

# Creating and Sustaining Discipline Policies That Support Students' Social, Emotional, Behavioral, and Academic Well-Being and Success:

## Strategies for School and District Leaders



This fact sheet is one of four developed by a collaboration of U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Safe and Supportive Schools technical assistance centers to enhance state and district implementation of the [Guiding Principles for Creating Safe, Inclusive, Supportive, and Fair School Climates](#) to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn in environments that are safe, inclusive, supportive, and fair. Please view the supporting fact sheets here: <https://t4pacenter.ed.gov/SupportiveSchools>.

### Framing the Topic and Needs

#### Evidence-Based Approaches to Effective School Discipline Policies

Education leaders, such as superintendents, administrators, principals, and other school and district leaders, play critical roles in making educational environments safer, more supportive, and more equitable. In essence, school leaders set the tone in their respective buildings and districts. They have a range of responsibilities, including policymaking, designing schools to be positive and inviting, implementing effective policies and

practices, and selecting training opportunities. Their positions enable them to facilitate meaningful and sustainable change in how students engage with one another and school staff members.

When developing disciplinary policies and practices, school and district leaders should work to understand the rationale underlying the disciplinary practices for their team, school, or district. They should consider whether practices are designed to dole out punishment for breaking school rules and/or behaving in ways deemed “inappropriate” or “undesirable” or whether the practices actively promote responsive relationships and safe,



supportive, and equitable learning environments for the entire community.<sup>1</sup> If the goal is to change student behavior, a substantial body of research has found no evidence that exclusionary discipline accomplishes this, and some research has found that it may make future misbehavior more likely.<sup>2</sup> If the goal is to improve student behavior, then the interventions should be focused on teaching and supporting appropriate behavior with evidence-based, non-punitive interventions and supports.

## Punishment-Based Discipline

Practices designed to punish can be ineffective, exclusionary, and reactive, relying on adults to exert power over young people. A punishment-based practice works against the desired outcome of meeting school expectations and learning by activating students' fight, flight, and freeze behaviors, often leaving students with shame and guilt long after the interaction and breeding distrust among and dehumanizing those who participate, regardless of their roles. All these impacts may become barriers to effective learning.

These negative impacts are even more prevalent for students of color. Adults are known to perceive students of color, especially Black students, as older,<sup>3</sup> in need of more correction, and as more threatening,<sup>4</sup> and these perceptions may contribute to more frequent and often harsher punitive discipline responses than the ones applied to white students.<sup>5</sup> A large and growing body of work on the concept of the "school-to-prison pipeline" describes policies and practices in schools that disproportionately criminalize student behavior through suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to the juvenile justice system and that result in Black students and other students of color being pushed out of school and into the juvenile justice system.

In addition, there are significant disparities in out-of-school suspensions by both the racial and disability status of students. Data compiled by the Center for Civil Rights Remedies at The Civil Rights Project (based on the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights' 2017-18 data) show that across grades K-12, Black students lost 61 instructional days due to out-of-school suspensions per every



100 students enrolled. In comparison, white students lost 14 days. Further, students with disabilities in grades K-12 lost 41 days per every 100 students enrolled, while students without disabilities lost 19 days.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the Office for Civil Rights 2017-18 data show racial disparities for in-school and out-of-school suspensions.<sup>7</sup> While Black boys make up just 7.7 percent of total enrollment, they experience 20 percent of in-school suspensions and 25 percent of out-of-school suspensions. Likewise, while Black girls make up 7.4 percent of total enrollment, they experience 11 percent of in-school suspensions and 13 percent of out-of-school suspensions.<sup>8</sup>

## Responsive Discipline

Rather than adopting policies that emphasize punishment, school administrators should develop and implement responsive discipline policies that underscore rules as critical to teaching, learning, and safety, thus keeping students open to learning instead of pushing them away. Responsive discipline also helps students develop inner self-discipline skills because students learn what to do and what not to do, and not simply how to avoid getting caught next time.<sup>9</sup>

Discipline implemented in this way teaches young people the skills necessary to manage their behavior and helps them learn from mistakes. It is inclusionary, restorative, and proactive. Adults and students also hold themselves and one another accountable for maintaining and reinforcing codes of conduct and community agreements. This kind of learning community relies on close, trusting relationships among all members. Altogether, such policies are implemented with students (as compared with done to or for students) and facilitate student learning and growth within the community.



See summaries of these concepts, drawn from a variety of evidence-based bodies of work, in Table 1.

## Strategies or Practices to Address Needs

### Changing Minds, Changing Practices

Simply changing school policy to be more inclusive, restorative, and proactive often is not enough to result in permanent change. To effect long-lasting change, administrators should engage with the entire school community, including school faculty

and staff, students, and families and caregivers.<sup>10</sup> Through thoughtful connections with the school community, conversations can focus on preventing undesired behaviors from occurring by creating and sustaining a positive, supportive school climate that effectively responds to student needs. By centering approaches that support positive school climate, occurrences of behaviors that warrant disciplinary procedure can be reduced in intensity and frequency. Further, schools can respond more effectively to infractions by using non-exclusionary practices and policies.

**Table 1. Punishment-Based vs. Responsive Discipline Practices**

Punishment-Based Discipline Practices	Responsive Discipline Practices
Exclusionary, punitive, transactional	Inclusionary, supportive, restorative, transformational
Rely on power and control	Rely on relationships and responsiveness
Penalty for bad behavior; making a child suffer for breaking rules; barrier to learning	Teach child skills to manage their behavior; help them learn from mistakes; facilitate learning
Done to	Done with
Reactive	Proactive, responsive
Leave a child with shame and guilt	Leave a child's dignity intact
Activate stress response (fight, flight, or freeze)	Activate relaxation response
Deficit oriented	Asset and growth oriented
Adult oriented	Student oriented
Technical strategies	Adaptive strategies

To better understand the rationale driving the administration of discipline policies, school and district leaders will find it helpful to understand their own and their team's, school's, or district's experiences and beliefs about school discipline. This understanding will bring to light beliefs and help move the team, school, or district toward discipline policies that better align with their community partners' values. Here are ideas for three focus areas that school leaders may use for reflection:<sup>11,12</sup>

### Focus Area #1: Self and Staff Reflection

- Determine your own and your school's or district's values and beliefs about discipline. Consider in what ways they orient toward punishment, a responsive approach, or a combination of discipline practices.
- Review and reflect on your school's or district's practices and policies relating to discipline. Think about the ways in which they orient toward punishment, responsive approaches, or a combination of discipline practices.

- Compare your school's or district's values and beliefs with its practices and policies. Where is there alignment and where is there misalignment? Create a description of what alignment would look like.

For more information and potential action steps, see [\*The Toolkit Before the Toolkit: Centering Adaptive and Relational Elements of Restorative Practices for Implementation Success\*](#).

### Focus Area #2: Student Inquiry

- Learn about how your students view your discipline practices and where they feel unsafe/safe or unsupported/supported at school. Determine the data you will use to understand how they feel. If you do not already have data collection practices in place, work with your agency's leadership to establish collection procedures, such as conducting student interviews or distributing climate surveys.



- Conduct a discipline data inquiry with your agency’s leadership team. Review which offenses result in exclusion and when and where offenses are most likely to occur (e.g., in certain classrooms, areas of the school, or times of day); decide how often the team should review these data to keep an accurate pulse on school or district discipline infractions and practices. The leadership team should analyze the data and engage in data-driven decision-making to proactively address student behavioral needs and increase student supports to reduce the need for discipline interventions.
- Review how your current systems and structures support or detract from their description of discipline.
- Thinking about your current system of discipline, reflect on who it seems to be designed for and what indicators you use to determine that.

## Systems Considerations

As discussed above, school leaders have a responsibility to understand the factors necessary to ensure that their team, school, or district offers a hospitable environment for all members of the learning community and to implement changes to discipline policies as intended.<sup>12</sup> Leaders can support responsive discipline practices by reflecting on the following questions:

For more information and potential action steps, see [\*Empathy Interview Protocols; Elevating Student Voice, Agency, and Co-Creation; School Climate and Culture Assessments; and School Climate and Student Discipline Resources: Know the Data.\*](#)

### Focus Area #3: Community Partner Reflection, Connections, and Identification of Levers for Change

- Connect with your school’s or district’s community partners. Find out how different members describe or define “discipline.”
- How might leadership challenges arise when working to shift discipline practices? Are the challenges technical (i.e., defined problems with straightforward solutions within existing frameworks) or adaptive (i.e., complex problems that require new approaches and stakeholder buy-in)?<sup>13</sup> Who is responsible for addressing those challenges, and who else should be engaged?



- What training do you and/or your staff need to shift mindsets and implement strategies toward a more responsive discipline paradigm? What ongoing coaching and professional learning support do you and/or your staff need? Consider trauma-informed, social-emotional, culturally responsive, and restorative approaches.
- What organizational supports are needed to minimize barriers and put supports in place to ensure streamlined processes and effective implementation within a discipline paradigm?

For more information and potential action steps, see [Implementation Drivers](#) and [An Introduction to the District Capacity Assessment \(DCA\): Supports for Schools and Teachers](#).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Osher, D., Cantor, P., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2020). Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science, 24*(1), 6–36.

<sup>2</sup> Fabelo, T., Thompson, M. D., Plotkin, M., Carmichael, D., Marchbanks, M. P., & Booth, E. A. (2011). *Breaking schools' rules*. CSG Justice Center. <https://csgjusticecenter.org/publications/breaking-schools-rules/>

<sup>3</sup> Epstein, R., Blake, J., & González, T. (2017). *Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of Black girls' childhood*. Center on Poverty and Inequality, Georgetown University Law Center. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3000695>

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, J. P., Hugenberg, K., & Rule, N. O. (2017). Racial bias in judgments of physical size and formidability: From size to threat. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 113*(1), 59–80. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000092>

<sup>5</sup> Gregory, A., Skiba, R. J., & Noguera, P. A. (2010). The achievement gap and the discipline gap: Two sides of the same coin? *Educational Researcher, 39*(1), 59–68. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X09357621>; Fenning, P., & Rose, J. (2007). Overrepresentation of African American students in exclusionary discipline the role of school policy. *Urban Education, 42*(6), 536–559. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085907305039>

<sup>6</sup> Losen, D.J., Martinez, P., & Rim Shin, G. H. (2021, March 23). *Disabling inequity: the urgent need for race-conscious resource remedies*. The Civil Rights Project, University of California, Los Angeles. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2pw440h5>; Losen, D. J., Martinez, P., & Rim Shin, G.H. (2021, March 23). *Disabling inequity report suspensions OCR 2017 2018 updated [Spreadsheet]*. The Civil Rights Project, University of California, Los Angeles. [https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/special-education/disabling-inequity-the-urgent-need-for-race-conscious-resource-remedies/Final\\_Disabling\\_Inequity\\_Report\\_Suspensions\\_OCR\\_20.xlsx](https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/special-education/disabling-inequity-the-urgent-need-for-race-conscious-resource-remedies/Final_Disabling_Inequity_Report_Suspensions_OCR_20.xlsx)

## Resources

This list of resources will help education leaders learn about, plan for, and implement best practices.

- [Barbara Coloroso: Discipline vs. Punishment Video](#) — learn how to differentiate between discipline and punishment.
- [Elevating Student Voice, Agency, and Co-Creation](#) — find more information on how including student voice, agency, and co-creation can help education systems become more student centered.
- [Empathy Interview Protocol](#) — access a framework to help guide interviews and gain a deeper understanding of others' experiences.
- [Equity Audit](#) — access a tool to help schools and districts examine policies, programs, and practices that directly or indirectly impact students or staff relative to their race, ethnicity, gender, national origin, color, disability, age, sexual orientation, sexual identity, religion, or other socio-culturally significant factors.
- [ED School Climate Surveys](#) — find a tool to measure school climate through the perceptions of students, staff, and parents.
- [Implementation Drivers](#) — get information about implementation drivers, key components of capacity that facilitate the use of a program or practice, and subsequent impacts.
- [The Toolkit Before the Toolkit: Centering Adaptive and Relational Elements of Restorative Practices for Implementation Success](#) — find strategies, tools, and structural supports to implement restorative practices and transform schools into strong communities.

<sup>7</sup> Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education. (2023, March 15). *Civil Rights Data Collection*. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/data.html>; Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education. (2021, June). *An overview of exclusionary discipline practices in public schools for the 2017-18 school year* [PowerPoint slides]. <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/assets/downloads/crdc-exclusionary-school-discipline.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education. (2022). *Suspensions and Expulsions in Public Schools* [Infographic]. Civil Rights Data Collection. [https://ocrdata.ed.gov/assets/downloads/Suspensions\\_and\\_Expulsion\\_Part2.pdf](https://ocrdata.ed.gov/assets/downloads/Suspensions_and_Expulsion_Part2.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Coloroso, B. (2022). *Barbara Coloroso: Discipline vs. punishment* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jRD6Llgxf0>

<sup>10</sup> Families refers inclusively to parents, other family members, caregivers, guardians, and in some cases students.

<sup>11</sup> Trout, L. (2021). *The toolkit before the toolkit: Centering adaptive and relational elements of restorative practices for implementation success*. Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd. <https://selcenter.wested.org/resource/the-toolkit-before-the-toolkit/#>; Trout, L., Pate, C., Wu, K., & McKenna, J. (2022). *Reimagining school safety: A guide for schools and communities*. Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd. [https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/SEL\\_Reimagining-School-Safety-A-Guide-for-School-and-Communities\\_ADA.pdf](https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/SEL_Reimagining-School-Safety-A-Guide-for-School-and-Communities_ADA.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> National Implementation Research Network (NIRN). (2015). *Implementation drivers*. <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/sites/nirn.fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/Handout%2012%20Implementation%20Drivers%20Overview.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Heifitz, R., Grashow, A., & Linksy, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2009.05.001>

## For more information:



<https://bestpracticesclearinghouse.ed.gov>



<https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov>



<https://oese.ed.gov/student-engagement-and-attendance-technical-assistance-sea-center/>



<https://rems.ed.gov>



<https://www.pbis.org/>



<https://selcenter.wested.org>



<https://t4pacenter.ed.gov>

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