



Roundtable: The Perspectives of Youth Affected by Exclusionary School Discipline

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Introduction

Reports of exclusionary school disciplinary policies have made headlines in recent years. Prominent among them was the release of *Breaking Schools' Rules: A Statewide Study on How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement* in July 2011 by The Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center in partnership with the Public Policy Research



Institute at Texas A&M University. This groundbreaking study of nearly 1 million Texas public secondary school students, followed for at least six years, found that a student's risk for repeating a grade, not graduating, and for involvement in the juvenile justice system increases significantly when a student is suspended or expelled.¹ Research has consistently demonstrated that suspensions and expulsions have been applied disproportionately to racial and ethnic minorities, males, students with low socioeconomic backgrounds, and students with disabilities.² For instance, a national report based on K-12 suspension data released by the US Department of Education in March 2012 indicated that across all racial and ethnic groups, more than 13% of students with disabilities were suspended—approximately twice the rate of their non-disabled peers.³ Furthermore, students of color are suspended and expelled more frequently and for less serious and more subjective behaviors than their nonminority peers.⁴

Two days after the release of the CSG report, the US Departments of Justice (DOJ) and Education (ED) announced the Supportive School Discipline Initiative (SSDI) citing concern that the use of excessive and inappropriate school disciplinary practices too often contribute to the pipeline to prison (the relationship between widespread school suspensions and expulsions and resulting involvement in the juvenile justice system).⁵ The Initiative is a collaboration between the two agencies implemented in coordination with organizations in the nonprofit and

¹ Fabelo, T., Thompson M. D., Plotkin, M., Carmichael, D., Marchbanks, M. P., & Booth, E. A. (2011). *Breaking schools' rules: A statewide study of how school discipline relates to students' success and juvenile justice involvement*. Retrieved from http://justicecenter.csg.org/files/Breaking_Schools_Rules_Report_Final.pdf

² Mendez, L. M., & Knoff, H. M. (2003). Who gets suspended from school and why: A demographic analysis of schools and disciplinary infractions in a large school district. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 26, 30–51.

³ Losen, D., & Gillespie, J. (2012). *Opportunities suspended: The disparate impact of disciplinary exclusion from school*. The Center for Civil Rights Remedies at The Civil Rights Project. Retrieved March 20, 2013, from <http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/resources/projects/center-for-civil-rights-remedies/school-to-prison-folder/federal-reports/upcoming-ccrr-research>

⁴ Skiba, R. J. (2002). Special education and school discipline: A precarious balance. *Behavioral Disorders*, 27(2): 81–97.; Skiba, R. J., & Knesting, K. (2001). Zero tolerance, zero evidence: An analysis of school disciplinary practice. In R. J. Skiba & G. G. Noam (Eds.), *New directions for youth development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.; Townsend, B. (2000). The disproportionate discipline of African American learners: Reducing school suspensions and expulsions. *Exceptional Children*, 66(3): 383–391.

⁵ https://www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojjdp/news_at_glance/235188/sf_1.html

philanthropic communities including CSG, the Atlantic Philanthropies, The Open Society Institute, and California Endowment. The goals of the SSDI are four-fold, to:

1. build consensus for action among federal, state and local education and justice stakeholders;
2. collaborate on research and data collection that may be needed to inform this work, such as evaluations of alternative disciplinary policies and interventions;
3. develop guidance to ensure that school discipline policies and practices comply with the nation's civil rights laws and to promote positive disciplinary options to both keep kids in school and improve the climate for learning; and
4. promote awareness and knowledge about evidence-based and promising policies and practices among state judicial and education leadership.⁶

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) has also played a role in the SSDI. This includes conducting research, contributing to The CSG's work as well as a variety of activities supported by supporting activities of Atlantic Philanthropies, providing support to Federal efforts through a variety of TA Centers that AIR runs. This work included conducting one face to face listening session and three virtual listening sessions for ED and DOJ in 2012. The goal of the listening sessions was to identify high-priority resources, tools, and training products that the field needs to adopt positive disciplinary practices in schools nationwide. At one of these sessions, participating youth asked AIR to conduct a youth-only event. Accordingly, on January 16, 2013, the Human and Social Development (HSD) program within AIR convened a youth roundtable in Washington, DC. Working with youth-focused agencies, AIR recruited a group of 19 young people to participate. The youth, most of whom had at one point been suspended or expelled from school, ranged in age from 16 to 23, came from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, attended schools in Washington, DC and New York City, and included students with disabilities.

In Their Own Words

During the roundtable, youth participants were asked to respond to a number of questions designed to elicit their personal stories and perspectives on how exclusionary school discipline affects the social-emotional development, academic performance, and life trajectories of youth. A number of perspectives on the impact of exclusionary discipline on students and recommendations for improving school climates emerged from the roundtable discussions which this report details. Three primary concerns were raised during the roundtable discussion.



⁶ <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2011/July/11-ag-951.html>

Exclusionary discipline:

1. limits opportunities to learn and compromises academic achievement,
2. is applied disproportionately and subjectively, and
3. deprives students of the support services they need.

The sections below detail what the youth themselves said about these three primary issues.

Exclusionary discipline limits opportunities to learn and compromises academic achievement

“I’m constantly getting pushed out of classes and doing my work, and not being able to succeed and to graduate on time.” Participants described situations in which exclusionary disciplinary actions caused them to fall behind academically:

“Students are actively put out of school for everything from not having enough money for textbooks to harassment from student safety officers. They get pushed out of schools and onto the streets and get funneled into the juvenile justice system. So, that is when students who dropout because they don’t have enough resources for afterschool programs, students that dropout because English is not their first language and their math state test is in English and they have to take it. So, things like that push [students] out.”

One participant stated that “I shouldn’t have gotten suspended for coming to school out of dress code; I should have maybe got in-school suspension so I could still be able to focus on my education, not just be out of school.” Another commented:

“...At my school...when you came late, you had to sit in the cafeteria and miss your whole first period and get stuck behind in your classes... [When] I get kicked out of class, I don’t get to do my work, and it sets me further back from graduating. And I would have to work really hard to get back on pace so I could graduate and make sure I’m not failing anymore.”

Exclusionary discipline is applied disproportionately and subjectively

“It is basically stereotyping and favoritism.” Some of the youth stated that disciplinary actions seem to be applied disproportionately to certain student demographic groups over others. One student suggested this by saying that, “...staff, they show, it is basically stereotyping and favoritism...because I’m a black male with dreads [and] all my teachers are white.”

“...you get suspended for minute things.” Additionally, participants reported that disciplinary actions are often perceived as more severe than the infraction would imply. As one participant suggested:

“We are making the effort to come get our education, but you turn us back around because you don’t have a tie... like...it was an assessment day so we were supposed to have collared shirts on, button down collars. But, I had a polo shirt and no tie. Like, I know that, but I am just trying to get to school on time because

you turn me back around if I don't have a pass [for being tardy], so if I forget something, you shouldn't deprive me of my education, based on the tie."

Another participant recounted a similar encounter that involved a classmate who had written his name on a desk during his freshman year and was arrested for it during in his senior year:

"Like all that time they couldn't find out who it was. So, they finally found who it was in his senior year, and they arrested him for it instead of talking to him and asking him why he did it. They arrested him after he offered to clean it and fix it. After that, he had tests, he had graduation, and he fell behind on all of that because of a minor infraction that he offered to fix himself."

Exclusionary discipline deprives students of the support services they need

"They don't need to be arrested; they need to go to therapy." Participants perceive that school staff are not taking the time to uncover the reasons behind student behavioral issues. Many of the youth stated that school personnel could do a better job of "actually listening to the students...instead of punishing them right away..." One student recalled:

"In my school, they didn't dig deeper into why you were getting in trouble or anything. I almost got arrested and suspended from a fight that I wasn't a part of. I came into a class and it was a substitute teacher, and they had my name already written on a referral when I initially walked in, and I ended up getting kicked out of class for a referral that just quoted things that I said, and I was just trying to figure out why I was getting a referral in the first place."

Roundtable participants argued that by not doing so, schools deprive students of the mental health services they really need as well as training in social emotional learning. One participant commented that:

"If you have a police officer there, they are going to end up with a record...If it was just a teacher and they ended up figuring out what the issue was, they get talked to or like get adequate resource that they need. They don't need to be arrested; they need to go to therapy."



Recommendations for change

“Our schools look like jails.” While some students were concerned about the presence of police in school, others were not. Some participants, who came from DC, believed that the presence of security personnel was warranted and heightened their sense of security while other—including all students from New York City—stated conversely that police presence made them feel less safe. Some participants went so far as to liken school to prison:

“...walking into school that has seven feet high fences, having one exit with a long line of metal detectors, getting searched in areas that you feel are only personal to you—that contributes to an unsafe environment. Specifically in New York City, which is the biggest public education system, there are more security guards than there are in the DC police force, than there are in the Boston police force, than there are in the Philadelphia police force. So if you compare that number to the maybe one guidance counselor and maybe one college counselor... that is an environment that looks exactly like a jail...and that contributes to that unsafe environment.”

“A good school to me is when you feel like you are being supported by your teachers and can talk to somebody and get help.” Comparatively, when asked to describe their ideal school, participants described one that is full of “good, culturally responsive teachers,” who are accessible to students seeking academic, social, and emotional support. They described an “adequately funded” school free of violence and drugs, offering high quality learning experiences, and in which all students are “treated equally, not depending on their race or gender.” They imagined an environment in which students have some decision-making power, and where “mutual respect between staff and students” exists due to restorative practices (those that focus on accountability, healing, and needs vs. punishments) in the school. As one participant suggested:

“By restorative practice I mean make it a community thing, make it so a student feels comfortable coming back into that situation. So, they come back into the community feeling more holistically better, not just for that situation, but they feel better as a person as they come into it, and not just with that person, but with the community.”

Recommendations

- Develop a culture in which school staff seek to understand the catalysts for disciplinary incidents prior to taking disciplinary action.
- Eliminate mechanisms that remove students from class or other learning opportunities for minor offenses.
- Develop the capacity of students and staff alike to create a positive, safe school community and an environment where everyone is treated fairly.
- Collect discipline disparity data.
- Establish community partnerships to address gaps in staff capacity in schools.
- Offer academic support services for students in need.
- Implement mechanisms such as restorative justice and peer mediation to help students hold themselves accountable.
- Foster positive relationships between adults and students.

To realize this vision for a safe and healthy school environment in which all students can learn and thrive, the roundtable participants offered a number of recommendations.

- **Develop a culture in which school staff seek to understand the catalysts for disciplinary incidents prior to taking disciplinary action.** “I think that a lot of schools need more counseling, mentoring, tutoring groups. Most of the kids I know bring their outside life to school... For my personal life--probation, foster care, getting locked up--is how I got kicked out of school. I think that a lot of students just need someone they feels like they care...If you come to school late and your principal suspends you, right? You out of school, you watching TV, you on the street. If you don't sit down with the student, you never know what somebody is going through except when they tell you. You don't know what nobody is going through when they are outside of school. They could be late because somebody just died and still when they come in you are going to suspend them and when you look into and really sit down and talk to a child and communicate and say, 'You are wrong,' that goes out the window. You don't know what I have been through before I was in school, and I still made it here, and I'm doing my work, and you still want to find some way to suspend me.”
- **Eliminate mechanisms that remove students from class or other learning opportunities for minor offenses.** “...if there are policies and practices that are blocking a pathway and making it difficult to learn, then you need to get rid of it...if it is blocking you from being able to get your education, if it is stopping you from being present in class, if you get suspended for minute things, get rid of it so that students can actually stay in class and continue to learn and grow. You are there to teach them, so teach them. Quit kicking them out and suspending them for the minute things like if I have on blue... I thought my brain was up here, not on my shirt... We are here to learn, so let us learn.”
- **Develop the capacity of students and staff alike to create a positive, safe school community and an environment where everyone is treated fairly.** “...implement more restorative justice practices and policies like peer courts, increasing training with involving improvements to create a healthy school environment on, like, evidence research data. Also to get rid of certain policies that are not working, like zero tolerance policies, and actually get equitable funding for a school, less for police, more for schools, because every time there has been a funding cut it has come from schools, and if we don't have the money for it, we are not going to have any schools because they are constantly closing, and we don't need that anymore. So, do more to get actual student input, restorative policies so when they come back it is more comfortable and a positive environment that feels more like school and comfortable instead of like a prison.”
- **Collect discipline disparity data.** “Get more data. Like the racial disparity data... how many students of color being suspended or given detention than a different race of students or different genders.”
- **Establish community partnerships to address gaps in staff capacity in schools.** “...I also want to focus on, like, the resources your organization has. If your nonprofit organization is great on social emotional support, there are schools that don't have social workers, and barely have guidance counselor, and barely have that shoulder to lean on. So, we can't look to a teacher that has 50 students to be that shoulder to cry on...So, really identifying what your organization can give, and then working together to find out where is the best place to give those resources.”

- **Offer academic support services for students in need.** “There weren’t always a lot of opportunities available for you to go into tutoring. So, you could try to ask your friends in class, but that didn’t always work because sometimes your friend was just as lost as you. And there are always rules in class that you are not supposed to talk even if you are trying to get help, because I know I tried that in class, where I tried to ask my friend for help, and I got kicked out of class ‘cause I didn’t know what was going on, and I got detention.”
- **Implement mechanisms such as restorative justice and peer mediation to help students hold themselves accountable.** “Student accountability is shown to work, right, through mediation, restorative justice? And just look at the example in California where someone who was not a part of the school came in with a gun, and the person who de-escalated the situation was not the national guard, wasn’t the LA PD, it was a teacher, it was the school environment that de-escalated the situation. So, that shows and proves that the school community, specifically students, have the power to hold not only themselves accountable, but their peers.”
- **Foster positive relationships between adults and students.** “...Everybody needs somebody that they can feel that they can go and talk to and that can help them with whatever they need help with, whether it be homework or something personal, something that is happening at home. Everybody needs a shoulder to cry on.”

Conclusion

“...the only one that knows exactly what is going on is the student, because they are the ones going through it.” The voices of youth affected by exclusionary disciplinary practices and policies are often absent from or marginalized in discussions on the adoption of more positive approaches to school discipline. When we engage young people, especially our most vulnerable, we acknowledge their value as partners and recognize their expertise in defining their needs. As one participant both encouraged and lamented:

“So, I think one of the things schools can do to engage young people is invite them to conversations specifically to make decisions. Not only talking about principals to say how can we stop bullying, but I am talking about your mayor requesting that students make a decision whether or not they want uniform policies, I’m talking about our governor, our president, the folks like AIR and other nonprofit organizations. They need to be inviting students, but also being real about it. Communities of low income, communities of color, we have politicians...coming in our schools, our communities every day promising the sky and above, right? And they invite us to this conversation, and the minute they get into power, we don’t see their face. We don’t hear from them again, and everything they said is down the drain, and we find ourselves in Washington, D.C. at an AIR conference talking about something we requested two years ago.”

Youth engagement leads to positive outcomes during the transition to adulthood.⁷ Youth engagement also enhances the sustainability and effectiveness of organizations by increasing the investment of staff, helping staff recognize and address the needs of youth, and by shifting how youth and adults view each other and the programs or systems in which they are involved.⁸ Enlisting youth to help problem-solve around the pipeline to prison is an essential part of the community-based participatory research (CBPR) model, in which research is conducted as an equal partnership between traditionally trained “experts” and key stakeholders from the affected community.⁹ In this context, youth roundtables such as this one are indispensable elements of any effort to enable positive academic outcomes for all students.

For More Information

For more information, watch a video of the students talking about their experiences at <http://hsd.air.org/exclusionarydisciplinevideo> and visit <http://hsd.air.org>.



⁷ Alberts, A., Chase, P., Naudeau, S., Phelps, E., & Lerner, R. (2006). Qualitative and quantitative assessments of thriving and contribution in early adolescence: Findings from the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development. *Journal of Youth Development: Bridging Research and Practice*, 1(2); Bandy, T., & Moore, K. (2009). Non-participation of children and adolescents in out-of-school time programs: Child, family, and neighborhood factors. Washington, DC: Child Trends. Retrieved January 8, 2013, from <http://www.childtrends.org/?publications=nonparticipation-of-children-and-adolescents-in-out-of-school-time-programs-child-family-and-neighborhood-factors>; Eccles, J., & Gootman, J. (Eds.) (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.; Roth, J., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2000). What do adolescents need for healthy development? Implications for youth policy. *Social Policy Report*, 14(1), 3–19.; Pittman, K., Irby, M., & Ferber, T. (2001). Unfinished business: Further reflections on a decade of promoting youth development. In P. Benson and K. Pittman (Eds.), *Trends in youth development: Visions, realities, and challenges*. Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers.; Lerner, R. (2004). *Liberty: Thriving and civic engagement among America’s youth*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Program on Applied Developmental Science.; Camino, L. (2000). Youth-adult partnerships: Entering new territory in community work and research. *Applied Developmental Science*, 4(1), 11–20.; Jones, K., & Perkins, D. (2006). Youth and adult perceptions of their relationships within community-based youth programs. *Youth and Society*, 38(1), 90–109.; Zeldin, S. (2004). Youth as agents of adult and community development: Mapping the processes and outcomes of youth engaged in organizational governance. *Applied Developmental Science*, 8(2), 75–90.

⁸ Zeldin, S., Camino, L., Calvert, M., & Ivey, D. (2002). *Youth–adult partnerships and positive youth development: Some lessons learned from research and practice in Wisconsin*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Extension. Retrieved January 8, 2013, from <http://www1.cyfernet.org/prog/teen/02-youthadult.pdf>; Zeldin, S., McDaniel, A., Topitzes, D., & Calvert, M. (2000). Youth in decision-making: A study on the impacts of youth on adults and organization. Madison, WI: Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, University of Wisconsin Extension. Retrieved January 8, 2013, from http://www.theinnovationcenter.org/files/Youth_in_Decision_Making_Brochure.pdf

⁹ Minkler and Wallerstein, ed. (2008). *Community-Based Participatory Research for Health: From Process to Outcomes*

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