

Discipline Disparities:

A Research-to-Practice Collaborative

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Discipline Disparities Series Executive Summary

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

How Educators Can Eradicate Disparities in School Discipline: A Briefing Paper on School-Based Interventions

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The Research to Practice Collaborative, supported by the Atlantic Philanthropies and the Open Society Foundations, has convened diverse stakeholders—advocates, educators, juvenile justice representatives, intervention agents, researchers, and policymakers—in a series of meetings from 2011 to 2013. Our goal was to counteract disparities in both discipline and juvenile justice system involvement by supporting educators in building academically rigorous and engaging schools strengthened by diversity, rooted in cooperation, committed to strong and sustained relationships, and attentive to bias or disparity across lines of race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability and/or immigration status. The brief summarized here enumerates interventions that classroom teachers can use to manage behavior and establish bias-free classrooms and respectful school environments.¹

The number of students issued suspensions in U.S. schools continues to be extremely high, meaning thousands of students are missing school every day. Simultaneously, disparities in school suspension continue to worsen, indicating that students in some groups are missing school far more often and disproportionately (particularly, boys, African Americans, students with disabilities, and in some regions, Latinos and, American Indians). These disparities are also true of referrals to law enforcement and school-based arrests nationwide. According to recent data collected by the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, students of color made up 75% of referrals to law enforcement and 79% of school-based arrests, even while students of color comprise 39% of the nation's public school population.

Research also shows that highly punitive discipline is often not as "necessary" as some might think: for example, the most common reasons for suspension and law enforcement referrals are for infractions seemingly unrelated to school safety. Further, the same student behavior may be viewed differently depending on who exhibits it. Disparities in discipline are greatest in more "subjective" categories of infraction (some educators may see a student behavior as defiant and others as innocuous). More objectively determined indicators (e.g., a student either hit a peer or didn't) tend to be applied more fairly. Regardless of the type of behavior, however, educators can make efforts in conflict prevention and intervention both to prevent disparities and to reduce overall rates of punitive discipline.

Moving beyond Punitive Discipline to Conflict Prevention and Conflict Intervention

In this brief, we present research-based principles to support educators in moving toward a diverse community of highly engaged student and staff learners, grouped into the categories of "Conflict Prevention" and "Conflict Intervention." The likelihood of conflict is reduced (prevention) when schools create diverse communities of motivated, invested, and engaged learners. Yet in all communities, some conflict is inevitable. When conflict happens, it can be addressed in a constructive and equitable manner (intervention). Such constructive responses to conflict reduce unnecessary discipline, teach students appropriate alternatives, and build a school climate that is ultimately stronger. Interventions should resolve and educate, rather than deport or discipline.

This briefing paper describes a variety of concrete strategies that can be used in schools to address disparities in discipline, including:

Principles of Conflict Prevention

Research suggests that to prevent unnecessary discipline and to prevent the overrepresentation of particular groups of children and adolescents in school discipline, educators can equitably offer all students:

- Supportive Relationships (Forge authentic connections with all students)
- Academic Rigor (Promote the potential of all students, hold high expectations, and provide high-level learning opportunities)
- Culturally Relevant and Responsive Teaching (Teaching that responds respectfully to students' real lives)
- Bias-free Classrooms and Respectful School Environments (Create inclusive, positive classroom and school environments in which students feel fairly treated)

Principles of Conflict Intervention

Research suggests that when discipline problems arise, educators can engage in equity-driven:

- Inquiry into the Causes of Conflicts
- Problem-solving Approaches to Discipline
- Recognition of Student and Family Voice and their Perspectives on Conflicts' Causes and Solutions
- Re-integration of Students after Conflict

Conclusion

Districts and schools across the nation are engaging in long-term change to transform their approaches to school discipline. Equity-oriented principles and examples of conflict prevention and intervention can help guide the change. Schools that prevent punitive discipline responses increase children and adolescents' access to supportive relationships, academic rigor, and culturally relevant and responsive teaching. Reducing unnecessary or unequal discipline requires transforming instruction and school practice overall to promote all students' academic, social-emotional, and behavioral development. It requires educators rethinking how staff members interact with youth and how youth treat each other. It requires new interactions between schools and other agencies, including juvenile justice—interactions focused on supporting youth development rather than punishing students primarily through exclusion.

¹ More complete descriptions and full citations for each study can be found in the full briefing paper available online at rtpcollaborative.indiana.edu