

Policy Brief
July 2016



PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE

Focus Area Policy Brief: Disciplinary Environment

Dr. Sarah K. Bruch
Director of Social and Education Policy
Public Policy Center
Assistant Professor of Sociology
University of Iowa

Harper Haynes
Sociology, M.A.
University of Iowa

Alex Hylka
Political Science
University of Iowa

Introduction

In February 2016, a student survey was administered to all 6th, 8th, and 11th grade students in the Iowa City Community School District (ICCSA). The survey asked students to report on their experiences of school across a number of areas including relationships with teachers, mentor relationships, support resources, negative experiences of school, social belonging, motivations to attend school, perceptions of discipline, inclusive classrooms, and the salience of race and gender for social identity and relationships. An extensive analysis of this survey was conducted and summarized in a report released in April 2016, *Assessing Student Experiences Survey Report* (Bruch et al. 2016). Drawing on the findings from the Report, three focus areas have been identified for the District: teacher and mentor relationships; inclusive community; and disciplinary environment.

This focus area brief concentrates on disciplinary environment. Briefs have also been prepared for teacher and mentor relationships and inclusive community. Each brief answers the following questions:

- 1) Why is this particular aspect of student experience important?
- 2) What is the extent of the problem in regard to this aspect of student experience in the ICCSD?
- 3) What are the strategies for intervening that have been shown in the education research literature to be effective?
- 4) What are the evidence-based recommendations that can inform the ICCSD decision-making process?

The Importance of the Disciplinary Environment

What does discipline contribute to the broader school environment and student experience?

School discipline policies and practices are a crucial feature of the school climate for students. Students' personal experience with being disciplined, their observations of other student experiences, and their overall perceptions of fairness, legitimacy, and equity are all critical aspects of a school's disciplinary environment. Administrators, and teaching staff alike, rely on discipline in order to keep students and staff safe and supported, and respond to and prevent instances of behavioral misconduct from students. Effective disciplinary policies and practices constitute a fundamental component of school's ability to create a learning environment conducive to all students' emotional growth and academic progress.

Over the past several years, American schools have to varying degrees moved toward school discipline policies that emphasizes stricter regimes of behavioral regulation, stronger security and surveillance procedures, zero-tolerance approaches to smaller violations, and increased reliance on punitive sanctions. Although as many school discipline authorities note, school discipline can be supportive or punitive – focusing on the support of students with an emphasis on prevention, or focusing on the punishment of students for wrong-doing. In many instances, scholars have shown that schools rely primarily on punitive discipline policies and have reactionary response to student misconduct as opposed to more proactive, preventative discipline policies that seek to minimize or prevent student misconduct from occurring (Skiba et. al. 2002; U.S. DOE, Office of Civil Rights, 2016; Aud, KewalRamani, and Frohlich, 2011). Escalated disciplinary policies often take the form of a range of actions such as classroom removal, out of school suspension, expulsion, or in some cases even arrest by local law enforcement (Gregory, Bell, and Pollock 2014; DOE, Office of Civil Rights, 2016).

How do discipline policies affect students?

The overall number of student suspensions in U.S. schools are of public concern, with a recent estimate that one in every three students will be suspended at least once during their K-12 educational experience (Schollenberger 2015). In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education released a resource guide for educators to improve school climate and discipline, recommending that schools and districts implement evidence-based school-wide practices aimed at address the over-use and disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline (U.S. DOE, 2014). This recommendation is based on a substantial body of academic research demonstrating that such policies do not increase student perceptions of safety or reduce school violence (Balanz, Byrnes and Fox in press), and are a detriment to students' emotional & academic growth (Himmelstein and Bruckner 2011; Wildhagen 2012). Being

successful in school requires having the opportunity to learn. Exclusionary discipline policies that remove students from classrooms, inhibit their opportunity to achieve academically.

Recent research also finds that school suspensions account for a portion of the racial achievement gap (Wildhagen 2012; Morris and Perry 2016). And, to many the most surprising consequence of a punitive school environment is that it negatively affects everyone, not just students that are suspended (Perry and Morris 2014). In other words, being in a school that has a higher level of exclusionary discipline negatively affects the academic achievement of all students in the school.

How students subjectively experience school discipline also has important effects on students. As Cohen and Garcia (2014: 13) point out, “Even when in the apparently same objective environment, the perceptions and beliefs that shape students’ experience and outcomes can differ markedly.” One of the most important aspects of student perceptions in regard to discipline is whether they think it is legitimate and fair (Arum 2003). Several studies of schooling suggest perceptions of unfairness are less prevalent among White students than Black students, and in some cases Latinos (Shedd 2015; Kupchik and Ellis 2008; Arum 2003). And importantly, student perceptions of fairness are associated with their own academic achievement (Arum 2003) as well as their later civic and political engagement as young adults (Bruch and Soss 2016; Kupchik and Catlaw 2015). In other words, students who perceive teachers to treat students unfairly, are less likely to participate in their community through volunteering or belonging to civic groups, or to vote in political elections as young adults.

Are there disparities in disciplinary experiences?

The relationship between disparities in school discipline and achievement are often interrelated and mutually reinforcing. The disproportional rates of who experiences the majority of disciplinary actions and suspensions illustrates a larger schism in the pursuit towards equitable education for the nation’s children.

Overwhelmingly, boys, African American students and students with disabilities experience the brunt of punitive and zero tolerance policies in the U.S. school system (Losen, Hodson and Martinez 2015). Data from the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) indicates that for the 2011-2012 school year, the national rates of suspension were 5% for white students, 7% for Latino students, and 16% for black students. Research has indicated higher rates of suspension correlate with lower academic achievement, higher risk for dropping out of school and economic losses (Marchbanks 2015). Highly punitive schools can shape the broader learning environment and can even hinder the academic achievements of non-suspended students (Perry and Morris 2014). Finally, these school discipline gaps greatly contribute to the confluence of racial inequality in the juvenile justice system and the school-to-prison pipeline (Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, and Valentine 2009). Given that most disparities in school discipline are due to differences in subjective interpretations of behavior (Gregory and Weinstein 2008), coupled with the academic and economic consequences of disciplinary actions, reducing the school discipline gap is imperative to the pursuit in creating a more just and racially equitable society.

One important factor that affects the disproportionality of school disciplinary outcomes is how teachers perceive student behavior. For example, researchers have examined variation in how teachers perceive student behaviors such as disrespect or disruption which are less likely to have objective criteria that allow for a uniform assessment of when the behavior requires disciplinary action. This work has found that Black students are more likely to be punished for exhibiting the same classroom behavior as other students (Gregory, Bell, and Pollock 2014). Other research in this area has also found that Black students receive harsher punishments more often than White students in part because the infractions they commit are more often categorized under the ambiguous label of subjective offenses (Skiba et. al. 2002). In fact, researchers have found disproportionate use of harsher punishments for Black students even in analyses that control for differences in student behavior, background and offense category (Skiba et al. 2014).

The Disciplinary Environment of the ICCSD

Disciplinary Equity Experiences Survey Results

Survey Measure	District Average	Race Disparity	Gender Disparity	Socioeconomic Disparity
Equal punishment	69%	White=71% Black=65% Latino=73%	Female=69% Male=70%	Low=69% Med=70% High=70%
School rules are fair	71%	White=71% Black=65% Latino=71%	Female=72% Male=70%	Low=69% Med=71% High=72%
Equal punishment expectations	67%	White=67% Black=65% Latino=72%	Female=67% Male=66%	Low=65% Med=66% High=67%
All students are rewarded for doing a good job	36%	White=35% Black=41% Latino=38%	Female=35% Male=37%	Low=43% Med=34% High=34%

Note: Race disparity includes the three largest racial/ethnic categories represented in the survey sample (White, Black, and Latino). Race is measured as the student's self-reported racial identification. Socioeconomic status is measured as the highest level of student's parental education. Details on each survey measure are provided at the end of the brief. Light yellow highlighted cells indicate a 5-10% disparity between groups. Dark yellow highlighted cells indicate disparities greater than 10% between groups.

Bold indicates the group with the worst value. When survey is a positive experience, this is the lowest number; when the survey measure is a negative experience, this is the highest number.

Key Findings

- 1) There are moderate racial disparities in all aspects of disciplinary equity perceptions with Black students being the least likely to perceive disciplinary equity for all aspects except positive rewards.
- 2) Less than 50 percent of students in the district overall, and across racial, gender, and socioeconomic status groups, think that there is equity in how students are positively rewarded.

Disciplinary Consistency and Strictness Survey Results

Survey Measure	District Average	Race Disparity	Gender Disparity	Socioeconomic Disparity
Rules are strict	52%	White=50% Black=53% Latino=54%	Female=48% Male=55%	Low=56% Med=48% High=52%
Students are punished too much for minor things	45%	White=43% Black=52% Latino=52%	Female=39% Male=50%	Low=52% Med=43% High=43%
Inconsistent discipline for misbehavior	55%	White=56% Black=55% Latino=57%	Female=56% Male=54%	Low=54% Med=54% High=54%
Students know punishments for rule-breaking	67%	White=64% Black=70% Latino=77%	Female=69% Male=65%	Low=69% Med=66% High=66%

Note: Race disparity includes the three largest racial/ethnic categories represented in the survey sample (White, Black, and Latino). Race is measured as the student's self-reported racial identification. Socioeconomic status is measured as the highest level of student's parental education. Details on each survey measure are provided at the end of the brief. Light yellow highlighted cells indicate a 5-10% disparity between groups. Dark yellow highlighted cells indicate disparities greater than 10% between groups.

Bold indicates the group with the worst value. When survey is a positive experience, this is the lowest number; when the survey measure is a negative experience, this is the highest number.

Key Findings

- 1) Overall only 45 percent of students think that the severity of punishment is appropriate, and only 55 percent perceive discipline as consistent.
- 2) Fifty percent or more of Black, Latino, male and low socioeconomic students think that disciplinary punishment is too severe.

Intervention Strategies

A recent review of intervention strategies to address disparities in school discipline, said the following,

Among the most important research-based conclusions is that these stark differences in suspension use are caused by differences in school policy, school leadership, and other factors that educators can control. While poverty and other factors do appear to contribute, studies that controlled for differences in student behavior, race, and poverty found that school-controlled factors are the strongest predictors of both frequency and disproportionality in the use of suspension" (Losen, Hewitt, and Toldson 2014: 3).

There are a number of potential research-based intervention approaches that could be implemented in the ICCSD to address disparities in disciplinary outcomes. The strongest research evidence of effectiveness reducing disparities in academic achievement and the use of non-punitive disciplinary sanctioning practices are interventions are found with interventions that use a relationship building approach (Gregory, Bell, and Pollock 2014; Losen 2015). Within the relationship building approach, there are two main variants of interventions: restorative justice-based models and Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS).

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice-based models target entire school communities (students, staff, and teachers), they are not a curriculum or program that can be implemented in one classroom or by one teacher. Restorative justice-based approaches have been implemented in schools to address school safety and violence, bullying, and disparities in discipline and achievement (Morrison 2005). There are a range of restorative justice-based models that have been implemented in schools, all of which focus on the everyday student experiences of school and the building of a relationally strong school community.

The key feature of restorative-justice approaches is that discipline is treated as being restorative and not about punishment. Many restorative justice-based interventions have been shown to be effective at reducing the overall use of and disparities in punitive and exclusionary disciplinary practices, as well as increase overall and reduce disparities in academic achievement (González, 2014). These interventions positively impact both achievement and discipline in a school because of the holistic approach which “not only repairs harm in the event of conflict and inappropriate behavior but also one that builds and nurtures relationship and community in the first place” (14: Johnston 2002).

One of the key dimensions of implementation strategies is the degree of formality in the approach. Different restorative justice models vary in the continuum of practice from formal to informal (Wachtel and McCold 2001). The most promising implementation practice is a tri-level approach, “The primary (or universal) level targets all members of the school community, with an aim to develop a strong normative climate of respect, a sense of belongingness within the school community and procedural fairness [reaffirming relationships]. The secondary, or targeted, level targets a certain percentage of the school community who are becoming at risk for the development of chronic behavior problems [reconnecting relationships]. The tertiary, or intensive, level targets students who have already developed chronic and intense behavior problems [repairing and rebuilding relationships]. Within this conceptual model, the students who receive intensive intervention typically also receive targeted intervention, and all students, including those at the targeted and intense levels, receive the primary intervention” (38: Morrison 2005).

Positive Behavior Intervention Supports

PBIS, similarly referred to as SWPBIS (School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports), is a preventative approach that seeks to provide systemic change to the overall school environment through the promotion of productive student behavior. The “supports” in the PBIS approaches are designed to be preventative, collaborative, data-driven, educative, and reinforcement-based (Fallon, O’Keeffe and Sugai 2012). PBIS focuses on teaching and learning settings in order to address potentially problematic student behavior. Similar to restorative justice-based models, PBIS-based models also have multiple levels or tiers (Colvin, Kame’enui, and Sugai 1993; Lewis and Sugai 1999; Sugai and Horner 1994; Walker et al. 1996). PBIS has three tiers: Tier 1 is the broadest and includes a support structure for all students across the entire school environment; Tier 2 is the use of coordinated efforts geared towards students whose behavior remained unaffected from the implementation of Tier 1; and Tier 3 is the most targeted, and consists of individualized student-centered planning, in which there is comprehensive oversight in the development of positive behavioral supports.

PBIS has a solid base of research evidence of its effectiveness at reducing the use of punitive or exclusionary disciplinary approaches, and increasing student achievement (Bradshaw, Mitchell, and Leaf 2010). PBIS has also been found to improve the overall school climate (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support 2008). This approach works in part because it is a school-wide system of support which provides proactive and supportive strategies for teachers and staff, and consistent, clear expectations for students.

One of the important insights from recent evaluations of PBIS-based approaches is the importance of assessing the effectiveness across different types of students. Recent research suggests that implementing SWPBIS is most effective when students are exposed at younger ages (Waasdorp, Bradshaw, and Leaf 2012), and has the largest effects on students who are most at-risk of social emotional or behavioral problems (Bradshaw, Wassdorp, and Leaf 2014).

Recommendation

Drawing on the key findings from the Assessing Student Experiences Survey Report and the research evidence regarding the effective programs listed above, the following are general recommendations to guide the district in improving the disciplinary environment of its schools.

Given that the District has some of the worst racial disproportionality in school suspension in the Iowa (Clayworth 2015), and there are moderate racial disparities for all of the measures of disciplinary equity, a holistic approach to addressing school discipline seems appropriate.

There is strong evidence of effectiveness for both restorative justice-based and PBIS-based school-wide approaches. However, in choosing between the two school-wide approaches, it is important

to note that the State of Iowa Department of Education supports PBIS and provides learning and implementation guidance to districts and schools that adopt PBIS. Given this state-level support, the District could work toward implementing PBIS in the District schools with a high degree of implementation fidelity, and follow the best practices for implementation as outlined by the PBIS Technical Assistance Center funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

Details on Survey Measures

Demographic Measures

Race and Gender are self-reported indicators of the student's racial and gender identification.

Student's socioeconomic status is measured by parents' highest level of education, which has been shown to be the most reliable indicator of socioeconomic status when asked of adolescents. Parents with a high school diploma or less are coded as "Low SES", those with a college degree as "Medium SES", and those with post-college degree as "High SES".

Perceptions of Discipline

Survey measures regarding perceptions of discipline are discussed in the full Survey Report (p.45-48), available online here: http://ppc.uiowa.edu/sites/default/files/iccsd_student_experience_onlineversion.pdf

Disciplinary Environment

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http://ppc.uiowa.edu/sites/default/files/iccsd_student_experience_onlineversion.pdf

Survey questions regarding perceptions of discipline referenced in this brief indicate student responses measured on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree."

Disciplinary Equity was measured by asking students about their agreement with four statements: "The punishment for breaking school rules is the same no matter who you are," "The school rules are fair," "I know I would receive the same punishment as others for breaking a school rule," and "All students receive rewards for doing a good job."

Discipline Strictness was measured by asking students about their agreement with two statements: "Rules for behavior are strict" and "Students are punished too much for minor things."

Disciplinary Consistency was measured asking students about their agreement with two statements: "Misbehaving students often get away with it" and "If a school rule is broken, students know what kind of punishment will follow."

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