

# Discipline Disparities:

A Research-to-Practice Collaborative

## Discipline Disparities Series Executive Summary

### DISCIPLINE DISPARITIES SERIES:

#### KEY FINDINGS

MARCH 2014

Disparities in school discipline are a serious problem. Frequent use of disciplinary removal from school is associated with a range of negative student outcomes, including lower academic achievement, increased risk of dropout, and increased contact with the juvenile justice system. Over 40 years of research has consistently found that particular student groups—especially Black males—have disproportionately received exclusionary discipline, placing them at increased risk of experiencing those negative outcomes. Disciplinary disparities have also been documented for girls of color; students with disabilities; Hispanic/Latino students; and students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and gender non-conforming. Disproportionality in discipline cannot be fully explained by higher rates of student misbehavior or the challenges associated with poverty. Hence, a more complete understanding of where and why disparities occur and developing approaches that effectively reduce both overall use of exclusionary discipline and the discipline gap, is an urgent national priority. Yet reducing the use of exclusionary discipline and eliminating disparities is possible and is beginning to happen in many places across the country.

In order to support the work of disparity reduction, the Discipline Disparities Collaborative (Collaborative)—an inter-disciplinary, multi-state, and highly diverse group of nationally recognized researchers, advocates, funders, content experts, and practitioners—engaged stakeholders across the country on both the problem of and solutions to disparities in discipline. Through meeting face-to-face with educators, parents, policymakers, researchers, youth service workers, and community-based leaders, and supporting new research, the Collaborative has developed a set of comprehensive briefing papers grounded in research and the lived experiences of stakeholders. The papers describe the problem of disciplinary disparities, and provide guidance on creating more equitable disciplinary systems. A brief description and key findings of those papers are described below.<sup>1</sup>

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

*By Anne Gregory, James Bell, and Mica Pollock*

Designed primarily for educators, advocates, and others interested in school- and community-based interventions, this briefing paper describes approaches schools and communities are using across the country to reduce disparities.

- **Seeing school discipline through an equity lens.** It cannot be assumed that efforts to improve schooling overall will change differential treatment in discipline or change differential access to learning opportunities. Indeed, it is possible to reduce exclusionary discipline without changing disparities. As schools and educators engage in disciplinary reform, reducing disparities must be an explicit goal undergirding the design, implementation, and outcomes of that work.
- **School discipline reform is connected to the rest of schooling.** Under-resourced schools face tremendous challenges in providing an exceptional education for all students. Real barriers to providing such an education for all students exist when schools and students have unequal access to quality teaching, a rigorous and meaningful curriculum, funding, or other factors related to positive student outcomes. Effective schools move away from blaming individual educators for discipline disparities and consider the conditions for learning and the school climate more broadly.

- **Effective school systems and contexts take steps to prevent disciplinary disparities.** Disparities are not inevitable. Schools can prevent or reduce excessive exclusion and disparities in discipline through school climates that establish supportive relationships, promote academic rigor and support for all students, provide high-level learning opportunities, engage in teaching that responds and connects to students' real lives, and create inclusive and fair classrooms.
- **Educators can effectively intervene in conflict when it does occur.** Even given the most effective preventative strategies and approaches, conflict will still occur in schools. When conflict among students or between students and staff occurs, schools need tools to be able to respond in a constructive and equitable manner. Rather than merely applying consequences, effective schools seek to identify the root cause of conflicts and disruption; engage in collective problem-solving; intentionally engage students, communities and their families in identifying causes and solutions; and implement effective re-integration efforts for students.

## Eliminating Excessive and Unfair Exclusionary Discipline in Schools: Policy Recommendations for Reducing Disparities

*By Daniel Losen, Damon Hewitt, and Ivory Toldson*

This briefing paper offers local, state, and national decision-makers specific policy change recommendations, grounded in what is known about the extent of, and reasons for, exclusionary discipline and disciplinary disparities.

- **School removal is too often a response to minor rule-breaking.** While there is no question that circumstances require students to be removed from schools for safety purposes, too many of our nation's public schools no longer reserve school exclusion for only the most serious offenses and dangerous situations. Attending school is one of the surest and most consistent predictors of academic achievement and strongest deterrents to juvenile delinquency. We need better policies to ensure that school exclusion is only used as a measure of last resort, and to reduce the disparate harm to historically disadvantaged youth.
- **Collect, publicly report, and use discipline data.** Policymakers should require states and districts to publicly report disaggregated data annually in order to determine if policy and practice changes are working. Those data—disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, English Language Learner status, disability status, and sexual orientation—should at a minimum include the number of students suspended, the number of suspensions, reasons for out-of-school suspensions, and instructional days lost at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The ability to analyze cross-sectional data (e.g., Black female students with disabilities) is also important.
- **Encourage alignment of discipline policies with educational mission and goals.** Recommendations include (a) ensuring the new federal guidance pertaining to “disparate impact” is used to spur improvements in policy and practice, (b) improving federal oversight of the requirement that states intervene where districts have large disparities in discipline, (c) codifying the priority of addressing excessive discipline and disparities when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is reauthorized, (d) leveraging competitive grants to promote remedies to excessive and disproportionate discipline, and (e) promoting the replication of state and district school codes of conduct that restrict the use of suspensions to a measure of last resort is important.
- **Provide support and funding for evidence-based and promising alternatives.** Funding should be prioritized to expand evidence-based or promising practices that reduce an overreliance on exclusionary discipline and reduce disciplinary disparities. New research funding (similar to what the Institute for Educational Sciences has already begun) and support for local initiatives at the federal and state levels can be used to create and document systemic improvements in disciplinary disparities, and scale up successful models. Ensuring that funding for alternative schools, school police, or other security mechanisms are not prioritized over methods with greater evidence of effectiveness.

## New & Developing Research on Disparities in Discipline

By Russell J. Skiba, Mariella I. Arredondo, and M. Karega Rausch

Written primarily for researchers and philanthropic/governmental funders, this briefing paper describes the results of the most recent research on disciplinary disparities, and identifies the most pressing research and investment priorities.

- **Research continues to show that students of color, especially African American males and students with disabilities, are at higher risk for suspension and expulsion, and that such disparities impact a number of other groups as well, including females of color, Hispanic/Latino students, and LGBT students.** New research continues to find no evidence that use of out-of-school suspension and expulsion is due to poverty or higher rates of misbehavior among Black and Hispanic/Latino students; rather, available evidence continues to show that students of color are removed from school for similar or lesser offenses compared to their peers. Intersectional research finds that risk factors for suspension and expulsion are additive, with Black males with a disability having the highest exclusionary rates by far.
- **Out-of-school suspension, expulsion, and school-based arrests place students who are disproportionately represented at increased risk of a variety of negative school and life outcomes, including academic disengagement, dropout, and incarceration.** Disciplinary disparities mean that certain students—African American males in particular—are at a heightened risk for a variety of negative outcomes, including course failure and academic disengagement. Moreover, new longitudinal research reports strong associations with negative long-term outcomes: one study finds that being suspended even once in 9th grade is associated with a two-fold increase in dropping out of school, and another reported that more than one-third (33%) of males suspended for 10 or more days had been confined in a correctional facility. Notably, engaging in delinquency or crime occurred only after the first time students reported being suspended from school.
- **Evidence-based and promising systemic interventions that reduce exclusionary discipline are emerging, but more research is needed on interventions that specifically target reductions in disciplinary disparities.** New research demonstrates that the use of exclusionary discipline can be reduced through a focus on interventions that emphasize relationship building, structural changes in school policies and systems, and enhancing student social and emotional skills. While a number of interventions have been shown to enhance school safety while reducing rates of suspension and expulsion, there are fewer interventions that have been shown to reduce disparities in discipline as well. *My Teaching Partner*, *Restorative Practices*, and the *Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines* are among the few evidence-based examples of disparity reduction currently available.
- **New investments and research are needed to understand the extent of, and reasons for, disparities for some groups, and interventions that create greater equity.** More information is needed on the extent of, and reasons for, disparities in discipline for a number of student groups, including Native American students, LGBT students and girls, and more research is needed to explain the inconsistent findings for disparities among Hispanic/Latino students. Most importantly, more research is needed to identify, develop, and evaluate effective approaches specifically designed for reducing disciplinary disparities. A number of important questions could be regarded as priorities for research and funding, including: *What malleable school factors and interventions show the most promise for reducing disparities? Is disciplinary equity best achieved through interventions that primarily focus on changing disciplinary systems, such as the implementation of PBIS, or through whole-school change efforts, such as new disciplinary, academic, human capital, and special education delivery systems? How do school-based practitioners respond to state, district, and school disciplinary policy changes? What resources are needed to change disparities?* The complexity of the issue requires sophisticated methodologies, such as use of multivariate and multilevel models, mixed methods approaches, and participatory/action research with educators as co-investigators.

One of our clear national goals is to close the achievement and opportunity gap in education. Yet achievement and discipline are inextricably linked: The achievement gap cannot be eliminated unless we also close the discipline gap. Research continues to demonstrate that the choice to use exclusionary discipline does little to improve school conditions and places students at increased risk for both short- and long-term negative consequences. In contrast, an emerging database shows that better understanding and addressing disciplinary disparities based on race/ethnicity, gender, ability, and sexual orientation results in stronger and safer schools and communities. Many states and communities are taking bold steps to reduce disparities while keeping students safe to learn. Yet achieving greater disciplinary equity at scale remains an urgent priority that will require the collaborative efforts of educators, parents, policymakers, community organizations, and funders, so that we maximize the chances for all students, especially those who have been most marginalized, to achieve success in school and in life.

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<sup>1</sup> More complete descriptions and full citations for each study can be found in the full briefing paper available online at [rtpcollaborative.indiana.edu](http://rtpcollaborative.indiana.edu)

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