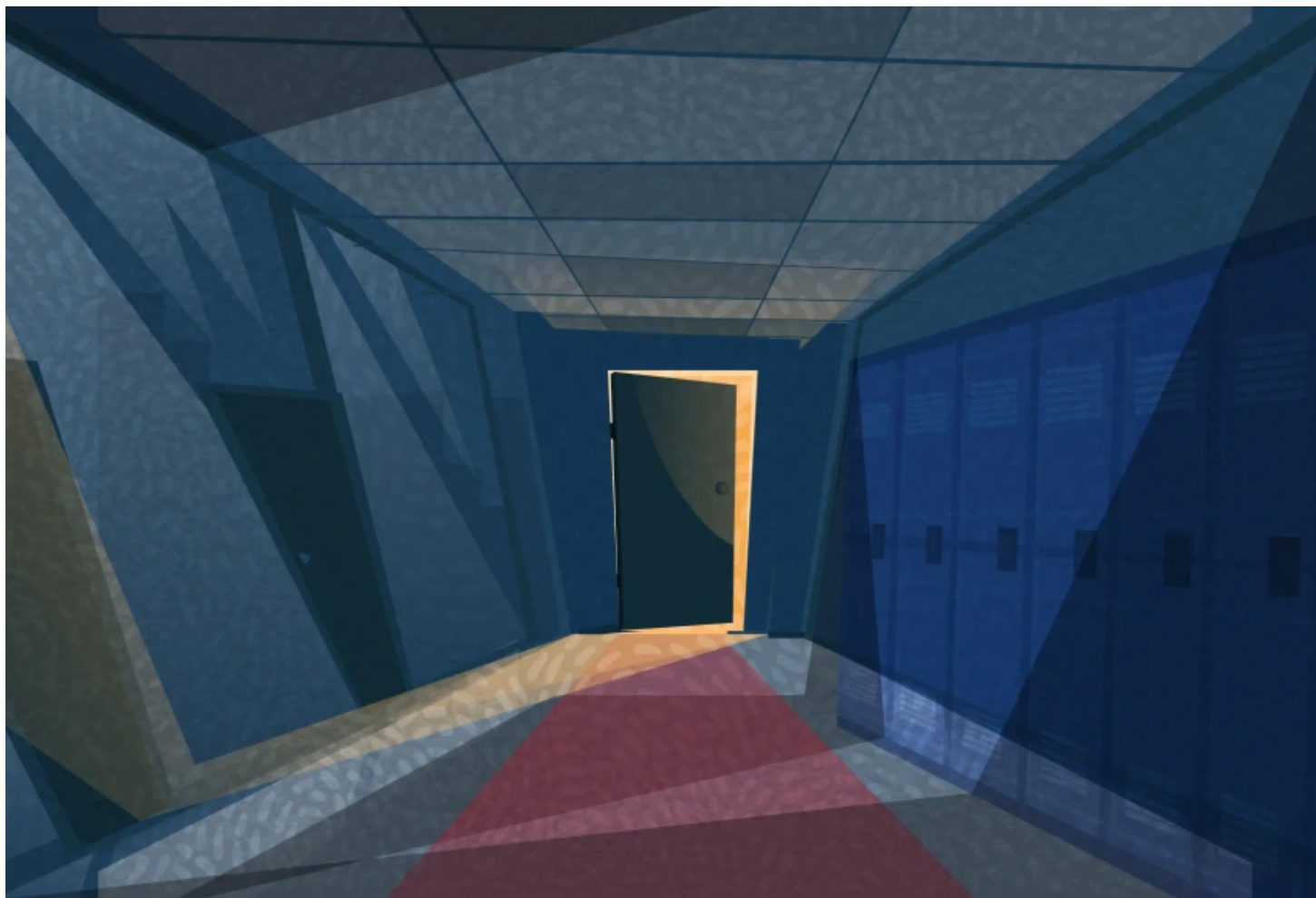


I Combed Through 81 Studies on School Discipline. Here's What Educators Need to Know

4 evidence-based considerations for closing discipline disparities

By Richard O. Welsh — October 06, 2023 ⌚ 5 min read



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For many district and school leaders, the new school year has not only brought excitement but also uncertainty about how to address their school discipline dilemma. Directors of student supports and principals are inevitably having heated conversations about whether to suspend certain students—and for how long—or send them to alternative schools. Refashioning school discipline policies and practices has become the bane of policymakers’ and educators’ existence.

District and school leaders are caught between a rock and a hard place. Teachers and parents are demanding safe schools. Equity advocates highlight persistent racial inequality in suspensions and expulsions and growing evidence of the school-to-prison pipeline. Student behavior has worsened as students are still readjusting to life after the disruption of the pandemic. Infractions like vaping and banned cellphone use are on the rise. There is an ongoing mental health crisis among students. Many districts are struggling to find teachers to fill vacancies in the face of the supposed mounting chaos in public schools.

Some states are responding to the uptick in students’ behavioral issues by reverting to zero-tolerance policies and hardening schools. This impulse to suspend, not support, students presents a false dichotomy between the exclusion of students of color for the benefit of the overall “orderly” learning environment. We are stuck in punitive sands as racial disparities in students’ disciplinary outcomes remain persistent. We need a better plan.

School discipline is a highly racialized topic, but there is no shortage of studies on what’s driving discipline disproportionalities. And the knowledge base for what school discipline reforms are working is rapidly expanding. So, what can we do to reduce the far too frequent instances of Black students and students with disabilities being disciplined more frequently or severely than their peers?

In a recently published integrative literature review, I synthesized the research evidence (81 studies published between 2010 and 2022) on policies and programs that have successfully reduced discipline disparities, not only the rates at which students are sent to the office, suspended, or expelled. Several considerations emerge for educational policymakers and leaders to address the root cause of discipline disparities by lowering office discipline referrals for African American students:

1. School discipline reform needs a strategic direction. Districts and schools are rarely

doing one thing to address school discipline issues. Typically, there is some combination of code-of-conduct changes as well as other possible investments in programs and personnel to reduce discipline disparities. Rejecting race-neutral school discipline reforms and strategically coordinating various alternative approaches to exclusionary discipline are a central plank of transforming school discipline. A key question that district and school leaders must ask is whether school discipline reforms are educator-focused or student-focused.

2. School discipline reform must support educators, not just students. Developing an empathic mindset, coaching, and professional development in classroom management and culturally responsive practices for educators are evidence-based reforms that show promise. Teachers have been given the proverbial basket to carry water. Upgrading their training and capacity to better manage classrooms is also a central plank of reducing discipline disproportionality, based in large measure on documented deficiencies in teacher-preparation programs. There is also evidence that the “top referrers”—the small number of educators who send the most students to the office for discipline—contribute significantly to discipline disparities. As such, supporting school administrators and teachers—emphasizing educator-focused interventions as much as student-focused programs—is an important strategic direction in school discipline reforms.

3. Leaders should acknowledge the potential and the limitations of school discipline-policy changes. A ban on suspensions for attendance-related infractions may reduce the overall use of exclusionary discipline and lower the racial disparities in suspensions. Yet, a growing number of studies have illustrated the limitations of policy interventions in school discipline. Before those interventions can succeed, however, educators need training to build their capacity and confidence and be given the tool kits to implement nonpunitive policies. Implementing policy changes without providing the prerequisite training is akin to putting the cart before the horse.

4. Sustainable school discipline reform depends on the quality of implementation. District and school leaders ought to prioritize the fidelity of the implementation of school-based programs such as restorative justice and positive behavioral interventions and supports, or PBIS. Complementing these programs with school mental health help also shows promise of reducing racial inequality in office discipline referrals and suspensions. PBIS in tandem with school mental health may reduce the overall use of exclusionary discipline and importantly the rates at which Black students are referred to the office and suspended.

Overall, the emerging evidence indicates programs' outcomes are dependent on the quality of the implementation. Factors such as the tiers and length of implementation (reforms may need sufficient time to take root) shape the overall effectiveness of programs such as PBIS on students' disciplinary outcomes.

In closing, there seems to be a disconnect between the wealth of research evidence, the prevailing discourse around school discipline reforms, and the decisions that will disrupt discipline disparities in schools and districts. This is not to say that there is no need for further research on topics such as the effects of anti-bias training and culturally responsive programs on students' disciplinary outcomes at the national level. Comparative studies of multiple districts could also help bolster the consensus on essential mechanisms across states and districts.

My experiences have also led me to believe that [equity-centered research-practice partnerships](#) may provide a vehicle to connect research evidence on school discipline to the decisionmaking process on school discipline policies and practices in districts, though more empirical research is needed. Now is the time to listen to the research evidence on school discipline and forge new ways of tapping into the experiential knowledge and expertise of practitioners to disrupt racial inequality in school discipline.

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