



Disconnection, Punishment, and Isolation Hurt Children and Make Our Communities Less Safe

IDRA Testimony Against House Bill 655, submitted by Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D., to the Texas House Select Committee on Youth Health and Safety, March 20, 2023

Dear Chair Thompson and Honorable Members of the Committee:

My name is Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D., and I serve as the chief legal analyst at IDRA, an independent, non-partisan non-profit committed to achieving equal educational opportunity for every student through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

At IDRA, we work to transform education by putting children first. It is with that spirit that I respectfully submit this testimony opposing HB 655, which would give schools broad discretion to remove children from schools and force them into a virtual setting – with no behavioral or mental health supports; no support or resources for parents, caregivers, and educators responsible for supervising students in the virtual setting; and no data or clear measures to hold virtual providers accountable for the care and success of students forced out of public schools under this proposal.

Alarming, there are no data supporting the necessity of this bill nor evidence justifying removal to virtual education as an appropriate response to challenging student behavior. To the contrary, disconnecting students from the school community and isolating them with no support or safeguards will make our schools and communities *less* safe.

Also concerning, HB 655 will likely have a disproportionate impact on Black students, other students of color, and students with disabilities, who are more likely to be wrongfully labeled as “habitually violent” because of implicit bias (Johnson, 2016). In addition, the provision authorizing schools to consult with law enforcement in making these determinations will increase the likelihood of student involvement with the juvenile or criminal legal systems with no legal safeguards.

It bears noting that schools are already required by law (SB 11, 2019) to establish Safe and Supportive School Teams at each campus that conduct threat assessments to assess and support students who make threats of violence or exhibit harmful, threatening, or violent behavior in order to determine appropriate interventions (Texas School Safety Center, 2022).

When youth do exhibit violent or aggressive behaviors, they are often doing so in response to underlying trauma and challenges.

Children who exhibit violent or aggressive behavior are often themselves the victims of violence or other forms of abuse, neglect, chronic stress or trauma that should be addressed. These underlying issues include experiencing food insecurity, having limited access to medical services, experiencing bullying, and living in homes with violence and unserved mental and behavioral health needs (David-Ferdon, et al., 2016). Accordingly, HB 655 will likely lead to the removal of our most vulnerable children in need of the stability, support and care that schools can help to provide – potentially to environments that could exacerbate the underlying issues with which students are struggling.

Disconnection, punishment and isolation hurt children exhibiting challenging behaviors and may increase risks for violence. Research shows policies and practices that rely on disconnection and isolation – like suspensions and other removals from school – can have harmful effects on youth’s behavior. Disconnection and isolation from school prevent students from learning and practicing important positive social behaviors, limit opportunities to build trusting relationships and reduce adult supervision (David-Ferdon, et al., 2016). Even more concerning, recent research has confirmed that children subjected to social isolation are more likely to experience high rates of depression and anxiety during and after enforced isolation (Abrams, 2023).

IDRA conducted a youth participatory action research study in 2021 focused on the impacts of virtual and remote learning during COVID-19. The students, all living in the San Antonio area, unanimously expressed loneliness, fear and lack of motivation throughout their time learning remotely during the pandemic (Campos, et al., 2021). For example, below are some of the comments from the students:

- “I feel so incredibly alone and unmotivated to keep waking up.”
- “I felt isolated and unmotivated constantly and online schools became overwhelming.”
- “I don’t really talk to any of my friends anymore and I feel extremely lonely, I have breakdowns more often now, and every other day I feel awful about myself.”
- “It’s so hard to keep up with everything going on. I feel trapped, and my anxiety has gotten worse.”
- “I feel bored and sad and cry a lot of the time now and just feel like I’m drowning at school.”
- “Sometimes I do not have the proper resources and then I feel shamed by my teachers, so in the end I’m sad.”
- “I am constantly on a laptop and my eyesight becomes strained throughout the day. Sometimes I’ll get headaches from this as well. I often forget to eat.”

We acknowledge that there are times when a child may need to be temporarily removed from the classroom for the safety of themselves, their classmates and their educators. But temporary and limited removals from the classroom are not the same as removals from the school to a virtual learning environment. While the former is designed to ensure safety and identify meaningful supports, the latter harms student learning and may exacerbate real challenges that young people experience. Removals must be temporary, be implemented in conjunction with appropriate supports, and include a plan to transition back into the learning environment once the student and family have received appropriate interventions and educators have received appropriate support.

Schools are critical partners in identifying challenging youth behaviors and supporting families and healthcare providers in preventing and addressing them. There is ample evidence that protective and preventative measures can reduce the likelihood of youth violence and address the root causes and risk factors causing challenging behaviors. Many of these measures are school-based or can be identified and provided by school staff and school-centered networks. Protective factors include strong relationships between young people, families and adults at school; healthy social, problem-solving and emotional regulation skills; and school readiness and academic support.

Strong and positive family-youth relationships are associated with healthy child and adolescent development and the prevention of violent behavior (David-Ferdon, et al., 2016). Schools can help foster these relationships through family engagement efforts that support meaningful family involvement in the campus community (Montemayor, 2016). Further, promoting positive relationships with other caring adults, such as teachers, mental and behavioral health professionals, coaches, mentors and community volunteers, is also shown to reduce youth risk for violence and other problematic behaviors. Rather than engaging in a reckless response to challenging student behavior, policymakers should instead invest in evidence-based prevention and support programs, including mentoring and after-school programs, partnerships with mental and behavioral health professionals that focus on building positive school climates, and robust family engagement programs.

Further, multiple studies have shown that strengthening youth's social and emotional skills is an important component of a comprehensive approach to preventing youth violence. These school-based approaches often include training for teachers and other school personnel on ways to build youth's social-emotional skills, monitor and manage behavior, and build a positive school climate to reduce aggression and violence, such as bullying, and support academic success. Removal to a virtual environment would reduce if not eliminate effective instruction on and support for these critical skills.

Rather than exclusion, policymakers must invest in supports that benefit individual students and teachers and improve overall school climates, including diverse and well-trained school-based mental and behavioral health professionals who can recognize and respond to students' and teachers' needs in challenging circumstances and evidence-based programs that help young people to develop critical social-emotional skills.

Exclusionary responses to challenging student behaviors may create a false sense of immediate security for a few but are not backed by research and can actually create less safe school environments overall – particularly for those students who are disproportionately impacted by them. Location matters: a young person's physical environment, including their school, can serve as a buffer to violence (CDC, 2016). Forcing a child into virtual education setting denies them the benefit of critical developmental opportunities and the protective factors that schools provide and could, instead, put them in challenging environments that exacerbate underlying issues.

Recommendations

Instead of passing exclusionary and harmful policies like HB 655, policymakers should:

- Study the prevalence, root causes and evidence-based practices to respond to and treat challenging youth behaviors, including violent behavior;

- Invest in school- and community-based resources and services to support educators, parents and other caregivers in treating violent behavior in children;
- Support programs and practices that promote strong and positive family engagement and connect families to community-based support and resources;
- Provide high-quality early childhood education and pre-school enrichment programs that include family engagement;
- Fund and incentivize the growth of school and community-based mental and behavioral health providers; and
- Expand local mental and behavioral health authorities throughout the state, and particularly in low-income and high-need communities.

IDRA is available for any questions or further resources that we can provide. For more information, please contact Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D., at paige.duggins-clay@idra.org.

Resources

- Abrams, Z. (January 1, 2023). Kids' mental health is in crisis. Here's what psychologists are doing to help. American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2023/01/trends-improving-youth-mental-health>
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- Craven, M. (June 16, 2022). What Safe Schools Should Look Like for Every Student – A Guide to Building Safe and Welcoming Schools and Rejecting Policies that Hurt Students, IDRA Issue Brief. <https://idra.news/SafeSchoolsIB>
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- Johnson, R. (October 2016). Zero Tolerance Policies Likely Contribute to High Attrition Rates of Black Students and Hispanic Students. Texas Public School Attrition Study, 2015-16. <http://www.idra.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/IDRA-Discipline-Article-2016.pdf>
- Montemayor, A. (September 2016). Co-Leading and Co-Transforming Schools – School Administrators and Family Leaders in Education, IDRA Newsletter. <https://www.idra.org/resource-center/co-leading-co-transforming-schools-school-administrators-family-leaders-education/>
- Texas School Safety Center. (2022). Threat Assessment Toolkit. <https://txssc.txstate.edu/tools/tam-toolkit/>

IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization led by Celina Moreno, J.D. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. IDRA strengthens and transforms public education by leading policy analyses and advocacy; dynamic teacher training and principal coaching; useful research, evaluation and frameworks for action; and innovative student, family and community engagement.