

Denver Teachers Push Back on Suspension Cuts

By [Nirvi Shah](#)

For several months during the 2012-13 school year, Thomas Jefferson High School teacher Michael Santambrogio watched one freshman struggle to adjust to the 1,100-student school in Denver.

The student always seemed to be in trouble, but whatever consequences he faced for his behavior—when they were handed out, if at all—seemed to have no effect, Mr. Santambrogio said.

And although the teenager had even taken a few swings at staff members, the teacher said, he was never suspended from school. It took the student breaking Mr. Santambrogio's nose to finally get him ejected from the school.

Now Mr. Santambrogio and other Denver teachers have become outspoken about what they say is the fallout from a districtwide push to cut suspensions.

In recent years, the Denver school system has been working to cut its out-of-school-suspension rate amid criticism that too many students have been sent away from school and that a disproportionate number of them have been black or Latino. The district's work mirrors similar changes around the country in response to complaints from parents and advocacy groups and warnings from the federal government.

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In Denver, the push for a lower suspension rate has been successful: The district [reports a 38 percent drop](#) in suspensions from 2010-11 to 2012-13.

Some teachers have formed a discipline committee to send a message to the school board: Eliminating suspension alone is not a workable solution. The teachers have appeared before the board with their requests for intervention. They have sent letters and emails.

The Thomas Jefferson student clearly needed more intervention and services than he was getting, Mr. Santambrogio said in recounting the situation. While suspending the student would not have helped, neither did keeping him at school with no added support, the teacher said.

"It doesn't do him or anyone else any good to put him in another building where he's set up to fail," Mr. Santambrogio said.

Responding Too Late?

The 84,000-student district is responding. The Denver system plans training in verbal de-escalation techniques for middle and high school teachers during the coming school year, along with training for district-level staff members in using data to create viable behavior plans for habitually disruptive students, spokeswoman Kristy Armstrong said.

And the district is investing \$1.5 million in mental-health services to provide more staff members who can work with students posing chronic discipline problems.

While teachers welcome the spending on mental health, those services kick in only after a student has become enough of a problem to be ejected from class.

"Once you've kicked the kid out of class, you've kind of lost the battle," said Stacey Hervey, a 14-year teacher who works at Denver's Fred N. Thomas Career Education Middle College, a high school. "We're really the first line of defense. We're not getting the training."

Whether the district can continue cutting out-of-school suspension rates and address behavior problems at the same time remains to be seen.

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"I don't know of any teacher that wants kids to be suspended—that means a kid eating Cheetos and playing Xbox all day," said Janell Martinez, a teacher at Compassion Road Academy, a Denver high school set to open this fall.

She said she is excited about the new school, which will work on students' behavioral needs, not just their academic ones.

But overall, Ms. Martinez and Mr. Santambrogio said, the district shifted from suspension too quickly.

Mr. Santambrogio wants to see more options for students like the one who assaulted him, who is now serving time in a juvenile-detention facility, but students who physically threaten teachers should be removed from classrooms, period, he said.

The goal should not be to punish disruptive students, but to make changes that will "benefit students who care."

Coverage of school climate and student behavior and engagement is supported in part by grants from the Atlantic Philanthropies, the NoVo Foundation, the Raikes Foundation, and the California Endowment. Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.