

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 30, 2020

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Dorado,

Over the past two years, several investigative reports have highlighted the complaints of parents, advocates, faculty, and administrators from school districts across the country concerning the intentional underreporting of suspensions in K-12 schools, including through use of “informal” suspensions.¹ Extant research verifies issues related to the ‘masking of higher suspension rates.’² Some of these reports describe how teachers were instructed by district administrators to mark students as absent when those students were actually sent home without any further documentation of the incident that led to the disciplinary action. Other reports detail how faculty were directed to label the suspensions as an “in-school activity,” or “excused absence” on attendance reports. For example, data collected in January 2017 from seven schools in the Washington, D.C. metro area showed that while “students spent a total of 406 days in suspension, only 15% of those were officially recorded [as suspensions].”³ Use of such tactics to implement “informal” suspensions in circumvention of federal reporting requirements pertaining to the use of exclusionary discipline practices has grave consequences for students.⁴

According to a 2018 GAO report examining Department of Education national civil rights data for the 2013-2014 school year, out-of-school suspensions for students in K-12 public schools declined nationally.⁵ However, because informal suspensions are not captured in federal discipline data, these data may understate school district discipline rates, thereby distorting the impact of discipline policies and practices, particularly the impact on marginalized student populations.

¹ Matos, Alejandra and Brown, Emma. “Some D.C. high schools are reporting only a fraction of suspensions.” *The Washington Post*. July 17, 2017.

Travis, Scott, O’Matz, Megan, & Maines, John. “Broward school district failing to report many campus crimes to state as required.” *Sun Sentinel*. June 8, 2018.

Zimmerman, Alex. “Are NYC schools underrepresenting suspensions? A new report suggests it’s possible.” *Chalkbeat*. July 30, 2019.

² Losen, Daniel J. & Skiba, Russel J. “Suspended Education: Urban Middle Schools in Crisis.” *The Southern Poverty Law Center*, 2010. 1-24.

³ Matos, Alejandra and Brown, Emma. “Some D.C. high schools are reporting only a fraction of suspensions.” *The Washington Post*. July 17, 2017.

⁴ Sullivan, Anna. “Schools tough approach to bad behavior isn’t working-and may escalate problems.” *The Conversation*. May 26, 2016.

⁵ GAO-18-258.


The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
January 30, 2020
Page 2

Recognizing that federal data does not capture informal suspensions, we are therefore requesting your assistance with answering the following questions:

1. How is informal suspension defined?
2. What is the relationship, if any, between out-of-school suspensions and chronic absenteeism, and what patterns may exist by school characteristics and student demographics?
3. In selected school districts, what factors contribute to declines in suspensions, and how may informal suspensions factor into such declines in suspensions?
4. How do selected states and school districts gauge the extent of informal suspensions and what has been the federal response in terms of guidance, technical assistance, resources, or civil rights investigations?

Thank you for considering this request. Please contact Loredana Valtierra (Loredana.Valtierra@mail.house.gov) at the Committee on Education and Labor, and Blair Wriston (Blair.Wriston@mail.house.gov) from Representative McEachin's office to follow-up on this request.

Sincerely,



ROBERT C. "BOBBY" SCOTT
Chairman
House Committee on Education and Labor



A. DONALD McEACHIN
Member of Congress