

MAPPING PROMISING ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE PRACTICES IN U.S. SCHOOLS



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Background

Exclusionary discipline refers to school disciplinary action that involves removal or exclusion of a student from the typical educational setting, such as in a suspension or expulsion. Exclusionary discipline practices are **pervasive** given occurrence at alarming rates for students in preschool through high school grades. Data from the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) suggest that about 5% of students in grades K-12 (i.e. 2.7 million students) have received one or more out-of-school suspensions.¹ About .2% have been expelled in the same year, or over 100,000 students. Approximately one in three students will receive at least one suspension or expulsion by the time of high school graduation. The rates are two to three times more for students from historically disadvantaged subgroups.²

Exclusionary disciplinary practices are **problematic** given links to negative outcomes such as increased likelihood of high school dropout and long-term involvement with juvenile justice (and eventually adult justice systems).³ In addition, exclusionary discipline is problematic given disproportionality:

- **Black students continue to receive out-of-school suspensions at disproportionately higher rates than White students.**¹ Black students only represent 8% of K-12 students overall; however Black female and male students respectively account for 14% and 25% of out of school suspensions. There are similar findings for in-school suspensions⁴ and expulsions.¹
- **Discrepancies also have been identified for students with disabilities.** Students with disabilities represent 12% of the population but have received 26% of the out-of-school suspensions and 24% of the expulsions in 2015-16.¹
- Disproportionality has been documented for over four decades, with a **continued rise in disciplinary overrepresentation** across time in U.S. schools.⁵

Given pervasive and problematic findings, exclusionary disciplinary practices are not aligned with the tenets of positive and preventive systems. Alternative disciplinary approaches are needed to represent best practices in the promotion of student social, emotional, and behavioral well-being.

What are alternative disciplinary approaches?

Alternative disciplinary approaches include an array of strategies that limit the use of exclusionary discipline and attend to disproportionality. For example, strategies may focus on strengthening positive teacher-student or student-student relationships, or may engage a system-wide approach to using positive behavior intervention supports.

To date, the evidence supporting alternative approaches has come through studies from different fields and using varied perspectives. The overall body of evidence has been described as promising. This means that studies investigating individual practices have shown positive results, but there is not yet enough research to demonstrate effectiveness across a wide range of situations (e.g. people, settings).

What are the features of promising alternative disciplinary approaches?

Although the overall research has largely focused on studying effectiveness of individual alternative practices, there have been some attempts to organize the promising practices within an overarching framework or summary. We present three such summaries of recommended alternative disciplinary approaches, and introduce a crosswalk to highlight points of alignment across the different options. The three summaries include:

- **Eliminating disparities in school discipline: A framework for intervention** by Gregory, Skiba, & Mediratta⁶
 - *These authors present a framework for increasing equity in school discipline, which has been widely referenced.*
- **The school discipline dilemma: A comprehensive review of disparities and alternative approaches** by Welsh & Little⁷
 - *These authors conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on effectiveness of alternative disciplinary approaches in reducing disproportionality.*
- **50-State comparison: State policies on school discipline** by the Education Commission of the States⁸
 - *This reference synthesizes findings regarding school discipline statutes and regulations across all 50 states and the District of Columbia.*

In the crosswalk (page 3), the recommended practices within each summary are grouped into four categories that include (1) individual teaching practices, (2) system supports, (3) inclusive problem-solving approaches, and (4) data-based decision making.

How can this crosswalk be used to guide decisions about alternative disciplinary practices?

The crosswalk can be used in evaluating the selection, adoption, and scaling of alternative disciplinary practices in different settings. **First**, the categories of promising individual practices can be used to highlight similarities with regard to strategy focus at the individual teacher, system, community, or data level. **Second**, once decisions regarding category of strategy focus are identified, the crosswalk can be used to explore specific alternative practices. In this exploration, it is important to remember that the specific practices are promising so there is need to dive into understanding the evidence to support use in the intended context. **Third**, before selection and adoption, evaluation of [usability](#) of the practice may be helpful to understand fit for the intended context, such as features associated with knowledge and skills needed for successful use, as well as satisfaction and ease of use. **Fourth**, remember that this crosswalk is focused exclusively on practices; therefore, it may also be important to engage in review of policies that may be barriers or facilitators to implementation of alternative disciplinary approaches.

| Summaries of Promising Alternative Disciplinary Practices | | | |
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| | Eliminating Disparities in School Discipline: A framework for intervention (Gregory, Skiba, & Mediratta, 2017) | The School Discipline Dilemma: A comprehensive review of disparities and alternative approaches (Welsh & Little, 2018) | 50 State Comparison: State Policies on School Discipline (Education Commission of the States, 2018) |
| Individual Teaching Practices: Supportive and Culturally-Relevant | Supportive relationships Culturally relevant and responsive teaching Bias-aware classrooms and respectful classroom environments | Teacher-student relationships (e.g., MyTeachingPartner) Culturally relevant interventions | |
| System Supports: Tiered Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Instruction and Intervention | Opportunities for learning and correcting behavior Multi-tiered systems of support, such as PBIS | Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Response to Intervention, such as PBIS | Prosocial behavior/ SEL Positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) |
| Inclusive Approaches for Problem-Solving Behavior Concerns | Reintegration of students after conflict or absence Inclusion of student and family voice on conflicts' causes and solutions Problem-solving approaches to discipline | Restorative practices | Restorative justice Anger management; Conflict/dispute resolution Parent conference Behavior modification/behavior support plan Counseling Community service |
| Data-Based Decision Making | Data-based inquiry for equity | | Use of school discipline data within accountability systems Use of disciplinary data to inform school improvement process |

Note: Practices that did not fit within the above categories included academic rigor (Gregory et al., 2017), Virginia Threat Assessment (Welsh & Little, 2018), and additional items identified in the 2018 Education Commission 2018 state policy review (e.g. parent/guardian attends school with the child, psychiatric evaluation).

Citation and References

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¹ U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2016). *2015-2016 Civil Rights Data Collection: School Climate and Safety*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/school-climate-and-safety.pdf>.

² Shollenberger, T. L. (2015). Racial disparities in school suspension and subsequent outcomes: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997. In D. J. Losen (Ed.), *Closing the school discipline gap: Research for policymakers* (pp. 31–43). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

³ Losen, D. J. (2015). *Closing the school discipline gap: Equitable remedies for excessive exclusion*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

⁴ Cholewa, B., Hull, M. F., Babcock, C. R., & Smith, A. D. (2018). Predictors and academic outcomes associated with in-school suspension. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 33, 191-199.

⁵ Wald, J., & Losen, D. J. (2003). Defining and redirecting a school-to-prison pipeline. In J. Wald & D. J. Losen (Eds.), *New directions for youth development* (No. 99; Deconstructing the school-to-prison pipeline) (pp. 9 –15). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

⁶ Gregory, A., Skiba, R. J., & Mediratta, K. (2017). Eliminating disparities in school discipline: A framework for intervention [Special issue on equity in school]. *Review of Research in Education*, 47, 253–278. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X17690499>.

⁷ Welsh, R. O., & Little, S. (2018). The school discipline dilemma: A comprehensive review of disparities and alternative approaches. *Review of Educational Research*, 88, 752-794. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654318791582>.

⁸ Education Commission of the States (2018). *50-State comparison: State policies on school discipline*. Retrieved from <https://www.ecs.org/50-state-comparison-state-policies-on-school-discipline/>.