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A GUIDE FOR DISTRICT AND SCHOOL TEAMS WHEN CONSIDERING POLICY TO ADDRESS DISCIPLINE DISPROPORTIONALITY

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A Guide for District and School Teams When Considering Policy to Address Discipline Disproportionality

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Introduction

This guide was designed to assist district and school teams in developing policies and procedures to reduce disproportionality in exclusionary discipline (e.g., referrals, suspensions, expulsions) where it is identified. Because most districts and schools have racial disproportionality, this guide will use race/ethnicity as the primary focus, although it can be used to address inequities for other groups, such as disability status, gender identity, or language status. The guide will describe and provide examples of key elements for policy and their application in schools. These examples can be included in board policies or district administrative rules and regulations. It also provides a process for assessing aspects of policies to make discipline practices more equitable. See Appendix A for a glossary of terms.

Audience

Intended users of this guide are district teams seeking to reduce disproportionality in exclusionary discipline in schools, whether or not they are using a positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) or multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) framework. School teams may also use this guide in developing school-specific policies and procedures. This guide is to be used along with legal counsel regarding policies required by local, state, and federal laws and regulations.

Background

A documented history of inequality and disparate student outcomes shows that discipline disproportionality exists across various student groups (e.g., disability status, gender identity, language status,

race and ethnicity, socio-economic status). Although disparities for some racial and ethnic groups have slightly decreased over time, national data show Black or African American students remain the most consistently excluded group of students (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2025). Racial differences in exclusionary discipline are seen even when controlling for socioeconomic status and prior behavior (Anyon et al., 2014; Huang, 2020). Furthermore, some policies, such as zero-tolerance, are intended to be race neutral but can exacerbate disparities (American Psychological Association, 2008). Many rigorous studies have shown the negative effects of exclusions on a range of student outcomes, such as academic achievement, mental health, and school completion (American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health, 2013; Angton et al., 2024; Ibrahim & Johnson, 2020; Jain et al., 2024; Johnson et al., 2024; Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019; Lee et al., 2011; Meek & Gilliam, 2016; Rosenbaum, 2020). In fact, suspensions are strong predictors of racial inequities in student academic achievement, not only for the suspended student, but the school as a whole (Morris & Perry, 2016). Given the challenge at hand and ineffectiveness of many current policies, school and district personnel could benefit from guidance in developing policies that improve outcomes for each student in their schools.

Different Levels of Policy

There are different types of policies and procedures in districts and schools. The most general policies are those formally developed and adopted by school boards. School board policies are often brief statements of requirements (e.g., federal or state legislative

mandates) and include few details about how to enact them. Following these policies, school districts may write longer, more detailed rules that provide uniform guidance to school administrators and other personnel about goals set by the school board. Finally, school administrators or school leadership teams develop school-level procedures that reflect district policies and instruct school personnel on the daily practices within each school. School teams are encouraged to consolidate and align these separate documents into one succinct handbook.

The Role of Effective Policy in Reducing Disproportionate Discipline

Researchers now consider bias to come in two main forms: explicit bias and implicit bias (McIntosh et al., 2014). Explicit bias is a form of conscious discrimination against other groups in ways that perpetuate inequities. Because explicit bias is conscious, research from other fields indicates explicit bias should be addressed directly through policy (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). By contrast, implicit bias is a form of unconscious and unintended discrimination that includes overreliance on stereotypes to make decisions. Because many of us are unaware of implicit bias in our decisions, a promising way to reduce its effects is to identify specific situations where biased decisions are more likely to occur and teach strategies aligned with our shared values for equitable outcomes (for this process, see the Center on PBIS Discipline Disproportionality Problem Solving Guide). By utilizing data-driven strategies to identify areas prone to both types of bias, organizations can develop

targeted interventions that support fair decision-making processes and improve outcomes for all individuals involved, fostering a culture of inclusivity and respect.

HOW DISCIPLINE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES COULD BE EFFECTIVE

It is important not to assume that policies by themselves will produce desired outcomes. However, there are specific ways in which policies could set the stage for improving school practices. Policies should strive to minimize inequitable practices and set forth procedures for ongoing assessment and continuous improvement with accountability for both actions and outcomes. To use them effectively, it is worthwhile to consider the ways policies might work to improve outcomes for each student group:

- **Policies could set clear priorities.** Adding a clear focus on equitable supports as a district or school goal increases awareness and communicates that all administrators and staff should be actively working toward it as a priority objective.
- **Policies could reduce the harms resulting from explicit bias.** In situations of explicit (i.e., conscious) bias, effective policy that specifically addresses discrimination is the most promising approach for reducing disproportionality.
- **Policies could enable implementation of specific interventions.** By promoting and creating the structures to implement specific practices (e.g., PBIS), policy supports educators' use of effective practices.

- **Policies could reduce discriminatory practices.** By removing or restricting use of practices that result in disparate outcomes (e.g., zero-tolerance policies), policymakers may make outcomes more equitable.
- **Policies could increase accountability for equitable access and positive outcomes.** By requiring teams to disaggregate their data and share results with partners, policymakers may empower educators to ensure that systems are effective for every student group.

HOW DISCIPLINE POLICIES COULD BE INEFFECTIVE

We also know that there are efforts that do not work to improve outcomes:

- **Policies that nobody knows about.** When educators and administrators are unaware of policies, the policies are not effective.
- **Policies that are vague.** If directions are not clear, they can be misinterpreted.
- **Policies that don't change school or classroom practice.** Without enduring change in practice, improvements in outcomes are not possible.
- **Policies without accountability for implementation.** If policies can be ignored, they are unlikely to lead to change.

Key Elements of Effective Policy to Reduce Disproportionality in Exclusionary Discipline

Based on the available research, we recommend a set of key elements for district and school discipline policies (and policies in general). These elements (with their critical features in Table 1) are as follows:

1. Specific Commitment to Equitable Access and Positive Outcomes in Affirming Environments
2. Family and Community Partnerships in Policy Development
3. Implementation within a Tiered Framework that Emphasizes Schoolwide (Tier 1) Supports
4. Clear, Objective Discipline Procedures
5. Removal or Restriction of Exclusionary Practices
6. Graduated Discipline Systems with Instructional Alternatives to Exclusion
7. Transparent Processes for Using Disaggregated Data to Monitor Progress

Table 1. Elements and Critical Features of Effective Policy

Key Element	Critical Features
1. Specific Commitment to Equitable Access and Positive Outcomes in Affirming Environments	- Specific language that affirms a commitment to equitable access and outcomes across all student groups - Inclusion of equitable access and positive outcomes in mission and vision statements - Explicit language related to the improvement or maintenance of outcomes for all student groups in key documents (e.g., newsletters, proposals, school improvement plans) - Continuous professional learning about the value of equitable access and opportunity and the role of each educator in contributing to an inclusive environment
2. Family and Community Partnerships in Policy Development	- Commitment to continual engagement with families of a range of student groups, especially those experiencing disproportionate discipline - Recruitment of family members from communities most impacted by exclusionary discipline and including them in school and district decision making - Family and community voice in determining behavior expectations and discipline policies - Sharing information on school and district policies and procedures with families and community members, in multiple languages and via preferred methods of communication (e.g., social media, website, email) - Regular evaluation of effectiveness of family and community partnership programs
3. Implementation within a Tiered Framework that Emphasizes Schoolwide (Tier 1) Supports	- Adoption of a multi-tiered behavior prevention framework (e.g., PBIS, MTSS) with an instructional approach to discipline - Attention to creating safe and welcoming school environments - Formal systems for identification, operational definition and regular teaching of contextually appropriate behaviors for students and staff - Formal systems for acknowledging contextually appropriate behaviors - Connection to a continuum of additional supports as student needs increase - Focus on creating structures to support consistent use of practices by school personnel
4. Clear, Objective Discipline Procedures	- Defined rights and responsibilities for adults and students - Operational definitions of behavior incident categories - Clear delineations between administrator-managed (major) and staff-managed (minor) behavior incidents - Instructional and restorative strategies that are designed to prevent future behavior incidents - Formal tracking of behavior incidents, responses, and removals from instruction

Table 1. Elements and Critical Features of Effective Policy *continued*

Key Element	Critical Features
5. Removal or Restriction of Exclusionary Practices	• Clear communication that suspension or expulsion is limited to behavior incidents that pose a serious and credible threat to the safety of students and staff • Removal of zero-tolerance or other automatic suspension procedures from all policies, except as required by current state or federal law • Prohibition of exclusionary discipline for non-violent behavior incidents (e.g., suspensions for disrespect), repeated minor behavior incidents (e.g., “three strikes” rules), and young students (e.g., PK-2) • Explicit training and coaching on the benefits of an instructional (as opposed to exclusionary) approach to discipline
6. Graduated Discipline Systems with Instructional Alternatives to Exclusion	• Descriptions of the processes for determining appropriate responses to behavior incidents • Commitment to use evidence-based instructional interventions instead of punitive responses • Lists of possible evidence-based instructional responses to student behavior and allocation of resources to ongoing professional learning opportunities and coaching supports • Established process for assessing student academic support needs as part of determining responses to behavior incidents • Established process for assessing the quality of Tier 1 classroom or non-classroom supports as part of determining responses to individual student behavior incidents • Clearly defined roles of school resource officers (if used) and descriptions of the processes for determining when and how it is appropriate to include school resource officers and law enforcement in responses to behavior incidents
7. Transparent Processes for Using Disaggregated Data to Monitor Progress	• Ongoing collection of disaggregated data to identify disproportionality in both the frequency and type of disciplinary responses to student behavior • Review and analysis of disaggregated data during each regular team meeting • Attention to team membership and training on inquiry skills and use of disaggregated data • Continuous action planning, monitoring of action plan steps, and evaluation of the effects of action plans to eliminate disproportionality in disciplinary practices at all levels, including within and across support tiers. • Regular (e.g., monthly, quarterly) sharing of disaggregated data with students, families, and communities

In the following sections, we provide critical features, examples, and non-examples for each of the seven elements. The examples are meant to illustrate the elements and are not recommendations for exact policy language. Additional legislation or other policies may need to be considered.

Element 1: Specific Commitment to Equitable Access and Positive Outcomes in Affirming Environments

Policies should ensure explicit language regarding equitable access and positive outcomes (e.g., academic, behavior, mental wellness) is prominent throughout district and school policies. These specific commitments signal clear direction for the district, especially as they relate to disproportionate school discipline. They may not lead to true change by themselves, but they may serve as unifying agreements to improve outcomes for all student groups as a priority for all activities and systems within the school and district.

Critical Features

- Specific language that affirms a commitment to equitable access and positive outcomes across all student groups
- Inclusion of equitable access and positive outcomes in mission and vision statements
- Explicit language related to the improvement or maintenance of outcomes for all student groups in key documents (e.g., newsletters, proposals, school improvement plans)
- Continuous professional learning about the value of equitable access and opportunity and the role of each educator in contributing to an inclusive environment

Examples: District Policy

EXAMPLE

At Example School District, we believe each student deserves a fair and appropriate education in which their abilities, culture, ethnicity, gender identity, race, and religion will be valued, celebrated, and used to enrich academic instruction. We are dedicated to being proactive in our efforts to implement discipline practices and policies that aim to keep our students in class, receiving access to instruction, and being provided the support to succeed. Likewise, we will identify and correct practices and policies that threaten to perpetuate gaps between discipline, achievement, and access to educational opportunities that benefit students. Our primary goal is to continuously improve our educational system, and we commit to ongoing professional learning to sustain necessary progress.

This example shows a district mission statement with explicit language that makes a clear point to focus on discipline disparities, which illustrates that these are comparable in importance to equitable access and positive outcomes in academic achievement. This example also describes the ways in which personnel will uphold the district policy.



NON-EXAMPLE

Non-Example School District does not discriminate on the basis of age, race, religion, color, national origin, sex, marital or veteran status, disability, or other legally protected status in its programs, services or activities. The district shall provide equal opportunities to all individuals within its geographical boundaries.

This non-example is a standard non-discrimination clause but does not go beyond non-discrimination in addressing equitable access and outcomes for students. These clauses are important and need to be included in district policies, but they do not identify reducing disproportionate school discipline as a priority. The mission statement also fails to describe how to ameliorate disparate outcomes or inequitable treatment of different groups of students.

Examples: School Procedures Reflecting District Policy

EXAMPLE

Example High School is committed to high expectations, varied and challenging experiences relevant for each student, positive and proactive discipline practices, and equitable access and outcomes for all students. We are committed to identifying strengths and addressing

improvements in the operations of our school through the continuous use of disaggregated data as an effort to honor each component of our mission.

This example illustrates a school's mission statement with language specific to equitable access and outcomes and the implementation of practices used to reduce discipline incidents. It also documents routine assessments of systems in the school to make sure the mission statement is upheld.

NON-EXAMPLE

The mission of Non-Example Elementary School, a diverse community, is to cultivate relationships and acceptance while developing college and career ready students. We welcome and respect students from all cultures and diverse backgrounds, and all students have a chance to succeed.

This non-example could be enhanced. Although it has terminology used in disproportionality work, it is vague and generic. Further, it is unclear whether the focus is on developing college and career ready students, building relationships, or fostering acceptance.

Element 2: Family and Community Partnerships in Policy Development

Heightened family participation in decision making is associated with reduced rates of exclusionary discipline (Mukuria, 2002). Thus, an important addition to discipline policy is the inclusion of families and community members in discipline policy development, implementation, and decision making.

Critical Features

- Commitment to continual engagement with families of a range of student groups, especially those experiencing disproportionate discipline
- Recruitment of family members from communities most impacted by exclusionary discipline and including them in school and district decision making
- Family and community voice in determining behavior expectations and discipline policies
- Sharing information on school and district policies and procedures with families and community members, in multiple languages and via preferred methods of communication (e.g., social media, website, email)
- Regular evaluation of effectiveness of family and community partnership programs

Examples: District Policy

EXAMPLE

Example School District believes the involvement of families in the decision-making process is vital to supporting our students' academic and social development. With that belief in mind, families are encouraged to participate in the development of discipline procedures in multiple and meaningful ways. One method is through participation on or providing input to the School-Family

Task Force on Discipline, a group charged with improving our district's discipline policy as it relates to equitable discipline, consistency, and fairness. We are committed to providing families with opportunities to be involved during all stages of the discipline process, including proactive communication about behavior concerns, and a grievance procedure and due process protections for families who feel that the disciplinary response for their student was inappropriate.

Example School District clarifies how families can be involved in the development and review of and the communication about the district discipline policy.

NON-EXAMPLE

Parent involvement is a crucial part of our district's mission. We welcome parent involvement on district and school committees and encourage participation in school volunteer opportunities, the PTA, and in their children's classrooms when appropriate.

Non-example School District provides a vague statement about the importance of family involvement but does not mention how families can take on more active roles. Moreover, the use of the term "parent" may alienate non-parent caregivers.

Examples: School Procedures Reflecting District Policy

EXAMPLE

One of our primary goals at Example School is to ensure that families and community members have opportunities to assist and support the educational process through participation in decision making, school governance, and



volunteer activities. It is our desire to include families and community members as an integral part of our students' learning process. With that said, Example School has jointly developed with families, students, and staff a Family/School Compact, which outlines how families, the entire school staff, and students will work together to ensure our school maintains a welcoming and positive learning environment that promotes student success for all.

The Family/School Compact specifies how families will be regularly informed of the disciplinary process, how Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) representatives and family partners will have opportunities for input about the disciplinary process, how all school families will be annually solicited for feedback on our school climate, behavior expectations, and disciplinary process, and how the sharing of the results of that process will be communicated to families in the language spoken in their home.

Example School has depended on their families in the development of the Family/School Compact, which states that families will have involvement in and input about the overall disciplinary process and the school climate, and information regarding the process will be communicated in the home language.

NON-EXAMPLE

The Non-Example School Student Handbook is sent home at the beginning of each school year to all students and families. The handbook contains our Student Behavior Code, the Student Discipline Policy, and Parent volunteer and visitation policy. The Student Handbook will ensure that families have been informed about our school's behavior expectations, as well as our discipline policy for behavior violations.

Providing all families with a handbook with information about student conduct and discipline is useful but not enough to ensure authentic family participation. This procedure does not include families in the process of developing or the review of the policy, information about how they can be involved at the school, or a schedule for or the type of communication.

Resources

- [Enhancing Family-School Collaboration with Diverse Families](#)
- [Family/Caregiver Letter: What is PBIS](#)
- [Using Family and Student Voice to Inform Equitable PBIS Implementation](#)



Element 3: Implementation within a Tiered Framework that Emphasizes Schoolwide (Tier 1) Supports

Behavior incidents and the time spent addressing them can be reduced when teachers and students view the school's behavior expectations as clear, fair, and relevant, and students receive behavior instruction before unwanted behaviors occur (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Behavior instruction should focus on teaching contextually appropriate behaviors in settings where they commonly occur. Further, behavior expectations are most effectively taught through systematic instruction of expected behaviors, including explicit instruction, practice, acknowledgement, and reteaching as needed (Carter & Pool, 2012). These policies increase the likelihood that students will engage in contextually appropriate behaviors.

Critical Features

- Adoption of a multi-tiered behavior prevention framework (e.g., PBIS, MTSS) with an instructional approach to discipline
- Attention to creating safe and welcoming school environments
- Formal systems for identification, operational definition and regular teaching of contextually appropriate behaviors for students and staff
- Formal systems for acknowledging contextually appropriate behaviors
- Connection to a continuum of additional supports as student needs increase
- Focus on creating structures to support consistent use of practices by school personnel

Examples: District Policy

EXAMPLE

In accordance with its strategic plan, Example School District will implement the use of positive and proactive behavior strategies (e.g., actively teaching and reteaching expectations, student reinforcement for demonstrating expected behaviors, and school-wide recognition systems specifically for following school expectations) on all school campuses, including alternate placement settings, and district-owned facilities (e.g., performing arts center). Personnel at each campus within the district will teach or revisit district and campus-wide expectations with all students, staff, and families at least annually. The district shall annually provide PBIS trainings for newly hired employees who have assigned contact time with students.

This example illustrates a district's detailed efforts to ensure a positive and proactive approach to addressing discipline and behavior management. Further, it outlines a plan for instruction of expectations and provision of supports for new staff, as needed.

NON-EXAMPLE

When a student is suspended, Non-Example School District will enroll the student in a remedial program to deter future offenses. This program is part of our effort to address high rates of suspension and expulsions.

This non-example attempts to provide improved outcomes for schools by addressing support for students who have already had behavior incidents. However, it is a reactive approach and does not provide proactive instruction of



expected behaviors. In addition, the use of terms common in law enforcement (e.g., offenses) may signal that responses should be punitive as opposed to instructional.

Examples: School Procedures Reflecting District Policy

EXAMPLE

Example High School will maintain a positive environment by providing ongoing instruction and reinforcement of appropriate social and behavior interactions within the school community. As a school, behavior expectations will be systematically taught in classrooms and in the common areas (e.g., cafeteria, gym, library) during the first two weeks of school, and again in January when students return from winter break. Throughout the school year, students will receive positive reinforcement for displaying contextually-appropriate behaviors and reteaching of behaviors when those expectations are not met.

This example outlines a plan for when systematic behavior instruction will occur at the school. Instruction occurs at the start of the school year and when data indicate a higher likelihood of behavior incidents.

NON-EXAMPLE

At Non-Example Elementary School, the first few days of school will be spent building relationships within the classroom, creating a classroom climate and culture, and allowing students to get comfortable in their new environments. Faculty and staff are expected to use “teachable moments” as a way to teach appropriate behaviors when contradictory behaviors occur.

This procedure is a non-example because behavior instruction is reactionary and non-systematic (e.g., informal). It does not describe specific strategies to use to prevent challenges.

Resources

- [Supporting and Responding to Students’ Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Needs: Evidence-Based Practices for Educators](#)

Element 4: Clear, Objective Discipline Procedures

Differences in how teachers perceive and respond to more subjective behaviors, such as defiance, disrespect and disruption, can lead to inconsistent discipline. For example, one teacher may find it disruptive for students to share answers without raising their hands, whereas another teacher may not. For that reason, this element addresses the importance of clearly defining what contextually inappropriate behaviors look like across school settings, distinctions regarding the severity of response to discipline incidents, and a formal discipline data system procedure to monitor impact.

Critical Features

- Defined rights and responsibilities for adults and students
- Operational definitions of behavior incident categories
- Clear delineations between administrator-managed (major) and staff-managed (minor) behavior incidents
- Instructional and restorative strategies that are designed to prevent future behavior incidents
- Formal tracking of behavior incidents, responses, and removals from instruction

Examples: District Policy

EXAMPLE

Policy 3.1.A: Schools within Example School District will:

1. Develop precise definitions for each common behavior incident category in the school. These definitions are taught to all staff members to establish consensus on what specific behavior incidents look like.

2. Define the differences between administrator-managed (major) and staff-managed (minor) behavior incidents. This step is critical, because many behaviors (e.g., disrupting the class, talking back to the teacher) can either be easily handled in class or be so severe that an administrator needs to be involved.

3. Professionally develop teachers on the difference between major behavior incidents, which are typically handled by an administrator, and minor unwanted behaviors, which are most commonly addressed by the teacher in the classroom.

4. Ensure teachers understand how preventative and instructional strategies fit into a continuum of discipline responses. This step integrates knowledge about positive, proactive, and responsive behavior support practices into a continuum of responses, explicitly communicates strategies educators are empowered to use before requesting support, and helps educators match their actions to the severity of behavior incidents.

5. Utilize the district's system for entering and tracking administrator-managed (major) and staff-managed (minor) behavior incidents, instructional responses, and all removals from instruction, including informal removals such as sending students to wait in the hallway or calling families to pick up students from school. Informal removals disrupt the learning, support, and services for all students, and disproportionately affect students with disabilities. These removals can impact student motivation, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. A formal system ensures accountability and consistency, helping to mitigate these negative impacts.

6. Explicitly communicate rights and responsibilities for all adults (e.g., parents/guardians/caregivers, teachers, administrators, and other school-based and district staff) working to ensure students' success.

7. Offer and explain the right to a formal due process procedure to parents/guardians and students who disagree with their treatment, as outlined in the School Board Policy.

Example School District provides a clear method for how their schools can develop clear processes and how they provide training to their teachers to reduce inconsistency in supports.

NON-EXAMPLE

Non-Example School District believes in holding students accountable by removing them from the classroom when behavior incidents may start to interfere with classroom order. Therefore, we work with our schools to make sure that fair disciplinary actions are appropriately assigned in response to behavior incidents.

Although Non-example School District claims that they work with their schools on ensuring that disciplinary actions are fair and appropriate, the district does not describe how they will assist their schools in making these decisions.

Examples: School Procedures Reflecting District Policy

EXAMPLE

The teachers and administrators at Example School have procedures for identifying and responding to behavior incidents in our building and review them formally on a regular basis. Our orientation materials and school website include [definitions](#) for the most common behavior

incident categories we see in our school as well as examples of how these behaviors can range from minor, staff-managed behaviors to major, administrator-managed behaviors. Here is one example (from SWIS, our discipline data system):

Disruption (Staff-Managed): “Student engages in low-intensity interruption of class or school activities, such as talking over others, making loud noise, or wandering around and distracting others in class.”

Disruption (Administrator-Managed): “Student engages in behavior causing an interruption in a class or activity. Disruption includes sustained loud talk, yelling, or screaming; noise with materials; horseplay or roughhousing; and/or sustained out-of-seat behavior.”

In our orientation materials and on the school website, you will also find our discipline continuum, which shows some of the different strategies we use to help students get back on track before removing a student from class. At least twice per year, we provide training to our staff on differentiating between staff-managed and administrator-managed behavior incidents, using the discipline continuum for selecting appropriate and consistent responses to student behaviors, and formal discipline tracking systems.

We have implemented a formal tracking system for all behavior incidents, inclusive of instructional responses taken, and any removals from instruction. This system ensures that (a) all incidents are documented; (b) there is a clear record of actions taken; (c) there is a standardized process for responding, reporting, and requesting supports; and (d) data are available to our teams for identifying patterns, addressing issues proactively, and supporting students effectively.

Example School's procedures are clearly in line with the processes that Example School District specified in their policy. The school has defined behavior incident categories, clarified the differences between staff-managed (minor) versus administrator-managed (major) behavior incidents, mapped out a process of response procedures that graduate from proactive and instructional practices to more reactionary responses for behaviors that threaten school safety, and established a standardized process of discipline incidents and action taken to monitor impact and inform action planning.

NON-EXAMPLE

At Non-Example School, we work hard to ensure that students are given appropriate discipline for behavior incidents. The goal of our discipline approach is to ensure that learning for all students can continue regardless of the disruptions that take place in class. We rely on our teachers to use their best judgment when sending students out of class for behavior incidents and trust they are only using that strategy in response to the most severe and disruptive of behaviors.

Non-Example School does not provide teachers with guidelines or support in making decisions about what forms of discipline—particularly removal from the educational environment—are used in response to discipline incidents. They do not state that any procedures or policies are in place to make such practices more consistent across teachers.

Resources

- [SWIS Referral Definitions](#)

Element 5: Removal or Restriction of Exclusionary Practices

Given the documented negative effects of exclusionary practices and overuse with marginalized student groups (see page 6), policies that eliminate or restrict such practices only in cases of serious safety concerns can both make disciplinary outcomes more equitable and reduce the likelihood of future behavior incidents.

In response to these issues, many districts have attempted to improve outcomes by either restricting the use of suspensions and expulsions to incidents with continuing safety concerns or banning suspensions for younger students (e.g., PK to grade 2). However, there is evidence that such policy changes, even if initially effective, are unevenly followed in practice, leading to continued overuse and racial disparities (Nishioka et al., 2020; Sartain et al., 2015; Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). A study in California showed that banning suspensions for willful defiance simply increased suspension rates for Black students in other behavior categories (Wang, 2022).

Critical Features

- Clear communication that suspension or expulsion is limited to behavior incidents that pose a serious and credible threat to the safety of students and staff
- Removal of zero-tolerance or other automatic suspension procedures from all policies, except as required by current state or federal law
- Prohibition of exclusionary discipline for non-violent behavior incidents (e.g., suspensions for disrespect), repeated minor behavior incidents (e.g., “three strikes” rules), and young students (e.g., PK-2)
- Explicit training and coaching on the benefits of an instructional (as opposed to exclusionary) approach to discipline

Examples: District Policy

EXAMPLE

Example School District strives to keep students in school with continuous access to instruction and reduce the practice of removing students from their classrooms for disciplinary reasons. Suspensions and expulsions are reserved for serious behavior incidents that pose a credible threat to the safety of our students and staff. More information on suspensions and expulsions, including the appeals process for families, can be found on the district's Student Discipline Webpage.

This example explicitly states the district’s commitment to reducing the use of exclusionary practices in their schools, the rights of families to know the process by which a course of disciplinary action is taken, and links to further information on the district’s webpage regarding their discipline policies.



NON-EXAMPLE

Non-Example School District holds high standards for our students and employs a Zero Tolerance Policy when it comes to issues of disruptive student behavior. The district's Zero Tolerance Policy is designed to make our schools safe and provide learning environments that are free from distraction. Thus, our teachers are empowered to remove students from class for one or more days to maintain order.

This non-example specifically includes a zero-tolerance policy that mandates exclusionary discipline for non-violent behavior incidents. Policies that mandate exclusionary discipline increase the likelihood that students who most need support will be excluded from school. Moreover, zero tolerance policies do not afford administrators any flexibility in addressing behaviors that may be undesirable but are not unsafe. Additionally, allowing any one individual to remove a student immediately and without consultation will lead to unnecessary exclusions and loss of instructional time.

Examples: School Procedures Reflecting District Policy

The following examples have been selected to illustrate how school procedures can reflect district discipline policies.

EXAMPLE

For serious behavior incidents that do not require mandatory expulsion, Example Elementary School's multidisciplinary team will determine appropriate interventions in lieu of out-of-school suspension. Students who are involved in behavior incidents in this category are required to participate in activities designed to support development of prosocial skills. See our Graduated Discipline Policy for alternative responses.

This example provides a clear process and specific strategies for school staff to provide students with instruction and environmental interventions in place of suspensions.

NON-EXAMPLE

When students commit non-threatening offenses, the staff will work to ensure a proper course of discipline is selected in lieu of expulsion.

This non-example does not provide a clear process for staff to select the discipline procedure or note how students receive instruction on appropriate behaviors.

Resources

- [What are the Economic Costs of Implementing PBIS in Comparison to the Benefits from Reducing Suspensions?](#)

Element 6: Graduated Discipline Systems with Instructional Alternatives to Exclusion

In place of overusing exclusionary discipline practices, many school districts are implementing graduated discipline systems, reserving exclusionary discipline for the most serious behavior incidents. A system of discipline that is graduated ensures that less serious behavior incidents are met with milder, instructional responses managed in the classroom rather than punitive consequences, which remove students from the classroom. Additionally, if campuses have a school resource officer or law enforcement officer, and/or seek to implement a school threat assessment, clear guidelines should be established regarding the involvement of officers in response to student behaviors and threat assessment. Discipline policies and procedures should also include assessment of needed supports—including academic assistance—that could prevent discipline incidents.

Critical Features

- Descriptions of the processes for determining appropriate responses to behavior incidents
- Commitment to use evidence-based instructional interventions instead of punitive responses
- Lists of possible evidence-based instructional responses to student behavior and allocation of resources to ongoing professional learning opportunities and coaching supports (see <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/practiceguide/31>)
- Established process for assessing student academic support needs as part of determining responses to behavior incidents

- Established process for assessing the quality of Tier 1 classroom or non-classroom supports as part of determining responses to individual student behavior incidents
- Clearly defined roles of school resource officers (if used) and descriptions of the processes for determining when and how it is appropriate to include school resource officers and law enforcement in responses to behavior incidents

Examples: District Policy

EXAMPLE

Example District uses graduated discipline to ensure severe punishments, such as exclusion from the learning environment, are reserved for credible threats or harm to the safety of others. The goal of all discipline responses is to ensure students understand the school's behavior expectations, repair the harm caused by their behavior, and identify how to prevent the problem in the future. When a student engages in repeated or serious behavior incidents, each school's multidisciplinary team will conduct a functional behavior assessment to identify needs for academic and behavior support. If the student has an Individualized Education Program (IEP), the team will review the plan and its goals. When many students are experiencing similar challenges, the team will determine whether additional Tier 1 supports are needed.

In addition to de-emphasizing the use of office referrals and suspensions, this example clearly articulates a range of instructional responses for various discipline incidents that focus on opportunities for the student to learn



appropriate social and academic skills. Additionally, it acknowledges there may be environmental factors that need to be addressed.

NON-EXAMPLE

Our schools use a graduated discipline system in which violations of the Code of Conduct are dealt with in accordance with the frequency and severity of the offense.

Although this policy uses the term graduated discipline system, there is little guidance for schools and families regarding the types of responses and the extent to which they are instructional.

Examples: School Procedures Reflecting District Policy

EXAMPLE

Example Middle School reserves suspensions and expulsions for serious behavior incidents, typically those that threaten or harm the safety and well-being of the student, other students, or school staff. Our PBIS system and proactive teaching approach should minimize behavior incidents in the first place.

For less serious behavior incidents (see list of minor unwanted behaviors), staff will use strategies to prompt prosocial behavior and increase student engagement, such as:

- *Positive recognition of prosocial behaviors for nearby students (“praise around”)*
- *Brief redirection*
- *Restatement of expectations and invitation to self-correct*
- *Reteaching classroom expectations and agreements*

- *Practice of Neutralizing Routine or Class Reset*
- *Teacher proximity or visual prompt*
- *Additional support for tasks*
- *Brief breaks*
- *Assessment of possible miscommunication between staff and student*
- *Identification of potential cultural mismatches between expected and exhibited behavior*

If at least two of these strategies are ineffective in improving student behavior, the immediate staff may issue the student a Staff-Managed (Minor) Incident Report, and the immediate staff determines the response. Responses may include one or more of the following:

- *Mini-conference or restorative chat with the student*
- *Additional teaching and practice in the skill*
- *Reassigned seat*
- *Reflection sheet*
- *Contact home*
- *Loss of privilege*

Only for more serious behavior incidents (see list of major unwanted behaviors), the student may receive an Administrator-Managed (Major) Incident Report, and a school administrator determines the response. Responses may include one or more of the following:

- *Conference with the student and administrator*
- *Contact home*
- *Behavior skills coaching*
- *Community service*



- *Restitution*
- *Restorative conference*
- *In-school suspension*
- *Out-of-school suspension (reserved for safety violations)*

This school provides explicit examples of consequences that may be used for less severe behaviors and a commitment to ensuring students will be taught the behavior expectations proactively and in response to minor incidents. In addition, the procedures are flexible (i.e., present a range of options) and based on student need as opposed to a specific response based on the number of behavior incidents documented. The school's discipline procedures are also shown in a flowchart format in Appendix B.

NON-EXAMPLE

Our school staff uses a graduated discipline policy:

- *First offense: Conference with the teacher*
- *Second offense: Call home*

- *Third offense: Detention*
- *Fourth and subsequent offenses: Suspension*

Although this policy is “graduated” in the sense of moving from less punitive to more punitive consequences, the procedure has no flexibility to determine an appropriate response that reflects consideration of the student and the context of the incident. As such, the response may lack instructiveness, be inappropriate given the student’s needs, or even reinforce unwanted behavior.

Resources

- [Instructional and Restorative Alternatives to Exclusionary Discipline: A Guide to Implementing the Five Components of the Inclusive Skill-building Learning Approach \(ISLA\)](#)
- [Supporting and Responding to Educators’ Classroom PBIS Implementation Needs: Guide to Classroom Systems and Data](#)
- [Aligning Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management with A Multi-tiered System of Support](#)

Element 7: Transparent Processes for Using Data to Monitor Progress

Policies should establish and mandate an ongoing process for using data-based decision making for equitable access and positive outcomes. Schools and districts can create teams that meet regularly, have ongoing action plans, and share disaggregated data on a regular cycle with administrators, students, families, and their communities. These policies might also include equitable access and positive outcomes for administrator or teacher evaluations.

Critical Features

- Ongoing collection of disaggregated data to identify disproportionality in both the frequency and type of disciplinary responses to student behavior
- Review and analysis of disaggregated data during each regular team meeting
- Attention to team membership and training on inquiry skills and use of disaggregated data
- Continuous action planning, monitoring of action plan steps, and evaluation of the effects of action plans to eliminate disproportionality in disciplinary practices at all levels, including within and across support tiers.
- Regular (e.g., monthly, quarterly) sharing of disaggregated data with students, families, and communities

Examples: District Policy

EXAMPLE

Example District Leadership Team will meet quarterly to analyze the academic progress, attendance, and discipline of students, disaggregated by group (i.e., race/ethnicity, English language proficiency, gender identity, and special education status) to identify any evidence

of disproportionality in both the frequency and type of disciplinary responses to student behavior. These data will be used to inform and evaluate school improvement decisions at each meeting. The Example District Leadership Team will subsequently share findings with the school board, employees, and the greater community at least annually.

Each school team in the Example School District (e.g., PBIS, RtI, Leadership) shall identify at least one goal specific to ensuring equitable academic outcomes and at least one goal specific to enhancing equitable school discipline outcomes. Additionally, the team will create or revisit action plans and determine progress of their equitable access and positive outcomes goals throughout the year.

This example explains how both district and school teams will meet regularly to review data, specifically assess equitable access and positive outcomes among different groups, and develop or revise action plans as needed. Additionally, the Example District policy clarifies how the district will communicate data results to stakeholders on a regular schedule.

NON-EXAMPLE

District Policy 5.2C. The Non-Example School District Administration team will meet with the board at the end of every fiscal year to examine district data and determine a plan for the following year.

This policy is a non-example because annual meetings do not allow for ongoing data analysis and the revision of ineffective action plans, practices, or policies. Additionally, there is no requirement for a plan to examine disaggregated data to identify any disparities



between different groups. Last, there is limited information provided describing who will collect data and when feedback will be provided to schools.

Examples: School Procedures Reflecting District Policy

EXAMPLE

Goals: In alignment with our school's mission and district discipline policy, our school leadership team's current equitable access and positive outcomes goals are: (a) provide at least two professional development opportunities annually for teachers and administrators related to culturally responsive behavior support practices, (b) increase the percentage of students who have positive perceptions of our school climate to 80% across all racial/ethnic groups as measured by the annual District School Climate Survey, (c) increase family and community partnership in school activities to 80%, (d) provide at least one community activity/field trip each semester, and (e) monitor disaggregated rates of ODRs at least quarterly and reduce risk ratios to no more than 1.25 for any group (see PBIS Disproportionality Data Guide).

This example demonstrates the use of ongoing data collection and analysis through a team-based approach. Further, the teams meet regularly to make decisions and action plans based on the data.

NON-EXAMPLE

Non-Example School will use data-based decision making when determining policies and procedures.

This is a non-example because the policy does not have a plan to assess and ensure equitable access and positive outcomes in academics or discipline. Further, it is unknown whether data will be collected or reviewed regularly.

Resources

- [PBIS Discipline Disproportionality Problem Solving Guide](#)



Assessing and Enacting Policies and Practices

District policies and procedures play an important role in communicating the underlying values and guidelines of a district or school approach to school discipline. Because the factors that influence school discipline policies shift over time, districts should review their policies and procedures to determine if refinement or revisions are necessary. A comprehensive review of school discipline policies requires examination of multiple sources of information, including the district's student/family handbook, code of conduct, and board policies. Helpful reviews of school discipline policies provide a snapshot of elements that are present or absent and the types of discipline actions used by schools.

Below are examples of questions the review process could address:

Do the policies and procedures:

- align with the district's vision on equitable access and positive outcomes?
- address the current needs of our students, families, and communities?
- incorporate research and evidence-based practices?
- comply with current state and federal laws and regulations?
- reflect the discipline practices used in our schools?

It is helpful to list any alternatives to suspension identified in the school policies and to note whether definitions and implementation guidelines are provided for each strategy. The review should also examine the specific behavior incidents identified in the district's discipline documents and consider whether the offense could result in discretionary or mandatory suspension or expulsion.

Sample Policies for Review

Several examples of district and state student codes of conduct and guidance documents are provided in Appendix C. Although no one example is conclusive or perfect, each serves as guidance to assist with reviewing, revising, and editing codes of conduct to ensure policies include evidence-based, safe, and instructional disciplinary practices that maintain students' dignity.

The Transforming School Discipline Collaborative (TSDC) Toolkit for Transformation and the Model School Code by Dignity Schools Campaign (see Appendix C) serve as examples of district policies related to school discipline, with a particular focus on equitable discipline. These resources provide frameworks, including a rubric for assessing district policies against comprehensive, evidence-based components, which align closely with the key elements outlined in this guide. However, it is important to recognize that no one example is perfect and can capture every nuance of implementation.

Tools for Assessing Policies

Several tools are available for teams to review their current policies and identify areas for improvement based on information included in this guide.

Checklist for Analyzing Discipline Policies and Procedures for Equity (CADPPE). The CADPPE can help identify policies and procedures emphasizing proactive, evidence-based strategies to support students' social-emotional-behavioral and academic needs. The CADPPE can also help the district leadership team identify reactive, punitive policies for review and revision.

Discipline Policy and Procedures Summary (DPPS).

This tool serves as a self-study resource for school districts to evaluate their discipline policies and practices. It emphasizes the importance of district policies in conveying values and guidelines for school discipline, particularly concerning equitable outcomes and inclusion. The DPPS includes three sections: a summary of key elements associated with low suspension rates, a planning sheet for identifying alternatives to out-of-school suspension, and a record of behaviors warranting discipline actions.

Guidance in Enacting Policies

An important but often neglected task after adopting or revising policies is developing a plan to implement them. A recommended general set of steps is as follows:

1. Communicate new or revised policies to others. It is critical for anyone who is affected by policies (e.g., administrators, school personnel, families) to know about the changes and learn how they affect their usual practices.
2. Conduct ongoing trainings. To change practices, simply sharing guidance about them is insufficient. It is important to use regular professional development practices to support personnel in improving practices.
3. Use action plans and fidelity tools to assess enactment. By assessing progress in policy enactment, administrators can identify next steps and hold themselves accountable for implementation.
4. Assess whether changes result in equitable access and positive outcomes. Effective discipline policies lead to changes in student outcomes. As such, teams can measure policy effectiveness by the extent to which student outcomes become less disproportionate over time.



The action plan in Appendix D includes common tasks related to policy assessment, revision, and enactment.

Conclusion

Students learn best in settings where they feel safe, nurtured, and supported. Because the issue of disproportionality in school discipline is multifaceted, there may not be one easy solution. However, direct efforts in policy are recommended to reduce ubiquitous racial and ethnic disparities (Green et al., 2023; Skiba et al., 2011). Using the key elements from this guidebook, policymakers at the board, district, and school levels can adopt or revise policies to address many of the contributing factors resulting in the disparate rates of office discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions found among historically underrepresented groups. Furthermore, the elements provide guidance that can potentially improve outcomes for all students



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Appendix A

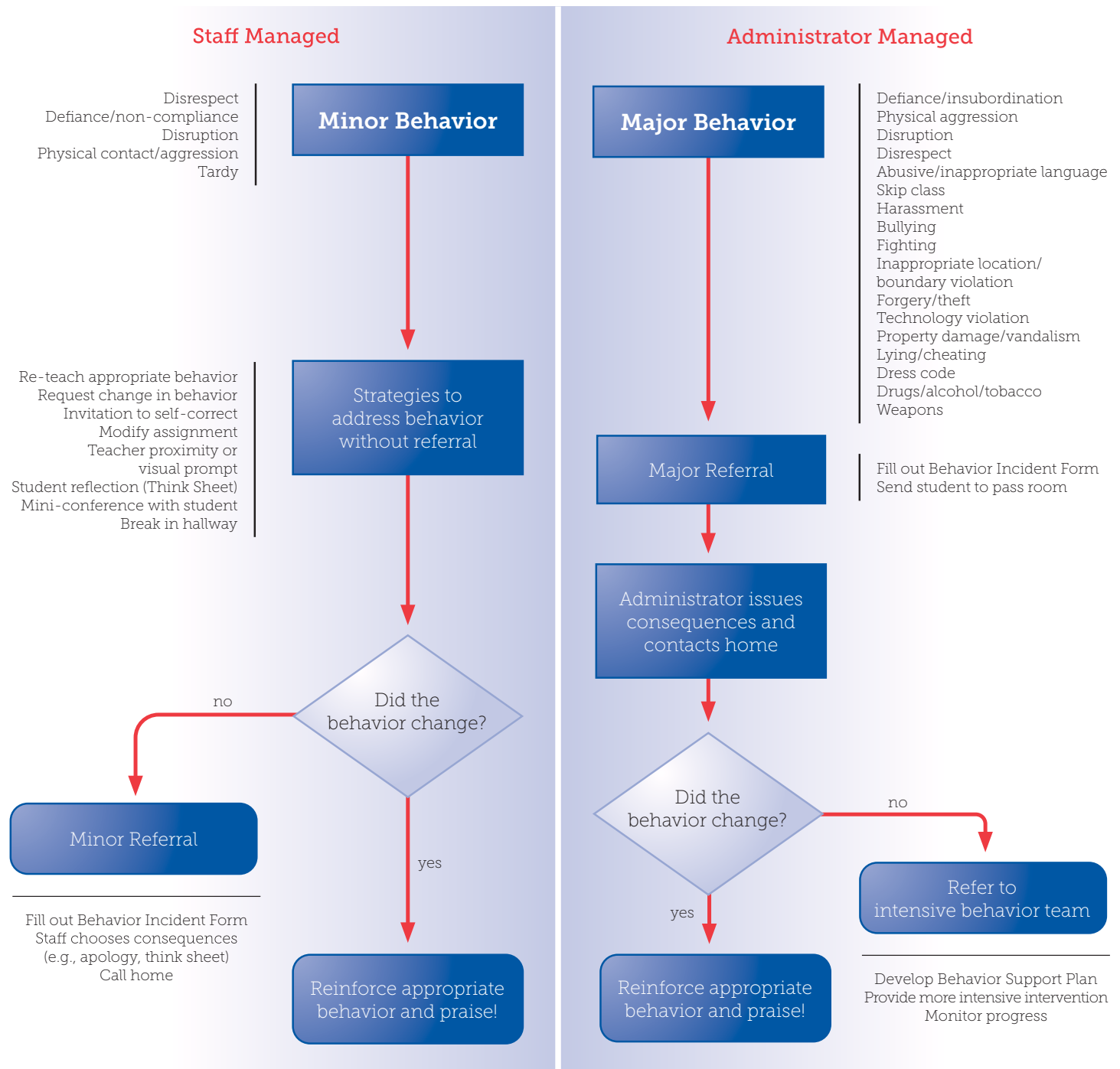
Glossary of Terms

Administrator-Managed (Major) Behavior	Serious behavior incidents that require follow-up action by school administrators
Affirming Environments	Learning spaces where students and staff are valued, acknowledged as assets to the system, and able to use their voice, agency, and expression.
Behavior Incident Categories	Standardized definitions of types of student behavior that may require disciplinary response (e.g., disruption, defiance)
Contextually Appropriate Behavior	Prosocial actions that are expected or desired in a given context
Contextually Inappropriate Behavior	Actions that are unexpected or unwanted in a given context but may be appropriate in another context
Disaggregated Data	Data broken down by student subgroups (e.g., disability status, ethnicity, gender identity, language status, race, religion) to identify patterns of inequity or disproportionality
Disproportionality	The overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a particular student group (e.g., by race, disability, gender) in disciplinary actions compared to their overall enrollment
Equitable Access and Positive Outcomes	Ensuring all students have full access to Tier 1 supports and the opportunity to receive the continuum educational supports they need in order to achieve academic and behavior success
Exclusionary Discipline	Responses to contextually inappropriate behavior that remove students from the learning environment (e.g., office discipline referrals, suspensions, expulsions)
Explicit Bias	Conscious beliefs or attitudes that result in discriminatory behavior or decisions
Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)	A process for (a) identifying how a student's behavior meets a basic human need and (b) developing an intervention plan to address it
Graduated Discipline	A system of responses to student behavior that increases in intensity based on the severity or frequency of incidents, emphasizing instructional approaches before exclusion

Implicit Bias	Unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that affect decisions and actions, often contributing to disproportionate outcomes
Instructional Alternatives to Exclusion	Strategies that teach contextually appropriate behavior and support student learning rather than removing students from the learning environment
MTSS (multi-tiered systems of support)	A preventive framework that provides varying levels of academic and behavioral support based on student need, typically organized into three tiers
PBIS (positive behavioral interventions and supports)	An evidence-based MTSS framework for promoting positive behavior and improving school climate through proactive practices, systems, and data
Policy	A formally approved document that establishes requirements for district or school personnel will carry out their required duties
Policy Fidelity	The degree to which a policy is implemented as intended, including consistency and accountability
Procedure	Guidance that provides specific details on how to implement policy
Restorative Practices	Approaches to discipline that focus on building relationships, community, and a sense of belonging, repairing harm, restoring relationships, and reintegrating students into the learning community
School Resource Officer (SRO)	A law enforcement officer assigned to work in schools, whose role should be clearly defined in discipline policies
Staff-Managed (Minor) Behavior	Minor behavior incidents that can be addressed by the immediate school personnel
Tier 1 Supports	Universal interventions provided to all students to promote positive behavior and prevent problems before they occur
Zero-Tolerance Policy	A discipline policy that mandates predetermined consequences (often exclusionary) for specific infractions, regardless of context

Appendix B

Sample “Staff-Managed vs. “Administrator-Managed” Behavior Flowchart



Appendix C

Sample Guidance Documents and Model Policies

Resource: American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California. (2016). Model board policy regarding school district police departments. <https://www.aclusocal.org/sites/default/files/appendix-c-aclu-board-policy.pdf>

Abstract: The ACLU's Model Board Policy Regarding School District Police Departments outlines guidelines for school police involvement in educational settings. It emphasizes the need for clear roles and responsibilities for school police officers, focusing on de-escalation strategies and minimizing student arrests. The policy highlights the importance of protecting student rights during questioning, searches, and disciplinary actions, while prohibiting racial profiling. It aims to create a safe and supportive learning environment, advocating for practices that prevent the criminalization of student behavior and foster positive interactions between law enforcement and students. The document serves as a resource for school boards to implement effective policies.

Resource: Connecticut State Board of Education. (2019). Position statement on reducing disproportionality in suspensions and expulsions (exclusionary discipline).

https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/sde/board/position_statement_reducing_disproportionality_in_suspensions_and_expulsions.pdf

Abstract: The position statement presents a thorough approach to tackling the important issue of disproportionality in suspensions and expulsions in Connecticut's public schools. Supported by the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), local education agencies are actively implementing

multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). These systems focus on fostering positive relationships among students, staff, and the community, as well as providing early intervention and tailored assistance for students who face academic and behavioral challenges.

Resource: Dignity in Schools. (2019). Model School Code on Education and Dignity. Dignity in Schools Campaign. <https://dignityinschools.org/take-action/model-school-code/>

Abstract: The Model School Code on Education and Dignity, developed by the Dignity in Schools Campaign, provides policies to combat school pushout and ensure students' rights to education and dignity. It includes recommendations on culturally relevant curricula, addressing racial disparities in discipline, and creating trauma-sensitive environments. It advocates for removing law enforcement from schools and implementing restorative justice approaches. The Code serves as a guide for schools and policymakers to create inclusive and equitable learning spaces, especially for marginalized students.

Resource: San Francisco Unified School District. (n.d.) Student and Family Handbook. <https://www.sfusd.edu/student-and-family-handbook>

Abstract: The Student and Family Handbook is a resource for all SFUSD stakeholders. We provide this Handbook as a way to work in partnership, to support students and families to understand the rights that you have in the district. It is also a place where the district outlines our expectations for students and families.



Resource: Transforming School Discipline Collaborative. (n.d.). Transforming school discipline: A guide to effective policies and practices. Transforming School Discipline Collaborative. <https://www.transformschooldiscipline.org/tsdc-toolkit>

Abstract: The Model Student Code of Conduct outlines a district or school's commitment to a restorative, non-punitive discipline philosophy aimed at teaching contextually appropriate behaviors and resolving conflicts. It emphasizes the importance of a positive school climate, inclusive policies, and community engagement. The Code highlights the rights and responsibilities of students, families, and staff, fostering collaboration among stakeholders. It promotes restorative practices to address misbehavior while discouraging exclusionary practices like suspension or expulsion, unless absolutely necessary. The Code also ensures equitable discipline policies that avoid disproportionate impacts on marginalized students, fostering an environment where every student can succeed academically and socially.



Appendix D

Action Planning for Establishing Effective Policies

Activity	Activity Task Analysis	Who	When
1. Assess current policies - Use policy assessment tools (see p. 27) - Seek feedback from students, families, and community members	a.		
	b.		
	c.		
	d.		
	e.		
2. Adopt/revise policies to include recommended elements - Specific commitment to equitable access and positive outcomes in affirming environments - Family and community partnerships in policy development - Implementation within a tiered framework that emphasizes schoolwide (Tier 1) supports - Clear, objective discipline procedures - Removal or reduction of exclusionary practices - Graduated discipline systems with instructional alternatives to exclusion - Transparent processes for using disaggregated data to monitor progress	a.		
	b.		
	c.		
	d.		
	e.		



Activity	Activity Task Analysis	Who	When
3. Implement policies and communication plan - Inform faculty and staff - Provide training and support to faculty and staff	a.		
	b.		
	c.		
	d.		
	e.		
4. Evaluate effectiveness - Collect data - Assess progress - Identify policies for further revision	a.		
	b.		
	c.		
	d.		
	e.		