensions. She says the school only sends kindergartners home when they become physically unsafe.

“Throwing things or moving their body against objects in a way that would compromise their safety,” Criado says. “That would be what I’m talking about.”

The school’s principal, Jabari Peddie, refused to be interviewed. Criado initially told WBUR that the school was reviewing its policy.

On Tuesday, she called back to say the UP Network [would ban kindergarten suspensions starting the next day](#).

Classroom Management

Many teachers say suspension can be avoided. And the key: classroom management.

Longtime kindergarten teacher Donna Hill-Harris has a slew of tricks to keep rowdy 5- and 6-year-olds under control.

“Sit. Down. Right. Now,” Hill-Harris barks. Immediately a smile creases her face. She breaks out in laughter. “That would be my ‘angry teacher voice.’”

She has an “angry teacher voice,” but also an “angry teacher face.” When kindergartners in her classroom at Dorchester’s Roger Clapp Innovation School see it, it’s time to listen.

“They know right away,” Hill-Harris says. “You know, the furrowed eyebrows and the scrunched-up face. They know, they know.”



Donna Hill-Harris prepares for her kindergarten class at Roger Clapp Innovation School in Boston. The longtime

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kindergarten teacher says good classroom management helps avoid suspensions. (Peter Balonon-Rosen/WBUR)

It's often up to teachers to learn how to control a class on their own. Through experience.

"They did not teach you this in classroom management 101," says Hill-Harris. "No they did not."

Classroom management and a structured day, Hill-Harris says, help her prevent situations that could lead to suspension. Over the past 20 years, she says, it's true that students in her class have been suspended — but only two or three times.

"If I recall correctly, it was hurting another student intentionally," Hill-Harris says.

While she agrees safety is a priority, Hill-Harris doesn't see any long-term benefit to suspension.

"Being suspended for two, three days, it's like they've lost the whole point," Hill-Harris says. "They've forgot. Out of sight, out of mind."

A Law On Discipline

Cities and states throughout the U.S. find different ways to stop suspending young kids. Connecticut and Minneapolis ban kindergarten suspensions. Houston's school board is considering a similar move.

Massachusetts policymakers haven't gone that far. But in 2014, a new school discipline law went into effect.

The law requires principals to notify superintendents in writing before any out-of-school suspension in kindergarten through third grade.

Some advocates question whether that part of the law is followed. But others credit it for a drop last year in kindergarten suspensions. The 603 reported kindergarten and pre-kindergarten suspensions from 2014-15 are about half as many as the year before.

"Frankly, it's a little fail-safe kind of provision so that you get kind of a second look at what's going on," says Alice Wolf, former Massachusetts state representative.

Wolf helped write the law when she served in the State House. She now works with Massachusetts Advocates for Children.

"It means the schools are beginning to really think about how they're operating," says Wolf. "And I think it will be a protection."

It's a protection that might keep adults from setting off a domino effect in children's lives. Even one suspension, at any age, puts a kid at higher risk of dropping out later on.

Correction: An earlier version of this story referred to UP Academy Holland as a charter school. UP Academy Holland is run by charter operator UP Education Network, but isn't a charter school.