

Breakthrough on Discipline

By Edward Fergus

How do we tackle the problem of disproportionate suspensions and other disciplinary actions associated with racial and ethnic minorities?

The lopsided statistics show up disturbingly early. In 2011-2012, black preschool students comprised 48 percent of suspensions, but they make up only 18 percent of the student population. The trend continues throughout K-12, with black students comprising 31 percent of suspensions while they make up only 16 percent of the overall public school population. We know these suspensions link directly to grade-level retention, dropping out of high school, and youth encounters with the criminal justice system. We also know a great deal about the systemic and ideological gaps in K-12 that are risk factors for such vulnerable youth populations. The challenge for K-12: to understand the nature of these gaps, and to develop and implement with fidelity systemwide remedies.

As an applied researcher working for the past 12 years across 50 school districts in New York, California, Colorado, Texas, Illinois, New Jersey, Louisiana, and Mississippi, I understand these gaps as complex and requiring an equal set of policy, practice, and belief solutions that are far from static or one-size-fits-all. This article looks at three key components of these systemic and ideological gaps.

1 Fuzzy and Broad-Brush Zero Tolerance Policies

The “zero tolerance” code of conduct policy, increasingly adopted by districts over the past two decades, contributes greatly to the disproportionately high percentage of discipline events for black, Latino, and Native American students in schools. Loosely defined by the U.S. Department of Education as a policy that “mandates predetermined consequences or punishments for specific offenses,” zero tolerance is traditionally and commonly associated with drug, alcohol, and weapon codes of conduct. But school districts have expanded that orientation to include more subjective categories, such as willful disobedience, dress code violations, intentionally treating authority with disrespect, and many others. In fact, zero tolerance disciplinary actions involving weapons, drugs, and other serious offenses are less frequent than those related to subjective behavioral infractions. This is especially true at the elementary level where defiance, disrespect, and disobedience types of infractions are most prominent and susceptible to a zero tolerance framework.

The second problem with the zero tolerance framework is its one-size-fits-all nature. This approach handcuffs principals into interpreting youth misbehaviors primarily as safety issues, forcing a narrowed, single treatment or intervention. For example, if a student brings to school a plastic sword as part of a Halloween costume, he or she may be susceptible to suspension under a zero tolerance weapons policy. The rigid, prescriptive nature of consequences for behavior infractions, without latitude for the judgment of school building leaders, infringes on the leadership role of principals. Overall, this policy approach operates strictly from the standpoint of punishing student misbehaviors with little room for considering the function and context of the behavior infraction.

2 Simplistic “Spare the Rod” Notions

The prevalence of punishment as a strategy for changing student misbehavior is predicated on a pedagogical notion that “youth learn their lesson by being punished.” This pseudo-psychological/behavior therapy approach, called out in a 2015 study published in *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics*, fails to understand the complexity of youth misbehaviors and how they can be remedied, replaced, and/or managed through multiple intervention tiers.



of black preschool students face suspensions, but they make up only 18 percent of the student population.



The concern with a punishment orientation is its limited expectation that practitioners actually understand why the misbehavior is problematic, how to replace or manage it, and how to help a child transition back into a classroom setting. This approach also presumes that students, themselves, are the sole and inherent cause of the misbehavior, and there is little focus on understanding their actions in context. In other words, it allows for practitioners to consistently ask youth only, “What’s wrong with you?” rather than, “What’s happened to you?”

The danger in this approach is that it does not equip the practitioner with the tools to manage continued misbehaviors. Acquiring such tools requires a much more complex strategy of examining behaviors within the broader context beyond school walls. These factors include adults, family, community, faith organizations, and community centers and afterschool programs, among others. Having an understanding of these factors allows practitioners to comprehend these behaviors in context, minimizing the possibility of any racial/ethnic bias to drive the perceptions of student behavior and response.

3 Ingrained Biases, Attitudes, and Perceptions

The problem of racial/ethnic disproportionate representation in suspensions and office discipline referrals is also driven to a great extent by a complex racialized and poverty-laden lens through which many practitioners interpret student behaviors. Each separate lens—race and poverty—operates slightly differently. For example, during a recent data meeting I held with a principal to discuss disproportionate patterns of suspensions and behavioral referrals, the principal pushed back on questions concerning the glaring pattern of black student suspensions occurring at three times the rate of their white peers. “Do you know how poor our kids are?” he said. “They misbehave and we need to punish them.”

Such comments are typical of a poverty-laden lens that drives interpretations of misbehavior. The message in this example is that black youth are disproportionately suspended because they are poor, and there is an unspoken assumption that youth living in poverty are prone to misbehaviors.

The practices that ensue from such a biased idea focus on disciplining individuals into acquiring behaviors perceived as necessary or required for being a good student, such as grit, perseverance, and self-regulation. Practitioners also judge it necessary to discipline those students whose youth culture appearance and unfamiliar ways—sagging pants, rolling eyes, speaking other languages—represent elements antithetical to education success, even going so far as to “discipline” their parents with parent-involvement contracts.

The racialized lens, on the other hand, stems from a long-standing national premise that cultural assimilation for racial and ethnic minority populations should be the ultimate goal. For decades, the U.S. has embraced an assimilation/acculturation ideology that says that in order

for racial and ethnic groups to experience educational and social mobility, their minority identities, such as culture and language, must diminish in favor of assuming a broader American identity. This strategy of “disciplining” racial/ethnic minority groups can be found in such examples as social/emotional skills training that ascribes specific behaviors, such as loud talking and moving the neck while talking, as not appropriate for school or workplace environments.

Overall, the racialized and poverty-laden lens is subtly present in the psyche of our practice, and the reversal of this requires leadership that can manage shifting, repairing, and replacing these worldviews about race and poverty.

Reversing Preconceptions, Practices, and Outcomes

Follow these suggested strategies to redefine your school’s approach to discipline.

- **Know the problem before naming the solution.** Getting the solution right requires being methodical about examining the problem. School and district leadership should expend the energy to conduct root cause analyses that examine policy, practice, and belief data points related to office discipline referrals and suspension outcomes. Root cause process involves a systematic review of behavior-related data (i.e., office discipline referrals, consequences, attendance, school climate surveys), behavioral intervention implementation data (i.e., frequency of intervention use, wellness/consistency of implementation, etc.), code of conduct, and if available, observations of classrooms with high and low office discipline referrals and interviews with students receiving frequent office discipline referrals.
- **Examine office discipline referrals—and not just suspensions.** In most districts, the highest rates of suspensions occur in middle and high schools. However, at the elementary level, office discipline referrals are used often, and at times at higher rates than middle and high schools. Thus, examining office discipline referral rates at the elementary level—at least on a quarterly basis—is necessary to understand the nature of behaviors that are emerging and the manner in which the school climate is responding. This examination should look at the following elements by race, gender, and grade level: frequency and percentage of office discipline referrals; frequency and percentage of reasons

for office discipline; frequency and percentage of interventions by reasons for referral; and the frequency of referrals by time of day. Understanding *when* something is happening can help leaders ask *what’s* happening at this moment for this student in this class.

- **Ensure fidelity of implementation.** Multitiered support systems are highly prevalent, but they can only be effective when there is leadership and organizational appreciation for fidelity of implementation. At times, school districts will venture into purchasing professional development for complex systems reform. School leaders should make sure to allot time for implementation, require necessary staff to attend trainings, include readiness examinations of school sites, request funds to ramp-up data systems necessary to monitor implementation fidelity and proximal outcomes, and most importantly, define a strategic integration with other initiatives.
- **Focus on pedagogical beliefs.** Often schools will invest in professional development focusing on “increasing diversity knowledge,” which concentrates heavily on learning more about the “other” and/or how the “other” is experiencing disproportionate outcomes. However, such workshops only promote new cultural knowledge, without challenging problematic pedagogical beliefs. What’s required are professional learning community sessions that focus on pedagogical beliefs such as deficit thinking, curricular and interactional colorblindness, culture of poverty, and racialized and poverty-laden disciplining. These beliefs should be replaced with concepts of equity, such as culturally responsive teaching, access, and opportunity.

Our society continues to be increasingly diverse, which is only a challenge for practitioners in so far as needing to adapt to new generational realities. Developing a school climate and culture that is responsive to those generalities requires an annual examination of who our students are. In order for school climate and culture factors to work in our favor, school leaders will need to ensure that the approach to discipline places an emphasis on serving as a protective factor rather than creating more risks. 

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WEB TOOLS

Want to implement the ideas in this article? Access the following resources to deepen your knowledge.

- **PBIS.** The Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports website features useful tools for preparing the implementation of substantive behavioral reforms. pbis.org
- **Dignity in Schools.** This website features useful tools for understanding the issue of disparity, and policy, and practice alternatives. dignityinschools.org