

Written Testimony HF2497  
In Support  
Section 26. Section 121A.425  
K-3 Suspension Ban

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A few years ago, I had a student join my class in October. He was quiet at first, but never smiled. One day, he got angry and started acting out. He was yelling and throwing chairs across the room. When he had finally stopped acting out and was just breathing hard, I asked a simple question: "Do you feel better?" Clearly, this was a response he had never received since he looked at me like I had three heads. He was absolutely stunned that I wasn't reacting more. I would later come to learn that the response he expected was for me to yell at him or kick him out of class. In that moment of looking at his astonished face, I could see how the system had failed him. It took another six months of consistently showing up with patience, empathy, and a willingness to work through the struggle with him before he started to trust me.

Thinking back to that moment, and all he had already been through up to third grade as a black boy in education, I can understand why he wouldn't expect help from someone he perceived to be the enemy. The following six months were not easy, and things did not get better overnight. It took a lot of intentional relationship building and teaching about his social emotional needs before things started to improve. The boy I saw at the end of the year was not the same sad boy who had walked in at the beginning. The feeling of restoring a child's relationship to learning and feeling success was worth all the tears, headaches, and nights of thinking I couldn't make a difference.

Children need to be taught how to deal with feelings, emotions and how to self-regulate just as much as they need to learn to read and write. If we as educators choose to punish and suspend children, whose sense of reason is not developed, we are depriving them of their right to an education. Throughout my 13 years teaching, the students who have predominantly been affected by these punitive policies have been black boys. How will children ever be able to make better decisions when under distress if, instead of teaching them the appropriate response ahead of time, our move is to suspend them? I implore you to ban suspensions through third grade to force schools to seek out and implement alternative practices that lead to better outcomes for students. As educators and professionals, we should be here to help children learn to handle the struggles of life, so they are better equipped to become productive members of society.