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# RTI$^2$-B Specialists Initiative & MSCS Behavioral Ecosystem

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## Key Findings

- The literature about school discipline centers on (a) the negative effects of exclusionary actions (suspensions and expulsions) which include less instructional time, worse academic outcomes, and higher rates of dropping out, and (b) the disparities in discipline, which include disparities in the rate at which students are disciplined and how severely they are punished in comparison to their peers based on race/ethnicity, disability, and gender/sexuality.
- District data show out-of-school suspensions make up the majority of disciplinary actions for 2023–24 and 2024–25 school years at 51% but decrease to less than half of disciplinary actions in 2025–26 (46%).
- The number of disciplinary incidents increased by 4,327 from 2023–24 to 2025–26, but the number of out-of-school suspensions only increased by 153. Progressive discipline increased at pace with disciplinary incidents. A change around suspension procedures in Board policy 6022, Student Conduct, was the cause of much of this change.
- A cohort of 31 RTI$^2$-B Specialists were hired at the start of the 2025–26 school year. These RTI$^2$-B Specialists served 51 schools and 592 students. The students who were paired with them were tracked throughout the year to evaluate if this pairing helped improve behavioral and attendance outcomes.
- RTI$^2$-B Specialist Paired students (BSP students) had a higher average attendance rate in the year they were paired than the previous year.
- BSP students also had a higher school retention rate in the year they were paired than the previous year, meaning they were more likely to continue to attend the school where they began the year than in the previous year.

Memphis-Shelby County Schools offers educational and employment opportunities without regard to race, color, religion, sex, creed, age, disability, national origin, or genetic information.

- BSP students' average attendance and school retention rates were even higher than non-BSP students, in two different comparison groups.

## Introduction

In fall 2025, District leaders requested a comprehensive analysis for the District's Behavioral Ecosystem, including how District practices compare to national literature on K–12 behavior and discipline. This coincided with a new RTI$^2$-B Specialist initiative that created over thirty positions at the District level to provide behavioral assistance to students who had a record of behavioral and attendance issues. This report will focus on this RTI$^2$-B Specialist Initiative with analyses using student data couched in the framework of the Behavioral Ecosystem of Memphis-Shelby County Schools (MSCS) as a whole and the literature at large. To better understand how this program works, first the literature will be discussed to set the overall context in which these RTI$^2$-B Specialists are working and then secondly, an overview of MSCS's Behavioral Ecosystem and disciplinary trends will be explained. Lastly, findings from the analyses of the RTI$^2$-B Specialists will be presented and recommendations based on those findings and the literature will be offered.

## Data and Methodology

### *Literature Review*

#### History of Discipline: Including External Influences, Negative Effects of Exclusionary Actions, and Discrimination in Discipline

Historically, disciplinary practices in schools have shifted as schools and districts adapt to external influences. These influences include enrollment expansion, government oversight and policy, and research. Exclusionary practices began as a reaction to enrollment expansion in the 1960s due to the baby boom generation (Adams, 2000). Suspensions and expulsions were seen as a convenient way to alleviate the classroom of 'troublemakers' in order to continue instructional time for the majority of students (Buckmaster, 2016; Perera & Diliberti, 2023b; Skiba et al., 2014). Government oversight increased these exclusionary actions by requiring zero tolerance policies around drugs and firearms (Allman & Slate, 2011; Green et al., 2020; Kaur, 2024; Mongan & Walker, 2012; Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Zero tolerance policies created a strict culture around discipline. However, research began to show that these practices were harmful and used disproportionally on students based on race/ethnicity and sex. This research caused the Obama administration to call for alternative approaches to exclusionary actions (González et al., 2020, Gordon, 2018; Hanover Research, 2023; Perera, 2022).

Even more recent research shows a continued pattern of negative effects of exclusionary practices and discrimination in these practices. Negative effects on students who are

suspended or expelled include: 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), 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), 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), worse civic outcomes after high school (Bristol et al., 2021; Powers et al., 2025), and 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). Research shows that these negative effects happen to Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino students more often than their peers. 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 analysis of MSCS data showed similar findings for the District. In 2021, Dr. Angelica Thompson found that over a quarter of Black students were sent to the office for misbehavior, compared to only a tenth of white students. Of those sent, over half of the Black students received an exclusionary action and over a third of the white students received the same level of punishment. This resulted in an exclusionary rate of about 15% for Black students and just under 4% for white students in the District (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).

## Alternatives to Exclusionary Practices

Because of the negative effects of exclusionary discipline and the disparities in those disciplines, alternative disciplinary methods have emerged. The following three sections will briefly outline a commonly used practice: Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Restorative Justice Practices (RJP), and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL).

## *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, meditated 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).

## *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 10 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.

### *Recommendations from the Literature*

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).

To read the full literature review with more details on each of the previous sections, please click the link here.

## *Behavioral Ecosystem in the Literature*

Teachers, principals/assistant principals, and support staff, e.g., counselors, coaches, and mentors are the main players in a school's behavioral ecosystem. 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). 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 (Moon et al., 2017).

Principals also agreed that their staff need more training in regard to discipline, including the areas of handling behavior issues (Perera & Diliberti, 2023c) and socioemotional development. Principals indicated their school needed more resources in light of student behavior, including hiring more teachers to help support student mental health. 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.

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. 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 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.

For more details on this section, please refer to the full literature review section here.

## Memphis-Shelby County Schools' Behavioral Strategies & Ecosystem

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 (RTI$^2$-B), Progressive Discipline, Reset Rooms, a Social Emotional Learning program, including a new Social-Emotional Learning curriculum as of 2025–26, hiring Behavioral Specialists/Behavioral Techinians/ RTI$^2$-B Specialists, the Mental Health Center, and other smaller initiatives.

For more details on state laws, District policies, RTI$^2$-B, the Social-Emotional Learning program, the Mental Health Center and the other smaller initiatives, including programs like Project STAND, please refer to this section of the full literature review here.

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.

Reset Rooms began as a pilot program in the 2019–20 school year at 30 schools across the District (FOX13 Memphis News Staff, 2022; Souchek, 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). For more details on Reset Rooms, please refer to this section of the full literature review here.

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.

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.

## Behavioral Ecosystem of MSCS in 2025–26 Overview

This report will focus on the RTI$^2$-B Specialists Initiative that began in 2025–26. However, before getting into that program, let's first look at the Behavioral Ecosystem of MSCS as a whole for the 2025–26 school year, including support staffing, discipline trends over the past few years, and disciplinary policy changes.

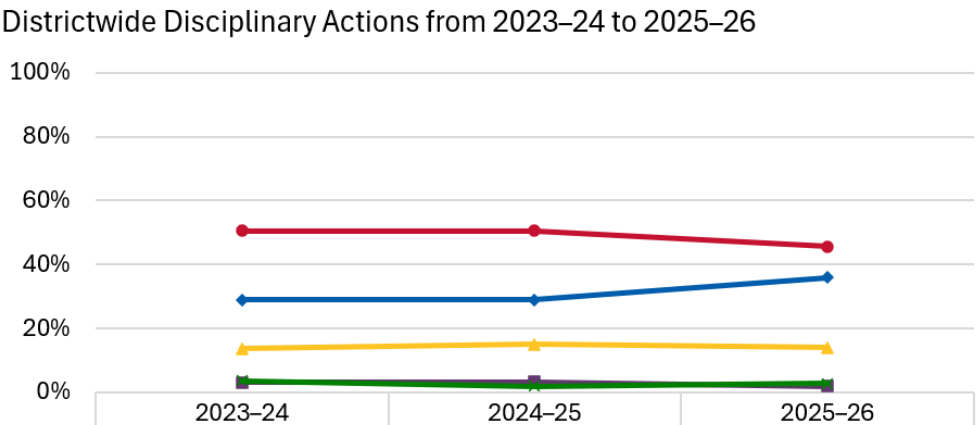
### *Behavioral Support Staffing*

As previously mentioned in the literature portion, Reset Room Assistants, Behavioral Technicians, Behavioral Specialists, and RTI$^2$-B Specialists are members of the support portion of the Behavioral Ecosystem. Staffing data were pulled from the following sources: files provided to the Research team by program leads on RTI$^2$-B Specialists and Behavioral Technicians, the Snowflake database provided by the Decision Analytics and Information Management (DAIM) team, the Student Intervention Plan PowerApps, schools' RTI$^2$-B plans, the District directory, and school websites. According to those data sources, it is estimated that there were 161 unique RTI$^2$-B Specialists, Behavioral Specialists, Behavioral Technicians, Reset Room Assistants, and Counselors that serve 123 schools (78.8% of District-managed schools). This is not to say that the other 21.2% of schools do not have some kind of support staff, rather documentation could not be found by the Research team to confirm that those schools, in fact, did have support staff. Of 21.2%, 16 of these schools did not have a school RTI$^2$-B plan for 2025–26 uploaded to be reviewed. It is recommended that schools and program leads maintain proper documentation on staffing for easier reporting in the future.

### *Discipline Trends*

From 2023–24 to the end of 2025–26, the number of disciplinary incidents rose from 37,207 to 41,543. While the number of disciplinary incidents ultimately increased over time, the number of exclusionary actions decreased. Chart 1 shows the movement of the proportion of these actions over time. Exclusionary actions in the District refer to out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and remands combined (showed in the orange box on the chart), as these actions remove a student from the school building for at least one full day. Out-of-school suspensions made up the majority of disciplinary actions for 2023–24 and 2024–25 at 51% but decreased to less than half of disciplinary actions in 2025–26 (46%). Progressive discipline, which include a myriad of practices and techniques that are often performed by support staff but are not limited to support staff (teachers or administrators could also provide progressive discipline for a student), grew from 29% in 2024–25 to 36% in 2025–26.

Chart 1. Districtwide Disciplinary Actions from 2023–24 to 2025–26




| | 2023–24 | 2024–25 | 2025–26 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number of Incidents | 37,207 | 39,475 | 41,543 |
| Progressive Discipline | 29% | 29% | 36% |
| ISS | 14% | 15% | 14% |
| OSS | 51% | 51% | 46% |
| Expulsion | 3% | 3% | 2% |
| Remand | 4% | 2% | 3% |

Chart 2 shows the number of disciplinary actions over these three years, and Table 1 below shows the change in these numbers over time. This is to show, again, that while the raw number of incidents increased over the years, the raw number of exclusionary actions went down. For example, the number of disciplinary incidents increased by 4,327 from 2023–24 to 2025–26, but the number of out-of-school suspensions only increased by 153. Both remands and expulsions also decreased. Conversely, progressive discipline increased by 4,069 incidents over the three years. The decline in exclusionary actions is possibly the result of two major strides in this work, the expansion of progressive discipline and the disciplinary policy change that occurred in October 2025.

Chart 2. Number of Disciplinary Actions—
Change from 2023–24 to 2024–25

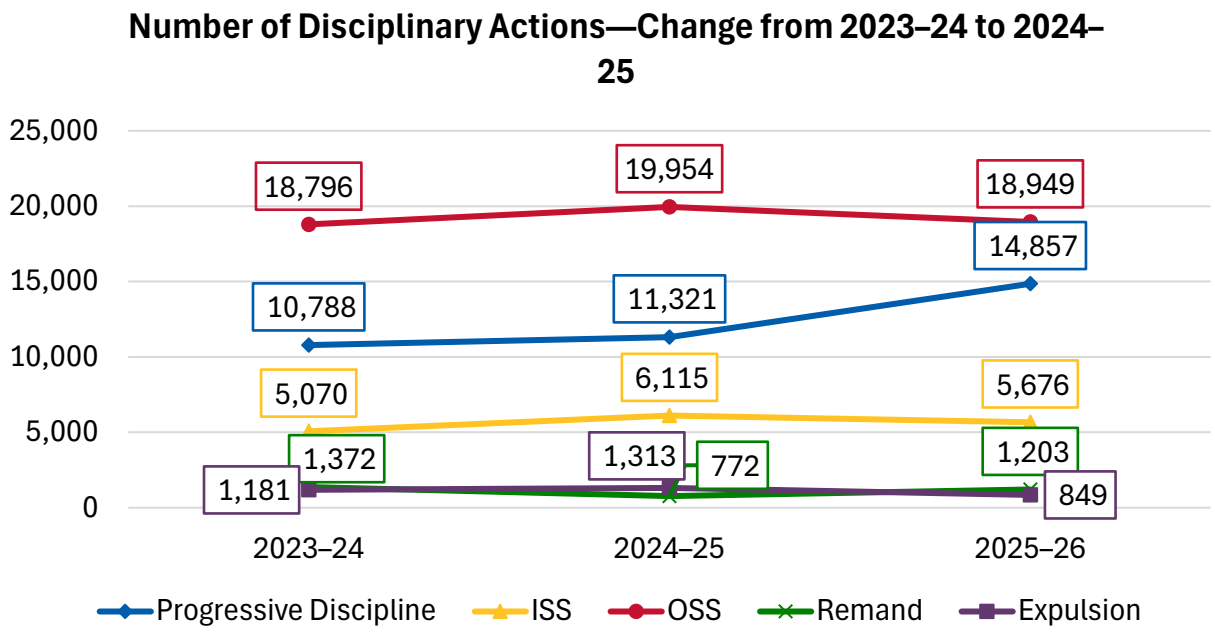


Table 1. Change in Number of Disciplinary Incidents Year of Year Broken Down by Type

| Year Comparisons | Change in Total Disciplinary Incidents | Change in Progressive Discipline Actions | Change in In-School Suspensions | Change in Out-of-School Suspensions | Change in Remands | Change in Expulsions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2023–24 to 2024–25** | +2,268 | +533 | +1,045 | +1,158 | -600 | +132 |
| **2024–25 to 2025–26** | +2,059 | +3,536 | -439 | -1,005 | +431 | -464 |
| **2023–24 to 2025–26** | +4,327 | +4,069 | +606 | +153 | -169 | -332 |

## *Disciplinary Policy Changes*

The overall decrease in exclusionary actions is exciting and is hopefully the start of a promising downward trend. This change could stem from the growing ecosystem that MSCS has been building for nearly a decade. This ecosystem has been trained in progressive discipline and as the numbers indicate, the support staff, teachers, and administrators seem to be turning to those practices at a higher rate than they previously had in the past. The increase in total incidents mirrors the increase in progressive discipline; this could point to a change in reporting—meaning, perhaps in the past an incident with a student that would now be handled with progressive discipline may have gone unrecorded or fully ignored. Teachers may now feel equipped with resources in a way that helps them, for example, send a student to a Reset Room or have a support staff member help that student. Previously, the teacher may have dealt with the student in the classroom and would not have recorded the incident due to a lack of resources or bandwidth. These more minor issues that would not require escalation to administration would likely have gone unrecorded. To be clear, this is one theory for why it could be that incidents have gone up while progressive discipline has too, in stride. It could also simply be the case that incidents continue to happen, and teachers and support staff decide to use progressive discipline in lieu of a more punitive measure.

Another reason exclusionary actions, specifically suspensions, decreased in 2025–26 was a policy change to board policy 6022 titled Student Conduct. This change is in the language on out-of-school suspensions. In the previous version of this policy and in the 2025–26 Student-Parent Handbook that was released at the beginning of the year, the policy said, "the principal, including vice/assistant principal, has sole discretion to issue out-of-school suspensions from one (1) to ten (10) days" (Memphis-Shelby County Schools, 2025b, p. 27). This phrasing of "sole discretion" was changed in the policy and in subsequent years of the Student-Parent Handbook. Now the policy says, "the principal, including vice/assistant principal, has authority to issue out-of-school suspensions from one (1) to ten (10) days in accordance with applicable law" (Shelby County Board of Education, 2018, p. 10; Memphis-Shelby County Schools, 2026c, p. 45), indicating that school leaders do not have *sole discretion* to suspend a student. It goes on further to explain a process where if a student is suspended for more than five days, documentation needs to be completed and sent to the Regional Superintendent who will then be able to review, evaluate, and monitor the case. This is to ensure that suspensions are not being used as a first resort but as a last resort as the Student Conduct policy indicates and to ensure that there is a behavioral intervention plan in place for that student. As has been shown, because of this policy change, suspensions significantly decreased in the 2025–26 school year.

## *RTI²-B Specialists Initiative*

Now that the research literature and District overview have set the context for how the behavioral ecosystem operates, the specifical program that this report will focus on is the RTI²-B Specialists Initiative. This is a cohort of RTI²-B Specialists who were hired in the summer of 2025 in preparation for the 2025–26 school year. The model was for a RTI²-B Specialist to be assigned to one region, two schools within that region, and 15 students at each of those schools. In order to pair RTI²-B Specialists to students, the Research and Performance Management (RPM) department created a dataset of students who had the following criteria: between four to seven PowerSchool Office Referrals or between five to nine disciplinary days, meaning days where the student is absent from school due to an exclusionary action, and/or being high risk for chronic absenteeism (defined as having an attendance rate of below 90%). These criteria were taken from the previous school year, 2024–25, or from the start of the 2025–26 school year, which had just begun when this list was created. This list was given to the program leads who were then able to assign RTI²-B Specialists to each region and school based on need. From there, schools were able to pair the RTI²-B Specialists to the specified students.

In practice, there were 31 RTI²-B Specialists hired in this cohort that ultimately served 51 schools and 692 students. Tables 2 and 3 show the breakdown of these RTI²-B Specialists at each region and school level, respectively. Of note, the Southeast region had 10 RTI²-B Specialists, which was the most, and 26 elementary schools were served which was the highest served school level.

Table 2. Regional Breakdown

| Region | Number of RTI²-B Specialists | Number of Schools Served | Number of Students Served |
|---|---|---|---|
| iZone | 6 | 12 | 151 |
| Northeast | 5 | 7 | 83 |
| Northwest | 5 | 10 | 115 |
| Southeast | 10 | 14 | 224 |
| Southwest | 5 | 8 | 119 |
| **Districtwide** | **31** | **51** | **692** |

Table 3. School level Breakdown

| School Level | Number of Schools Served | Number of Students Served |
|---|---|---|
| Elementary | 26 | 332 |
| K–8 | 1 | [1]* |
| Middle | 17 | 239 |
| High | 8 | 121 |

[1]*These students are included in the relevant elementary and middle school grade bands as they are broken out into grade bands in the analyses.

## Data

This section will detail the datasets used to prepare this evaluation. The initial dataset was prepared by RPM to pair RTI$^2$-B Specialists with students based on behavioral and attendance criteria that were outlined in the previous section. This dataset included students who were ultimately paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist but also students who did not go to a school with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist from this specific cohort. Those students would become the control group for one of the analyses.

Another dataset used was the student discipline data pulled from PowerSchool for 2024-25 and 2025-26. These data are pulled into a flat file by the Research SQL Developer. These data show every instance of a student behavioral incident that is recorded in PowerSchool. These data were cleaned so that multiple incidents in a day were combined to have one outcome. For example, if a student had three incidents in a day; 1. they were disruptive in class (reported as disruptive behavior and seen as a lower level offense), 2. they assaulted a teacher (reported as assault to staff and seen as a higher level offense), and 3. they would not listen to and comply with staff after the previous incident (reported as insolent/insubordinate-refuse punishment and seen as a lower level offense), in the cleaned file, all of these incidents and the outcomes of those incidents would be combined into one occurrence. The most extreme incident and outcome (disciplinary action) was used in the analyses (although all information was kept).

The next dataset that was used was provided by the program leads. They tracked which RTI$^2$-B Specialists were at each school and paired with which students. This dataset was used as the basis for the treatment group. Different data points were pulled for certain analyses which will be detailed later, but those data points were pulled from 2024–25 and 2025–26 student demographics, student grades, student assessments, and files about participation in certain programs. The last dataset that was used concerned students who were enrolled at the schools where RTI$^2$-B Specialists were assigned, but these students were not paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist. These students were used as a control group in one set of analyses.

## *Data Definitions: Outcome Variables*

For each of the following analyses the outcome variables largely remained the same (in one analysis these variables were compared over time for one group and for the other analyses, these variables were compared between groups). The definitions of the outcome variables are as follows:

- Number of exclusionary actions—number of times a student receives a disciplinary action that removes them from the classroom; this is a combination of out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and remands.

- Number of disciplinary days—number of days a student has been removed from school due to an exclusionary action. This combines all days from all out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and remands.
- Attendance rate—calculated by the number of days a student is present in school divided by the number of days the student is enrolled in the District. This rate specifically was taken at the District level. If a student went to multiple schools, any day that student was present at any of those schools is counted in their overall Districtwide attendance rate.
- School retention rate—the rate at which students remain enrolled at the school in which they began the school year. This is a binary variable, with a value of either 1, meaning they remained at the school they began the year, or 0, meaning they moved to a new school in the District or moved out of the District. When looking at an average over a group of students, this number will be somewhere between 0 and 1. For ease of reporting purposes, however, these were changed to percentages, so in the findings, these will be reported as a percentage between 0–100%.

## Methods

Three separate analyses were completed for this evaluation. In all, the RTI$^2$-B Specialist Paired-Students (BSP Students) were the focus. First, BSP students were compared to themselves from the previous year. Secondly, BSP students were compared to students who attended the same school but were not paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist (Non-BSP Students). And lastly, BSP students were compared to students who also 'qualified' to be paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist but those students attended a school that did not have a RTI$^2$-B Specialist (a non-BSP school).

### *1. Comparing BSP Students over Time*

In the first analysis, BSP students' data were compared from 2024–25 to the end of 2025–26. This compared their previous year's data to their data after they had been paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist for the entire year. This was to see if being paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist improved the students' outcomes. The following data points were compared:

- Average number of exclusionary actions from 2024–25 and 2025–26
- Average number of disciplinary days from 2024–25 and 2025–26
- Average attendance rate from 2024–25 and 2025–26
- Average school retention rate from 2024–25 and 2025–26

#### Analysis

A one-tailed paired samples t-test was used on each of these outcome variables to determine if there were any statistically significant differences in pre- and post-pairing for

the students who were paired with the RTI$^2$-B Specialists. A one-tailed paired samples t-test was chosen because it is a directional t-Test, meaning that there is an assumption that the treatment (the RTI$^2$-B Specialists) will have a certain directional effect on the student outcomes. In the cases of number of exclusionary actions and disciplinary days, it is expected that BSP students would have a lower average in the post year than in the previous year. In the cases of attendance rate and school retention, it is expected that BSP students would have higher average rates after being paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist for the year. These analyses were completed looking at BSP students in general, at the regional level, and at the school level.

## *2. Comparing BSP Students to Non-BSP Students at the Same School*

In the second analysis, BSP students' data were compared to non-BSP students' from the same school. This compared end of year data from both groups to see if being paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist gave the BSP students an advantage in comparison to those who were not paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist. The following data points were compared from each group:

- Average number of exclusionary actions in 2025–26
- Average number of disciplinary days in 2025–26
- Average attendance rate in 2025–26
- Average school retention rate in 2025–26

### Analysis

Students who were not paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist likely did not have the same behavioral and/or attendance issues or at least to the same degree that the BSP students had to be paired. Because of this, these groups were inherently quite different, especially in terms of the outcome variables. In order to get the most appropriate comparison group from these students, propensity score matching was used.

Propensity score matching is a method used to estimate a causal effect of a treatment when randomly assigning (in this case) students to the treatment is impossible. In this case, RTI$^2$-B Specialists were not randomly assigned; in fact, they were assigned based on certain criteria. This was specifically designed so that the RTI$^2$-B Specialists could help the students who had the most need. For the efficacy of the program, this is a good thing but when needing to have a good comparison group, this can create a challenge. Propensity score matching helps solve that problem.

This method assigns a unit interval to each student in the dataset based on how likely it is for the student to be in the treatment group; this is based on variables that are included in the model and how closely the control group students look to the treatment group students. The treatment group students would automatically get a '1' indicating they are in the treatment group. The control group would get a unit interval somewhere from 0 to 1, based on how similarly the model interprets their values compared to the treatment groups'. To do this, it is advised to include as many variables that could influence a student to be in the treatment group as possible.

As has been stated, BSP students had specific behavioral and attendance criteria to be paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist. These variables were included when creating the propensity score matching dataset. The following variables were also included:

Binary variables (1 for yes; 0 for no):

- Chronically absent in 2024–25 (had an attendance rate below 90%)
- Economically Disadvantaged
- English Language Learner
- MSCS Pre-K
- Repeated grade
- Sex (1 for female; 0 for male)
- Student with Disabilities
- Summer Learning Academy participation during 2025
- Tutoring participation during 2024–25

Continuous variables (a range of numbers):

- Number of disciplinary incidents in 2024–25
- Number of school enrollments in 2024–25
- Numeric ELA grade for 2024–25
- Numeric Math grade for 2024–25

Categorical variables:

- Grade level in 25–26
- Race/Ethnicity
- Student age by 08/15/25

The dataset including both BSP and non-BSP students with these variables and the outcome variables (number of exclusionary days, number of disciplinary days, attendance rate, and school retention rate) were run through the Covariate Balancing & Weighting Web App, also known as CoBWeb (Markoulidakis et al., 2023). This web app accurately balances a dataset based on the treatment group's confounders and runs a regression model on the outcome variable; the user is able to choose which model is best based on certain balancing

specifications. This process was completed on all of the outcome variables for BSP and non-BSP students at each school level.

## *3. Comparing BSP Students to Similar Students Attending a Non-BSP School*

In the third and final analysis, BSP students' data were compared to non-BSP students' who qualified to be paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist but did not attend a school with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist. As resources are finite, there were students and schools that were on the initial list who had the criteria of behavioral and attendance issues and ultimately were not served by a RTI$^2$-B Specialist. While this is an unfortunate truth in educational resources, this provided a rather convenient comparison group. These students had the needs that the BSP students had, but they were not treated, providing a natural comparison group. This compared end of year data from both groups to see if being paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist gave the BSP students an advantage in comparison to those who were not paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist. The following data points were compared from each group:

- Average number of exclusionary actions in 2025–26
- Average number of disciplinary days in 2025–26
- Average attendance rate in 2025–26
- Average school retention rate in 2025–26

### Analysis

An independent samples t-Test was used on each of these outcome variables to determine if there were any statistically significant differences in the BSP students compared to the non-BSP school students. While a one-tailed paired samples t-Test was used in comparing BSP students over time, a two-tailed independent samples t-Test was used in this case to see if there were differences between the groups at all, in any direction. It may be disheartening to see results that skew towards non-BSP students, but it is helpful information to have to better the program, which is the ultimate goal of this evaluation. These analyses were completed looking at BSP students and non-BSP school students in general, at the regional level, and at the school level.

## Findings and Results

Overall, BSP students had a lower average number of exclusionary actions, higher average attendance rates, and higher average school retention rates in the year they were paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist than in the previous year. In comparison to non-BSP students at their schools, they did not yield particularly special results, although BSP students had higher school retention rates on average than their non-BSP peers. When comparing BSP

students to non-BSP school students, their average number of disciplinary days was lower and average attendance and school retention rates were higher. The following sections will detail these findings.

## *1. Comparing BSP Students over Time*

### BSP Student Sample

The initial program served 692 students. Because Kindergartens do not have a previous year to compare to, these students were removed from analysis. Additionally, there were some students that were new to the District or for whatever reason did not have enough previous year data points to be included in the analysis. Therefore, in total, 54 students were removed to have $N = 638$ for the full group of BSP students.

### Findings

Before being paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist, BSP students had an average number of exclusionary actions of $M = 1.38$, $SD = 1.54$. After being paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist this average went down only slightly, $M = 1.37$, $SD = 1.82$. Looking across all school levels and regions, the findings were mixed. Elementary grades had a slightly lower average number of exclusionary actions, but middle and high school grades were slightly higher. At the regional level, the Northeast and the Southwest had a slightly lower average number of exclusionary actions. Although slight differences were found in the comparisons described above, none was statistically significant, However, the Southeast region showed a different pattern. The Southeast region BSP students previously had an average number of exclusionary actions of $M = 0.97$, $SD = 1.34$, and after being paired had an average number of exclusionary actions of $M = 0.76$, $SD = 1.14$, which was a statistically significant difference over time, $t_{(203)} = 1.93$, $p = .027$, with a small effect size ($d = 0.14$). Being paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist positively influenced the Southeast region's BSP students' average number of exclusionary actions, meaning they were less likely to receive an exclusionary action after being paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist. Table 4 shows each group's breakdown from 2024–25 and 2025–26.

Table 4. BSP Students' Average Number of Exclusionary Actions over Time

| Group | *N* | 2024–25 | 2025–26 | Difference (2025–26 – 2024–25) | *p* value (shown only if sig.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All BSP Students | 638 | 1.38 | **1.37** | **-0.01** | |
| Elementary Grades (1st–5th) | 305 | 0.97 | **0.83** | **-0.14** | |
| Middle School Grades (6th–8th) | 230 | **1.67** | 1.74 | 0.07 | |
| High School Grades (9th–12th) | 103 | **1.99** | 2.17 | 0.18 | |
| i-Zone region | 136 | **2.00** | 2.05 | 0.05 | |
| Northeast region | 92 | 1.33 | **1.25** | **-0.08** | |
| Northwest region | 113 | **1.84** | 2.28 | 0.44 | |
| Southeast region | 204 | 0.97 | **0.76** | **-0.21** | .027 |
| Southwest region | 93 | 0.91 | **0.74** | **-0.17** | |

Generally, disciplinary days were slightly higher in 2025–26 for BSP students than they were the previous year. Only at the elementary and high school levels were the disciplinary days slightly lower than they were previously. For regions, only the Southwest region had a statistically significant finding. In the previous year, the average number of disciplinary days was $M = 6.39$, $SD = 17.89$, and following the year of being paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist the average decreased to $M = 3.34$, $SD = 9.58$; the difference in averages being slightly over three full days. This was a statistically significant difference $t_{(93)} = 1.76$, $p = .041$, with a small effect size ($d = .18$). Southwest region BSP students were positively impacted by RTI$^2$-B Specialists, receiving on average three fewer disciplinary days than the previous year. Table 5 shows BSP students' average number of disciplinary days broken down by group.

Table 5. BSP Students' Average Number of Disciplinary Days over Time

| Group | *N* | 2024–25 | 2025–26 | Difference (2025–26 – 2024–25) | *p* value (shown only if sig.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All BSP Students | 638 | **10.58** | 11.51 | 0.93 | |
| Elementary Grades (1st–5th) | 305 | 4.57 | **4.26** | **-0.31** | |
| Middle School Grades (6th–8th) | 230 | **10.58** | 14.2 | 3.62 | |
| High School Grades (9th–12th) | 103 | 28.46 | **27.07** | **-1.39** | |
| i-Zone region | 136 | **15.31** | 18.63 | 3.32 | |
| Northeast region | 92 | **5.11** | 7.97 | 2.86 | |
| Northwest region | 113 | 21.97 | 21.97 | 0.00 | |
| Southeast region | 204 | **5.52** | 6.35 | 0.83 | |
| Southwest region | 93 | 6.39 | **3.34** | **-3.05** | .041 |

When looking at BSP students' average attendance rate, in all group breakdowns, BSP students had a higher average attendance rate in 2025–26 than in 2024–25. In general, at the elementary and middle school levels, and at the Northeast, Southeast, and Southwest regions, BSP students had statistically significantly higher average attendance rates in 2025–26 than they did in the previous year. In general, the average attendance rate overall increased by 1.39 percentage points. The Northeast region and the Southwest region had the largest increases with 2.31 and 2.50 percentage points, respectively. Table 6 outlines all of these differences with significant *p* values where applicable.

Table 6. BSP Students' Average Attendance Rate over Time

| Group | *N* | 2024–25 | 2025–26 | Difference (2025–26 – 2024–25) | *p* value (shown only if sig.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All BSP Students | 638 | 84.57 | **85.95** | **1.39** | <.001 |
| Elementary Grades (1st–5th) | 305 | 86.25 | **88.13** | **1.88** | <.001 |
| Middle School Grades (6th–8th) | 230 | 85.60 | **86.82** | **1.22** | .037 |
| High School Grades (9th–12th) | 103 | 77.18 | **77.48** | **0.30** | |
| i-Zone region | 136 | 80.31 | **80.89** | **0.58** | |
| Northeast region | 92 | 86.18 | **88.49** | **2.31** | .002 |
| Northwest region | 113 | 81.69 | **82.90** | **1.21** | |
| Southeast region | 204 | 87.63 | **88.73** | **1.10** | .046 |
| Southwest region | 93 | 85.93 | **88.43** | **2.50** | .004 |

BSP students' average school retention rates were statistically significantly higher in 2025–26 in every analysis, from the general group, to all grade level bands, and all regional zones. This means that students were more likely to stay at their school where they began the year when paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist than they were in the previous year Overall retention rate increased by 16 percentage points. The high school level BSP students had the highest school retention rate difference of over 30 percentage points. Of the regions, the Northwest region saw the highest increase with over 25 percentage points. Table 7 shows these differences and their associated *p* values. The effect size for all analyses were small to medium (Cohen's *d* = .19 to .52).

Table 7. BSP Students' Average School Retention Rate over Time

| Group | *N* | 2024–25 | 2025–26 | Difference (2025–26 – 2024–25) | *p* value (shown only if sig.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All BSP Students | 638 | 76.53 | **92.18** | **15.64** | <.001 |
| Elementary Grades (1st–5th) | 305 | 79.68 | **91.48** | **11.80** | <.001 |
| Middle School Grades (6th–8th) | 230 | 79.57 | **93.48** | **13.91** | <.001 |
| High School Grades (9th–12th) | 103 | 61.17 | **91.27** | **30.10** | <.001 |
| i-Zone region | 136 | 71.32 | **85.29** | **13.97** | .002 |
| Northeast region | 92 | 80.43 | **95.65** | **15.22** | <.001 |
| Northwest region | 113 | 71.68 | **97.34** | **25.66** | <.001 |
| Southeast region | 204 | 80.39 | **90.19** | **9.80** | .004 |
| Southwest region | 93 | 78.49 | **96.77** | **18.28** | <.001 |

## *2. Comparing BSP Students to Non-BSP Student at the Same School*

### BSP and Non-BSP Student Samples

For propensity score matching, the model requires that all cases in the dataset have a value for each variable, so that it can determine how to weigh that case based on each of those variables' values in relation to the treatment group's values. Because of this, the model will omit treatment group cases for not having a value in every variable. While this removes students from the BSP group, it also ensures that the control group is the most appropriate possible. It is not possible to run a full comparison of all BSP students to non-BSP students with propensity score matching because that would require too many cases for the model to handle. Instead, the comparison groups are looking at school levels only. For the elementary school grade level, 269 BSP students were included in the model. The initial control group contained 7,512 students. The estimated sample size was 661, meaning

of the model created a control group with the weighting of an estimated group of 392 (the estimated sample size – the treatment group), which equals 8% of the original sample size of 7,781 (the control group + the treatment group). For the middle school grade level, 220 BSP students were included, and the model created an estimated group of 317 out of an initial control group of 6,559 non-BSP students (8% of the sample size was retained). And lastly, the high school grade level included 49 BSP students and an estimated sample size of 144 out of 2,364 cases in the control group (non-BSP students). The retained sample size was about 6%.

## Findings

When looking at the average number of exclusionary actions by BSP and non-BSP students at their same school, non-BSP students had statistically significantly fewer exclusionary actions than BSP students. This is not all that surprising, as the BSP students have a history of behavioral issues that the non-BSP students likely did not have, or did not have to the same degree. Table 8 below shows the averages, differences, and *p* values. In Table 9, average number of disciplinary days are shown for these two groups. In elementary grades, non-BSP students had statistically significantly fewer disciplinary days. Non-BSP students had an average of a bit over one and a third days, while BSP students had over four disciplinary days. Middle school grade BSP students had slightly lower average than non-BSP students. And high school students had a difference between them of over seven days, but this was not statistically significant. These results are not all that surprising, while propensity score matching does create the most appropriate comparison group possible, if the outcome variables are ones that the treatment group is specifically *in* the treatment group to resolve, it makes sense that the comparison group would do better in this area.

Table 8. BSP & Non-BSP Students' Average Number of Exclusionary Actions

| School Level | Non-BSP | BSP | Difference (BSP– Non-BSP) | *p* value (shown only if sig.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Elementary Grades (1st–5th) | **0.36** | 0.82 | 0.46 | <.001 |
| Middle School Grades (6th–8th) | **1.18** | 1.70 | 0.52 | <.001 |
| High School Grades (9th–12th) | **1.14** | 1.63 | 0.49 | .029 |

Table 9. BSP & Non-BSP Students' Average Number of Disciplinary Days

| School Level | Non-BSP | BSP | Difference (BSP– Non-BSP) | *p* value (shown only if sig.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Elementary Grades (1st–5th) | **1.36** | 4.17 | 2.81 | .005 |
| Middle School Grades (6th–8th) | 14.07 | **13.55** | **-0.52** | |
| High School Grades (9th–12th) | **17.63** | 24.74 | 7.11 | |

Another example of this is that in all grade level group comparisons, non-BSP students had higher average attendance rates than BSP students. Again, this is likely because the BSP students were selected for the treatment group for having behavioral and attendance issues. At the high school level, this difference was significant. Table 10 shows the full results below.

Table 10. BSP & Non-BSP Students' Average Attendance Rate

| School Level | Non-BSP | BSP | Difference (BSP– Non-BSP) | *p* value (shown only if sig.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Elementary Grades (1st–5th) | **89.17** | 88.57 | -0.60 | |
| Middle School Grades (6th–8th) | **87.64** | 87.01 | -0.63 | |
| High School Grades (9th–12th) | **81.13** | 75.08 | -6.05 | .001 |

A surprising result is that BSP students across all grade level groups had higher school retention rates than non-BSP students. Across each school level, this difference was over 5 percentage points, with elementary and middle school grade level BSP students having statistically significantly higher rates. This indicates that BSP students were more likely to stay at the school they began the year and consequently, at the school they were paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist, than their non-BSP peers. Table 11 shows these results in full.

Table 11. BSP & Non-BSP Students' Average School Retention Rate

| School Level | Non-BSP | BSP | Difference (BSP– Non-BSP) | *p* value (shown only if sig.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Elementary Grades (1st–5th) | 80.28 | **91.08** | **10.80** | <.001 |
| Middle School Grades (6th–8th) | 84.27 | **93.63** | **9.36** | <.001 |
| High School Grades (9th–12th) | 83.85 | **89.80** | **5.95** | |

## *3. Comparing BSP Students to Similar Students Attending a Non-BSP School*

### BSP and Non-BSP School Student Samples

The sample size for the BSP students was the same as in the first comparison, with the same constrictions around excluding Kindergarteners and those without the previous year's data. This was to ensure a consistent sample where possible. The samples for the control group came from the initial dataset of students who qualified to be in the RTI$^2$-B Specialist program. Students were excluded if they went to the same school as the BSP students or if they did not have data for the outcome variables. The total number of non-BSP school students was 1,529. Each of the comparison tables below (Tables 12–16 show the *N* counts for each group. As will be noted in the findings and the recommendations, the overwhelming majority (71.8%) of the non-BSP school students were in high school, while high schoolers only made up about 16.1% of the BSP group. This imbalance contributes to some of the results being a bit skewed in favor of the BSP students, but that speaks to a possible change that could be made to the program to ensure the students with the most need are receiving services.

### Findings

In general, non-BSP school students had lower average numbers of exclusionary actions than BSP students. These differences were minute overall, at the elementary school level, the middle school level, and at the Northeast region. At the high school level, i-Zone region, and Northwest region, these differences were statistically significant. At the southeast and Southwest region, the opposite was true, however. There were statistically significant differences in favor of the BSP students for having lower average number of exclusionary actions.

Table 12. BSP & Non-BSP School Students' Average Number of Exclusionary Actions

| Group | *N* for Non-BSP | *N* for BSP | Non-BSP | BSP | Difference (BSP– Non-BSP) | *p* value (shown only if sig.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All BSP Students | 1,529 | 638 | **1.24** | 1.37 | 0.13 | |
| Elementary Grades (1st–5th) | 190 | 305 | 0.84 | **0.83** | -0.01 | |
| Middle School Grades (6th–8th) | 241 | 230 | **1.67** | 1.74 | 0.07 | |
| High School Grades (9th–12th) | 1,098 | 103 | **1.22** | 2.17 | 0.95 | <.001 |
| i-Zone region | 441 | 136 | **1.42** | 2.05 | 0.63 | .002 |
| Northeast region | 425 | 92 | 1.29 | **1.25** | -0.04 | |
| Northwest region | 237 | 113 | **0.98** | 2.28 | 1.30 | <.001 |
| Southeast region | 239 | 204 | 1.10 | **0.76** | -0.34 | .004 |
| Southwest region | 187 | 93 | 1.23 | **0.74** | -0.49 | .013 |

Table 13 displays the average number of disciplinary days for both groups. BSP students had 11 fewer disciplinary days than non-BSP school students, which was a statistically significant finding. This is a shockingly big difference, however, it must be noted that a large portion of non-BSP school students were high school level students, *N*= 1,098 of 1,529 (71.8%). As mentioned in the RTI²-B Specialists Initiative description, RTI²-B Specialists were assigned to only eight high schools, in comparison to 26 elementary schools and 17 middle schools. As elementary and middle school students tend to have fewer overall behavioral incidents and less-severe disciplinary actions, this could be the main reason for this huge difference in disciplinary days in the overall group.

Elementary and middle school grade level BSP students also have fewer disciplinary days than their non-BSP school peers. When looking at regions, the Northeast, the Southeast, and the Southwest regions all have statistically significantly fewer disciplinary days, with at least 12 fewer days each. It is important to remember that the likely reason for these differences is the large portion of high school students in the non-BSP school group.

Table 13. BSP & Non-BSP School Students' Average Number of Disciplinary Days

| Group | *N* for Non-BSP | *N* for BSP | Non-BSP | BSP | Difference (BSP– Non-BSP) | *p* value (shown only if sig.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All BSP Students | 1,529 | 638 | 21.37 | **11.51** | **-9.86** | <.001 |
| Elementary Grades (1st–5th) | 190 | 305 | 4.93 | **4.26** | **-0.67** | |
| Middle School Grades (6th–8th) | 241 | 230 | 18.84 | **14.2** | **-4.64** | |
| High School Grades (9th–12th) | 1,098 | 103 | **24.78** | 27.07 | 2.29 | |
| i-Zone region | 441 | 136 | 24.39 | **18.63** | **-5.76** | |
| Northeast region | 425 | 92 | 20.47 | **7.97** | **-12.50** | <.001 |
| Northwest region | 237 | 113 | **20.58** | 21.97 | 1.39 | |
| Southeast region | 239 | 204 | 20.56 | **6.35** | **-14.21** | <.001 |
| Southwest region | 187 | 93 | 18.37 | **3.34** | **-14.99** | <.001 |

The average attendance rate for BSP students was generally higher than that of the non-BSP school students. This was statistically significant, as were the differences for the Northeast region and Southeast region. The i-Zone region and high school grade level groups had lower average attendance rates in comparison to the non-BSP school students and in the case for high school, this difference was statistically significant in favor of non-BSP students. The full breakdown is shown in table 14. In general, the BSP students had better attendance rates than their non-BSP school peers.

Table 14. BSP & Non-BSP School Students' Average Attendance Rate

| Group | *N* for Non-BSP | *N* for BSP | Non-BSP | BSP | Difference (BSP– Non-BSP) | *p* value (shown only if sig.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All BSP Students | 1,529 | 638 | 82.80 | **85.93** | **3.13** | <.001 |
| Elementary Grades (1st–5th) | 190 | 305 | 86.75 | **88.10** | **1.35** | |
| Middle School Grades (6th–8th) | 241 | 230 | 86.34 | **86.82** | **0.48** | |
| High School Grades (9th–12th) | 1,098 | 103 | **81.33** | 77.51 | -3.82 | .004 |
| i-Zone region | 441 | 136 | **82.36** | 80.89 | -1.47 | |
| Northeast region | 425 | 92 | 81.03 | **88.49** | **7.46** | <.001 |
| Northwest region | 237 | 113 | 82.72 | **82.88** | **0.16** | |
| Southeast region | 239 | 204 | 83.55 | **88.73** | **5.18** | <.001 |
| Southwest region | 187 | 93 | 86.98 | **88.33** | **1.35** | |

Average school retention rates were overall higher for BSP students than non-BSP school students, except in the case of the high school grade level, the i-Zone school region, and the Southeast region. At the middle school level and in the Northwest region there were statistically significant differences, with a nearly 6 percentage point difference for both. Average school retention rates were higher for BSP students, meaning BSP students were more likely than the non-BSP school students to stay at their starting school throughout the year. Table 15 shows all of the breakdowns.

Table 15. BSP & Non-BSP School Students' Average School Retention Rate

| Group | *N* for Non-BSP | *N* for BSP | Non-BSP | BSP | Difference (BSP– Non-BSP) | *p* value (shown only if sig.) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| All BSP Students | 1,529 | 638 | 91.76 | **92.16** | **0.40** | |
| Elementary Grades (1st–5th) | 190 | 305 | 90.00 | **91.48** | **1.48** | |
| Middle School Grades (6th–8th) | 241 | 230 | 87.97 | **93.48** | **5.51** | .039 |
| High School Grades (9th–12th) | 1,098 | 103 | **92.90** | 91.26 | -1.64 | |
| i-Zone region | 441 | 136 | **88.44** | 85.29 | -3.15 | |
| Northeast region | 425 | 92 | 93.88 | **95.65** | **1.77** | |
| Northwest region | 237 | 113 | 91.14 | **97.35** | **6.21** | .010 |
| Southeast region | 239 | 204 | **94.98** | 90.20 | -4.78 | |
| Southwest region | 187 | 93 | 91.44 | **96.77** | **5.33** | |

## Takeaways and Recommendations

BSP students had higher school retention in nearly all comparisons. This seems to indicate that students and families see this pairing as a value-add to their student's educational experience. This pairing is an extra connection point for the student at the school, rather than just having their teacher and school administration, these students have a specific person assigned to them who will check in with them and help them. BSP students also had higher attendance rates in the year they were paired than the year previous. Again, this seems to show that this pairing positively impacts this group of students' engagement at school.

Having a RTI$^2$-B Specialist seemed to help elementary and middle school students more than high school students. This could just be because more RTI$^2$-B Specialists were paired with the lower grades. This could also be because elementary and middle school students tend to have overall fewer behavioral issues and less-severe disciplinary actions than high school students. There are myriad reasons why this could be the case, such as the different logistics of high school students rotating classes more often than elementary or middle

school students. This research does not answer why this could be the case, but it does seem to point to better results for elementary and middle school students.

The following recommendations have been given to the program leads:

- From the initial student dataset, many of the students who were not paired with a RTI$^2$-B Specialist were high schoolers, meaning the grade band with the greatest need is high school. It is recommended that RTI$^2$-B Specialists be assigned to high school students to help alleviate this need.
- This was the first year tracking this cohort of RTI$^2$-B Specialists. If further research were to be done, the same diligence needs to be taken to ensure data are being tracked properly. These include student-RTI$^2$-B Specialist pairings, school-RTI$^2$-B Specialist pairings, and staffing changes/turnover, etc.
- Ensure RTI$^2$-B Specialists have resources and training to help reduce BSP student exclusionary actions and disciplinary days.
- BSP students who continue to 'qualify' for the program should continue to be paired with RTI$^2$-B Specialists to see if this pairing helps the student longer term.
- The RTI$^2$-B Specialists should continue to meet regularly across all regions and grade levels to discuss best practices and engage in professional development, especially considering the differences found between regions and grade levels, it can be helpful to discuss what is working at one grade level or region that could be beneficial for another group.
- While some schools were not assigned a RTI$^2$-B Specialist from this specific cohort initiative, these schools may have a different Behavioral Specialist, a Behavioral Technician, or a Reset Room Assistant. It is recommended that every school has at least one of these professionals in the building, if not more, as these analyses indicate that having that mentorship can help attendance and school retention.
- As this was the first year of this specific initiative, it is likely with more funding, hiring, and PD, this program could see further positive results in student attitude.

## Next Steps and Conclusion

The program leads of the RTI$^2$-B Specialist Initiative have been diligently preparing for the 2026–27 school year and have changes to the program based on the research provided and the first year of implementation. The following list of next steps is from their team and their efforts to continue supporting this initiative.

They are focused on building the capacity of the Behavioral/RTI$^2$-B Specialists to provide both direct student support and school-level support. Key next steps include:

- Meeting bi-weekly to debrief and deliver PD that will strengthen capacity of each RTI$^2$-B Specialist.
- Shifting the focus on high school and middle school (based on incidents, suspensions, enrollment, and current supports) with an intentional focus on light feeder pattern support.
- Continuing professional learning and certification: They are strengthening the professional capacity of the RTI$^2$-B Specialists through additional training and certifications, including Registered Behavior Technician (RBT) certification, No Place for Hate, CASEL training, along with continued professional learning in evidence-based behavioral practices, intervention strategies, a5nd progress monitoring.
- Strengthening SEL Implementation: Specialists will support the District's social-emotional learning work by helping schools connect SEL competencies to behavioral practices. This includes being equipped to model strategies for teachers and staff, reinforce positive school climate practices, and help adults identify strategies that can be embedded into daily interactions with students.
- Supporting RTI$^2$-B Teams: Specialists will have an intentional role in supporting school-based RTI$^2$-B meetings and problem-solving processes. Their work will include helping teams examine behavioral and attendance data, identify student needs, select appropriate interventions, monitor progress, and make data-informed adjustments to supports. Specialists will lead PD sessions and share strategies weekly.
- Modeling and Building School Capacity: An important evolution of the work is moving beyond simply responding to behavioral concerns. Specialists will help build the capacity of school teams by modeling strategies, coaching staff, and supporting intervention implementation
- Behavioral/RTI-$^2$B Specialists will continue providing intentional supports to students identified through behavioral, suspension, and attendance data who may benefit from additional Tier 2 intervention (we will also meet with gender-based small groups). Progress will be reviewed regularly to determine whether supports are working and what adjustments may be needed relating to the documented caseload (This will be the caseload of 15).
- Data-Informed Deployment and Support: The District will use behavioral, suspension, and school-level support data to determine where Behavioral/RTI$^2$-B Specialist resources are most needed. This year, they will also add an additional reporting structure using Student Intervention Plan (SIP PowerApps) to track the number of supports, in lieu of referrals provided. This allows them to remain responsive to emerging needs while supporting schools in developing sustainable behavioral systems.

MSCS has a vast behavioral ecosystem that includes not only each student, teacher, support staff, and school administrator, but as this work has shown, it also includes District leaders, Board members, the Superintendent, and even the families of the students. As the results have shown, BSP students are more likely to continue attending the school where they began the year and attend at a higher rate than the previous year; it stands to reason that the families of these students see the value of having a RTI$^2$-B Specialist paired with their student and so too, are helping improve the behavioral ecosystem of MSCS. The work that the District leaders, the Superintendent, and the Board members have put into changing the suspension portion of the Student Conduct policy and to increase the use of progressive discipline has greatly improved lowering exclusionary actions for the 2025–26 school year. All of this work leads to more time in the classroom for students and hopefully to a future with fewer exclusionary actions and a more socially- and emotionally-healthy educational environment for all of our students.

## Appendix

For the full literature review, please click this link. The following sections are discussed in further detail (please click any of these links below to go directly to that section in the literature review):


- A Brief History of U.S. Discipline
    - Zero Tolerance Policies
    - Response to the Research
- Negative Effects of Exclusionary Practices
- Disparities in Discipline
    - Disparities by Race/Ethnicity
    - Disparities by Disability
    - Disparities by Gender and/or Sexual Identity
- Alternatives to Exclusionary Discipline
    - Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports
    - Restorative Justice Practices
    - Social-Emotional Learning
    - Recommendations from the Literature
- Behavioral Ecosystem in the Literature
    - Memphis-Shelby County Schools' Behavioral Ecosystem

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