

Discipline Myth Busters

THE MYTH

THE FACTS

Students of color are being disciplined and suspended more often because they misbehave more often (and exhibit more serious behaviors)

Multiple studies have found little to no evidence that racial differences in discipline are due to differences in rates or types of misbehavior by students of different races.

One study found that regardless of levels of misbehavior and delinquency, schools with higher enrollment of black students are more likely to use higher rates of exclusionary discipline, court action, and zero tolerance policies, and to use fewer mild disciplinary practices.

Disparities in discipline are not based on race as much as they are a result of poverty and the home or community conditions of students

Urban schools consistently suspended a higher proportion of black students even after controlling for poverty.

Not only are there racial disparities in discipline rates, there are also disparities in how black students are disciplined that appear to be literally based on skin color. One study found that darker-skinned black students were more likely to be suspended than black students with lighter skin. This was particularly true for girls, who seemed to be driving the overall disparity safer. Darker-skinned black girls were suspended three times more often than lighter-skinned girls.

Disruptive students must be removed so other students can learn

Studies have found the opposite to be true: suspending or otherwise pushing out students has not improved academic outcomes for other students, and can actually harm the students who remain.

For example, after tracking nearly 17,000 students over three years, two Midwestern researchers found that high rates of school suspensions harmed math and reading scores for non-suspended students.

Research has found that lower suspension rates correlate with higher academic achievement. This finding applies across racial groups.

More suspensions make schools safer

The research findings suggest the opposite. Schools with higher rates of school suspension and expulsion appear to have less satisfactory ratings of school climate and less satisfactory school governance structures, according to the American Psychological Association.

THE MYTH

Restorative justice practices or other alternatives to suspension let students off the hook, and they are not held accountable

THE FACTS

Accountability within restorative frameworks requires that students take responsibility for their behavior and take action to repair the harm. Taking full responsibility for behavior requires:

- Understanding how that behavior affected other human beings (not just the courts or officials).
- Acknowledging that the behavior resulted from a choice that could have been made differently.
- Acknowledging to all affected that the behavior was harmful to others.
- Taking action to repair the harm where possible.
- Making changes necessary to avoid such behavior in the future.

Restorative justice practices are something that only school counselors or behavior interventionists are responsible for

The most successful examples of restorative justice practices resulting in reduced suspensions and behavior incidents involve schoolwide systems.

There are many ways in which teachers can integrate restorative approaches into their classrooms and teaching, such as holding a one-on-one restorative conversation or a classroom circle to address an issue and restore relationships.

Suspensions deter students from engaging in serious offenses

Suspensions do not work as a deterrent. Suspensions are particularly ineffective in deterring future suspensions once a student has been suspended. Students receiving a suspension are up to 50 percent more likely to receive additional suspensions.

Suspensions are only used as a measure of last resort in serious or violent incidents

Federal data, such as the data collected by the Office of Civil Rights in 2009–10, demonstrates that most out-of-school suspensions are for minor nonviolent and subjective offenses, especially for students of color who attend America’s middle and high schools.

Other research that analyzes state databases shows similar trends. For example, in Minnesota, approximately 70 percent of suspensions during the 2013–14 school year were for nonviolent incidences. The most common category was “disruptive/disorderly.”