



Christy:

You're listening to ABC New England Northwest. Christy reading with you this morning. Now, have you ever had experience with school suspension? The very thought of it may have gotten you to pull your socks up, but maybe you found yourself having to take time out to reflect on your behaviour. You might have had to navigate a suspension with one of your children. Well, a new study says boys in regional and remote New South Wales are more likely to be suspended from public schools than their city counterparts. The study also found that one in five students been suspended or expelled at least once before finishing school. Researchers from Queensland University of Technology have analysed New South Wales public school suspension data from 2012 to 2021. So what do the figures tell us about how disciplinary exclusion is working in our schools? Professor Linda Graham is from the Centre for Inclusive Education and is a co-author of the research. Linda, good morning and thanks for joining us today.

Linda:

Thank you, Christy.

Christy:

Why were you looking at suspensions? Why were you delving into this?

Linda:

Well, we've been looking, our team has looked at suspensions in numerous states in Australia, so Queensland, South Australia, New South Wales. And the reason that we're so interested in suspension is because we know that it doesn't work and that it has huge lifelong impacts for young people. So it's really something that we want to avoid.

Christy:

So what data were you looking at specifically?

Linda:

Okay, so this is really the largest study that's ever been done in Australia. So it's called a longitudinal cohort study, which is basically a full cohort, which means the students that attended all in one year level and then we tracked them over 10 years. So the first sort of wave was in year three and then we followed those students all the way through to year 12.

Christy:

Were you surprised that almost 20% of students had been suspended or expelled at least once by year 12?

Linda:

Yeah, we were actually. I suppose because when you look at, you know, we see the data that is published every year and it sort of says, oh, you know, about 4% of students are suspended, you know, per year. But what that doesn't at is over time how individual students are you know how



many clock up a suspension over 10 years I mean one thing that we were not that surprised about is that we knew that there are some students who get suspended again and again.

Christy:

You also found a high number of repeat suspensions. I mentioned that boys in regional and remote New South Wales are more likely to be suspended from public schools as well than students in the city. Why do you think this is the case?

Linda:

So there's actually... well, so for boys themselves um they're over represented comparison to girls across the board so you know in the big cities just as much as they are um well you know they are in every uh sort of domain but in the region so that's it's an interesting thing, right?

So regions are really good at doing some things, but regions also face challenges that the big cities have less of. So for example, the teacher shortages can be particularly acute in the region. We also know from other research that there's a lot of churn. So, you know, there's of turnover in teachers and there's a lot of pretty inexperienced teachers. I mean, what we have in our education system, and it doesn't matter whether you're in New South Wales or Queensland or anywhere else in Australia. One of the ways that we staff regional schools is that we say to graduates from the city, hey, off you go, you're going to go to Walgett for your first placement or whatever. Some of those teachers will go, I love this place, and they stay, but a lot don't. So you have a lot of churn. You have a lot of inexperience. It's not uncommon for a senior sort of role to be filled by someone who has only a few years of experience. And the issue with that is that there isn't the sort of institutional knowledge and experience that you do need to handle or implement some of the most important things, you know, sort of systems to deal with student need.

Christy:

Professor Linda Graham is with us this morning from the Centre for Inclusive Education, a co-author of this research that we're talking about this morning. I wonder if you've got any with suspension at school, 0467 922 684, that is the number to text. Linda, you mentioned before that suspension doesn't work. Tell me a bit more about your thoughts on that and why it doesn't work.

Linda:

So when I say that it doesn't work, it especially doesn't work for the kids for whom it is used the most, right? So when we look at that data, the kids that are being suspended over and over again are, you know, from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. It is who've experienced trauma. It's kids that have a disability. It's Indigenous kids that, you know, living in care and so on and so forth. So one of the reasons that, I mean, there's a multitude of reasons as to why it doesn't work for any particular individual. But if you think about it this way, which is that if you find school a really quite difficult place to be and behaving in a certain way means that you don't have to go anymore, then what are you going to do? So what suspension does is reinforce the behaviours that lead to it in the first place. it also doesn't teach kids an alternative behaviour. So they're kind of like, well, OK, doing this led to that. OK, well, I get to stay at home for the day and I don't have to deal



with maths that I don't understand or kids that are bullying me or whatever. And so, you know, they'll do it again.

Christy:

What were students being suspended for, Linda?

Linda:

Oh, a multitude of things. But in... I mean, and it's interesting. So in New South Wales every state has, you know, different descriptors for the types of behaviours that are, you know, lead in New South Wales the kind of two most, you know, the two minor, if you like, categories are continued disobedience and aggressive behaviour. And the thing to note, though, because aggressive, you know, behaviour really does sound a bit, ooh, scary, but actual physical violence is in a different category altogether. So there is a distinction between the lower-level behaviours and the higher-level behaviours and what we're finding is that kids are getting suspended mostly for lower level behaviours. So suspension is meant to be a mechanism of last resort, but it's not. And you can see that from the data.

Christy:

So what kind of other approaches are needed, Linda? I mean, you've spoken about some of the challenges and the result that it can have for kids who probably don't care and maybe see the benefit of suspension versus teachers that have got a lot on their plates and they're trying to get through syllabus, they're trying to get through day-to-day. What are some of the other approaches that you think could be needed here?

Linda:

So I mean of the really good things about this area is that there's lots of things that we could do there's not I mean okay there's not one silver bullet but it also means that there's lots of things that can be implemented that can reduce the problem. And the key factor in all of that is that you need to implement a system so that there is some logic in between the things that you implement. So in the United States, where you'd have to agree in places like Los Angeles and Chicago and so forth, there's even more, the depths of poverty and social difficulties in some of those places is much more protracted than it is here. Meanwhile, they have had significant success and what they've done is implement something called integrated multitude systems of support.

And basically what that is, is it's looking at children, you know, like at the whole child and working out, okay, academically what does this child need? Socially, emotionally, what does this child need and behaviourally, what does this child need? And then figuring out, well, all right, so where are the difficulties? What is the best evidence based solution? You know, what programmes can we implement? How much of that does this child need? So they've implemented these systems and programmes that have been kind of titrated across different schools and so forth according to what that school needs. And they've had huge success. They've improved school safety, they've improved student engagement and achievement and they've reduced, most importantly, suspensions. So that is what we should be doing here. But instead we have governments that are saying, no, no, it's, you know, we're not afraid of increasing suspension.



Christy:

So given the data shows that boys in regional and remote New South Wales are more likely to be suspended from public schools than students in the city, does that mean the approach regionally should be different as well?

Linda:

Yeah, it should be in that... it depends. So, for example, because, you know, different parts of New South Wales in the region, I'm originally from New South Wales, so I know it. But different parts of New South Wales are vastly different to others. And so, you know, if you're looking at the Southern Highlands, for example, there are different issues going on there than you would find in Moree, for example. So what we really need is for governments to start looking at their systems and going, okay, so what guidance and programmes and support do we need to be providing to the educators and particularly the school leaders in these regions to say, hey, look. Because the reality is the governments have enormous databases. They know what's going on in each of these different places. They can put their finger on it and I know they can. So the reality is that the government should be saying, righty-ho, we can see these patterns in these places. And, you know, the research evidence says that this is the best response. So this is what we're going to support you to do. But we don't see that, do we?

Christy:

How interesting. Professor Linda Graham, it's been so great to talk to you this morning about this data, about this research that you've been looking at. Where to from here for this research? I mean, are you putting it under the noses of education ministers, policymakers and the like?

Linda:

Oh, we do our very best, but we do, in this particular study, we will be looking at this data more. And we are particularly interested in characterising what we call the school to prison pipeline. So there's been a huge amount of work done on that in the United States which has led to system reforms like nationally over there. So what we're trying to do is to look at that here in Australia so that we can't have the situation anymore where governments say, "Yeah, yeah, this is acceptable. No, no, we're happy with, you know, high discipline," but no, you need to try something else.

Christy:

Linda Graham, great to have you on board this morning. Thanks so much for joining us.

Linda:

Thank you Christy.