

Recommendations for Addressing Discipline Disproportionality in Education

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Disproportionality represents one of the most significant problems in education today (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2013). The results of decades of research consistently show that students of color, particularly African American students (and even more so for those with disabilities), are at significantly increased risk for exposure to exclusionary discipline practices, including office discipline referrals and suspensions (e.g., Fabelo et al., 2011; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Shaw & Braden, 1990). These differences have been found consistently across geographic regions and cannot be adequately explained by the correlation between race and poverty (Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010). Given the well-documented negative effects of exclusionary discipline on a range of student outcomes (American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health, 2013), educators must address this issue by identifying rates of discipline disproportionality, taking steps to reduce it, and monitoring the effects of intervention on disproportionality. Disproportionality in exclusionary discipline blocks us from the overall objective of promoting positive outcomes for all students.

Components of Effective Intervention to Prevent and Reduce Disproportionality

The existing research is clear that that no single strategy will be sufficient to produce substantive and sustainable change. Multiple components may be needed, but not all components may be necessary in all schools. We describe

here a 5-point multicomponent approach to reduce disproportionality in schools.

1. Use Effective Instruction to Reduce the Achievement Gap

Because of the well-documented relation between academic achievement and problem behavior (McIntosh, Sadler, &

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Brown, 2012) and the achievement gap between students of color and White students (Gregory et al., 2010), ameliorating the achievement gap may reduce disproportionality. Effective instruction includes (a) explicit instruction, (b) high rates of opportunities to respond with performance feedback, and (c) use of formative assessment to guide instruction (Hattie, 2009).

2. Implement School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions And Supports (SWPBIS) to Build a Foundation of Prevention

SWPBIS focuses on improving behavior by teaching students prosocial skills and redesigning school environments to discourage problem behavior (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Core features of SWPBIS include (a) defining and teaching a small set of positive, school-wide behavior expectations to all students, (b) establishing a regular pattern in which all adults acknowledge and reward appropriate student behavior, (c) minimizing the likelihood that problem behaviors will be inadvertently rewarded, and (d) collecting and using discipline and implementation data to guide efforts. SWPBIS also incorporates a multi-tiered system of support so that students needing more intensive support gain access to increasingly individualized support options.

SWPBIS is particularly relevant to the challenge of disproportionality for three reasons. First, because of its focus on establishing a clear, consistent, and positive social culture, identifying and teaching clear expectations for behavior can reduce ambiguity for both students (e.g., it is not assumed that all students know what being respectful at school “looks like”) and adults (e.g., expectations and violations are clearer, reducing ambiguity). These expectations can be developed collaboratively with students, families, and community members, as well as assessed for their congruence with the range of cultural groups in the school (Fallon, O’Keeffe, & Sugai, 2012). Second, the SWPBIS focus on clear discipline definitions and procedures can reduce

ambiguity in discipline decisions, decreasing the effects of implicit bias (Lai, Hoffman, Nosek, & Greenwald, 2013). Third, the focus of SWPBIS on instructional approaches to discipline and integration with academic systems can keep students in the classroom and learning instead of removed from instruction (Sugai, O’Keeffe, & Fallon, 2012).

Research to date on the effects of SWPBIS on disproportionality is limited but promising. Evaluation studies have shown decreases in ODRs over time for each racial/ethnic group (Vincent, Cartledge, May, & Tobin, 2009, October) and statistically significantly reduced disproportionality in schools implementing SWPBIS than those not implementing SWPBIS (Vincent, Swain-Bradway, Tobin, & May, 2011).

3. Collect, Use, and Report Disaggregated Student Discipline Data

Any school or district committed to reducing disproportionality should adopt data systems that allow disaggregation of student data by race and provide instantaneous access to these data for both school and district teams. Some discipline data systems for entering and analyzing office discipline referrals and suspensions, such as the School-wide Information System (SWIS; www.swis.org), can automatically produce disproportionality data for identifying and monitoring the extent of disproportionality. Risk indices and risk ratios are common metrics for assessing disproportionality (Boneshefski & Runge, 2014). These data can easily be added to monthly school team meeting agendas, as well as built into district and state accountability systems. The OSEP Center on PBIS (www.pbis.org) has produced a free guide for school teams in using discipline data to address disproportionality.

4. Develop Policies with Accountability for Disciplinary Equity

Many policies include an explicit commitment to equity, but it is more important for policies to have clear steps to

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achieve equity and accountability for taking these steps (Devine, Forscher, Austin, & Cox, 2012; Petersen & Togstad, 2006). Effective policies include clear, actionable procedures for enhancing equity (e.g., remove harmful practices, data collection, hiring preferences, professional development). Hiring procedures should include a preference for individuals with a commitment to educational equity. In addition, the procedures should have true accountability, such as inclusion of equity outcomes into administrator and teacher evaluation processes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

5. Teach Neutralizing Routines for Vulnerable Decision Points

It may be effective to provide training to school personnel to identify situations in which their decisions may be vulnerable to bias (e.g., fatigue, subjective behavior, unfamiliar student). In these situations, using a self-review routine just prior to a making a discipline decision may neutralize the effects of implicit bias, especially in situations that are chaotic, ambiguous, or seem to demand snap judgments (Lai et al., 2013). Research in other fields (Mendoza, Gollwitzer, & Amodio, 2010) suggests that short “if-then” statements are most effective (e.g., “If a student is disrespectful, handle it after class”).

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