

# The Civil Rights Project



*Proyecto Derechos Civiles*

## **A Summary of New Research Closing the School Discipline Gap:<sup>1</sup> Research to Policy by The Center for Civil Rights Remedies**

Public concern about excessive school disciplinary exclusion and the related racial disparities has grown recently. Sixteen new research studies, all presented in January 2013 at the “Closing the School Discipline Gap Conference,” describe the school discipline gap, contributing factors, and the benefits of reducing the disparities for students’ academic and life outcomes, and school safety.

The public has only recently become aware of the high frequency of out-of-school school suspensions and the depth of the disparities in school discipline. Our latest national report, “Out of School and Off Track: The Overuse of Suspensions in American Middle and High Schools,” shows that, across America, one out of four Black secondary school students and nearly one out of five students with disabilities and one out of five English learners were suspended at least once in one 2009-2010 compared to just one in sixteen White students without disabilities.

Most suspensions are a matter of the routine enforcement of minor school rules, such as violating dress codes, truancy, excessive tardiness, cell phone use, loitering, or disruption. There is no argument that serious misbehavior should be addressed, but as this body of new research suggests, harsh discipline policies increase the number of young people who are disengaged from school, which has damaging academic consequences and long-term economic and societal costs.

Policymakers have been reluctant to change this harsh approach to school discipline, in part because the social costs have been hidden and in part because effective alternatives have taken time to develop.

In an effort to sharpen the focus on disparities in school discipline and the viability of constructive alternatives to suspension that could help close the school discipline gap, The Center for Civil Rights Remedies at UCLA’s Civil Rights Project, with the assistance of a collaborative of experts in this field, commissioned 16 new research papers from leading scholars across the country.

This summary highlights the findings from the commissioned studies in the two areas most relevant to policymakers. First, the studies show how reducing suspensions can lead to improved academic outcomes and avoid hidden costs. Second, the research explores promising alternatives to the discipline status quo, including teacher training and classroom management; ideas for improving Positive Behavioral Supports and

Interventions (PBIS); the benefits of restorative practices; and social and emotional learning; and protocols for addressing threats made by students. The papers describe efforts that have proven successful, including examples from Cleveland, Ohio, and across the state of Virginia.

The aim of this summary is to further inform the education debate and bring more attention to school discipline policy. This robust collection of new research is accessible at [www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu](http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu).

### **Key Research Findings (researcher names are noted in parentheses)**

#### ***1. Why reducing the high rate of suspensions and racial disparities matters.***

- **Out-of-school suspensions likely have serious, disparate, and negative academic consequences, including an increased number of dropouts** (Balfanz). An eight-year longitudinal study tracking every ninth grader in Florida found that 27% of the cohort was suspended at least once in grade 9, a rate that rose to 39% for Black ninth graders. The study also found that being suspended just once in grade 9 was associated with an increased risk of dropping out, from 16% to 32%. Being suspended twice in grade 9 was related to a 42% likelihood of dropping out. Most students who were suspended also had attendance and academic issues. Thus, efforts to reduce suspensions should be coupled with initiatives to boost attendance and academic achievement.
- **Suspensions may contribute to delinquency** (Schollenberger; Toldson). A national study tracking third-grade students through early adulthood suggests that getting suspended from school tends to precede serious delinquency for Black and Latino children, whereas the opposite trend was found for White children (Schollenberger). Furthermore, research that coupled surveys of adolescent youth with discipline data suggests that delinquency and aggressive behaviors are triggered by academic disengagement, especially for Black and Hispanic males (Toldson).
- **School policy and leadership can drive high suspension rates** (Skiba; Marchbanks). State and multidistrict analyses that controlled for race, poverty, and prior behavior showed that higher suspension rates were primarily the result of school policies and practices and the attitudes of school leaders. These studies built on similar findings by the Council of State Governments' Justice Center study of Texas schools.
- **Out-of-school suspensions have hidden costs that policymakers rarely consider** (Marchbanks). In Texas, researchers found that 60% of all Texas middle school students had been suspended from the classroom and that there was a strong relationship between being suspended, being retained at grade level, and dropping out. They estimated that suspensions were related to a 13% increase in dropouts, which could cost the state of Texas between 0.7 and 1 billion dollars

annually (Marchbanks). Considering that the new longitudinal studies from Florida (Balfanz) and nationwide (Schollenberger) also indicate that a heightened risk for dropping out is associated with suspensions, it is reasonable to infer from these three new studies that the large hidden economic costs associated with dropouts are likely increased by the frequent use of suspensions. Therefore, reserving suspension as a measure of last resort and paying attention to racial disparities in the use of suspension should yield economic dividends. Reducing suspensions also should yield benefits in terms of voting and civic participation (Kupchik).

- **Youth of color get harsher punishments when behavior is controlled for.** One study that controlled for teacher ratings of behavior, as well as self-reports from a large sample of high school students, suggests that Black students were suspended more harshly than others (Finn). This finding comports with several other studies suggesting that racial disparities are most pronounced for the less serious subjective offense categories (Skiba; Schollenberger; Marchbanks) and that compared to Whites, Blacks may receive harsher treatment for similar degrees of misbehavior (Skiba).

***2. There are effective alternatives to harsh and punitive approaches to discipline that improve safety and academic outcomes:***

The murder of schoolchildren in Newtown, Connecticut, has led policymakers to consider the competing needs for school counselors versus school police. More must be done to make schools both safer and more productive learning environments. As decisions must be made about how to distribute scarce resources to increase safety, policymakers should consider that new research consistently shows that the safest school environments had: (1) a high level of student engagement, and (2) high-quality relationships between teachers and students and teachers and parents.

- **Chicago's safest schools have strong teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships and low suspension rates** (Steinberg). A districtwide study of Chicago schools found that the quality of student-teacher and parent-teacher relationships had the greatest influence on the sense of safety in the school building. "Both students and teachers feel safest in schools where teachers view parents as partners in children's education" (p. 22). In particular, "schools serving the least advantaged students – students who live in neighborhoods with high levels of crime and poverty, few human and social resources and who attend lower achieving schools – but with high-quality relationships are as safe, on average, as the most advantaged schools with weak relationships" (p. 25). Controlling for differences in community and school contexts, the researchers also concluded, "High rates of suspension do not show any benefit for either students' or teachers' feelings of safety at school, and they may even have adverse effects on school climate by aggravating distrust between students and adults" (p. 34).

- **Teacher training and improving student engagement lead to lower suspension rates** (Gregory). A randomly controlled study of the impact of My Teaching Partner-Secondary, a teacher-training program designed to improve teacher-student relationships and student engagement, showed clear benefits for all students but especially for Black students, who experienced the largest reductions in their rate of disciplinary referrals.
- **Efforts to improve the engagement of Black male students would likely reduce their rate of out-of-school suspensions** (Toldson). Several studies found that disparities in discipline reflect disparities in student engagement (Toldson; Skiba; Gregory). These new findings align with prior findings. As Toldson points out, “Mukuria (2002) found that principals of predominantly Black urban middle schools with low rates of suspension were more effective in promoting parental involvement, creating a structured environment, implementing school wide discipline programs, and cultivating mutual respect among students and teachers. Another study found that improving school engagement through mentoring improved behavior control at an urban school (Holt, Bry, & Johnson, 2008).”
- **Large districtwide investments in social and emotional learning strategies paid dividends, even where resources were limited** (Osher). Following a school shooting, the Cleveland school district initially invested in high-security measures, such as metal detectors and school police, without any measurable benefits to the school community’s perception of safety or academic achievement. However, between 2008 and 2011, when Cleveland invested in social and emotional learning, student support teams, and planning centers that replaced the suspension system with a learner-centered approach, there was a drastic reduction in reported behavioral incidents—from 233 to 132 per school—along with a 59% decrease in out-of-school suspensions district wide.
- **A non-punitive threat assessment protocol effectively reduced suspensions among all racial groups in Virginia** (Cornell). When students made threats, the Virginia Student Threat Assessments Guidelines helped teachers and administrators select appropriate responses that reduced their reliance on long- and short-term suspensions by 19% and 8%, respectively. A follow-up analysis demonstrated that the guidelines benefitted White and Black students equally.
- **Positive Behavioral Supports and Interventions would likely be more effective if aligned with codes of conduct and attention to multicultural competence.** One study found that high schools with harsh punitive codes of conduct did not reap the benefits typically associated with properly implemented Schoolwide Positive Behavior Supports (SPBS or PBIS)(Fenning). Another study of districts where PBIS was not very effective suggested that it might have worked better if coupled with training on multicultural competence (Vincent). Researchers suggest that schools and districts adopting SPBS should add training

in cultural competence and align their codes of conduct with the positive and prevention orientation of the framework.

- **Restorative justice is a viable school policy strategy for keeping students in school and out of the juvenile justice system** (Schiff). Restorative justice focuses on non-punitive responses to misbehavior with the goals of improving relationships, personal responsibility, problem-solving, and the school community. Restorative justice allows the person who causes harm to make amends while the root causes of the misbehavior are addressed to prevent reoccurrence. Research on the benefits resulting from restorative justice include “improved school climate, . . . increased responsibility among students, and better teacher-student interactions” (p. 12).

### *3. Some popular, well-intended interventions could be counterproductive.*

- **Investing resources in high-security measures, such as school police and metal detectors, could be counterproductive, especially for students of color.** In Cleveland, a package of supportive programs, counselors, and positive interventions succeeded where more police and metal detectors did not (Osher). Another districtwide study demonstrated that, after controlling for race and poverty, high-security elements such as metal detectors and school police were associated with higher use of out-of-school suspensions, especially for Black and Latino students (Finn).
- **Alternative disciplinary schools may be making matters worse** (Vanderhaar). Alternative disciplinary schools could help persistently misbehaving students stay in school if they were to receive academic instruction and interventions that teach successful behaviors. However, disciplinary alternatives that lack the necessary supports and an engaging curriculum can be gateways to prison. One longitudinal analysis of alternative schools in a large urban district suggests that the schools contributed to racial disparities in disciplinary exclusion and found a strong relationship between disciplinary alternative school placement and subsequent juvenile detention. These findings raise serious doubts about the efficacy of disciplinary alternative schools as a strategy for improving the behavior of disruptive youth.

## **Policy Recommendations**

### ***1. Annually collect, publicly report, and use discipline data.***

- Require states and districts to publicly report disaggregated data annually, including the number of students suspended, the number of incidents, reasons for out-of-school suspensions, and days of lost instruction, and do so by school level (elementary, middle, and high). Ensure that the reported data are disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, English learner status, and disability status.

- Ensure better monitoring and public reporting of discipline reporting requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. These include incidents and their duration, and require disaggregation by race/ethnicity, gender, and English learner status. Expand these statutory requirements to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

***2. Encourage alignment of discipline policies with educational mission and goals.***

- Include suspension rates among the factors schools and districts use to measure the performance of secondary schools, and as “early warning” systems to target supportive interventions. Include incentives in competitive grant programs for districts to develop early warning indicators for both schools and students.
- Leverage competitive grants to incentivize revisions of school discipline codes to align with the principles of PBIS, social and emotional learning, and restorative practices.
- Revise accountability structures to balance test scores with graduation rates and other outcomes that would help remove incentives to “push out” low achievers on disciplinary grounds.
- Require that schools and districts identified for improvement or turn-around measures under state or federal accountability provisions include plans to improve teacher-student engagement and reduce the use of out-of-school suspensions.

***3. Provide support and funding for effective alternatives.***

- Invest in remedies by providing greater support for research on promising evidence-based interventions and by targeting more funds for systemic improvements in approaches to school discipline.
- Provide support for teacher-training programs and professional development aimed at promoting higher levels of student engagement and improved relationships between teachers and students. In particular, structure grant awards to give preference to evidence-based programs such as My Teaching Partner-Secondary.
- Take note of the recent GAO findings and require that the provisions of the IDEA, regarding the review of racial disparities in discipline for students with disabilities, be implemented with integrity, so that states do not create unreasonable thresholds for required interventions.
- Ensure that schools and districts seeking funds for policing and security have adequate resources in place for counseling, mental health support, and teacher training in classroom and behavior management.

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<sup>1</sup> The conference held on January 10, 2013, at the Gallup Center in Washington, D.C., was jointly sponsored by *Education Week*, Gallup, and the Equity Project at Indiana University. A draft of each paper can be found at [www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu](http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu).