

What Discipline Looks Like At A Boston School With 325 Suspensions

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By: [Peter Balonon-Rosen](#) | March 9, 2016



Students prepare for the day in a morning assembly at UP Academy Holland in Dorchester. (Joe Difazio for WBUR)

 WBUR
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BOSTON — Second- and third-graders walk in silence through the hallways of UP Academy Holland. A student

speaks to his classmate, and a teacher gives a soft but stern warning. UP Academy Holland's rules are explicit: No talking in the halls.

Teachers walk along with the groups of students. Each teacher clasps a stick striped in rainbow colors, with clothespins bearing the students' names clipped on from top to bottom. If your clothespin is at the bottom, in the red zone, it means you've misbehaved. And everybody knows it.

It's all part of the "broken windows" theory of discipline at UP Academy Holland, a Dorchester public school that was declared "failing" in 2013. It's now run by a nonprofit network under state supervision.

The theory, borrowed from policing, holds that cracking down on minor offenses will create a culture with fewer major ones. UP Academy Holland embraces that philosophy in the [school turnaround plan](#) created by state Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester and UP Education Network CEO Scott Given.

So UP instructs teachers to "sweat the small stuff" and meet every single infraction of the rules with an immediate consequence. Often, this means issuing an "automatic" — an automatic consequence for rolling your eyes, or wiggling in your seat, or disputing an automatic, on up to fighting and other dangerous acts.

"Structure is important," says Given. "I think that it helps to create an environment where students can focus on learning."

And [Holland's test scores](#) have gone up. But some current and former Holland parents, staff members and students' advocates say the emphasis on structure also creates a rigid school culture and that Holland imposes even a serious consequence — suspension from school — without the required notice or hearing. As WBUR [reported Feb. 3](#), UP Academy Holland suspended kindergartners more times than any other Massachusetts school in the 2014-'15 school year.

In response, UP Education Network, which runs Holland and four other Massachusetts schools [said it would stop suspending pre-K and kindergarten students](#).

But current and former parents and staff members responded with stories of their own. They describe overwhelmed staff, stern discipline practices and their own concerns about how the school treats students with disabilities.



Students walk silently through the halls of UP Academy Holland. (Joe Difazio for WBUR)

One teacher, who requested anonymity for fear of reprisal, sent WBUR discipline records for the current school year, with students' names redacted. Those records show 233 in- and out-of-school suspensions in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade from August through January. Holland has about 750 students in those grades.

Last year, state data show, the school imposed 325 suspensions overall. Massachusetts schools, on average, out-of-school suspended one in 33 students. UP Academy Holland out-of-school suspended one in 11.

“Any removal from the school we take incredibly serious and before that can happen we have to go through a very complex process that is checked by our receiver before any exclusion is authorized,” says Jabari Peddie, UP Academy Holland’s principal.

State Education Commissioner Chester says the school must improve.

“There’s no rationale for suspending young people at that kind of rate, that’s just unacceptable,” says Chester. Still, he expresses confidence in the school’s administrators. “I feel very confident that we will get this moving in the right direction.”

Of Holland’s 233 in- and out-of-school suspensions so far this year, 117 were for first- and second-graders, according to the records supplied to WBUR. The school has about 250 students in those grades. Students with disabilities substantial enough to keep them out of regular classrooms were suspended 37 times, the records show.

“I feel like instead of teaching kids how to be successful in life, we’re teaching them how to behave like robots,” the teacher says. “And if they don’t behave like robots, we’re teaching them that they’re really bad kids with really big problems.”

The teacher pointed to the school’s philosophy of punishing even small infractions, like rolling their eyes, sucking their teeth or not sitting in “scholar ready position” as setting students off.

“They’re like, ‘Oh my gosh, I’m such a bad kid, I’m going to act out and act crazy now.’ When all they were doing was slouching,” the teacher says. “And kids get really escalated.”

Zaina Amin-Jajah has a son in second grade at UP Academy Holland. She praises the school’s structure.

“Kids will do whatever they want,” Amin-Jajah says. “But when you give them some rules to work with they will always be in shape.”



UP Academy Holland posts its values in a hallway. (Joe Difazio for WBUR)

Not only does Holland report more suspensions than many other schools, but it also suspends students without following the required procedures, some parents and an attorney say.

“By state law, an out-of-school suspension is if a child is sent home early for disciplinary misconduct,” says Elizabeth McIntyre, a lawyer who has represented seven students at UP Academy Holland. “So if school gets out at 3:05 and a kid is sent home at 2:45 — that’s a day of suspension.”

As an Equal Justice Works fellow at Greater Boston Legal Services, McIntyre represents students who have been unlawfully suspended or expelled. Almost all are students of color, she says, and all have disabilities. Her clients’ median age is 8.

All too often, McIntyre says, schools don’t count sending a child home early as a suspension.

“No, I mean they’re just not,” McIntyre says. “By and large, schools send particularly little kids — particularly little kids with disabilities — home regularly without all of these processes that they’re supposed to go through.”

Those processes include notifying parents before the student is suspended, holding a hearing on the suspension and, in certain cases, determining whether the student’s disability caused the behaviors, in which case suspension is forbidden. By state law, parents can appeal the suspension to the district superintendent.

For instance, Boston Public Schools’ [Code of Conduct](#) lists specific measures: Before any suspension, school staffers must document that they’ve tried discipline that keeps the student in class. Principals must notify the district superintendent in writing before any suspension of a student in kindergarten through third grade. And a student’s parents or guardians can appeal the suspension to Boston Superintendent Tommy Chang.

“I support UP Education Network’s decision to stop its practice of suspensions for our youngest students,” said Chang, in a statement. “Suspensions should be the last resort when it comes to discipline, even in challenging situations.”

But UP Academy Holland, while still considered a public school, no longer reports to the superintendent of Boston Public Schools. So, rather than notifying Chang, principals are told to notify Given, the UP CEO. And if parents want to appeal, they would appeal to the CEO, not to a public official.

“Suspension is a multi-step process. Ultimately the school makes the decision, they know their students the best,” Given says. “But as a receiver we provide guidelines and oversight to the process.”



Sharlene Sutton and her son, Jayden, wait on the front porch for his school bus to arrive. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

One of McIntyre’s young clients, Jayden, knows the suspension drill only too well. He entered Holland’s first grade in 2014, the same year that UP Education Network took control.

Jayden’s mother, Sharlene Sutton, got daily calls to pick him up. No notice of suspension. No hearing.

In first grade, Jayden couldn’t recognize many of his letters.

“How could he learn anything by them calling, ‘Come get your son,’ every minute?” Sutton says. “He can’t learn nothing like that.”

Jayden has a diagnosis of ADHD and significant developmental delay; he required specialized instruction in kindergarten, plus speech and language therapy. His history also includes behavioral and emotional disabilities, trauma and homelessness.

And he acts out. UP Academy Holland records, which Jayden’s mother shared, cite one instance in first grade when Jayden ran from his classroom — three times in one day. An incident report says he stabbed a fellow student with a plastic knife and said he was going to kill him.

That resulted in a formal, one-day out-of-school suspension.

Other times, though, McIntyre says Jayden was disciplined, removed from class, physically restrained or sent home for less obviously dangerous actions: kicking a whiteboard, trying to drink Purell, eating paper or running from class.

Principal Peddie would not comment on specific incidents, but says the school uses physical restraints rarely.

“Restraints, if ever used, are only used by individuals who have gone through a very rigorous training,” Peddie says.

Jayden, now 8, still remembers one time when a Holland teacher sent him out of class.

“I wanted to come back in. She said when I’m ready,” Jayden says. “But I was ready till she didn’t want to let me back in.”

So he started acting out.

“So I got upset, then I was beating up on another student, because she didn’t let me in,” Jayden says. “Now that’s when she let me in the door, and that’s when she made a call.”



A “calm-down room” at UP Academy Holland. (Joe Difazio for WBUR)

Jayden was sent to one of the school’s “calm-down rooms.” A first-floor calm-down room is a former storage closet, still labeled “STORAGE” on an outside sign, that’s been turned into a dedicated space for timeouts.

Sometimes students stay in there alone while a staff member waits outside. The door has a small window for observation, although not every corner is visible through it. If a student is in the room longer than half an hour, the staff must notify the principal.

Malikka Williams’ son Malik attended UP Academy Holland in kindergarten. She remembers the first time she saw one of the calm-down rooms.

“Tears just started coming down my eyes, because it reminded me of a hospital ward room for psychiatric,” says Williams. “And I remember at that moment I said, ‘My God, this is not OK.’ ”

School administrators say they put students there only when they pose a danger to themselves or others. Principal Peddie says it allows students to calm down.

“We give students the space and the opportunity to self-regulate and really put themselves in a position where they feel as if they can be successful,” he says.

But Robert Cross, Malik’s dad, remains concerned.

“Why would you put a 5-year-old in an isolated room?” Cross asks. “Why would you suspend a 5-year-old, at that matter, you know?”



Jabari Peddie is principal of UP Academy Holland. (Joe Difazio for WBUR)

Malik started kindergarten at UP Academy Holland in September. Malik, who Williams says is diagnosed with social-emotional delay, was suspended 10 times in the first half of this school year.

It could start small. One time, Williams says, it started with laughter.

“He was in dramatic play, and a little girl whispered in his ear,” says Williams. “And when she whispered in his ear, it kind of tickled and he yelled out, ‘Aaah!’ ”

The teacher asked Malik to use his inside voice, Williams says. But he laughed and yelled again, loudly. So, Williams says, he was sent out of the classroom to the dean of students’ office.

“And he gets in the dean’s office, and he’s acting out because he was removed and he doesn’t understand why laughing is a problem,” Williams says. “If he can’t regulate himself because he’s upset that he had to go to dean’s office, so now [he’s] in there a little bit longer.”



Michael Cross enjoys a little playtime with his son Malik after school. Malik attended UP Academy Holland in kindergarten. (Jesse Costa/WBUR)

Soon, according to the school records Williams shared, Malik’s behavior became a daily problem. And as the semester wore on, it got worse. Often, Malik could get genuinely dangerous. He’d have outbursts, throw things, try to attack staff, or run out of class. That would put him back in the dean of students’ office, or DOSO.

“Once my son knew that he was going to DOSO, that outburst is going to be [magnified] because he doesn’t even understand what he did wrong,” says Williams. “He’s scared.”

Eventually, Williams says, she was getting texts and calls almost every day to pick up Malik. More often than not, it wasn’t a formal suspension, just a demand that she come take him out of school. Sometimes, she says, a staff member told her that if she didn’t take Malik, they’d call EMS to do it.

“It got to the point that my phone would ring and my nerves became shot,” says Williams. “I do feel that through the numerous suspensions, calls and emergency removal threats, that you were pushing my son out.”

In January, Malik transferred to another school. Since then, he has not been suspended once.

“My son, when we pick him up, he runs to the car...,” Williams says with tears in her eyes. “He says, ‘Mommy, I had an excellent day!’ I’m so happy. Happy he’s happy.”



A student heads to class at UP Academy Holland. (Joe Difazio for WBUR)

There's abundant evidence that being suspended, even once, even in kindergarten, hurts students' academic performance and increases their chances of dropping out later on. But in the face of genuinely dangerous behavior, educators often feel that they have no choice.

"We had kids throwing scissors, spitting, punching, throwing laptops, putting teachers' phones in the sink, biting," says a former UP Academy Holland staff member, who requested anonymity to avoid hurting her chances of employment. "From a kindergartner, I've been punched in the jaw. I've been spit at. I've been kicked."

Holland suspended the school's few very disruptive students often, the former staffer says, but staff members throughout the school also tried hard to avoid suspension whenever possible. Even with very disruptive students, she says, they were left searching for ways to keep them in class.

"I think that that was the sort of issue that really kept the administration up at night," the staff member says. "The sort of 'What do we do to fix this problem?'"

UP Education Network CEO Given says the UP Network schools are looking into new ways to handle students with significant needs.

"Earlier this year we started to recognize that our use of suspension for our youngest students was not the best approach to balance supporting all students and keeping the school safe," says Given. "We thought that it was."

Updated on March 11, 2016:

UP Education Network posted CEO Scott Given's [response](#) to this story on its website.

"We take this critique to heart and are committed to continually improving. But we are also proud of and must celebrate the strides our students have made in the short time that we've been able to work with them."

View the complete response [here](#).