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Behavioral Ecosystems

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A Brief History of U.S. School Discipline

Student discipline has long been a concern for educators in the United States public school system. Corporal punishment was a common method of discipline throughout colonialism and until 1977 was defended by the Supreme Court (Adams, 2000). Adams argues that corporal punishment's efficacy began to wane in the 1960s as school size increased due to enrollment exploding as baby boomers aged into and transformed the public school system.

Regardless of its long-term impact on human development, one of the intended consequences of corporal punishment was that it would have deterrent qualities, as student onlookers would observe the spectacle. While this may have been successful with the one-room schoolhouse, it lost its effectiveness with large hierarchically structured schools. The advent of the baby boom, flourishing public educational facilities, swelling school enrollments, and increased student unrest [civil rights movement, women's movement, Vietnam war protests] meant that new disciplinary techniques had to replace the corporal punishment of the past. One of the main practices to which school administrations resorted was the suspension and expulsion of students (2000, p. 144).

Suspension and expulsion or exclusionary discipline quickly became a popular way for schools to deal with misbehavior (Buckmaster, 2016; Skiba et al., 2014). This was an attractive method for schools for a few reasons—it alleviated the teacher of the immediate

disruption to the classroom, allowed the misbehaver's peers to stay on task, enforced a firm standard, and ensured schools could maintain control (Adams, 2000; Perera & Diliberti, 2023b). Of course, exclusionary discipline is not without its faults.

After the 1978 publication of the Safe School Study at Congress' request which found that schools were safer when they had clear guidelines for student behavior, districts and schools began having written policies on discipline and codes of conduct (Green et al., 2020). This was a nationwide push towards eliminating crime and violence in public schools. In the court case *Goss v. Lopez* of 1975, the decision was made that students have a right to due process while at school; essentially, students cannot be removed from school without respecting their right to due process (Allman & Slate, 2011; Mongan & Walker, 2012). Schools had been using suspensions and expulsions to remove students from school, but now by law, schools had to allow for due process. In light of this decision and the backlash of lawsuits school districts faced, many school districts began using in-school suspensions as an alternative punishment method (Adams, 2000). In-school suspension was seen as a more humane way to discipline students. Though one side of the discipline debate argued for more humane methods, another side pushed for harsher or tougher punishments; enter: zero tolerance policies.

Zero Tolerance Policies

Zero tolerance policies were first introduced as a measure to combat drug usage and possession. The military first used zero tolerance policies in 1983 as a rationale to terminate military members who were in possession of drugs, and later law enforcement used these policies to seize property (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Though controversial, these policies were becoming more widespread and being implemented in several school districts across the country, until they became mandatory in 1994 with the passage of the Gun Free Schools Act (Green et al., 2020; Kaur, 2024; Mongan & Walker, 2012; Skiba & Peterson, 1999). This federal act, that arose after several fatal school shootings, required all school districts adopt a zero tolerance policy around firearms in schools, ensuring that any student in possession of a firearm on school property be expelled for at least one calendar year (Skiba

& Peterson, 1999), in order that school districts continued to receive federal funding (Mongan & Walker, 2012).

Zero tolerance policies do not take into consideration a student's behavioral history, their current circumstances (Kaur, 2024), or as Mongan and Walker point out, if the student has *mens rea* (2012). In the 2000 court case *Seal v. Morgan*, it was decided that *mens rea* or having the knowledge and intent to commit a crime, was needed to expel a student from school. Effectively, a student would need to have brought a weapon to school with the intent to harm someone in order to be expelled. However, only one year later in the case, *Bundick v. Bay City ISD*, this ruling was overturned. Rather than needing to prove the student had intent, school districts could expel a student for possessing a weapon at all, meaning the student could have no knowledge of having a weapon or have zero intent to use it and still be expelled. This ruling, along with *Butler v. Rio Rancho* in 2003, further cemented the idea that knowledge or intent is not necessary to expel a student for having a weapon on school property (Mongan & Walker, 2012).

Some school districts already had zero tolerance policies in place before the Gun Free Schools Act for behaviors such as drug possession or gang activity. But once they became federally mandated for firearms, school districts began to expand what behaviors were considered part of these policies. The use of suspensions and expulsions grew in large part because of the broadening of the definition of zero tolerance policies (Allman & Slate, 2011). Zero tolerance policies once ensured that extreme behaviors were met with at least a minimum level disciplinary action; however, now they could be defined as “policies that punish all offenses severely, no matter how minor” (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Some behaviors that have been included in school districts' zero tolerance policies include: use or possession of illegal drugs, tobacco use or possession, alcohol use, verbal threats, sexual harassment, gang activity, fighting, vandalism, disruptive behavior or willful defiance—which could include “talking back to a teacher or not listening to a teacher's instructions” (Perera & Diliberti, 2023a). These lesser offenses like disruptive behavior or willful defiance are often nonviolent and subjective since the terminology is abstract (Allman & Slate, 2011; Green et al., 2020; Losen, 2011; Perera & Diliberti, 2023a; Skiba &

Peterson, 1999). One report revealed 95% of out-of-school suspensions were for non-violent offenses, categorized as disruptive behavior or other, meaning the justification of excluding misbehaving students to ensure a non-violent educational space is moot (Losen, 2011; Rausch & Skiba, 2006, as cited in Losen, 2011).

Perera and Diliberti argue that zero tolerance policies fit within the broken windows philosophy—"which encouraged harsh punishment for even minor infractions to dissuade individuals from committing more serious offenses" (2023a, para 1). In theory, this would deter the punished students from becoming repeat offenders and other students from misbehaving. However, just as the broken windows theory negatively impacts Black and brown and poorer communities, so too do zero tolerance policies (Adukia et al., 2025a; Green et al., 2020; Hanover Research, 2023; Perera, 2022; Perera & Diliberti, 2023a). "Zero tolerance policies are theoretically unsound and exacerbate the overrepresentation of students of color and students with disabilities receiving exclusionary practices for minor and subjective behaviors unrelated to weapons or drugs" (Green et al., 2020, p. 138). Another scholar found that having zero tolerance policies in place predicted an increased use of exclusionary actions, about an 8% increase, with very little change in school leaders' perceptions of student misbehavior (Curran, 2016).

Response to the Research

One of the next big shifts in school discipline happened during the Obama administration after years of research showing the racial disparities in exclusionary practices and their detrimental effects (Hanover Research, 2023; Perera, 2022). Under the Obama administration, the Department of Education and Department of Justice issued a Dear Colleague Letter discussing these racial disparities and giving policy guidance on school discipline (Gordon, 2018). The letter recommends schools use positive methods of discipline rather than suspensions or expulsion. As a result of Obama's policy guidance, 32 states passed legislation in order to limit the use of exclusionary practices (González et al., 2020). The vast majority of research on school discipline agrees that exclusionary practices should be reduced due the negative effects they have on students and the ample evidence of discriminatory uses of them; In spite of this, In Donald Trump's first term, Betsy DeVos,

the then Secretary of Education, rescinded the 2014 Dear Colleague letter. And while these efforts were restored by the Biden administration (Perera & Valant, 2023), the second Trump administration has doubled down on eliminating an equity focus in school discipline. There are concerted efforts made to diminish the strides made in this area of educational policy; however, there was a passive hinderance as well, in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Schools across the U.S. (over 80%) have reported increases in student behavior issues since the COVID-19 pandemic (Adukia et al., 2025a; Perera & Diliberti, 2023c; Perera & Diliberti, 2023d). The pandemic is cited as the reason for students' worsened mental health and socio-emotional development. There was a mass exodus of tenured teachers leaving the field as the job grew even more demanding with little to no incentive increase. In a survey on the effects of the pandemic on teachers, about 66% of teachers said they did not receive adequate training to teach remotely (Diliberti et al., 2021). COVID-19 brought on new challenges, such as remote instruction, isolation, quarantine anxiety, and worries about the virus; however, it also brought to light many structural issues that teachers had been facing for a long time, like work stress, burnout, and insufficient pay (Diliberti et al., 2021). Both educators and students felt the effects of the pandemic and while educators could choose to leave the classroom, students returned to in-person schooling with decreased socio-emotional development and unsurprisingly, worse behavior management (Adukia et al., 2025a).

Most states and the District of Columbia (D.C.) currently have laws in place to deter schools from using exclusionary actions for at least certain student misbehaviors, and some acknowledge there are disparities in who receives those actions and how severely those actions are given out. Conversely, all states and D.C. have language around zero tolerance policies around firearms/weapons in schools, although 23 states include other non-firearm/weapon possession related behaviors in these zero tolerance policies, and six of that subset have nonviolent behaviors included as well (Kelley et al., 2021b). Trump and his administration have stripped much of the language and work towards equity on this front. In an executive order, Trump denounced equity and charged states to reinstate "common sense school discipline policies" (Exec. Order No. 14,280, 2025, p. 17,533). The president

argued that the focus on equity in school discipline causes “increased levels of classroom disorder and school violence” (Exec. Order No. 14,280, 2025, p. 17,534), even though the data do not support this claim. As federal funding for teacher training, mental health services, and general education funds, as well as student loan forgiveness and access are being disrupted or fully cut, educators are now grappling with classroom behavior issues with fewer resources, less training, and more confusing information (Powers, 2026). The research, the federal Department of Education, state laws, and school districts may all differ in mandates or best practices, which can be confusing at best and can jeopardize funding and harm students at worst.

Negative Effects of Exclusionary Practices

Although zero tolerance policies and exclusionary practices are still in place, the research abounds with evidence that these practices have negative effects on students. Students who are suspended or expelled tend to have less time in the classroom and specifically less instruction time (Kaur, 2024; Losen & Martinez, 2020; Mata, 2024; Skiba et al., 2014; Sorensen et al., 2021; Sorensen et al., 2024), have worse academic outcomes (Bristol et al., 2021; Kaur, 2024; Losen, 2011; Mata, 2024; Perera & Diliberti, 2023d; Skiba et al., 2014; Sorensen et al., 2021; Sorensen et al., 2024), have higher rates of transferring to a new school or dropping out of school entirely (Balfanz et al., 2014; Bristol et al., 2021; Kaur, 2024; Mata, 2024; Perera & Diliberti, 2023d; Powers et al., 2025; Sorensen et al., 2021), have worse civic outcomes after high school (Bristol et al., 2021; Powers et al., 2025), and are more likely to have further behavior issues and criminal activity (Hanover Research, 2023; Losen & Martinez, 2020; Powers et al., 2025; Skiba et al., 2014; Sorensen et al., 2021; Sorensen et al., 2024).

An obvious outcome to exclusionary actions is that students spend less time in the classroom. Sorensen and their coauthors concluded that receiving a juvenile complaint increased student absence, with students missing an additional 2.6 days of school (2024, para 12). Secondary school students lose five times more instructional time than elementary school students to out-of-school suspensions (Losen & Martinez, 2020). Because students who receive exclusionary punishment are missing class time, it would

also follow that these students fall behind in academics. One study that compared harsher principals to more lenient principals found that students who committed minor offenses under a strict principal had lower math and reading test scores and were more likely to be retained in the same grade than students who were under a lenient principal (Sorensen et al., 2021). Students with no discipline record were not positively affected by students being suspended by a harsher principal; in fact, they had slightly lower test scores under a harsh principal. Other studies attested that suspension and expulsion is associated with decreases in academic achievement for both individual students (Bristol et al., 2021; Mata, 2024; Perera & Diliberti, 2023d; Sorensen et al., 2024) and the school as a whole (Losen, 2011; Skiba et al., 2014).

“Suspensions harm students academically, in both the short and long run” (Perera & Diliberti, 2023d, para 12). Beyond the already discussed lower test scores and generally lower achievement that students face when getting suspended or expelled (or when their peers are punitively punished), students also are more likely to transfer to a different school or drop out of school entirely if they are disciplined with an exclusionary action (Balfanz et al., 2014; Bristol et al., 2021; Kaur, 2024; Mata, 2024; Perera & Diliberti, 2023d; Powers et al., 2025; Sorensen et al., 2021). Powers and their colleagues showed that students who are suspended in ninth grade were much more likely to transfer to another school than their non-suspended peers (86% of non-suspended students were still enrolled at their school of origin by 12th grade vs. 78% of suspended students) (2025, p. 20). They argued this is a step for schools to take to push students out of the education system.

However, if the underlying motivation is for schools to ‘get rid of their (perceived) troublemakers’, then it is technically not necessary for students to drop out of school altogether. Rather, schools can accomplish their goals simply by pushing students out of their school and towards another school. In other words, students can be *pushed to transfer*, and in doing so, become ‘someone else’s problem’. Given what we know about the strong relationship between transferring and dropping out of school, being pushed out of one school and towards another may represent an

important piece of the larger process by which students are pushed out of the education system altogether. ...

Exclusionary discipline practices are not isolated events, but rather occurrences that can place students on trajectories of intensifying exclusion (Powers et al., 2025, pp. 21; 25).

Another study demonstrated that one suspension decreased the odds that a student graduates from 75% to 52% and doubled the risk of dropping out (16% to 32%). Each successive suspension decreased a student's odds of graduating high school by 20% (Balfanz, et al., 2014). Lower civic engagement (e.g., paying less in taxes, lower voting rates, lower volunteer time) is also associated with suspensions (Bristol et al., 2021; Powers et al., 2025).

Lastly, a negative effect of exclusionary actions is they do not seem to temper misbehavior and may, in fact, cause more misbehavior or at least flag a student as 'devious' to school staff (Hanover Research, 2023; Kaur, 2025; Losen & Martinez, 2020; Powers et al., 2025; Skiba et al., 2014; Sorensen et al., 2021; Sorensen et al., 2024). One study revealed 38% of students who were suspended in a school year were re-suspended within that same school year (Valant, 2018), indicating if a school does not work to resolve the underlying issue the misbehaving student is experiencing, it is likely a student could misbehave again or at least be perceived as a repeat offender. Sorensen's previously mentioned study of the lenient and harsh principal comparison found that students who committed more serious crime and had a harsh principal were more likely to receive a juvenile justice referral, even though these stricter discipline practices did not affect the frequency of serious crime (Sorensen et al., 2021). There is concern schools may refer students to alternative schools or the juvenile justice system in order to appear to be reducing exclusionary actions in lieu of actually replacing them (Losen & Martinez, 2020). Being referred to the juvenile justice system can create even more problems for students, like increasing the probability of risky behavior, such as drug use (Hanover Research, 2023), or being reported to the system again.

We find that, despite fewer disciplinary incidents following a juvenile complaint, students' likelihood of receiving a subsequent *juvenile complaint* within the same

school year nearly doubles. This suggests that schools and police increasingly monitor and penalize youth after their initial juvenile justice contact (Sorensen et al., 2024, para 14).

School Safety

This leads into school safety; if harsher discipline practices do not make schools safer (Perera & Diliberti, 2023d), what does? And who would it make schools safer for? One answer to this question is police. Adding a police presence or School Resource Officer/Sworn Law Enforcement Officer (SROs/SLEOs) tends to be one solution, especially in conversations around school violence and school shootings. Although, research shows SROs do not prevent gun-related incidents (Losen & Martinez, 2020; Sorensen et al., 2023), having police in schools does not reduce student crime (Losen & Martinez, 2020), and having police/SROs in schools tends to inflate the number of incidents and escalate student misbehavior into referrals to juvenile court (Losen & Martinez, 2020; Owens, 2023). The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights reported in 2016 that 42% of all high schools in the U.S. have SLEOs and 51% of schools that have at least 75% of their population being Black or Hispanic have SLEOs (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2016, p. 5). Owens referred to these schools as ‘more punitive climates’ and because of this, students are surveilled more closely than students in schools without SLEOs (2023, para 17). Students at these schools will be more likely to get caught and punished, even though they may be breaking rules at a similar rate to students at schools with less security. One report detailed that of the 2,000 calls the police received from schools in Oakland, according to the police chief, only about 600 calls needed a police presence, meaning 70% of those calls should have been dealt with at a lower level of discipline (Losen & Martinez, 2020).

Suspensions and expulsions had been on the rise from the 1970s until recently. The reliance on exclusionary actions as a disciplinary method skyrocketed after zero tolerance policies were put in place with the intention of creating safer schools by eliminating weapons and drugs from school property. However, over the past thirty years these policies have not improved school safety or student behavior. There are myriad negative effects of

exclusionary actions, but some of the key negative effects are: reduced instructional time, lower academic outcomes, higher transfer rates, higher dropout rates, lower graduation rates, worse civic outcomes, more discipline issues or very little change in the number of disciplinary events, and little to no positive outcomes for non-misbehaving peers—in fact, often times, these peers also have worse outcomes due to these practices being used in their schools. The American Academy of Pediatrics recognized that exclusionary discipline is associated with various health risks and that this discipline is not distributed equally (Jain, et al., American Academy of Pediatrics, 2024).

Disparities in Discipline

It is impossible to discuss school discipline without diving into the disparities that have been well documented and researched for the past fifty years. As the American Academy of Pediatrics succinctly put it, “American Indian/Alaska Native students, Black students, students whose caregivers have low socioeconomic status, male students, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning students, and students with disabilities are disproportionately disciplined with suspension and expulsion” (Jain et al., American Academy of Pediatrics, 2024, p. 1). One of the most striking disparities in discipline is by race/ethnicity.

Disparities by Race/Ethnicity

Black and Hispanic/Latino students are disciplined at an overwhelmingly higher rate and are given more severe punishments when disciplined than their peers (Adukia et al., 2025a; Ausdal et al., 2015; Barrett et al., 2017; Bristol et al., 2021; Curran, 2016; Dhaliwal et al., 2020; Gordon, 2018; Jain et al., American Academy of Pediatrics, 2024; Losen, 2011; Losen & Martinez, 2020; McIntosh et al., 2014; Owens, 2023; Pallotta, 2021; Perera & Valant, 2023; Powers et al., 2025; Shi & Zhu, 2021; Skiba et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2014; Sorensen et al., 2024; Thompson, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Right, 2016; Wilson et al., 2025). Forty-three percent of preschoolers who had at least one suspension were Black, while Black preschoolers only made up 18.2% of the U.S. preschool population (Bristol et al., 2021, para 1). This phenomenon has persisted and intensified since 1974

(Adukia et al., 2025a), and Perera and Valant warn that “if anything, evidence of racially discriminatory student discipline is stronger now than it was in 2014” (2023, para 11), citing multiple studies of Black students being punished more severely than their white peers. With consistent research showing that Black and Hispanic/Latino students are more likely to be disciplined and disciplined more harshly than their non-Black and/or Hispanic/Latino peers, one could make the assumption that Black and/or Hispanic/Latino students’ behavior is simply worse than the average student’s; however, time and time again, that assumption has been disproven (Barrett et al., 2017; Dhaliwal et al., 2020; Gordon, 2018; Owens, 2023; Shi & Zhu, 2021; Sorensen et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2025). Barrett and their colleagues discovered that when students were involved in interracial fights, the Black students involved were consistently and statistically significantly punished longer than the white students they fought with (2017). They further argued, “it seems possible, if not likely, that punishment disparities are larger in less visible circumstances” (Barrett et al., 2017, para 10). Another example comes from Wilson and their co-researchers who observed Black and Hispanic/Latino students received harsher punishment than their white peers during the pandemic when schooling was likely to be remote. Essentially, a white student and a Black or Hispanic/Latino student could engage in the same misbehavior but receive different disciplinary outcomes; even when controlling for school level, infraction type, and frequency, the difference was statistically significant. Also, Black and Hispanic/Latino students received fewer warnings than white students for the same behaviors (2025).

Teacher race and teachers’ implicit bias are among the variables associated with these disparities. One research team sought to measure teacher implicit bias; in doing so they concluded that of the 764 counties they analyzed only seven had a majority of teachers who did not display anti-Black bias. They noted Black students in counties where teachers held an average level of bias were much more likely to be suspended than those in low bias counties (Dhaliwal et al., 2020). Some studies looked at matching teacher and student race and found that students tend to be disciplined less often or less harshly when paired with a teacher of their same race (Bristol et al., 2021; Edmonds 2022 as cited in Perera, 2022; Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Perera, 2022; Shirrell et al., 2021; Thompson, 2021). In an experiment

where teachers were shown videos of white, Black, and Hispanic/Latino students acting out misbehaviors, teachers were more likely to punish the Black students than the white students, assign blameworthiness to Black students, judge recurring misbehavior from Black students to be more severe and more deserving of harsher punishment, and decide to send the Black students to the principal's office, even when a behavior was perceived at the same level of severity as the white students (Owens, 2023).

Similarly, Black and Hispanic/Latino students are more likely to get suspended for more vaguely defined behavior like "willful defiance" or "disorderly conduct" (Gordon, 2018; Skiba et al. 2011; Sorensen et al., 2024). Black students are more than two times as likely than white students to have their school discipline be escalated to law enforcement (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2016). And when Black students are suspended, they are often losing more classroom time than white students (Shi & Zhu, 2021); at the secondary level nationally, Black students lost 103 days per 100 students enrolled, compared to the 21 days white students lose, a staggering 82-day difference (Losen & Martinez, 2020). Research and analyses of MSCS data showed similar findings for the District. In 2021, Dr. Angelica Thompson identified that 26% of Black students were sent to the office for misbehavior and of those, 57% received a suspension or expulsion, resulting in an exclusionary rate of 14.9% for Black students, compared to only 10% of white students getting sent to the principal's office and of those, only 36% receiving a suspension or expulsion for an exclusionary rate of 3.7% (2021, p. 21). Another report from MSCS on discipline showed the trend of Black students having a higher exclusionary rate continued during virtual learning in 2020–21 and persisted once students returned to in-person learning in 2021–22 (McDonald & Jackson, 2022).

So many of these disparities build on themselves; the term for this is intersectionality. Crenshaw, who originally coined this phrase, explains, "...challenges as a consequence of intersectionality, intersections of race and gender, of heterosexism, transphobia, xenophobia, ableism, all of these social dynamics come together and create challenges that are sometimes quite unique" (2016, 11:04). Each identity a person has creates a road, and at times, these roads intersect, and for better or worse, society treats

people in certain ways based on these intersections. For example, a Black student with disabilities may face different challenges that a white student with disabilities may not face. They both have challenges (as all people do), but likely the Black student will face challenges that are specific to them for both identities of being Black and having a disability. This framework is helpful when looking at discipline. So often these identities are impossible to strip away when looking at the data. For that reason, going forward, some of these data points will have multiple identities analyzed. This is not to weaken the point, but rather to demonstrate these identities intersect and speak to the bigger issue of disparities in discipline as a whole.

Disparities by Disability

The first intersection to examine is race and disability. Students with disabilities are often disciplined at a much higher rate than students without disabilities (Losen, 2011; Losen & Martinez, 2020; Mata, 2024; McIntosh et al., 2014; Pallotta, 2021; Skiba et al., 2014; Skiba & Peterson, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2016). After a ban on suspensions was passed in Maryland, exclusionary discipline declined generally, but there were still disparities in the use of suspensions against Black students and students with disabilities. In fact, the disparity widened from a student with disabilities being five times more likely to get suspended to six times more likely than their non-disabled peers (Mata, 2024). Another study on state suspension rates showed three states suspended more than a third of all Black students with disabilities (Losen, 2011). Students with disabilities are twice as likely as non-disabled students to be suspended (Skiba & Peterson, 2000) and lose about twice as many days to out-of-school suspension than students without disabilities (Losen & Martinez, 2020). In fact, secondary school students with disabilities in five states, including Tennessee, lost between 119 and 137 days per 100 students enrolled, over three times the average (Losen & Martinez, 2020). Skiba and Peterson warned about this overreliance on exclusionary discipline for students with disabilities, claiming this practice does not meet the needs of students and does not make schools safer; “it is becoming increasingly apparent that providing effective behavioral supports for students with disabilities requires that the school disciplinary climate be improved for all students”

(Skiba & Peterson, 2000, p. 340-341). Decades later this still seems to be the case. The Office of Civil Rights detailed that beyond being a punishment to the student, suspension or expulsion for a student with disabilities also has the potential to take away crucial services the student receives at school (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2016).

Disparities by Gender and/or Sexual Identity

Gender and sexual identity are also often predictors of exclusionary discipline, especially when stacked with other identities, such as race (Bristol et al., 2021; Himmelstein & Brückner, 2011; Jain et al., American Academy of Pediatrics, 2024; Losen & Martinez, 2020; McIntosh et al., 2014; Owens, 2023; Skiba et al., 2014; Sorensen et al., 2024; Thompson, 2021). In general, male students are more likely to receive an exclusionary action than female students and made up more than 70% of expulsions in the 2020–21 school year (Jain et al., American Academy of Pediatrics, 2024). In preschool, this was even more pronounced with male students making up 54% of enrollment but 78% of students receiving an out-of-school suspension (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2016). In the 2013–14 school year:

[W]hile 6% of all K–12 students received one or more out-of-school suspensions, the percentage is 18% for [B]lack boys; 10% for [B]lack girls; 5% for white boys; and 2% for white girls...Black girls are 8% of enrolled students, but 13% of students receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions. Girls of other races did not disproportionately receive one or more out-of-school suspensions. (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2016, p. 3)

In this case, as mentioned before, intersectionality plays a role in how Black female students are perceived; while generally female students are disciplined at a lower rate than male students, Black female students are treated more harshly than their white counterparts. Another example of this comes from a study that concluded Black female students were 65% more likely than their peers to receive a juvenile complaint due to vaguely defined misbehaviors like “disorderly conduct” (Sorensen et al., 2024). When looking at days lost due to suspension, Black male students and female students had the highest rate when looking at race and gender together, with 132 days lost and 77 days lost,

respectively (Losen & Martinez, 2020). In MSCS schools, the largest gap in exclusionary rates was between Black male students and white female students (Thompson, 2021).

Lastly, sexual identity or gender non-conformity can also heighten students' risk of being disciplined more harshly. Non-straight adolescents are more likely to be punished, disproportionate to their misbehaviors than their straight counterparts (Himmelstein & Brückner, 2011). Between higher instances of bullying or fighting, expectations of gendered dress code adherence, and expectations of gendered conduct, these students may be seen as troublemakers for not following societal norms. LGBTQ+ students face exclusionary discipline at a higher rate than their peers and even more so if they are students of color (over one and a half times their straight/cisgender peers) (Jain et al., American Academy of Pediatrics, 2024; Welsh & Little, 2018).

Ultimately, disparities in discipline are a moral failing of the education system. It is wrong to punish students more harshly solely based on the color of their skin, ethnicity, cultural background, disability status, gender, family socioeconomic status, or sexual identity. Research shows over and over these disparities in discipline are real and cause harm to students. “Disproportionality in exclusionary discipline blocks us from the overall objective of promoting positive outcomes for all students” (McIntosh et al., 2014, p. 1). If it is known that these disparities run rampant, what is to be done about them? And if it is known that exclusionary actions are ineffective and harmful, how should the education system move forward in providing a safe space for students to learn and grow?

Alternatives to Exclusionary Discipline

Some solutions to exclusionary practices have shown tentatively promising results, like banning suspensions for lower grades or for lower-level offenses; Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS), sometimes referred to as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (for the current paper, it will be referred to as the latter); Restorative Justice Practices (RJP); and Social Emotional Learning (SEL). The following section will dive into each of these strategies—the goals, the implementation, and some of the findings related to each. Like exclusionary practices, not all of these methods help reduce the disparities in discipline. If a program is designed for equitable outcomes,

that intent is explicitly stated, and proper implementation is in place, it is much more likely these disparities will diminish.

After years of ample evidence that suspensions carry negative outcomes, some states and districts have limited or banned the use of them. About 16 states and D.C. have limitations on the use of suspensions and expulsions, typically for younger grades (Kelley et al., 2021a). One example of this is Maryland banning suspensions in early elementary school grades, specifically kindergarten through second grade. This ban ultimately reduced suspensions in these grades but did not fully eliminate them. Other elementary school grades that were not included in the ban held the same suspension rate (Mata, 2024). In another study, California banned the use of suspensions for low level offenses like willful defiance, and according to Los Angeles Unified School District data, their ban was associated with a modest decrease in racially disparate suspension rates (Perera, 2022). Removing suspensions as a discipline option without equipping teachers with helpful tools to handle student misbehavior can cause teachers to feel powerless or at times, even unsafe, when disruption in the classroom occurs (Kaur, 2024). In a study about the cultural shift in New York City middle schools after a suspension ban, researchers found students had academic gains that were not caused by the suspension ban alone. They argued, “these test score gains appear to be better-explained by improvements in school culture” and those improvements to school culture were due to “replacing suspensions with alternative interventions” (Craig & Martin, 2023, p. 3–4). Banning suspensions alone will likely not produce the results educators are looking for; in order to see real change, new strategies must be implemented with fidelity.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

One such strategy could be Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). PBIS is a schoolwide approach to discipline that establishes expectations and rewards good behavior, rather than just punishing unacceptable behavior. Establishing expectations is an important component of PBIS, allowing students and teachers to be preemptively aware of both school policies and consequences for noncompliance. This alleviates the ambiguity teachers face while navigating vaguely-written rules. That vagueness often results in

disproportionately severe outcomes for students of color. Clear expectations around discipline can clarify and standardize teachers' disciplinary responses independently of a student's identity. Rewarding positive behavior provides additional opportunities for teachers to interact with students, highlighting accomplishments that otherwise may go unrecognized. This can encourage misbehaving students to strive for the attention that excellence garners them rather than that which comes with misbehavior. This also creates more opportunities for teachers to interact with well-behaved students, whose lack of disciplining often leaves them relatively overlooked (McIntosh et al., 2014; Perera, 2022).

Restorative Justice Practices

Restorative Justice Practices (RJP) is another way to reduce exclusionary actions. RJP has Indigenous roots and centers on community building and reconciliation (Adukia et al., 2025b). These practices are all about having open dialogue when a student misbehaves—focusing on harm reparation; what the student can do to make amends for what they have done, rather than focusing on punishing the student alone. The goals of RJP are conflict resolution and providing a safe space for all students (Adukia et al., 2025a; Adukia et al., 2025b; Gregory et al., 2026; Hanover Research, 2023; Kaur, 2024; Koza et al., 2024). RJP includes having a conference with the offending student and the “victims” of their offense, mediated by staff, so the offending student can take ownership of the harm caused and the victims can be heard and hopefully feel a sense of justice has been reached. Results of RJP studies have shown lower rates of recidivism for those who have misbehaved and a higher sense of justice for victims (Koza et al., 2024).

In a model that describes differing discipline styles, Wachtel and McCold placed control and support on opposing axes, creating a plane on which to situate certain discipline styles. In the quadrant that contained high control and low support, they placed punitive discipline where staff have control of students but there is little support for the students' needs, academic or otherwise. They suggested shifting from low support to high support, moving to the quadrant with both high control and support, which is where they placed restorative justice (2001). They continued:

If punitive [discipline is used], staff would respond by doing things TO the youth, scolding and handing out punishments. Responding in a restorative manner requires that staff work WITH the young people in their care and engage them directly in the process of holding them accountable. (Wachtel & McCold, 2001, p. 124)

As an example of this, one use of RJP is suspension reduction which allows students to have the choice of being suspended or reducing or eliminating their punishment by participating in a restorative conference; this gives the student the autonomy to choose the consequences of their actions and in doing so being an active member in the discipline system (Buckmaster, 2016). Suspensions alone are unlikely to cause positive behavioral changes in misbehaving students or resolve the feelings of injustice in the victims; therefore, RJP can help close this gap for all parties (Adukia et al., 2025b).

The literature showed mixed results for RJP's effectiveness. Adukia and their team demonstrated an 18% decrease in instructional days students lost to suspensions in the four year period after implementing RJP, and a 15% decrease in the number of arrests out of school, which they included because they argue, "police officers serving outside of schools operate independently from school policies and practices, thus the decline in out-of-school arrests offers the strongest evidence of genuine changes in underlying student conduct" (Adukia et al., 2025b, p. 2). These results were especially beneficial for Black students—their rates of reduction were double that of the average population and Black male students' number of attendance days also increased, beyond what would be associated with suspension days, possibly indicating these students were now more engaged (Adukia et al., 2025a; Adukia et al., 2025b). They also observed students' perception of school climate had improved since the start of RJP. In another study, Kaur compared the implementation and results of two U.S. states' approach to RJP. Michigan mandated RJP be implemented as the primary alternative discipline method and Texas permitted schools to use RJP as an option for discipline but also required schools have a campus behavior coordinator (Kaur, 2024). These two methods of implementation yielded startling results; while Texas' program was optional, all three metrics that were measured—number of suspensions, reported cases of bullying, and discipline for bullying—showed a decrease, meaning a positive change due to

RJP. Michigan ended up with an overall increase in all three metrics; however, when broken down by school districts, a majority had decreases across the three metrics (Kaur, 2024). Kaur suggested:

appointing a campus behavior coordinator may play a crucial role in facilitating the integration of RJ practices into the school's disciplinary framework. Moreover, Texas has positioned RJ as a supportive tool, whereas Michigan has mandated it, possibly placing an additional burden on already overworked teachers without specifying additional staff or resources (2024, p. 44).

In this same study, however, Kaur detailed that the implementation of RJP in Michigan districts with higher Black and Asian enrollments had increases of bullying rates and suspensions, indicating this implementation of RJP did not help students' equally (2024). Similarly, Davison and their colleagues saw that white students experienced a greater decline in suspension rates than their Black peers, creating an even bigger discipline disparity gap (2019).

Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a common support for discipline, seen as a preventative measure for, rather than a solution to, discipline. SEL is a schoolwide or district wide approach that focuses on creating common language for students and staff to use about social-emotional issues and frames learning around specified competencies through lessons and daily check-ins. This design is meant to bolster both teacher and student mental health, nurture healthy relationships between the two, and foster a positive school environment (Council of the Great City Schools, 2021). Many school districts have implemented SEL; in a report published by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), they stated that they have worked with ten urban U.S. school districts to apply SEL in the classroom. They explained that some districts use clusters of schools as a pilot program, some start with central office and disseminate to the schools, and some start with classrooms and work from there (CASEL, 2017). CASEL argued that it is best to make SEL a part of every aspect of a district. In Oakland Unified School District's

case, they transitioned their board policies, curricula, standards, discipline practices, and professional development to include SEL to ensure it was the entire district's focus.

CASEL asserted positive outcomes from these districts, pointing to Chicago and Sacramento's declines in suspension rates (CASEL, 2017). Students with high social and emotional competence had higher math and ELA proficiency rates than their peers (CASEL, 2017). Another study found that students in SEL programs had significantly higher emotional competence and academic achievement than their peers who were not in an SEL program (Durlak et al., 2011).

Strategies in Action & Recommendations

These strategies are being implemented in states and districts throughout the country. Thirty states and D.C. recommend that their schools and school districts use non-exclusionary forms of discipline, and of those 31, 23 have specific recommendations on which strategies to implement, such as the previously explained practices (Kelley et al., 2021a). Atlanta Public Schools, Austin Independent School District, Chicago Public Schools, Los Angeles Unified School District, Metro Nashville Public Schools, Oakland Unified School District, St. Louis Public Schools, and Tulsa Public Schools are just some of the school districts that have SEL programming in place (CASEL, 2017; Council of the Great City Schools, 2023). Dallas Independent School District and Metro Nashville Public Schools have both tested having de-escalation rooms available for students. Clark County School District, Cleveland Metropolitan School District, Jefferson County Public Schools, Portland Public Schools, St. Paul Public Schools, along with others practice PBIS (Council of Great City Schools, 2023). Atlanta Public Schools, Boston Public Schools, Dallas Independent School District, Denver Public Schools, Kansas City Public Schools, Michigan state, New York City Public Schools, Pinellas County Schools, San Francisco Unified School District, and the state of Texas are among those who have restorative practices in their schools (Council of the Great City Schools, 2023; Craig & Martin, 2023; Kaur, 2024). Boston Public Schools have a program that began in 1986 to combat bullying with individual and group therapy. These strategies often can be and are implemented together as part of the discipline tool kit of a school district or state.

A thread throughout all of these approaches is they ultimately are useful tools that generally work better than punitive discipline; however, using just these approaches alone does not fix disparities. Districts tend to utilize strategies to attempt to decrease these disparities, but often, it is not explicitly stated as a goal to eliminate or decrease disparities between students, and in not doing so, this goal is not achieved. Research has shown that if the goal is to close this gap, it must be explicitly stated and policies need to be in place to help accomplish this goal, rather than relying on race-neutral strategies or the ‘implement and hope it works’ strategy (Green et al., 2020; Kaur, 2024; Mata, 2024; McIntosh et al., 2014; Perera, 2022). Perera suggested pairing a discipline strategy with racial equity focused professional development to ensure teachers know about these disparities and can work towards equity in their classrooms, equipped with a new strategy and reasoning behind it (2022). McIntosh and their colleagues advised enhancing equity by removing harmful practices, including equitable language and practices around hiring, providing ongoing professional development, and ensuring proper data collection (2014). Implementing a program without proper fidelity does a disservice to the program and the students it is attempting to reach (Green et al., 2020); in doing so, outcomes are likely to be underwhelming and funding could be cut due to the program being ineffective.

Similarly, districts should not employ a new strategy without ongoing support, known as “train and hope” (Green et al., 2020; Gregory et al., 2026; Hanover Research, 2023). The “Train and hope” model is when a district initiates a change in curriculum or discipline practices and may have a training on said change and then hopes it works without any further resources or ongoing professional development. There should be initial training for these programs, but there should also be ongoing training, coaching, peer learning, regular check-ins, demonstrations, surveys to gauge teachers’ feedback, etc. to help teachers feel comfortable with the new initiative (Hanover Research, 2023; Greogry et al., 2026). One district “discovered after two years of implementing student-centered reforms it needed to pause to focus more on staff training. ‘We can’t expect teachers to model what we don’t give them a chance to practice themselves’” (CASEL, 2017, p. 14). This is a case where a district

took the right step to pause the program to ensure teachers got the proper training to ultimately serve their students better.

Beyond these programs, the research has the following recommendations for state policymakers and districts to help improve student behavior:

- Expand mental health support (Council of the Great City Schools, 2023; Moon et al., 2017; Sorensen et al., 2024).
- Promote community partnerships that help fill gaps in district staff capacity (Council of the Great City Schools, 2023).
- Reduce or eliminate police presence in schools (Losen & Martinez, 2020; Sorensen et al., 2024).
- Provide clear guidance on when reporting to the police is needed (Sorensen et al., 2024).
- “When practicable, funds delineated for police and security should be redirected toward direct supports for students, teachers, and administrators” (Losen & Martinez, 2020, p. 50).
- Require more in-depth behavioral/mental health training in educational programs (Moon et al., 2017; Perera & Diliberti, 2023c; Perera & Diliberti, 2023d).
- Provide more funding to education in general to hire more teachers and support staff and to increase teacher salary (Perera & Diliberti, 2023d; Powers et al., 2025; Sorensen et al., 2024).

Behavioral Ecosystem in the Literature

Who is included when discussing a school or a school district’s behavioral ecosystem? An argument could be made that each person in a school system could be part of that ecosystem, from the students, their family members, community members, teachers, custodians—any adult who works in the school. For the current paper, those who make the most direct decisions on discipline within a school will be the focus—teachers, principals/assistant principals, and support staff, e.g., counselors, coaches, and mentors.

Teachers interact with students more than any other adults in a school setting. They are on the front lines of dealing with student misbehavior, meaning they are the first to

determine if a behavior needs to be escalated; in doing so they can help detect the level of threat a student misbehaving could be (Mongan & Walker, 2012). They also set the mood or tone of what is acceptable behavior in their classroom (Craig & Martin, 2023). One study found elementary school teachers have large effects on students' self-perception, happiness, and behavior in class (Blazar & Kraft, 2017). As has already been stated, teachers usually decide if a misbehavior needs a more severe response, and research has shown teachers' implicit biases affect students differently (Dhaliwal et al., 2020; Owens, 2023; Perera, 2022). For this reason, it is vitally important teachers receive training on implicit bias and further training on dealing with student behavior.

Teachers often identify discipline as one of the biggest challenges in their job (Adukia et al., 2025a); at times, feeling frustrated, by being unable to maintain classroom order, or even unsafe, especially when there are mental health concerns they may not feel equipped to handle. In fact, in one survey, almost all of the educators who responded (more than 96%) reported they were likely to interact with students with mental health issues, and 97% agreed it is important for school staff to understand mental health issues; however, only 60% said they were confident in recognizing mental health issues in students, and 65% stated they were confident in making a referral to mental health services on behalf of a student (Moon et al., 2017).

Principals also agreed that their staff need more training in regard to discipline. In one study, over 60% of principals surveyed felt their teachers were not adequately trained to handle behavior issues (Perera & Diliberti, 2023c). In another survey, 70% of principals indicated that more training for teachers around socioemotional development was needed in their schools, and 79% said they needed more support for mental health in their schools, to which hiring more teachers would help (Perera & Diliberti, 2023d). Over half of principals agreed their school needed more resources in light of student behavior. Funding is one of the biggest barriers to the supports principals need; principals face staffing challenges, resource deficits, infrastructure issues, and more due to underfunding. Even when districts were flush with federal funding due to COVID, many districts and schools were hesitant to use that money for longer term solutions, like creating more positions or

curriculum/program changes, because once that temporary funding discontinued, so too would those improvements (Perera & Diliberti, 2023c). Ongoing funding is needed for more permanent solutions. Another survey from Perera and Diliberti revealed a majority of principals thought exclusionary practices did not solve discipline problems and only 12% believed suspensions helped students learn from their mistakes; so, if suspensions don't work like principals think they should, why do they still use this method? Perera and Diliberti speculated this could be due to limited resources, the standardization of zero tolerance policies, or it is simply what they are accustomed to doing (Perera & Diliberti, 2023b).

If that last hypothesis is correct, principals can be the change they want to see in their schools. While teachers set the tone in their classrooms, principals set the tone for the entire school. They often have the final call on the level of discipline a student should receive, and teachers tend to follow the lead of their principals as far as how severely to punish their students, as seen in the study about the harsh versus lenient principals (where students had better outcomes under the lenient principal versus under the harsh principal) (Perera & Diliberti, 2023b; Sorensen et al., 2021). Principals are in charge of executing the discipline policy, by ensuring students and staff alike follow the policy; however, it is also their responsibility to ensure that policy is fair. "A visionary leader may make it known that at this school or district we value working with students who are exhibiting behavior problems. It is important to note that the visionary leader is espousing a value, not a policy" (Buckmaster, 2016, p. 7). Principals can establish a precedent for teachers and staff of how they want their students to be treated; as an example, when trying to shift the school culture towards a restorative framework, one principal began using and encouraged their staff to use the word 'cooperation' rather than 'compliance,' to establish that teachers and students work together by following the rules to create a safe learning environment. They also used the words 'consequence' and 'intervention' rather than 'punishment' (Golann & Jones, 2024, p. 47). Principals leading by example like this can help teachers feel less overwhelmed by schoolwide change, which is extremely common (Gregory et al., 2026).

The last group in the ecosystem is the additional staff in schools who specialize in behavior, mental health, or student relations. This group includes school guidance

counselors or mental health specialists. They also include staff members who can vary in titles depending on the school system or discipline strategies that are in place, but some of these roles can be coaches, mentors, specialists, and assistants. These are support staff who help teachers by being secondary adults to assist when a misbehavior occurs. In a restorative practices environment these adults will often be the one to facilitate whichever exercise is deemed appropriate for the situation. As previously stated, both teachers and principals agree teachers are not fully equipped to deal with behavior issues and mental health issues, which is why having in-house staff who are capable of handling these is vital. “The most important aspect of this role is that the person has had formal training to interact with students with trauma and mental health issues” (Pallotta, 2021, p.4; Stegelin et al., 2020). Research has shown that while white youth are more likely than Black youth to access publicly available mental health services, there is little difference between the level of access when the service is provided at school (Angold et al., 2002). This is one more reason why these services in schools are necessary.

Memphis-Shelby County Schools’ Behavioral Strategies & Ecosystem

Memphis-Shelby County Schools (MSCS) is the largest school district in Tennessee and in the top 25 largest in the United States. MSCS has over 200 schools and around 106,000 students (Memphis-Shelby County Schools, 2023). The Shelby County website states the MSCS student population is 74% Black/African American, 15% Latino, 7% white, and 1% Asian (other races omitted) (Shelby County, Tennessee, 2021). Memphis-Shelby County Schools has a multitude of initiatives, programs, and an entire ecosystem to handle behavior issues while also reducing exclusionary actions. These initiatives and programs include Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior (RTI²-B), Progressive Discipline, Reset Rooms, a Social Emotional Learning program, including a new Social-Emotional Learning curriculum as of 2025–26, hiring Behavioral Specialists, the Mental Health Center, and other smaller initiatives.

Tennessee law states that every school district’s code of conduct “must include evidence-based behavior supports and interventions” (Teacher’s Discipline Act, 2022, section 2801). The Tennessee Department of Education provides a framework the District follows called Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior (RTI²-B). RTI²-B is a multi-tiered support system in which, as the tiers escalate, so does the support a student will receive—starting with Tier 1 that all students receive and moving up to Tier 3 that is meant for students who need more intensive strategies (typically about 5% of students) (Memphis-Shelby County Schools, 2021; Memphis-Shelby County Schools, 2026a; Tennessee Department of Education, 2016). This is the framework in which MSCS conducts all discipline, “ensuring that all schools use the same language and same structures in building a positive school culture and climate supporting academic achievement at the highest levels” (Memphis-Shelby County Schools, 2026a, para 1).

According to the 2025–26 MSCS Student-Parent Handbook and the Shelby County School Board policy on student conduct, the District adheres to state laws regarding discipline in order to “(1) establish clear behavior expectations for students and staff and (2) provide guidance to positively respond and strengthen capacity to establish and maintain safe, healthy, and supportive school climates that reduce and prevent inappropriate and disruptive student behavior” (Memphis-Shelby County Schools, 2025b, p. 24; School Discipline Act, 2024; Shelby County Board of Education, 2018; Teacher’s Discipline Act, 2022). These documents also outline that MSCS intends to be a trauma-informed district and will do so by having a multi-tiered system of support and will seek to meet the needs of all students. This is in accordance with section 9 of the School Discipline Act, which lays out the following criteria all school districts’ discipline policies must align with:

Each trauma-informed discipline policy must: (1) Balance accountability with an understanding of traumatic behavior; (2) Teach school and classroom rules while reinforcing that violent or abusive behavior is not allowed at school; (3) Minimize disruptions to education with an emphasis on positive behavioral supports and behavioral intervention plans; (4) Create consistent rules and consequences; and (5)

Model respectful, nonviolent relationships. (School Discipline Act, 2024, section 4109)

The 2025–26 MSCS Student-Parent Handbook describes the goals of student discipline as ensuring academic achievement, school success, and safety (Memphis-Shelby County Schools, 2025b, p. 24). It states that it is expected that positive supports will manage most behavior issues but at times, a more serious consequence may be needed. When that happens, “the District will respond in a manner that will minimize the impact of the incident, repair harm, and address the underlying need behind the behavior” (p. 25). It also says out of class or school suspension should be minimalized and that “out-of-school suspensions should only be used as a last resort” (p. 25). The handbook goes on to discuss progressive discipline measures which were previously defined as “gradual, sequential, and strategic responses (e.g., interventions, restorative practices) implemented to deter negative student behavior and reduce exclusionary consequences” (p. 23). These measures are aligned with the RTI²-B framework and consistent with trauma-informed discipline by including things like employing multi-tiered supports, being proactive about addressing underlying issues, reinforcing positive behaviors, and avoiding traumatic or shaming discipline (p. 25).

The handbook lists strategies that may be employed for student behavior: “positive behavior supports, restorative practices, mental health supports, progressive discipline strategies, and behavior intervention plans... teacher/parent or guardian/administrator conference, confiscation of items, loss of privileges, before/after school detention/Saturday school, or suspension from the bus” (Memphis-Shelby County Schools, 2025b, p. 25). After defining some of those strategies, it then lays out the Student Code of Conduct which groups offenses and behaviors by most extreme to least extreme (A–E) (pp. 29–31). Category A is state-mandated zero tolerance offenses which require the student to be expelled or suspended for 180 days, and the offenses include: aggravated assault on an adult, possession of any drug, possession of a firearm, and threats of mass violence (p. 29). For Category B offenses, restorative practices should be implemented first and if that does not work, the penalty is either out-of-school suspension or expulsion (p. 30). In-school

suspension is the discipline spelled out for Category C infractions (p. 30). Category D behaviors warrant parent/guardian-principal conference, before/after school detention/Saturday school, in-school suspension, or out-of-school suspension (after restorative practices have been implemented) (p. 31). Lastly, the lowest category of offenses, Category E, has the following disciplinary actions: implementation of restorative practices, parent/guardian-principal conference, before/after school detention/Saturday school, or in-school suspension (p. 31).

MSCS' superintendent, Dr. Roderick Richmond published a 100-Day plan in April 2025 after he was named the interim superintendent. This plan discusses the 5 As the District is focusing on: Academics, Attendance, Attitude, Athletics, and Arts. Under Attitude, there are four action steps:

1. Character Education: Introduce character education programs focusing on SEL (social-emotional learning) and positive behavior.
2. Mentorship Programs: Establish mentorship programs pairing students with faculty/staff to guide behavioral and academic improvement.
3. Positive Behavior Recognition: Implement a positive behavior recognition system with quarterly awards.
4. Conflict Resolution: Train teachers and students in conflict resolution techniques and track reduction in disciplinary incidents. (Memphis-Shelby County Schools, 2025a, p. 20)

The timeline provided for this section indicates that in year 2 of these action steps there should be a 10% reduction in behavioral incidents and a 20% decrease in suspensions.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) has been a focus of the District for some time but has been further clarified to be a priority in this plan. One of the action steps was to introduce character education programs focusing on SEL. MSCS also states, "all MSCS employees who support students must receive training to ensure their vision aligns with the mindset and mission of social emotional learning" (Memphis-Shelby County Schools, 2024a). Because of this, MSCS provides several professional development courses educators can take to ensure they understand how best to use this approach. In the 2025–26 school year,

the District adopted and began to implement a new SEL curriculum called 7 Mindsets (Memphis-Shelby County Schools, 2025c). This curriculum implementation will have its own evaluation that is forthcoming. For that reason, the current paper will not detail that curriculum change.

Two of the most important jobs in the support role type in the MSCS behavioral ecosystem are the Reset Room Assistants and the Behavioral Specialists (Reset has been formatted differently depending on the source, i.e. Reset, ReSet, ReSET, etc. For the current paper and for consistency, it will only be formatted as Reset). Sometimes these roles overlap and they often perform the same duties; the name may vary depending on the year or the school. First, Reset Rooms will be explained and then the role of a Reset Room Assistant and a Behavioral Specialist will be detailed.

MSCS started a pilot program of Reset Rooms in the 2019–20 school year at 30 schools across the District (FOX13 Memphis News Staff, 2022; Soucek, 2021). The Reset Room is a “non-punitive, in-school intervention” (Research & Performance Management, 2023a, slide 5). It is a physical space in a school where a student can go if they are misbehaving; this room is meant to be a safe place for the student to calm down and refocus with the help of a Reset Room Assistant. This is meant to be part of the progressive discipline model and ideally would replace in-school or out-of-school suspension for the student (Student Equity, Enrollment and Discipline [SEED], 2020, slide 2). Students are provided with 30 to 90 minutes of intervention with the goal of ‘bouncing back’ to the classroom rather than receiving an exclusionary action. The types of intervention the assistants use are restorative practices like one-on-one discussion, mindfulness exercises including art therapy, and restorative circles (slide 4). At the time, Reset Room Assistants underwent an 8-day intensive training on behavior and strategies, they also were trained on a myriad of District duties such as PowerSchool and Bright Bytes, reporting procedures, SEL lessons, and they met weekly with trauma coaches. These coaches model interactions with students and use SEL tools, and practice other interventions with the Reset Room Assistants (Research & Performance Management, 2022b, slides 8–12). The current training for Reset Room Assistants has changed but has not been publicly documented.

The Reset Room pilot program was deemed successful, and it was expanded to nearly every school in the District. One report found for the 2021–22 school year almost all District-managed schools had SEL supports through Behavioral Specialists, Reset Room Assistants, or both” and that those who had both had a 22% reduction in out-of-school suspension rates compared to the 2018–19 school year (Research & Performance Management, 2022a, slide 5). In a KPI report published in September of 2023, the District had reduced the number of Black, male students with disabilities who had been suspended. This was in large part due to the Reset Rooms, and in doing so, this removed MSCS from a state mandate list. “Reset is our District’s primary preventative and supportive behavior intervention strategy” (Research & Performance Management, 2023c, slide 36). In this same report, a comparison between 2021–22 and 2022–23 school years are made; Tier 1 supports increased by 28% and Tier 2 supports increased by 29% between years. And in a comparison for the following year, there was a 45% increase in supports in the first semester of the 2023–24 school year compared to 2022–23. Also, 63% of principals agreed Reset Rooms improved their school culture and climate. This report explains that Reset Rooms were funded by the temporary use of ESSER funds (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief/COVID relief), and the future of the program could drastically change depending on the District budget in the coming years (Data Strategy, 2024, slides 27–28). There has been no further official documentation on the continuation of the Reset Room program, especially in tracking the number of rooms and specialists in the District and how well the program is doing.

The Behavioral Specialist is a supportive role in the school that is meant to improve culture and climate and to create safe spaces for students and teachers, often through the Reset Room and other SEL and restorative practice (progressive discipline) methods (Research & Performance Management, 2023b, slide 12). These specialists are usually the point person in the school who monitors the school’s behavioral support plan, maintains data records, assists misbehaving students through progressive discipline strategies, and helps with classroom management skills (Memphis-Shelby County Schools, 2026a). These behavior supports most often include check in/check outs (an “evidence-based

intervention that addresses classroom behavior challenges to reinforce and track behavioral goals”), character education, restorative practices, soft touch intervention, and mindfulness (Data Strategy, 2024, slide 30 & 50). Challenges that both of these programs have run into are staffing issues (assistants citing frustration with implementation and being overqualified for the pay) (Research & Performance Management, 2022b, slide 12), uncertain funding (Data Strategy, 2024, slide 28), and organizational changes.

The SEED office that was previously over these programs and roles was eliminated in 2024 by the superintendent at the time. Other programs, such as SEL supports, the Office of Civil Rights, Homeless/Foster Care supports, the Mental Health Department including the Mental Health Center (a team of licensed psychologists/therapists who provide counseling, therapy, mental health supports, and a hotline for MSCS students, schools, and families) were under this office. With the termination of that office, there has been the loss of experienced workforce, institutional knowledge, consistent data collection, and reporting, as well as a decentralization of program expectations. These programs are now split between Student Support Services and the Department of Exceptional Education.

Another component of MSCS school discipline is the Department of School Services, in charge of safety and security. This department has multiple prevention and intervention programs, including GRASSY, which works to reduce gang activity and involvement. They oversee the use of metal detectors and other surveillance equipment in school buildings, and they employ 12 school resource units and 128 school resource officers (SROs). School resource units are police officers who work in schools, while SROs may not be law enforcement officers (Memphis-Shelby County Schools, 2024b). These SROs are listed as mobile officers and may not be stationed at specific schools for the duration of the school year.

The School House Adjustment Program Enterprise (SHAPE) program is a diversion program that began in the District in July 2007 “that aims to reduce the number of minority youth who are transported and booked into juvenile detention for minor offenses” (Newman, 2023, p. 1). When a student has misbehaved, they can be referred to this program where they meet regularly with other students and a site coordinator to work through a curriculum

designed to teach social-emotional and behavioral skills. This program works with over 60 schools in the District to reduce juvenile justice occurrences.

Another program meant to reduce juvenile justice incidents is Project STAND. STAND is an acronym for Social-Emotional, Transition, Academic, and Network Developing. This is a grant-funded program that began in 2017 which provides mentoring, academic help, post-secondary guidance, learning opportunities, and connection to resources for MSCS youth in the juvenile justice system to reduce recidivism. This program is aligned with a District goal to “provide equity, education, and empowerment to African American Males [sic] involved in the juvenile justice system” (Memphis-Shelby County Schools, 2026b, para 1).

These various programs and roles make up MSCS’ behavioral ecosystem. Teachers, principals, and support staff like Reset Room Assistants and Behavioral Specialists, using progressive discipline strategies like restorative practices, SEL lessons, and positive behavior interventions, all work together to ensure a safe learning environment. One of the biggest priorities is to keep students in the classroom by reducing exclusionary actions and using those alternative strategies to resolve behavioral issues and reduce the harm caused by the offending student. Tertiary programs like Project STAND and others help students who have committed more serious offenses stay out of the juvenile justice system.

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