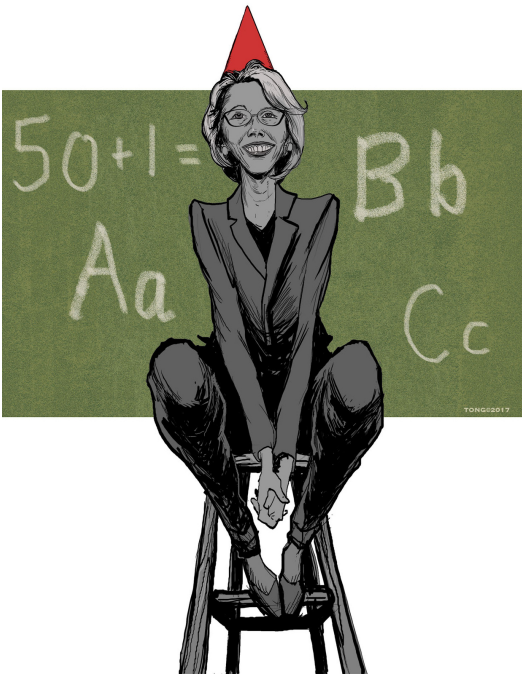


# The Seattle Times

## Opinion

### The goal of school discipline should be keeping kids in the classroom



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Paul Tong / Op-Art

**Secretary Betsy DeVos should continue to encourage schools to find ways to keep students facing discipline in class.**

By [Jennifer Blatz](#)



*Special to The Times*

If we want our kids to succeed in school, the first step is making sure they're actually in class. But a stark disparity in discipline results in removing black students from school far too frequently. In 2014, [black students represented 39 percent of those suspended](#), despite being only 15.5 percent of public

school students nationally.

As one means of addressing this problem, the federal departments of Justice and Education jointly issued guidance to schools four years ago, instructing them to find ways to discipline students that avoid kicking them out of class. The issue is now at the center of a debate [as Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos considers rescinding the Obama-era guidance](#).

We are right to focus on who is getting disciplined. The data clearly shows implicit bias plays a significant role in the unfair treatment of students of color. Black students in particular are disciplined at higher rates than their peers — and often for similar offenses. But we can't forget another important part of the story: Kids who are not in school also are falling behind in the classroom.

Rescinding this 2014 guidance would ignore the fact that students of color, especially those with disabilities, are losing critical classroom time at a far higher rate than peers. Instead of removing kids from school, we should build on the intent of the guidance by encouraging communitywide efforts to close racial gaps in education. We know this approach works, because at StriveTogether, we're helping nearly 70 communities around the country get better results for kids. We use real-time, student-level data to target strategies for the students who need help most, preventing dropouts and dramatically improving the chance that high school graduates attend a postsecondary institution.

In Tacoma, just 55 percent of students were graduating high school in 2010, prompting USA Today to call Tacoma Public Schools “dropout factories.” And when the school district noticed students of color and low-income students were severely underrepresented in advanced placement courses, the district began enrolling all high school students in at least one rigorous course, doubling their numbers in three years. Today, more than 86 percent of students are graduating from high school.

When public schools in Portland — another StriveTogether community — noticed black students were suspended far more often than white students, the district partnered with an organization that specifically works with black students to improve outcomes. As a

result, discipline referrals for black students at one school dropped 38 percent.

Opponents of the federal guidance argue that local school boards should have the power to discipline problematic students, while others have said that it makes schools less safe, even suggesting the shooting in Parkland, Florida, was a result of lax discipline practices. The data does not support either assertion. In fact, research shows the guidance doesn't go far enough to ensure every child has the opportunity to reach his or her potential, regardless of race or ZIP code.

Disparate discipline has continued since the guidance was issued, and black students continue to be suspended and expelled at much higher rates than white students, proving schools have hardly lost the power to punish students. Furthermore, following its survey of 850 school leaders across 47 states, [the School Superintendents Association](#) said in a statement the suggestion that the guidance "has transformed districts from safe school environments to unsafe ones is hard to justify."

Pairing proactive interventions with a focus on equitable classroom time is already working in communities around the country. Less time in school is not the answer for any child we want to see succeed academically, and punishing students by removing them from the academic environment sends the message that we don't value their education. Instead of going back to the drawing board, we need to double down on policies that keep students in the places where they are meant to thrive.

### ***Jennifer Blatz***

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