



Practice Brief: Reducing and Eliminating Disparities in School Discipline

Source: Gregory, A., Skiba, R. & Mediratta, K. (2017). [Eliminating disparities in school discipline: A framework for intervention](#), *Review of Research in Education*, 41, pp. 253-278.

Issues Addressed: Fueled by zero tolerance policies and other drivers increasing the use of out-of-school suspension and expulsion, disparities in discipline based upon race/ethnicity have grown significantly over the last four decades. Even as rates of exclusion have leveled off or declined in recent years, disparities have remained stubbornly persistent.

Students who tend to be overrepresented in school discipline in Washington include American Indian/Native Alaskan, Black/African American, Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, Multi-Racial, and Hispanic/Latino students, as well as students with disabilities, students from low-income families and students with insecure housing, such as homeless students and students in foster care.

Over-represented groups are more likely to be excluded for minor and subjective behaviors for which other students may not be excluded or disciplined at all.

Suspension and expulsion have been found to be ineffective in improving student behavior because they fail to teach problem solving and other social/emotional skills, while also limiting instructional time and academic progress for students who have been excluded. Long-term negative outcomes resulting from school exclusion include future suspension and expulsion, student disengagement, dropout and juvenile/criminal justice system involvement.

Approach: The framework for eliminating disparities summarizes approaches found to reduce the use of exclusion and reduce racial and other disparities in the application of discipline.

The framework includes approaches that include the following levels of prevention and/or intervention:

- A. Intrapersonal: Educator beliefs and attitudes
- B. Interpersonal: Interactions between individuals and among groups of educators and students
- C. Instructional: the quality, rigor and responsiveness of instruction and curriculum
- D. Systemic: Implementation of behavioral supports and process for implementing, using and sustaining them

Levels of Change:

- A. National Level: Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA, which placed an increased emphasis on positive school climate as important for student achievement, requires local education authorities to plan to reduce the overuse of exclusion, and allows more flexible use of federal funding for practices tied to positive climate and reduced discipline, including multi-level tiers of support, family engagement and school-based mental health services.
- B. State-level changes can include various policy steps. In Washington, the Revised Codes of Washington (RCW) were changed to increase reporting of disaggregated discipline data,¹ limit the periods of exclusion for students, require alternative approaches to discipline, ensure that excluded students maintain access to academic instruction, and require notice to and due process for students and their families. RCW changes also require an individual approach to student discipline, taking the context of the student's needs, history and other characteristics into account, effectively prohibiting the "zero tolerance" approach to discipline that had been used in previous decades.²
- C. District-level approaches will have the most direct impact on students. These can include changes in local policies and practices, such as student codes of conduct, to discourage and prevent the use of exclusion, particularly for minor or subjective behaviors. In addition, positive behavior practices, such as School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS), Restorative Justice (RJ), Social Emotional Learning (SEL), and others, have been implemented in schools and districts across Washington and across the U.S.

¹ WAC 392-190-048

² Chapter 392-400 WAC Student Discipline <http://www.k12.wa.us/studentdiscipline/Rules/pubdocs/2019-20-DisciplineRules.pdf>

Equity and Race-Conscious Focus to Implementing Reforms:

The framework recognizes that discipline reforms, including those listed above, may fail to reduce or eliminate disparities in discipline if they are not implemented without a culturally conscious approach. When reforms are implemented without recognition of historic and systemic inequities, they may provide benefits largely to students who already enjoy other advantages. Thus, the framework recognizes the differential access that students of color and other students have experienced. It also acknowledges that disparate discipline reflects cultural differences between students, teachers and administrators and the culturally based judgements about students' speech, dress, body language and tone of voice lead to disparate treatment and decision-making.

The framework, therefore, focuses on practices found through research and evaluation to improve outcomes across racial, ethnic and other groups, particularly in terms of reducing the disparate use of exclusionary discipline.

Ten Principles in the Framework for Increasing Equity in School Discipline: In addition to evidence-based practices, the framework includes notes for culturally-conscious implementation of each approach.

1. *Supportive relationships* are at the core of both positive school climate and the framework. Positive student teacher relationships are tied to positive academic outcomes and reduced discipline. Warmth and empathy from teachers toward students increase positive student engagement. Conversely, negative relationships can produce cumulatively negative and increasingly damaging effects for students.
2. *Bias-aware and respectful* classrooms and schools also lead to more positive outcomes for students of color. When teachers and administrators don't take steps to understand, analyze and neutralize implicit bias, they are more prone to view the behavior of students who are from different racial, ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds differently and more negatively when compared to students who come from backgrounds similar to their own. They may view culturally normative verbal and non-verbal behaviors as more negative, disruptive, disrespectful, aggressive or dangerous. For example, Black boys are more likely to be perceived as older than their chronological age; therefore, neutral or normal behaviors may be perceived as more aggressive, disrespectful or willfully disobedient, when compared to White peers.

3. *Academic rigor and high expectations* are important to address opportunity gaps and engage students. The authors noted that cognitively rich and motivating instruction reduces students' risk of discipline disparities. Unfortunately, students of color have historically been placed more often in remedial and less rigorous classes and less likely to be recommended for more advanced or rigorous classes. Teachers who have been observed facilitating higher-level thinking skills, such as problem solving, were also found to make more infrequent and more equitable discipline referrals.
4. *Culturally relevant and responsive teaching* can "shift students' educational trajectories." Culturally responsive teaching affirms and celebrates the various cultural backgrounds of students and integrates their experiences into the curriculum. The article refers to culturally conscious practices that have been or are currently under review, such as the Double Check teacher coaching program and the Manhood Development Program. High academic expectations and scaffolding of rigorous academic work through these programs, along with specific ethnic studies curricula can produce measurable improvements in outcomes such as attendance, GPA and progress toward graduation.
5. *Learning and correcting behavior through direct instruction, specific praise and tangible rewards.* This approach includes practices such as School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, Social/Emotional Learning (SEL) and others. Previous studies have found improvements from specific praise and its ability to reduce disruptive and other undesirable behaviors and to increase behaviors being reinforced. These approaches have also displayed benefits related to shifting adult behavior away from reprimands and punitive mindsets. Because social norms exist within a cultural context, it is necessary for adults to deepen and develop relationship skills in which they can navigate diverse cultural norms and avoid negative teacher-student interactions resulting from cultural differences.
6. *Data-based inquiry for equity.* The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)³ has added requirements for schools to collect and report data on discipline. What schools and districts choose to measure and review to guide practice is a reflection of their priorities. Studies on SWPBIS found a correlation between the use of data and sustained implementation, which in turn correlated to improved student outcomes. The collection and use of disaggregated data is critical for conducting root cause

³ The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 <https://www.ed.gov/essa>

analyses to address discipline disparities and to engage in continuous improvement processes.

7. *Problem-solving approaches to discipline.* This can involve inquiry-based practices, ranging from Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) to Restorative Practices (RP, or historically called Restorative Justice, RJ). Benefits from such practices include uncovering underlying learning difficulties or mental health needs (FBA) and providing opportunities for shared respect when students are able to express their side and be heard (RP). Problem solving approaches also include programs such as the Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines. An objective, multi-disciplinary process for threat assessment can reduce the use of suspension, expulsion and arrest, and reduce disparities in these outcomes, among students referred for threat assessment. Implementation with fidelity is critical to achieve desired outcomes so that use of these practices doesn't revert to shaming and punishment. Authentic engagement of marginalized youth and their families, and an explicit awareness of power and privilege, are essential.
8. *Inclusion of student and family voice on causes and solutions of conflicts.* Student and family engagement can occur through restorative circles and other practices. In addition, individual students can set their own behavioral goals and self-monitor. These approaches help to engender feelings of engagement, trust and autonomy. "Respectful and regular engagement of historically disenfranchised voices in school could engender the type of trust needed for constructive collaboration to prevent or diffuse disciplinary interventions that fuel race and gender disparities in discipline." (p. 269)
9. *Reintegration of students after conflict or absence.* Students who have been suspended and/or arrested are at substantially increased risk for recurrence of these poor outcomes. Effective re-engagement practices can help disrupt this cycle, commonly referred to as the "School-to-Prison Pipeline." This is also an important step in reviewing the needs that students may have for additional supports, such as mental health or substance abuse treatment, tutoring, wraparound services, or other supports. And it also provides an opportunity for teachers, counselors, peers and others to welcome the student back into the school community.
10. *Multi-Tiered Systems of Support.* SWPBIS is the most common MTSS framework, but multi-tiered frameworks are compatible with other approaches, such as restorative practices. Culturally responsive and culturally adaptive implementation of SWPBIS or other MTSS approaches are important to ensure that reduced exclusionary discipline

results across racial/ethnic groups. This can mean emphasizing cultural sensitivity, culturally relevant instruction and strong family partnerships as part of SWPBIS implementation.