

Spotlight on Success: Changing the Culture of Discipline in Denver Public Schools

DU-DPS Researcher-Practitioner Partnership on School Discipline

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About the DU-DPS Researcher Practitioner Partnership

This study was conducted as part of a researcher-practitioner partnership between the University of Denver (DU) Graduate School of Social Work (GSSW) and the Office of Social-Emotional Learning at Denver Public Schools (DPS). GSSW and OSEL work together to improve school discipline outcomes and reduce racial disparities in exclusionary discipline practices. The overall goals of the partnership are to:

- Conduct rigorous and relevant research on school discipline and racial disparities in exclusionary practices.
- Sustain and strengthen efforts to use research to inform local policy, programs, and practices.
- Work with policy makers and practitioners to identify preventive interventions to disseminate broadly.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This mixed methods study draws on district discipline data, interviews, and focus groups to identify characteristics of DPS schools who met the district's discipline goals of a 0-3% suspension rate for their student population overall and for Black students in particular during the 2014-2015 school year.

Quantitative Findings

Statistical analyses comparing schools who met the district's discipline goals to those who did not revealed that low-suspending schools had the following features:

- More racially and economically integrated
- Fewer serious discipline incidents (type 2-6) reported by school staff
- Greater use of Restorative Practices in response to discipline incidents
- Less frequent use of in- and out-of-school suspension among disciplined students

Qualitative Findings

Principals and school staff from a subset of low-suspending schools reported the following common strategies, conditions, and district resources were used to meet the district's discipline goals:

Positive Behavior and School Culture Systems

- Relationship Building
- Behavioral Recognitions and Rewards
- Social-Emotional Skill Building
- Restorative Practices

Inclusive Policies and Protocols for Responding to Misbehavior

- Start with Classroom-Based Interventions
- Connect Misbehaving Students to Support Services
- Use Punitive and Exclusionary Discipline Practices as a Last Resort

Supportive Implementation Conditions

- Robust School-Based Student and Family Services
- Professional Learning, Training and Coaching
- Strategic Hiring for Culture Fit

Awareness of Racial Inequalities and Bias

- Strengthen Staff Members Knowledge about Racial Disparities
- Prioritize Relationship Building with Black Families and Students

District Supports

- Policy & Intervention Consultations with Discipline Coordinators
- Professional Development Units on Restorative Practices and Equity

Recommendations

The following recommendations are focused on themes from this report that were consistent across our qualitative and quantitative data, and supported by prior research:

Schools

- Engage all school staff in ongoing professional learning about universal strategies for relationship-building, proactive classroom management approaches, equity frameworks, and implicit bias.
- Collaboratively (re)establish and teach school-wide expectations for students and staff members every school year, with regular opportunities for recognition of positive behavior.
- Greet students and implement social-emotional learning or community building activities at the start of the school day.
- Participate in the Parent-Teacher Home Visit program.
- Use Restorative Practices to resolve discipline incidents.

The District

- Strengthen initiatives that promote racially and socioeconomically integrated schools, such as high quality schools in every neighborhood, and transportation for students who choice-in to sites outside of their community.
- Increase the availability of engaging and tailored site- or network-based trainings on Equity, PBIS, and Restorative Practices.
- Provide training and consultation on evidence-based classroom management approaches like Responsive Classroom.
- Expand the Parent-Teacher Home Visit program to a greater number of schools, prioritizing those with high suspension rates.
- Conduct a needs assessments of schools that have consistently been unable to meet the district's discipline goals.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
KEY TERMS	1
METHODS	3
STUDY FINDINGS.....	5
Quantitative Results: Features of All Low-Suspending Schools	5
Qualitative Results: Strategies and Approaches used by Low Suspending Schools	5
School-Wide Positive Behavior and School Culture Systems.....	6
Inclusive Policies and Protocols for Responding to Misbehavior.....	11
Awareness of Racial Inequalities and Bias in the Discipline Process.....	15
Supportive Conditions for Robust Implementation	16
District Resources.....	18
EVIDENCE FROM THE RESEARCH LITERATURE	21
RECOMMENDATIONS	25
APPENDIX.....	27
Tables	27
Resources	30
References.....	31

INTRODUCTION

The goals of the project were to identify strategies and interventions used by schools who met the district's goals of reducing and maintaining suspension rates of 0-3% for all students, and Black students in particular, during the 2014-2015 school year. With support from district partners, the research team led a mixed methods study of low-suspending schools that involved analysis of district discipline records, interviews with school-based administrators, and focus groups with school staff.

KEY TERMS

Approaches and Strategies: Instructional, behavioral, or disciplinary practices that share philosophical underpinnings or other commonalities, but are not necessarily aligned with a specific program or standardized model. These two terms are used interchangeably.

Classroom-based approaches: Strategies that are implemented in the classroom by the teacher during the regular school day.

Discipline records: Information about serious discipline incidents entered by school staff into required fields of the "behavior management" tab in the district's student information system (*Infinite Campus*). Staff use this database to record student behaviors that are viewed as chronic or high-level (called Type 2 and above) in which a punitive or exclusionary response outside the classroom, such as suspension or expulsion, is permitted by district policy. The database was not designed to capture less serious discipline incidents, such as occasional disrespect or defiance (called Type 1), for which district policy mandates classroom-based interventions.

Educators or Participants: Used when attributing quotes to individuals who participated in interviews or focus groups, or when discussing themes that were shared by many individuals.

Exclusionary approaches: Strategies for resolving misbehavior that remove students from the classroom or school, including in- or out-of-school suspensions, intervention rooms, and/or expulsions.

Growth-mindset: The belief that intelligence can be developed by various means, as compared to a "fixed-mindset," which presupposes intelligence is a static, unchanging trait.

Inclusive approaches: Restorative, therapeutic, or behavioral responses to discipline incidents that keep students in the classroom and do not result in missed instructional time. These approaches often involve community service, loss of privileges, peace circles, mediations, counseling and social-emotional skills groups.

Interventions: Practices that are used to interrupt or change the behaviors of adults or students (rather than prevent them).

JK-R: Denver Public School's discipline policy (Board of Education Policy JK-R Student Conduct and Discipline Procedures), passed in 2008 with the aim of reducing exclusionary discipline practices and eliminating racial disparities in suspensions. The policy defines the seriousness of different student behaviors in a matrix (Type 1-6) and provides a ladder of recommended interventions. The policy encourages schools to implement classroom-based interventions for low-level behaviors. Restorative Practices and therapeutic interventions are recommended as responses to more serious discipline incidents. Out-of-school suspensions and law enforcement referrals are discouraged unless mandated by district, state, or federal law.

LEAP. The observation system used by the district for evaluation of teachers' growth and performance.

Low suspending schools: Schools with 0-3% suspension rates overall and for Black students in particular.

No Nonsense Nurturing: A professional development program in assertive discipline that involves four steps: give precise directions, utilize positive narration, provide consequences, and build nurturing relationships with students and families.

Responsive Classroom: A professional development program in academic and social-emotional learning. Key components include: student-developed classroom rules, modeling expected behaviors, morning meetings to build community, reinforcing, reminding and redirecting teacher language, and logical consequences in response to rule-breaking behavior.

Restorative Practices: An alternative to suspension that involves students and adults identifying the harm caused by a discipline infraction, acknowledging responsibility, and jointly problem-solving to develop strategies for repairing harm.

Schools: Used when reporting themes that were evident across several participating sites.

School culture: School culture refers to shared expectations about desired, acceptable, and unacceptable student or staff behavior.

School leader, administrator, principal, or director: Used interchangeably when it was possible to attribute quotes to a school leader without revealing their identity or school site.

School-based student service provider: Professionals who deliver the majority of their services at a school site, such as: school counselors, social workers, nurses or psychologists; restorative justice or social-emotional learning coordinators, family liaisons, deans, student advisors, and interventionists.

School-wide approaches: Policies or practices that were described as being used throughout the school, rather than in a single classroom or by a particular staff member.

Student-focused approaches: Strategies that target an individual student.

METHODS

Quantitative

The quantitative dataset used in this analysis included all DPS schools (n=200) during the 2014-2015 school year. Of these schools, 81 (41%) were low-suspending and 119 (59%) did not meet the district's discipline goals. The quantitative dataset included:

- Student demographics, such as students' eligibility for free and reduced lunch; limited English proficiency and disability classifications, along with the Colorado State Race/Ethnicity designations: American Indian or Alaska Native; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; Asian or Asian American; Black or African American (non-Hispanic); Hispanic; White (non-Hispanic); and Multiracial;
- Discipline records that included the type of behavior characterizing an incident (Type 2-6), and one or more ways the incident was resolved, including the use of: in- or out-of-school suspensions, behavior contracts, Restorative Practices, referrals to support services, requests for expulsion, and referrals to law enforcement.
- School features such as school size, school governance type (district-managed, innovation, or charter), and grade configuration.

We conducted bivariate and multivariate statistical analyses to identify common characteristics of low-suspending schools in Denver.

Qualitative

A subset of schools who met the district's discipline goals and had a student body that was at least 1% Black (n=36) were invited to participate in the qualitative study. Of the schools that met this criteria, 33 (92%) participated in the study. As illustrated in Table 2, the majority of the schools in the study were elementary schools (60%), followed by schools with non-traditional grade configurations (K-8, 8-12, and K-12) (24%), high schools (9%) and middle schools (6%). Fifty-seven percent were traditional district schools, 21% were charter schools, and 21% were schools with innovative status. Schools in the sample served predominantly students eligible for free and reduced lunch (56%) and students of color (43% Latino, 34% White, 13% Black, 4% Multiracial, 3% Asian and Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian). Compared to all other district schools, qualitative study sites served younger students from more advantaged backgrounds in terms of socioeconomic status, disability, language proficiency, and race, and were more likely to have non-traditional grade configurations (e.g. K-12) (see Table 1, appendix).

Qualitative data was collected twice at each school. First, the study's primary investigator interviewed key school leaders involved in discipline practices at each school. This typically included the school's principal, director, or designated administrator(s). The school leader was asked to identify other staff members who had played a key role in discipline practices during the 2014-2015 school year. These individuals were subsequently invited to participate in a two-hour focus group. The protocols used for qualitative data collection were developed during a pilot project and addressed topics such as site-specific discipline policies and practices, prevention and intervention approaches, hiring practices, staffing structures, professional learning, and district supports. In order to prioritize the perspectives of school staff, each focus group began with an activity to encourage participants to generate their own ideas about the factors they felt were most salient to their school's discipline practices and suspension rates. The interview protocol was then woven into these discussions as relevant.

All interviews and focus groups were conducted between August 2015 and February 2016. In total, 198 educators participated in this study, the majority of whom were predominantly female (71%) and White (70%). Nearly 60% had been at their current school less than five years, but over half of all participants had been working in education longer than ten years. Most of the sample was comprised of administrators or school leaders (39%), followed by teachers (24%) and school-based service providers (23%).

All audio was transcribed verbatim by students enrolled in a master's-level program and coded by doctoral students using *Dedoose* qualitative software. The initial coding scheme was developed deductively from three sources: (1) recent research on school discipline (2) themes generated during the pilot study and interviews with school leaders, and (3) input from district partners. Two doctoral students developed a codebook that outlined inclusion and exclusion criteria for different themes and provided stronger and weaker forms of each code. As the research team progressed through the coding and analysis process, the district team provided regular feedback about the development and interpretation of themes from the qualitative data.

Partnership Process

The current study was precipitated by two years of previous research on racial disparities conducted through the DU-DPS Researcher-Practitioner Partnership on School Discipline. The partnership consisted of three researchers from the University of Denver and six district partners from Denver Public Schools. Over the course of the Spotlight on Success project, this racially diverse and interdisciplinary team met monthly from August 2015 through June 2016 to plan the study, recruit participating schools, generate preliminary qualitative codes or themes, and make sense of study findings.

STUDY FINDINGS

In the following pages we describe the school features, strategies and conditions of low-suspending schools that met Denver’s discipline goals (0-3% suspension rate overall and for Black students). First, we review quantitative data on the features distinguishing low suspending schools from those in the district that did not meet these goals. Then, we present qualitative findings on the strategies used by a subset of sites to accomplish the district’s discipline goals, followed by a discussion of the conditions schools put in place to assure these approaches were implemented. In order to identify approaches that may be more relevant or useful in different school contexts, we also describe when meaningful differences existed between schools of different grade-levels, racial compositions, or school type.

Quantitative Results: Features of All Low-Suspending Schools

To identify school features that are related to low suspension rates among all DPS schools, we compared data about the sites that met the district’s discipline goals (n=81) to those that did not (n=119). Descriptive results indicated many differences between these two groups of schools in terms of grade-level, school composition, management type, and discipline practices (see Table 2 in the appendix). However, statistical analyses revealed that when all school features considered simultaneously, schools who met the district’s discipline goals had the following defining characteristics (see Table 3 in appendix):

- More racially and economically integrated terms of the proportion of the student body that identified as Black, Native American, Multiracial or Asian and the percent eligible for free and reduced lunch.
- Lower rates of serious discipline incidents (Type 2-6) among all students.
- Less frequent use of in- and out-of-school suspension in response to serious discipline incidents.
- Greater use of Restorative Practices to resolve serious incidents.

These analyses revealed that on the surface, low-suspending schools appear to be less likely to serve secondary students, students with disabilities, and students who are limited English proficient. Yet what truly distinguished these schools from others was enrollment patterns related to race and class, and most importantly, their discipline practices. Of note, Restorative Practices were the only inclusive response to serious discipline incidents that distinguished schools who met district goals from those who did not.

Qualitative Results:

Strategies and Approaches used by Low Suspending Schools

Focus groups and interviews with educators mostly involved questions about their schools’ approaches to prevent, and respond to, rule-breaking behavior. In general, participating schools created systems that supported positive behavior and school culture with a combination of 1)

*“Culture will eat academics every
time for breakfast”*
– Charter School Educator

rewards and recognitions for students who met behavioral expectations, 2) inclusive strategies to resolve lower-level infractions like disrespect or defiance, and 3) exclusionary or punitive consequences only in response to high level offenses. The majority of schools implemented classroom-based practices that were linked to school-wide systems, reserving student-level interventions for students whose needs were not met through universal approaches. In the language of the DPS discipline policy, JK-R, these schools emphasized “therapeutic/skills-based” (e.g. social emotional supports and counseling groups) and “restorative” interventions over “administrative” consequences (e.g. suspension and expulsion.)

School-Wide Positive Behavior and School Culture Systems

Most participants believed that intentional systems for cultivating positive behavior and school culture were necessary conditions for low suspension rates and academic success. A principal of an innovation elementary school noted, *“The school-wide expectations we establish are a foundation upon which we all stand.”* Often statements about school culture were preceded with claims like this is *“how we do things”* or *“who we are”* or the converse, *“we’re not that kind of school”* or *“we don’t do that here.”* Rather than focusing on the behavior of students alone, these schools created shared agreements about acceptable student *and* staff conduct. They invested time in establishing cohesive norms and consistent expectations throughout the building:

We agreed upon certain signals, everybody uses the same bathroom signal, everybody uses the same drink signal, everybody uses the same attention getter. While teachers may vary here and there, every class knows our school clap and our [core values]. Those common expectations are very proactive.

A defining characteristic of positive cultures in these schools was an ethos of shared responsibility among school staff for supporting all students in the building. One teacher reported, *“They’re all our kids. I have had that feeling since I started working [here]. All of the kids are as much my responsibility as they are everyone else’s responsibility.”* This sense of ownership contrasted sharply with sites that relied on specialized positions or administrators to work with students with rule-breaking behaviors. Many schools found such an approach, in which one individual intervenes with a misbehaving student, to be less effective than school-wide reinforcement of expectations.

Several schools also characterized their school culture as a reflective of a “growth mindset.” Educators from these sites viewed students’ behaviors and adults’ practices as malleable, rather than fixed. A core belief was that making mistakes was to be expected from everyone in the building, and was not something deserving of punishment, shame or judgment. Instead, mistakes or challenges were opportunities to problem-solve and learn new tools. Participants reported that this environment of humility helped prevent discipline incidents from escalating, and also encouraged school staff to use one another as a source of ideas for meeting their students’ needs. In these

schools, a request for assistance with student behavior concerns indicated a teacher's commitment to equity and inclusion, not weak classroom management skills:

"This school is built around collaboration amongst teachers. The culture here is that teachers are empowered to come together and problem solve [or] troubleshoot. It's not out of compliance. We're coming together as a team because we all have a vision that this kid can and will. And it's up to us; it's a really strong common belief around all the staff. We're a highly diverse school; in order to work here you have to have that sense of ownership." - K-8 School Leader

"Seeing the incredible impact of culture on student achievement and student behaviors. Like the instructional side, this culture piece is equally important. How kids see themselves, how they see each other, how they behave in and out of class. Defining that for kids and holding them accountable to it is so important."

- Innovation School Leader

Public recognition was another way staff cultivated a positive, supportive culture among one another. Several schools also described opportunities for staff members to 'shout out' and spotlight the good things they saw one another doing, as well as dedicated time for apologies and regrets to be made among one another during faculty meetings. The use of scenarios or videos, role plays, and planning or application time were highlighted as being especially helpful for strengthening educators' behavior and/or discipline practices.

Relationship Building

Although we did not ask about the topic directly, one of the most common themes from our conversations with educators was the importance of relationship building, especially with students, but also with families. Participants from secondary schools serving higher proportions of students of color discussed the value of relationship-building the most frequently.

Echoing the sentiment of one participant, *"it's all about the relationships,"* many educators attributed their school's low suspension rates to strong connections between adults and students in the building in which adults had knowledge of students' lives inside and outside of school. Adults' awareness of students' strengths and areas of growth, triggers and coping

resources, helped them understand the underlying motivation behind misbehavior, respond effectively, and frame any consequences as being in the best interest of the student. Building relationships with students also facilitated the development of effective interventions that targeted the root cause of the problem (for example, low reading skills, lack of classroom rituals or routines, or trauma), rather than the symptom of acting out. Relationships also allowed educators to connect accountability measures to their specific understanding of a young person's unique needs. This personal knowledge created the conditions for students to experience discipline as an opportunity for growth and problem solving, rather than impersonal punishment. Additionally, staff members felt students were more willing to take responsibility for their actions, and motivated to change when

they trusted school adults and felt known. An educator reported, *“If you’ve got a relationship with a student, they’re 100 times more likely to listen to you and understand and respond and try.”*

Participants described how these relationships were distinct from friendships because they were defined by mutual respect rather than affinity. Some participants characterized their approach as *“warm-strict,”* explaining that:

“Warm comes down to genuinely showing that you care about each individual student through relationship building, taking an interest in their life outside of school, taking a lot of interest in their life inside of school and how they’re doing and keeping tabs on things....Then, the strict side I think is the accountability side that I am going to hold you accountable and follow up with you when you make a poor choice because I care so much about you.”

Participants were clear that strong student-staff relationships did not involve leniency or lowered expectations for young people, rather, they were rooted in lovingly holding students accountable. Developing rapport through this warm-strict approach was described as creating a sense of reciprocal obligation between staff members and students. Educators observed that these strong relationships minimized problem behaviors and maximized the impact of interventions or consequences.

Three strategies stood out as uniquely focused on building relationships between school staff and students: home visits, morning meetings or advisory periods, and staff visibility both during the school day and during after-school activities. Many schools conducted home visits through the Parent-Teacher Home Visitation Program sponsored by the school district. Home visits often provided school staff with new insights about their students. A secondary school leader observed, *“Home visits change the relationship. Once you’re in someone’s home, that opens everyone’s eyes to a different sort of encounter that’s not about grades, it’s not about attendance.”* Another frequently cited approach was to use the beginning of the school day as an opportunity to check in with students and learn about their lives, build community, and set a positive tone for the day. Specific practices included greetings, advisory periods that integrate social-emotional learning, and regularly held classroom-based, grade-level, or school-wide morning meetings.

Finally, participants reported that increased visibility of adults during the school day and during after-school

“There’s a lot of schools of thought out there about relationships, if they are important at all. I will go to the end of the earth to say that that’s the number one thing, [but] there’s other people that say you need academics and that’s it. I feel like you have to have rapport with the students. They have to know if you care about them first before they will go the extra mile. Do you respect them? Do you respect them by challenging them, giving them rigorous work?”
– Elementary School Educator

“It used to be check for dress code or gum, and now it's, check for tears, check for an angry countenance, check for like a kid walking on clouds and figure out why.”

– Secondary School Dean

activities supported relationship building by creating opportunities for students and staff to identify common interests and get to know one another. At some schools teachers were encouraged to be visible during lunches and passing periods and some administrators deepened their involvement by leading activities in classrooms on a rotating basis. In other cases, teachers who might see students less frequently, e.g. elective teachers, were integrated into morning meetings in order to connect with students. After school hours, some school staff used time outside of school to get to know students, by attending school-sponsored or community-based sporting events, recitals, or field trips. Although many of these approaches are relatively time-intensive, participants reported that the initial investment was warranted because it yielded substantial benefits. For example, when asked to justify time spent on relationships in the face of a high stakes testing environment, the following comment was typical:

“I would just say it pays off. Like, the proof is in the pudding. I would point to different people who have amazing relationships with students and show them how high the teacher can go with rigor, how the teacher can get them to do that the teacher down the hall can't get them to do. When [your relationships] are in order, it becomes easier for you to teach.”

The vast majority of discussions about relationships focused on those between staff and students. However, some participants also spoke about relationships with families as being important when addressing behavior concerns. Communicating with caregivers and involving them regularly in conversations about their children's successes and challenges through calls home or family meetings were the most common approaches to parent engagement.

Restorative Practices

Schools used Restorative Practices to resolve conflict and strengthen relationships with all students, not just those who entered the discipline system. Restorative Practices were described as being used widely across the school building by teachers, school psychologists, school social workers, school counselors, and school leaders. In other words, these approaches were often deeply embedded in the fabric of systems that supported a positive school culture. Restorative Practices were used across schools serving all grade levels, but were more common in district-managed schools and sites serving greater proportions of students of color and students eligible for free and reduced lunch.

The vast majority of schools described processes for resolving rule-breaking behavior that were aligned with Restorative Practices, although they did not necessarily utilize formal dialogues, mediations or peace circles. These educators worked with students, and at times teachers, to identify the harm caused by wrongdoing, reflect on each person's contributions to an incident, and develop

If you hit someone, how are you going to repair the harm that you did by hitting them? Because that student doesn't feel safe anymore. How are you going to make them feel safe now? It's your job as a student to go out of your way to make them feel safe. As the teacher you're trying to help them plan that and figure out how they're going to get there"

-Elementary
School
Educator

ideas about how to repair the damage done. The following key questions guided this process: *"What actually took place? How were people affected? What responsibility can you take? How can we come to a solution so that this doesn't happen again? How can we get along better?"* Staff members at these schools acknowledged that *"everyone makes mistakes,"* but emphasized that students have to *"own it,"* recognize the *"ripple effect"* of their actions on others, and *"find a solution."* In particular, these educators tended to emphasize the need for *"logical consequences"* that are explicitly tied to the nature of the misconduct and allow students to reintegrate into the school community. Participants reported that Restorative Practices were more time intensive than suspension, which at times caused frustration among school staff or parents who wanted immediate action or student removal. Still, they reported these challenges were worth facing given the long-term benefits.

Participants reported that Restorative Practices allowed for greater social-emotional development, conflict-resolution, and accountability than punitive or exclusionary consequences because students themselves had to reflect on their actions, develop solutions, and take steps to restore their community or rebuild relationships. Even with younger students, participants reported being able to help students understand how their behavior impacts the larger school community. Educators also observed that Restorative Practices were more culturally responsive than other discipline approaches because they took into account students' life context and membership in the larger school community. Indeed, the value of Restorative Practices was most often discussed by participants working in schools serving predominantly students of color.

Behavioral Recognitions and Rewards

Another common strategy used to build systems in support of positive behavior and culture involved recognition and rewards for good behavior, overwhelmingly in the model of School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SW-PBIS). Elementary schools - especially district-managed sites- had SW-PBIS systems that involved a) explicitly teaching behavioral expectations at the start of the year and revisiting them regularly; b) hanging visuals throughout their buildings with models of desired behaviors; c) using points, bucks, stickers, stamps or tickets to track all students' positive behavior, character traits, or core values; and, d) using celebrations, rewards, awards or privileges to recognize desired behaviors. Schools serving secondary students usually modeled behaviors implicitly through example and then rewarded or recognized students nominated by their peers or teachers for demonstrating the school's core values, expectations, or character traits. To identify successful students, schools used teacher or peer nominations and accrual of points, bucks,

etc. Students were then recognized daily, weekly, monthly or quarterly, usually in the form of an award or a “*shout out*” during a school-wide or grade-level assembly.

Social Emotional Skill Building

Many participants observed that social and emotional development was intertwined with their students’ academic growth, and argued that social skills need to be taught in a similar manner to math or reading. The vast majority of study schools used SEL programs or curricula tailored to students’ developmental stages and staff members’ preferences. Popular examples of SEL programs included Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, and Peace4kids. Among schools serving younger students, many incorporated character or core value report cards or passports through which students and their caregivers received feedback about areas of strength and growth. These tools illustrated school’s focus on both academic and social-emotional development for all students. Some schools used older students as mentors to younger students, or as playground or hallway monitors. When classroom and school-level approaches were not resulting in desired changes to student behavior, schools reported referring students out to the Promoting Academics and Character Education (PACE) program run by the Boys and Girls Clubs of Denver program. Nearly half of the schools serving middle school students reported using this program.

Classroom-based SEL strategies included creation of classroom agreements, morning meetings, buddy rooms, and teachers’ use of instructional and classroom management approaches like *No Nonsense Nurturing* and *Responsive Classroom*. A few educators found that SEL strategies infused into teachers’ everyday practices and student interactions were more effective than using a specific program for a portion of the school day. Schools that integrated SEL strategies into instruction had lower racial disparities in suspension than other sites, suggesting the promise of this approach to keeping students of color in the classroom.

Inclusive Policies and Protocols for Responding to Misbehavior

It was uncommon for participating schools to report having a formal code of conduct in the traditional sense of a list of rules and consequences. Yet this should not be mistaken for the absence of a discipline system or process. Nearly all schools described a general protocol for how staff members should respond to misbehavior. Instead, most schools had an internal process they developed to guide decisions about what staff should do when students did or did not meet school-wide expectations or acted in ways that did not reflect the school’s core values or character attributes. Many schools did use some kind of decision-making tree to guide decisions about who and how to respond to different types of student behavior. Often these documents were based on the district’s discipline offense matrix and intervention ladder, but were modified to their school’s unique approach. Some participants reported that they intentionally did not have a discipline policy beyond what the district mandated, because they did not view most forms of misbehavior as a serious discipline incident, unless it involved physical harm or legal concerns, like drug distribution.

“It’s 100 percent on our responsibility for understanding and changing ourselves and our own understandings and skills, so that we can better support our students. That’s a big paradigm shift.”
– Charter School Principal

It was common for participants to describe consulting district policy when making decisions about how to respond to disciplinary incidents, usually in conjunction with additional information, such as the student’s history of misbehavior and parental cooperation. As one principal said, *“we go straight to the DPS discipline ladder and matrix and decide where it falls, we also pull up that child’s record of issues to see, like, is this the first event, second event, because that helps us make that decision.”* Rather than taking a hard-lined approach, school leaders often interpreted district policy as a general framework that needed to be tailored to individual students and school contexts. These leaders did not see district policy as the *“end all, be all.”* As an elementary school principal said, *“Sexual harassment, starting a fire, bringing a weapon to school, there are things like that that are non-negotiable, but conflict among students I try to use as a teaching point and a restorative point not a, ‘oh this is your 3rd time you’re on this ladder you must go home’”* Said another administrator, *“We view the DPS discipline matrix as, this is as far as we can go [punitively], but we have some wiggle room to find a more creative way.”*

These schools tended to treat most forms of misbehavior as opportunities to intervene and teach, rather than punish or exclude. In particular, they had high thresholds for classifying subjective misbehavior such as ‘disrespect’ or ‘defiance’ as serious problems that, under district policy, could be resolved with a suspension. Being less likely to interpret behaviors as disrespect or defiance may be a possible explanation for the low rates of serious discipline incidents reported among these schools. That is, their documentation process reflected a philosophy that conceives of most student misbehavior as “low-level” and requiring classroom-based intervention, rather than exclusionary or punitive consequences.

Three principles underlying district discipline policy were aligned with most schools’ protocols for addressing challenging behavior: 1) Teachers, not administrators, should be the first responders to misbehavior in the classroom; 2) Students with habitual rule-breaking behaviors should be connected to support services; and 3) Punitive and exclusionary practices should only be used as a last resort, after several other approaches had been tried, or in cases when an investigation was needed. These principles were reflected in most schools’ emphasis on classroom-based interventions and support services before suspension would be considered.

Start with Classroom-Based Interventions

The vast majority of schools, around 80%, shared an expectation that classroom teachers should be the first responders to resolving misbehavior and conflict. When students did not meet classroom expectations, common student-focused interventions included redirects and written reflections,

phone calls home or parent conferences. In general, teachers were expected to address behavior in the classroom first, rather than automatically sending a student out or making a referral to administrators or support service providers:

“So, if a kid’s calling out, if a kid refuses to do work if a kid doesn’t come to class prepared, if a kid gets up out of their seat without asking, those are all level 1 things they have to follow a certain progression of a ladder right? If it’s the 10th time it happens, but those are things you have to handle in your classroom...Use your buddy teacher, use a refocus form...Those things aren’t dealt with [outside the classroom] unless it becomes habitual.” – Secondary School Principal

These schools felt that addressing challenging behavior in the classroom played an important role in maintaining positive relationships between teachers and students. Participants often viewed the use of office disciplinary referrals as sending students the message *“that you don’t want to deal with them.”* Many felt that keeping students in class when they misbehaved allowed the teacher’s authority, relationship and trust with a student to remain intact.

“One of the things that we let teachers know [is that] the child isn’t going to be taken out of your class because they’re having a behavior issue. You have to be willing to change your instruction or how you deal with things to support this child being in your classroom. They’re not going to be leaving your classroom because we don’t have any control of the children that come into our building. These are our kids and we have to work with them. Period.”

-Elementary School Principal

Connecting Students to Support Services

Most study schools had high thresholds for what was considered an official discipline incident and instead treated most misconduct as an opening to first connect teachers or students to additional resources before a student’s rule-breaking behavior became a problem of discipline. In some cases, this process was guided by Response to Intervention (RtI) or MTSS (Multi-Tiered system of Support) committees, Student Intervention Teams (SIT), or grade-level meetings. In other cases, it was standard practice to refer students to a school-based student services providers before making an office discipline referral. Schools also made an effort to connect challenging students to support services and therapeutic intervention prior to, or simultaneously with, an exclusionary consequence like an in- or out-of-school suspension. The most common types of supports were personal behavior charts, and daily check-ins and outs, one-on-one counseling, physical therapies, manipulatives or modifications to the classroom environment like standing tables or seating arrangements.

Limiting the Use of Punitive and Exclusionary Practices

Schools attempted to limit the use of administrative consequences that are statutory, rule, or contract-based interventions done "to" an offender. Examples include teacher-assigned mandatory tutoring or detention, office discipline referrals, in-school suspension, and in-school intervention rooms. The vast majority of schools, more than 80%, tried to

use these punitive and exclusionary practices only as a “last resort,” after a variety of other approaches or interventions had been attempted, in cases involving a safety threat, or when time was needed to conduct an investigation. Several reported they were aware that their use of therapeutic or Restorative Practices in response to a typical incident (e.g. fighting) would not be used at other schools, where students would have received a suspension much more swiftly.

These schools largely considered punitive and exclusionary practices to be ineffective. An educator described, “*We realized we’re punishing students over and over and over again. For example, if they [were] not getting their homework done they [were] getting a study hall and missing recess. We [were] creating behavior problems, we’re creating meltdowns.*” Educators also wanted their students to stay in the school and the classroom as much as possible. They often highlighted the impact that missing classroom instruction had on student performance. They also found that removing students from the classroom or school did not resolve most root causes of challenging behaviors and that when students returned to school, the cycle repeated. Finally, they recognized that some students actually looked forward to suspensions as a “free day” to watch TV, play video games or hang out. A smaller number of educators also felt suspensions sent a message to staff, students and parents that the school was willing to “throw away” young people in its care. A school leader described an experience with an 8th grader,

“[He said], ‘what are you going to do, suspend me?’ [I said], ‘Of course we’re not going to send you home. We’re going to help you fix this.’ That is something that we value here at the school, the idea that we fix our problems, we don’t run away from them. We don’t just step away because they’re not going to magically get fixed. We tell the kids all the time that you are not going to leave; you will stay here and you will perform some kind of reparation. You don’t have an option of being sent home. We’re not going to throw you away. We care and we are going to work at it.”

When punitive or exclusionary practices were used, they rarely involved sending students home. Some schools had in-school intervention, suspension, or detention rooms which ranged widely in design and implementation. One particularly innovative approach was an intervention room created as a ‘support hub’ where students were connected to restorative counselors, mental health providers, and social-emotional support services. On the other hand, some schools found that having designated spaces where students were sent during the school day was self-fulfilling. These schools felt that by dedicating space and resources to in-school spaces schools were creating a culture where it was acceptable to remove students from the classroom. Schools that advocated against these types of space instead eliminated or transformed the school spaces where teachers historically sent challenging students. Removing benches, tables, rooms, or desks used to contain challenging students increased staff member’s use of alternatives like classroom-based interventions or specialized supports. A school leader from an innovation school said, “*We’ve really tried to steer clear of*

You can't just send them home because you needed to take a break. When they come back they're going to do the same thing.

– Elementary School Principal

a detention and in-school suspension room. We really believe that designating a room for that sends the message to everyone that this is ok. And it's not."

Awareness of Racial Inequalities and Bias in the Discipline Process

Many educators were uncomfortable talking about the role of race in their discipline process and emphasized that they treated all students "the same." About a third of schools expressed a more race-conscious perspective and explicitly discussed their use of culturally responsive practices. Educators from these schools were familiar with issues of racial and socioeconomic inequality in education and the criminal justice system. Some described intentional efforts to identify and create awareness about racial bias in their teaching and discipline practices *"not necessarily to solve it, but to be aware of it. Just the simple act of awareness created some changes in, not only in the grades and how kids were attaining, but also discipline."* With an understanding of the impact of racism and bias on students' educational trajectories, these schools took responsibility for changing student academic and discipline outcomes, rather than blaming students or families: *"It is not the student's fault. [Racial disparities exist] because there is something wrong in our culture, there's something wrong in our society, these children are set up from day one to fail. We as teachers must do whatever is necessary to change that; it is on us."*

Administrators and staff at these schools recognized that educators have too often marginalized

"Sometimes children have a whole different experience at home than they have at school and we have to recognize that. There's a lot of injustice in life and they've seen a lot of really adult things."
—Innovation School Leader

families and students of color, and that intentional outreach and relationship building was therefore necessary to counter parents' and students' skepticism about fair treatment. *"I intentionally make connections with Black boys and their parents right away"* said one principal, and another shared, *"we've worked incredibly hard with our Black and our Latino students to make sure that they feel respected and feel heard, feel loved."* Home visits were used to inform their understanding of parents' past experiences with educators, *"I think the home visits and the relationship with the parents [are key]. You don't know what their parent's experiences or history has been with teachers, public schools, private schools, White teachers or Black teachers."* When confronted with parent concerns about discrimination, administrators took the concerns seriously and discussed them openly with parents. Reflecting on changes in discipline practices at her site, a principal shared that *"There were certain families here at our school that had a really bad taste in their mouth about*

how their kids had been treated. I had to meet with families [who felt] that the kids of color at our school would get punished for certain things that other kids would not."

These participants also shared an understanding that in previous schools, educators may have had lower expectations for Black students. They saw high quality and engaging instruction in all classrooms as an important approach to supporting Black students in particular, who may have been under-challenged in the past. As an elementary principal described, *"Hopefully our focus on quality instruction is where we're seeing a difference [for our students of color]. We've really asked for all students to be engaged*

in learning.” Finally, school administrators also discussed the importance of having staff members who mirror the diversity of the student body and can be school-based role models to students of color.

Supportive Conditions for Robust Implementation

Schools reported that it was difficult to get everyone in the building to implement school-wide expectations. Over half of schools reported that some of their educators inconsistently followed the discipline or behavior protocols. As a result, school leaders used training and coaching, strategic hiring, and teams of student services providers to ensure high quality implementation of their systems, strategies, and protocols.

Professional Learning

One of the most important conditions that supported school’s efforts to implement effective discipline practices was sustained professional learning for school staff. A focus group participant from a charter elementary school observed, *“You need that support, additional training, coaching to be able to implement at a consistent level, never mind at a high level.”* Professional learning was viewed by the vast majority of participants as crucial to maintaining high fidelity to the school’s behavior or discipline

“Once a month we do school-wide professional development and the teachers have three options they can choose: Restorative Practices, cultural competency or growth mindset. And those all lead into discipline. We did an overview the first week and then we did some breakout sessions on each of those and the teachers could choose which path spoke to them.”
– School Leader

practices and policies. Several schools made an intentional effort to include every staff person in their building in trainings on behavior or discipline - from front office staff and paraprofessionals and safety professionals to custodians. Administrators reported these adults *“have their ear to the ground all the time”* and need to be empowered to talk to students about their behavior, echoing the sentiment described in the school culture section that everyone is responsible for all of their students.

Participants discussed two main formats for professional learning: formal training and informal coaching. Formal trainings included staff retreats, professional development units, book clubs, staff or grade-level meetings, and in-house or district-led workshops. These trainings were most often held the week before school started for the year and on non-student contact days reserved for professional learning throughout the year. Formal trainings, especially retreats, were used to recommit staff to school mission, culture, or values. A particularly innovative and flexible approach to professional learning was to allow school staff to choose among several professional learning options aligned with the school’s vision for school culture, behavior and discipline.

Accountability

Mechanisms to hold staff members accountable to school-wide expectations emerged as another condition of high fidelity implementation. Accountability was enacted by administrators and teachers providing feedback to one another, following through with plans and goals, and recognizing successes. At the core of accountability was having clear expectations for the process and follow-up with staff who did not adhere to it. Teachers held each other accountable by encouraging new strategies and checking in about protocol breaches with one another. Importantly, accountability was not a punitive process, but rather an opportunity for an administrator or peer to offer support and ideas about *“how to better deal with those circumstances or how to better work with certain populations of our school.”* These strategies were woven into informal coaching conversations as well as all-school faculty meetings. Informal coaching involved feedback and consultation to individual staff members, usually by an administrator, but in some cases by peers. It typically entailed observations of teachers followed by a check-in where alternative strategies and specialized training opportunities were discussed. At times these coaching sessions were initiated when a staff member did not follow the discipline policy or protocol. Coaching gave administrators the opportunity to provide more tailored and specific guidance for teachers based on their unique strengths, challenges, and classroom dynamics or configurations. A handful of schools used teaching evaluations systems that include assessments of the learning environment, including the district system (LEAP), to initiate coaching on classroom management. Frequent classroom observations were characteristics of several schools, allowing greater opportunities for coaching and feedback. Dedicating time for observations and feedback therefore served an important role in establishing norms around discipline.

Strategic Hiring for Mission, Values & Culture Fit

A portion of our interviews and focus groups involved questions about how school's leveraged their hiring practices to meet the district's discipline goals. Most schools said they hired people who demonstrated alignment with their school's staff and student culture, core values, or discipline philosophies. Commonly cited characteristics included: 1) capacity for relationship building; 2) belief in all students' potential; 3) a commitment to meeting the needs of all types of children; and, 4) responsiveness to feedback. A secondary school leader said, *“I find people who care about kids. That's a big shift for me. The*

“I look for instant connection with kids. People [who] come in and in five minutes, they know kids' names and you can see a relationship building. I look for neutral statements, not judgmental, or too praisey. I can coach on that. But if it's really negative or punitive, I don't look at you as a candidate. I definitely look for high-paced student engagement, changing it up, [incorporating] movement piece. No matter who the child is, they can't sit through a 30 minute lecture. I mean, I can't!”

-K-8 School Principal

first year here I tried to hire the best content teachers. This year I just went out looking for people who are going to love our kids.” Participants also described how they used differing hiring practices to find high quality candidates who had these traits. In writing samples or initial interviews, schools asked questions about their approach to building relationships, beliefs about students, and commitment to equity or inclusion. For example, one school asked candidates to *“relate to a story, personal or professional, where the value of all kids was taken into account.”* Another asked, *“How has your own race and class privilege tied into your success?”* How applicants responded to such questions indicated their fit with the school’s mission. *‘If someone’s willing to say, I don’t know, I’ve never thought about that, let me unpack this,’ that’s who we want in front of our kids. Someone that says, ‘That’s not a thing’ [is not] the best fit for our culture.”* One charter school even utilized an empirically-validated survey to screen applicants for mission and culture fit, called the Haberman Foundation’s Star Teacher Questionnaire, described by a focus group participant as *“a screener for teachers who will work well in urban environments.”* After preliminary screens, schools further assessed fit with school culture through observations, demonstrations, mock meetings, and scenarios. For example, a few schools assessed the trait of a growth mindset by having applicants incorporate or respond to feedback from observers.

Availability of School-Based Student Services

Schools of all types attributed their success in meeting district goals to strong, site-based student services that were provided by a wide range and mix of professionals from a variety of disciplines, including mental health (school social workers, school counselors, school psychologists), school culture (deans or administrative assistants, restorative counselors, social-emotional learning coordinators), specialists (academic or behavioral interventionists, physical therapists, paraprofessionals), and others (family liaisons, social services, recess coaches). These adult rich environments supported robust implementation of school-wide systems and inclusive protocols for responding to misbehavior:

“We’re able catch kids before they fall. To have three interventionists on-site for a school of 360 kids is excellent. That doesn’t include myself [psychologist], that doesn’t include our special educator, our speech language pathologist, our OT, who also work to help provide classroom-based supports.”

Many described the importance of having student support services every day of the week so that providers would be able to *“see patterns”* and *“really get to know the students.”* When that was not possible, schools pieced together part-time positions to have supports every day of the school week. Schools often built out these supports with their own budgets, supplemented by fundraisers or parent donations, or grants and community partnerships with organizations like City Year, Playworks, Uplift, GREAT, and Denver Mental Health.

District Resources

We asked participants to talk about their experiences with Denver Public School district partners, policies, programs, funding or other supports in relation to meeting school discipline goals. Educators identified several strengths in district-level supports, but also areas of improvement. Funding for site-based student services through the mental health expansion grants were highlighted as the most useful. The availability of discipline partners to answer specific questions about discipline incidents and how they should be addressed, was another area of strength for the district,

along with professional development and trainings support. Areas of improvement include district-wide discipline meetings, long-term funding, and ease or timeliness of communications with district partners.

When I think about the larger picture on how I want the district to be more in tune with is this whole conversation about behavior versus discipline. I need to have more flexibility around money and more money to be able to make this really fly. After seeing the effectiveness of [Restorative Practices], I could have somebody on here full time working with staff for at least 2 years. But [the district is] so focused on instructional leadership, that I feel like many of the culture pieces don't have the resources or the time to be able to develop properly."

– Elementary School
Principal

Dedicated Funding

Participants from about half of the schools identified district funding dedicated to site-based student services as a critical resource provided by the district. Funding for home-visit programs and mental health expansion grants was often cited as helpful in meeting the discipline goals. Time-limited funding created difficulties in sustaining reforms, however: *"The .5 expansion on mental health support that was granted to me was awesome. The challenge with the way our structure is [that] once schools start doing well they stop giving you funds."* Conversely, about half of schools reported needing additional support for school social workers, school psychologists, restorative justice coordinators, and other student support staff. Several administrators shared disappointment about the 1-day mental health support provided by the district and felt, especially in highly impacted schools, that two full time staff members were needed. Many observed that the district's current emphasis on site-based budgeting, without dedicated lines of funding for student services, indicated that the district was not serious about discipline reforms, or did not value positive behavior and school culture systems.

Professional Learning and Trainings

Many schools found professional development units or other trainings led by the district on equity and inclusion, Restorative Practices, and culturally responsive education to be helpful resources in their efforts to meet discipline goals. About a third of schools referenced the district-wide Discipline Building Leaders (DBL) meetings during interviews or focus groups. Several participants found the meetings to be helpful, especially content on racial disparities and equity in the discipline process. An elementary school administrator said, *"[If] they had never mentioned the inequity in Black males being suspended versus everybody else, I might have just said 'okay, it's on the discipline ladder, they were fighting, that's a suspension, we need to teach them a lesson.' I'll give the district credit for raising my awareness."*

However, the majority of participants who referenced the DBL meetings said they did not attend because the content was not tailored to their grade-level, governance type, or school network. Others, especially those from schools with small administrative teams, found it difficult to participate in the meetings during regular school hours, but expressed an interest in attending if

other time options were made available. Increasing the relevancy of meeting content and the use of experiential facilitation methods were other recommendations for improvement. Several charter schools expressed a desire for additional clarification about their responsibilities and legal or policy obligations related to discipline, including whether or not they should attend the DBL meetings. One educator even suggested that staff get training from the district on anything that's "mandated" by law or policy. As one charter school administrator observed, *"because charter schools and district schools are so separated, in instances where a student brings a weapon to school where we have to follow [district] protocol, we don't know what that protocol is because we're not required to go to any of those trainings. We could do a better job of working together."*

Consultations with District Partners

Contacting OSEL and discipline partners was a commonly mentioned district resource. In particular, educators found it helpful to work with OSEL network partners and discipline coordinators as thought partners for developing interventions when misbehavior escalated to an office discipline referral. Administrators often contacted district discipline coordinators when they weren't sure how to apply district policy to a particular incident. As one principal said, *"I have conversations with [a district discipline coordinator] all the time to just bounce ideas off of"* and as another charter school dean said, *"I've always been able to reach out and say, 'hey I have this situation how do you think I should handle it?'...so it's not fun but I've always felt there's been support."*

At the same time, participants also identified areas of improvement for district partners. One suggestion was to improve clarity about who to contact for different types of support. Many administrators were not sure who to contact because of changes in district positions, responsibilities and phone numbers. Navigating district support systems was challenging even for principals who had worked in the district for many years who said they were *"starting to find it harder and harder to get through the layers because the players have changed."* A second suggestion was to improve communication response times between district partners and school staff. Some educators reported that their calls, particularly those related to Special Education, led to dead ends or were not responded to quickly enough to be useful.

Other schools felt that rather than helping schools develop interventions or connect to additional resources, their support partners approached them as though they were not doing enough for their students. As one principal described, *"What I feel on a regular bases is frustration, 'You didn't do enough for this kid... You need to try harder you need to be innovative you need to think outside of the box.'" From this, a final suggestion was for support partners to refrain from blaming school personnel for discipline incidents and approach the work more collaboratively. While administrators agreed that additional efforts to support students on their end were necessary, they felt additional funding, services, or resources from the district were needed to do so.*

EVIDENCE FROM THE RESEARCH LITERATURE

The research literature on effective school discipline provides support for many of the factors and approaches described by Denver educators in this report. The strongest evidence exists for relationship building; school-wide, positive, and restorative systems; discipline or behavior protocols that limit the use of punitive and exclusionary practices; and debiasing interventions.

Racial and Socioeconomic Integration

Many studies have documented relationship between school racial and socioeconomic composition and discipline outcomes (Payne & Welch, 2010; Skiba et al., 2014). Schools serving predominantly students of color and students from low-income backgrounds tend to use punitive discipline sanctions more widely and have larger racial disparities in suspension and expulsion (Payne & Welch, 2010; Skiba et al., 2014). These patterns are partially explained by characteristics of highly segregated schools: limited capacity for parent fundraising, unequal school funding, less access to highly qualified teachers, and the concentration of security guards or police officers (Arcia, 2007; Eitle & Eitle, 2004).

School-Wide Positive Behavior and School Culture Systems

The emphasis on school-wide expectations and systems reported by educators in focus groups and interviews is consistent with previous research on effective school discipline. School-wide and teacher-focused interventions are among the most effective approaches for improving student behavioral outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). Successful approaches to discipline are characterized by preventative, collaborative, and instructional strategies that coordinate school- and classroom-level supports (Skiba & Peterson, 2010). A multi-tiered framework that involves defining and teaching expectations, reinforcing positive behavior, redirecting unacceptable behavior, and managing repeated or serious rule violations consistently throughout the building has proven to be especially effective in reducing discipline incidents (Simonsen, et al., 2015).

Relationship Building

Establishing authentic, supportive relationships is a key lever in creating a positive school climate, minimizing problem behaviors, and reducing racial discipline gaps (Gregory, Bell, & Pollock, 2014). The warm-strict approach to relationships is well supported in the literature as a strategy for building positive relationships with students (Bondy & Ross, 2008). Relationships with students of color are especially important for teachers to develop because such students often have feel less safe among, and connected to, adults in schools (Voight, Hanson, O' Malley, & Adekanye, 2015). A recent study in DPS documented the same pattern; Black, Latino, Asian, and Multiracial students in the district all felt less care, concern, encouragement, and emotional availability from school adults than their White counterparts (Anyon, Zhang, & Hazel, 2016).

Restorative Practices

Multiple studies suggest that Restorative Practices can reduce office discipline referrals and suspensions, improve school climate and teacher-student interactions, reduce racial disparities in suspension, and even improve academic outcomes (Jain, Bassey, Brown, & Kalra, 2014; McCluskey, Lloyd, Kane, et al. 2008; Teske, 2011; Schiff, 2013) Recent research conducted in Denver Public Schools also finds that the use of Restorative Practices can reduce a student’s risk for an out-of-school suspension (Anyon et al., 2014; Gonzalez, 2011)

Behavioral Recognitions and Rewards

Several studies have demonstrated that implementation of school-wide systems of expectations, rewards, and recognition lead to reduced discipline incidents (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Mukuria, 2002; Skiba & Sprague, 2008; Vincent & Tobin, 2011). In the schools we studied, school-wide systems were typically premised upon providing positive reinforcements for desired behavior through incentive programs and rewards, a strategy consistent in other low-suspending schools (Bradshaw, Koth, Thornton, & Leaf, 2009; Christle, et al, 2004; Raffael Mendez, Knoff, Ferron, 2002).

Social Emotional Skill Building

The emphasis on social emotional skill building among schools that met the district’s discipline goals is consistent with studies of other low-suspending schools in which social emotional programs are used as part of an overall response strategy aimed at meeting student’s needs, rather than relying on punishment (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000; Raffael Mendez, Knoff, Ferron, 2002).

Inclusive Policies and Protocols for Responding to Misbehavior

Recognizing the subjective nature of the district discipline policy, several schools perceived incidents that could have been interpreted as zero-tolerance infractions -- necessitating suspension—as contextually-bound interactions that fell into grey areas in the district’s discipline policy. Such an interpretation tended to result in supporting students rather than automatically punishing them. This flexible interpretation of district policy is consistent with studies on low-suspending schools, whereas high suspending schools tend to adopt a black-and-white interpretation of discipline policies (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000). District and school leaders may do well to decide on a shared interpretation or extent to which directives on the discipline ladder may be negotiated.

Classroom-based interventions

Many schools in this study made it a clear priority that educators to resolve discipline incidents in the classroom using graduated, tiered responses. Following basic classroom strategies to resolve misbehavior, teachers would seek additional supports from colleagues and use data-collection and reflection strategies to direct subsequent intervention strategies. Most office referrals originate in the classroom (Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Skiba, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). It is fitting then, that schools in this study emphasized a “classroom-first” intervention approach. The use of a graduated approach that proceeds from universal supports to more specialized, student-specific,

data-driven interventions is nearly identical to the process modeled in Response to Intervention (RtI), a national model used to improve the accuracy with which students are identified for increasingly intensive instructional supports and special education services (Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2010). The systematic decision-making approach undergirding RtI reduces the unnecessary identification of students without disabilities (VanderHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007).

Student Support Services

Part of the graduated response to discipline used by educators in this study included referring students for social and emotional support services with school-based mental health providers such as psychologists and social workers. While research on the direct effects of school-based providers is limited, available recommendations suggest that these professionals can support discipline reforms by advocating for students' well-being, offering trainings for staff, and educating staff about the consequences of suspension and use of alternative form of discipline (Cameron, 2006; Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010).

Proactive and Inclusive Discipline Protocols

There is no research evidence supporting the use of suspension as an effective strategy for changing student behavior (Skiba, Shure, Middelberg & Baker, 2011.) Schools in this study typically had established a general process for responding to misbehavior that focused on early prevention and graduated supportive interventions with limited use of punitive practices. The last-resort approach to exclusionary practices effectively takes the option off the table, creating positive pressure for educators to innovate new ways of intervening and responding to students. Such an approach is consistent with study findings from other low-suspending schools which typically emphasized prevention and services over exclusion (Skiba et al., 2014; Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000; Mukuria, 2002; Christle et al 2004).

Awareness of Racial Inequalities and Bias

Despite the potential for school-wide systems to reduce the overall number of discipline incidents, they alone will not reduce racial disparities (Gregory, Bell, & Pollock, 2014; McIntosh, Frank, & Spaulding 2010; Vincent & Tobin, 2011). Rather, reducing racial disparities requires a race-conscious approach that recognizes the role of racism and racial stereotyping in discipline processes (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2014) and that uses culturally relevant frameworks as part of a school-wide approach (Jones, Caravaca, Cizek, Horner, & Vincent, 2006; Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Braday, 2011). A limited number of schools in this study explicitly discussed race and racism. In schools, biases are enacted towards students of color through educators' nonverbal criticism and lowered expectations, less favorable treatment in classrooms, and presumptions of criminality (Casteel, 1998; LaVonne, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003; Blair 2001; Ferguson, 2000; Monroe, 2006; Pinnow, 2013; Simpson, & Erickson, 1983). Implicit biases are pervasive and people are particularly vulnerable to act upon them in high-pressure, time constrained decision-making (Staats, 2014). Despite their pervasiveness, implicit biases are malleable and can be reduced through evidence-based strategies such as role-playing, extended time for decision-making,

promoting empathy and connections to racially different groups, countering stereotyped assumptions, and explicating implicit biases through deliberate processing (Aboud & Fenwick, 1999; McGregor, 1993; Paluck & Green, 2009; Staats, 2014). Several schools in this study also mentioned the importance of academic rigor, engagement, high expectations and high supports for minimizing racial disparities. High expectations for student learning and performance, with caring adult relationships, has shown great promise for reducing office discipline referrals and suspensions for Black students in particular (Gregory, Bell, & Pollock, 2014; Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011)

Conditions that Support Robust Implementation

Introducing new discipline approaches to school staff and ensuring they are utilized consistently is challenging. However, there is strong evidence about two key conditions that school leaders can create to promote robust implementation.

Professional Learning

Professional learning opportunities were frequently mentioned by participants as a necessary condition for high quality implementation of discipline and behavior systems. Research also indicates that the amount and quality of training and technical assistance, including consultation and coaching, is associated with higher program fidelity in school settings (Payne et al., 2006; Mendenhall et al., 2013). In fact, schools with low rates of suspension tend to provide more staff development and training and more varied ways of reducing and preventing misbehavior (Raffael Mendez, Knoff, Ferron, 2002). Just as students need opportunities to develop their skill sets, so too school staff benefit from opportunities to hone social and emotional skills (Gregory, Bell, & Pollock, 2014). Certain kinds of professional development may directly impact the racial discipline gap. Teacher training programs to improve relationships between teachers and students showed benefits to reducing suspension rates overall, but especially for Black students (Gregory et al. 2012).

Accountability

Study participants reported that adopting new discipline approaches required school staff to encourage and support each other, but also provide critical and timely feedback to individuals who do not follow protocol. Other studies have found that school leaders can help staff overcome resistance to new systems by being willing to expose their own vulnerabilities and areas of growth, facilitating shared decision-making, and focusing on staff relationships (Harris, 2005; Zimmerman, 2006). These strategies comprise the approach of distributed or shared leadership (Bolden, 2011). Distributed leadership has been shown to be effective in implementing school reform, largely with respect to academic achievement and performance (Bolden, 2011). However, the key strategies such as a focus on relationships, creating an environment where learning is valued among staff, and a collaborative school culture are all aligned with themes reported by participants in the interviews and focus groups.

District Resources

The research evidence on how districts can positively impact discipline is limited; but studies suggest district-wide investments into social-emotional supports and replace suspension with learner-

centered approaches can result in drastic reductions in the frequency of behavioral incidents (Cornell & Lovegrove, 2013). Additionally, district resources should also focus on empowering principals to adopt aspects of distributed leadership within their school, adopting a more “coaching” focused model with principals. Studies show this practice is effective in support principals (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014) and includes such strategies as joining and working with principals to create and sustain change, personalizing support tailored to the needs of the principal, modeling skills, tools, and techniques, providing tools, and brokering for resources (Honig, 2012). As with principals promoting change within their school by personalizing services and empowering teachers, district staff should employ similar strategies when partnering with principals. Many techniques available to accomplish this, however solution focused approaches and motivational interviewing appear to be particularly impactful. Motivational Interviewing (MI) is an approach to communication and engagement rooted in change and “it is designed to strengthen personal motivation for and commitment to a specific goal” (Miller & Rollnick, 2012 pg. 29 as cited by Frey, Sims, & Alvarez, 2013). Solution focused approaches shift perspective to concentrate time and attention towards what is working or when things have been going well (Kelly, Liscio, Bluestone-Miller & Shilts, 2011). Both solution-focused approaches are well supported in theoretical literature and literature about change in schools and classrooms (Frey et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2011). As such, it is recommended that when engaging with principals (or coaching principals to engage with their staff) positive, solution focused approaches are used with an eye towards change employing MI techniques.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are focused on themes from this report that were consistent across our qualitative and quantitative data, and/or are supported by prior research:

Schools. Robustly implement key strategies outlined in this report:

- Engage all school staff in ongoing professional learning about universal strategies for relationship-building, proactive classroom management approaches, equity frameworks, and implicit bias.
- Establish and provide training for school staff on inclusive and proactive discipline or behavior protocols.
- Collaboratively (re)establish and teach school-wide expectations for students and staff members every school year, with regular opportunities for recognition of positive behavior.
- Greet students and implement social-emotional learning or community building activities at the start of the school day.
- Participate in the Parent-Teacher Home Visit program.
- Use Restorative Practices to address low-level misbehavior and resolve more serious discipline incidents.
- Allocate funds from site-based budgets, fundraise, and write grants to provide a wide variety of site-based student support services.

The District. Create high expectations, high support, and high accountability conditions that encourage more schools to implement the strategies outlined in this report:

- Strengthen initiatives that promote racially and socioeconomically integrated schools, such as high quality schools in every neighborhood, and transportation for students who choice-in to schools outside of their community.
- Expand the Parent-Teacher Home Visit program to a greater number of schools, prioritizing those with high suspension rates.
- Increase the availability of engaging and tailored site- or network-based training and consultation on Equity, PBIS, and Restorative Practices.
- Develop consistent strategies for recognizing and rewarding schools who use Restorative Practices in response to discipline incidents, reduce their suspension rates, and/or minimize racial suspension gaps over time. Incorporate these measures into the School Performance Framework.
- Provide training and consultation on evidence-based classroom management approaches like Responsive Classroom.
- Conduct a needs assessments of schools that have consistently been unable to meet the district’s discipline goals.
- Leverage mill levy funds in support of all types of school-based service providers, including social workers and psychologists, but also Restorative Practices counselors and Social-Emotional Learning coordinators.
- Re-introduce and provide sustained financial support for the “mental health expansion grant” to provide additional school-based student services at sites with high suspension rates.
- Provide consultants, workshops, or network-based mentoring for principals in highly impacted schools to receive support with fundraising, grant-writing, and site-based budgeting in support of the strategies outlined in this report.
- Encourage Instructional Superintendents to advocate that principals utilize district-offered training and consultation on Equity, Restorative Practices, PBIS, and evidence-based classroom management approaches.
- Train district partners who provide consultations to schools in solution-focused coaching and motivational interviewing.

APPENDIX

Tables

Table 1: Qualitative School Sample Characteristics for the 2014-2015 School Year.

The qualitative sample is a sub-set of schools that met the district’s discipline goals *and* had at least 1% of the student body that identified as Black (n=33). A larger number of schools (n=81) met the district’s discipline goals, but had very few, if any, Black students.

	Qualitative Sample (n=33) % or mean	All Other Schools (n=167) % or mean
<i>Grade Configuration</i>		
% Elementary Schools	58	43
% Non-Traditional Schools (e.g. K-8, 6-12)	24	11**
% Middle Schools	6	22**
% High Schools	12	25
<i>Management Type</i>		
% District-Managed Schools	58	55
% Charter Schools	21	25
% Innovation Schools	21	20
<i>Student Composition</i>		
Mean School Size	503	432
% Students of Color	61	78****
% Eligible for Free & Reduced Lunch	56	74****
% Limited English Proficient	14	20**
% with Disabilities	9	11***

*The number of stars next to a value indicates statistical significance, or the probability (a form of mathematical confidence), that the differences in the means or percentages of between these two groups of schools is not random in a district of this size. *p < .10, ** p <.05, ***p <.01, ****p <.001

Table 2: Descriptive comparison of all Schools that met the district’s discipline goals and those that did not during the 2014-2015 school year.

	Low Suspending Schools (n=81) % or mean	Others (n=119) % or mean
<i>Grade Configuration</i>		
% Elementary Schools	64	33****
% Non-Traditional Schools (e.g. K-8, 6-12)	17	10
% Middle Schools	5	29****
% High Schools	14	29**
<i>Management Type</i>		
% District-Managed Schools	67	48****
% Charter Schools	16	30**
% Innovation Schools	16	23
<i>Student Composition</i>		
Mean School Size	426	455
% Students of Color	65	83****
% Latino	50	63****
% White	30	13****
% Multiracial	3	2***
% Black	11	17***
% Asian & Pacific Islander	3	2*
% American Indian	1	1
% Eligible for Free & Reduced Lunch	60	78****
% Limited English Proficient	15	22****
% with Disabilities	9	12***

Table 2, continued.

	Low Suspending Schools (n=81)	Others (n=119)
	% or mean	% or mean
<i>Discipline Rates</i>		
% of Student Population with Serious Discipline Incidents	5	15****
% of Student Population Suspended	1	8****
Mean Racial Discipline Gap	0	7****
<i>Consequences for Disciplined Students</i>		
% Suspended	32	55****
% Students Referred to Support Services	26	28
% Received RPs	21	16*
% Suspended In-School	22	30**
% Behavior Contract	4	4
% In-School Intervention Room	2	5*
% Referred to Law Enforcement	2	4**

*The number of stars next to a value indicates statistical significance, or the probability (a form of statistical confidence), that the differences in the means or percentages of between these two groups of schools is not random in a district of this size. *p < .10, ** p <.05, ***p <.01, ****p <.001

Table 3: Statistical analysis of factors associated with meeting district discipline goals during the 2014-2015 school year^a

	Likelihood of meeting district goals
% of Student Population Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch ¹	-3.51***
% of Student Population with Serious Discipline Incidents	-28.63****
% Disciplined Students Suspended	-5.24****
% Disciplined Students Suspended In-School	-2.96***
% Disciplined Students who Received RPs	+2.41**

^aOnly statistically significant results are presented. This analysis also accounted for grade-level, proportion of students with disabilities, proportion of students who are limited English proficient, governance type, use of in-school intervention room and law enforcement referrals.

+/- A negative or positive sign indicates the direction of the relationship.

The numerical value represents the magnitude of the relationship between a school feature and meeting the district's discipline goals.

*The number of stars next to a value indicates statistical significance, or the probability (a form of mathematical confidence), that the relationship between school features and a school's likelihood of meeting the district's discipline goals is not random in a district of this size. *p < .10, ** p <.05, ***p <.01, ****p <.001

Resources

The following websites provide additional information about some of the strategies discussed in this report.

Effective School Discipline:

- <http://supportiveschooldiscipline.org/>
- <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html>

Discipline Disparities:

- <https://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/>
- <http://www.indiana.edu/~equityiu/>

Growth Mindset:

- <http://www.mindsetworks.com/mindset-school/>
- <http://www.edutopia.org/topic/growth-mindset>

JK-R:

- http://webdata.dpsk12.org/policy/pdf/Policy_JK-R_Attachment_A.pdf
- https://www.dpsk12.org/pdf/Executive_Summary_English.pdf
- http://webdata.dpsk12.org/policy/pdf/Policy_JK-R_Attachment_B.pdf
- http://webdata.dpsk12.org/policy/pdf/Policy_JK-R_Attachment_C.pdf

SWPBIS (School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports): <https://www.pbis.org/>

Relationship Building: <http://www.corclassrooms.org/>

Responsive Classroom: <https://www.responsiveclassroom.org/>

Restorative Practices: <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/restorative-justice-resources-matt-davis>

Social-Emotional Learning: <http://www.casel.org/>

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¹ The proportion of students eligible for free and reduced lunch in a school constituted the indicator of both racial and socioeconomic segregation in the statistical model. These two demographic features of school composition were so strongly related to each other they could not be disentangled. In other words, the proportion of students eligible for free and reduced lunch is so highly correlated with the percentage of students of color in a school (.94) that they essentially measure the same phenomenon. We therefore ran models separately, with either percent free and reduced lunch or percent students of color, and the results were fundamentally identical in terms of the direction and statistical significance of each covariate.