



Effective Ways to Reduce Disparities in School Discipline

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Suspending students who misbehave at school is widespread in the United States – and hits minority students the hardest. According to the latest estimates, one of every three students may get suspended at least once in the journey from elementary through high school. But some groups of students experience severe discipline of this sort much more than others. Hardest hit by far are boys, African American students, and those with disabilities. They are the ones most affected by surveillance and severe, criminal-style punishments. Data from the Office of Civil Rights indicates that during 2011-12, rates of school suspension nationwide were 5% for white students, 7% for Latino students, and 16% for black students.

A growing body of research reveals the high cost of severe school discipline. Highly punitive schools can mar the broader learning environment, undercutting learning even for students who are not suspended as well as for those who are. Students who are severely punished at school become young adults with lower rates of civic and political participation and less trust in government than others. And students who experience severe punishments are more likely to have run-ins with the criminal justice system – reinforcing what has been called the “school to prison pipeline.”

Compounding the harm severe school punishments can cause, research suggests that they do little to reduce violence or increase the sense of safety in schools. Furthermore, disparities in school discipline are often attributable to varied subjective reactions to the same behavior by different individuals. Given that many costs are attributable to policies that have few proven benefits, reducing the use of severe punishments in certain schools would be an important step toward creating a more just and racially equitable society.

Lessons from an Iowa Project

The Iowa City Community School District is a small-metropolitan school district in eastern Iowa with just over 13,000 students. After educators realized that African American students were being suspended four times more often than other students, they decided to enter into a long-term collaboration with researchers at the University of Iowa to formulate a district-wide Comprehensive Equity Plan to reduce disparities in student achievement and discipline. Primary objectives include reducing disparities in school discipline, assignment to special education, graduation rates, and academic performance. Based on what we have learned from participation in this project, we suggest a number of principles that can usefully guide collaborative community efforts of this kind.

- **Gather comprehensive data.** Recognize that each school, each classroom, presents a unique environment for students and teachers. Researchers working with schools should gain an understanding of each school's problems and possibilities -- interviews and observations of school routines along with quantitative indicators of student achievement and patterns of discipline. Reform strategies are unlikely to work unless they are grounded in such detailed information about each school community.
- **Understand student perceptions and experiences.** Research has shown that student experiences matter for equitable outcomes, yet we have insufficient information about how students perceive rules in their own schools – and whether they believe that discipline is fairly applied and everyone is included in the school community. From past studies, we have indications that positive student perceptions are grounded in strong relationships with teachers, constructive inter-group relations, and chances to develop a positive personal identity. The school's overall climate and organizational routines also matter. Understanding factors such as these as they play out in each individual school context can help educators do a better job in devising effective reforms.

- ***Devise interventions that fit specific contexts.*** Studies of disparities in school discipline and techniques to reduce such gaps often refer to large urban school districts – very different from most school districts in Iowa, which tend to have overwhelmingly white student bodies and only tiny minorities of students of color. Although some reasonable generalizations can be made about reforms likely to prove effective in many kinds of schools, researchers and educators still need to learn more about what works best according to student body characteristics, school size, and the nature of the surrounding community (urban, suburban, or rural). The social setting and racial dynamics of schools can vary substantially within one district, and alter the impact of interventions across schools. A recent intervention applied in a large Midwestern school district demonstrates this variability; the intervention aims to modify the self-evaluations of students in stereotyped social groups. Not surprisingly, the study confirmed that interventions are not a “one size fits all” venture. Specifically, researchers found that the attempted reform was effective only in schools with few students of color, and where academic achievement gaps were large. For schools with large minority student bodies hampered by academic deficits or relatively small academic achievement gaps, the same reforms would probably not work. Alternative approaches need to be tailored to those settings.

The Importance of Sustained Community Involvement

As more research is done on the best ways to reduce punitive punishments and make schools more equitable for all groups of students, entire communities will need to collaborate. Sustained community involvement can improve all aspects of the reform process – from the design of studies to gather evidence, to the implementation and monitoring of attempted improvements, to the implementation of adjustments. In the Iowa project, university researchers are working with leaders of school districts to decide what kind of new data is needed – including detailed information about student experiences and perceptions of their school environments. Rather than simply impose new procedures from the outside, this collaborative project maintains continuous communication among researchers, school district leaders, students, and school staff members; and it also reaches out to include leaders of community organizations. Interchanges happen at all stages, from the design of reforms through their implementation and improvement.

Teamwork, in short, is the watchword, because inclusive cooperation is the only way to advance effective and equitable public education across the United States, taking account of the specific contexts, needs, and challenges of each local community.