

## Exclusionary Discipline Practices in Texas: Addressing the School to Prison Pipeline

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### *Abstract*

*Statewide discipline data indicate that African-American and Latino students are disproportionately removed from classrooms in Texas. Students who are excluded from school are more likely to experience academic failure, drop out of school, and become involved in the juvenile justice system. Changing the culture of schools by training staff to use proactive and positive approaches to behavior management offers the best prospect of breaking the school to prison pipeline. In several states, improved Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports implementation has resulted in changes in exclusionary discipline. Use of this model in Texas might reduce discipline discrepancies by race.*

*Keywords: African American, American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN), cultural responsiveness, disproportionate minority, exclusionary discipline, Latino, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), representation, school-to-prison pipeline*

Suspending and expelling students from school are common disciplinary practices. These policies relieve administrators and teachers of the responsibility of teaching appropriate behaviors, and the excluded students frequently enjoy extended vacations from school, a result that inadvertently reinforces the problem behaviors that got them into trouble in the first place. This paper reviews the results of research on exclu-

sionary discipline practices in Texas, the state with the nation's second largest public-school system, in which two-thirds of students are non-White.

School disciplinary practices are not color blind. The Office for Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education reported that African-American students are three and one-half times more likely to be suspended or expelled than White students. According to nationwide data for the 2013-14 school year, African-American K-12 boys were 3.8 times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions as White boys. Similarly, African-American girls represented 8% of enrolled students but 13% of students receiving out-of-school suspensions. In districts that reported expulsions under zero-tolerance policies, African-American students were 1.9 times as likely to be expelled from school without educational services as White students (Office for Civil Rights, 2016).

Disproportionate discipline practices in Texas made national headlines (Schwarz, 2011) when the Justice Center at the Council of State Governments reported that 31% of students received at least one out-of-school suspension or expulsion during their middle and high school years. Eighty-three percent of African-American males had at least one removal from the classroom for disciplinary reasons compared to 74% Latino male stu-

dents and 59% White male students. Female students experienced a similar pattern: 70% African-American, 58% Latino, and 37% White were excluded at least once (Fabelo, Thompson, Plotkin, Carmichael, Marchbanks, & Booth, 2011). Suspended or expelled students were more likely to be held back a year or to drop out and to be involved in the juvenile justice system the following year.

In Texas during the 2015-2016 school year, African-American students represented 12.6% of the school population but accounted for 22.6% of expulsions to Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program (JJAEP) facilities, 21.5% of other expulsions, 30.6% of Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP) placements, 34.8% of out-of-school suspensions, and 25.8% of in-school suspensions (students enter JJAEP and DAEP placements as a result of the most serious disciplinary offenses; Texas Education Agency, 2007). Latino students represented 28.5% of the school population, but accounted for 58.3% of JJAEP expulsions, 59.8% of other expulsions, 63.8% of DAEP placements, 48.7% of out-of-school suspensions, and 49.7% of in-school suspensions.

In contrast, White students' representation in each discipline category was less than half of their proportion of the school population (see Figure 1).

### Explaining the Discrepancies

Researchers theorize that the overrepresentation of ethnic minority youths in exclusionary discipline cases is due to the interaction of school and family risk factors (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). While in school, students from minority groups are more likely to be identified as having mental retardation and emotional disturbance and less likely to be identified as eligible for gifted and talented programs. These students, faced with a greater likelihood of special education placements and disproportionately more suspensions and expulsions, decide that school is not a welcoming place and drop out (Nelson, Leone, & Rutherford, 2004). In terms of societal risk factors, students from minority backgrounds often come from

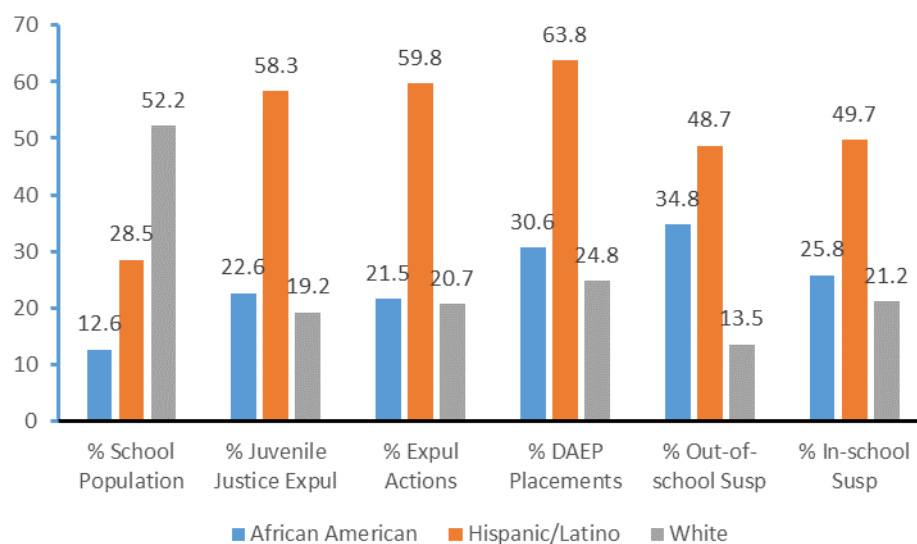


Figure 1. Texas School Discipline Data for 2015-2016. This figure illustrates exclusionary discipline discrepancies by ethnicity.

impoverished homes, experience academic failure, and engage in law-breaking behavior (Skiba et al., 2011). School risk factors such as the failure of teachers to understand the needs of children from impoverished families interact with the aggressive behavior patterns that some minority students learn at home to set the stage for confrontational situations in the classroom (Scott, Nelson, & Liaupsin, 2001).

Students who drop out of school become susceptible to the problems that plague impoverished neighborhoods: crime, drugs, gangs, and gun violence. Antisocial behavior frequently leads to incarceration in juvenile or adult detention facilities, which often lack the educational and mental health programs that could address the needs of delinquent youths (Nelson, Leone, & Rutherford, 2004). The result for these individuals is that the educational system, intended to be a pathway to a better life, becomes a conduit to a life of crime, a paradox known as the school to prison pipeline (Christle, Jolivet, & Nelson, 2005; Rennie Center, 2016).

### **What Needs To Be Done**

Changing the culture of schools might reduce disproportionate disciplinary exclusions. Combining the proactive disciplinary approaches of Schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) and implementing more culturally responsive practices could bridge the gap between students' culturally diverse backgrounds and their school environment (Horner, Sugai, Todd, & Lewis-Palmer, 2005). SWPBIS is a three-tiered approach to preventing problem behavior in schools. At the primary or whole-school level, teachers explicitly teach social skills, measure students' progress in using the skills, and provide opportunities for practice and feedback. The emphasis is on creating a high quality learning environment for students

and staff (OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2015).

Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, and Swain-Bradway (2011) proposed six initiatives to enhance SWPBIS cultural responsiveness: (a) enhance staff members' cultural knowledge, (b) enhance staff members' cultural self-awareness; (c) validate others' culture, (d) increase cultural relevance, (e) establish cultural validity, and (f) emphasize cultural equity. They recommended integrating these practices with the emphasis on preventive discipline and decision making based on behavioral data. "If teaching and rewarding appropriate behaviors equally validated students' varying cultural identities," they noted, "the common school social culture built on these practices could have equal relevance for all students" (p. 5).

SWPBIS schools with diverse student populations in Colorado, Illinois, and Maryland have reduced disproportionate disciplinary referrals by emphasizing positive reinforcement of expected behaviors and ensuring that transitions between instructional and non-instructional activities go smoothly (Tobin & Vincent, 2011). These schools also regularly reported discipline referral data to faculty, and some leadership teams provided ongoing training and evaluation. In Oregon, where schools exclude American Indian/Alaska Native students at much higher rates than their White peers, researchers have proposed combining SWPBIS with culturally relevant practices. The latter include (a) increasing the cultural awareness and knowledge of school staff, (b) incorporating culturally relevant social skills lessons and language, (c) using culturally valid data for decision making, and (d) placing students in

less restrictive environments through curricular and home-school collaborations (Sprague, Vincent, Tobin, & Pavel, 2013).

An analysis of office discipline referral data from a national sample of schools revealed that teachers were more likely to refer African-American and Latino students than White students and that school administrators were four times more likely to suspend or expel African-American students and twice as likely to suspend or expel Latino students than their White peers (Skiba et al., 2011). The researchers recommended that districts and states disseminate disaggregated data on discipline patterns, promote policies that ensure the equitable disposition of disciplinary referrals, and train staff to minimize the disproportionate application of discipline policies.

### Ending the School to Prison Pipeline

When states and districts educate school personnel on the need for cultural awareness, rewarding appropriate student behavior, and sharing discipline data, schools will change from being oppressive places where teachers punish and exclude students to places in which diversity and positive behavior are valued (Sugai, O'Keefe, & Fallon, 2011). A culturally relevant application of behavioral principles must take account of the unique characteristics and learning histories of students and educators. When behavior management becomes contextually appropriate and avoids stereotyping, all stakeholders will share in an equitable outcome. This will open to all students the educational opportunities that are now available only to some.

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