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# CLOSING THE DISCIPLINE GAP

**Suspension and expulsion give way to restorative justice and other equity initiatives**

**By Jessica Ablamsky**

**I**n the wake of a divisive presidential election, hundreds of students from about a dozen high schools in Oakland, California, cut class last November to voice their discontent with President-elect Donald Trump.

Rather than demand students return to school, faculty at Oakland USD supported the peaceful demonstration, where students could express their feelings, says David Yusem, Oakland's restorative justice program coordinator.

It is part of a transformation in the district, which in recent years has sought to replace zero-tolerance discipline policies with alternatives designed to eliminate the racial divide in school discipline.

Oakland is not alone. Districts across the U.S. are coming to grips with having inherited exclusionary discipline practices that disproportionately target students of color and students with disabilities, and too often funnel them into the school-to-prison pipeline.

Nationwide, both groups are excessively suspended and expelled, according to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. Black students

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**BROWARD PROMISE**—Members of the Broward County community, including police officers and court officials, attend a PROMISE program meeting, above. The program puts students in trouble into a special program to learn from mistakes.

without disabilities are more than three times as likely as white students without disabilities to be suspended or expelled.

Although 12 percent of all students receive special education services, special ed students represent 20 percent of out-of-school suspensions and 23 percent of school-related arrests.

Experts agree discipline that removes students from the classroom causes sig-

nificant harm and does little good. The answer, they say, is to replace zero-tolerance policies with alternatives that help every student thrive, regardless of challenges they face at home and in their communities.

### Promising interventions

Such an alternative model is what Robert Runcie followed when he took over as su-

perintendent of Broward County Public Schools in the 2011-12 school year, when there were 1,000 school-related arrests, the highest number in Florida. Most of them involved nonviolent misdemeanors.

Runcie went public with the data and gathered a diverse group of stakeholders to devise a districtwide policy that emphasizes alternatives to arrest. In November 2013, nearly a dozen agencies—including the state attorney's office, the Broward County sheriff and the Fort Lauderdale Branch of the NAACP—signed a Collaborative Agreement on School Discipline, which favors school-based interventions for nonviolent misdemeanors.

Broward County students involved in infractions, such as petty theft or possessing alcohol, can be assigned to the PROMISE program—Preventing Recidivism Through Opportunities, Mentoring, Interventions, Support & Education. PROMISE students are removed from their home school for two to 10 days, sent to the district's Pine Ridge Education Center and given tutoring, family counseling and other interventions.

The program is a community effort with participation from the city court and state Department of Juvenile Justice. Only about 12 percent of students who successfully completed the PROMISE program in the 2015-16 year reoffended, Runcie says.

The transformation also reduced arrests, behavior incidents and suspensions. In the 2014-15 school year, less than 500 students were arrested, and the county had one of the lowest arrest rates in the state, according to the juvenile justice department.

## A need for empathetic preschool teachers

Preschool teachers' treatment of students of different ethnicities reveals that expulsions and suspensions disproportionately deny access to boys and black students, according to the Yale Child Study Center.

Its recent report—"Do Early Educators' Implicit Biases Regarding Sex and Race Relate to Behavior Expectations and Recommendations of Preschool Expulsions and Suspensions?"—notes:

- Implicit biases may be reduced by increasing teachers' empathy for children. Early educators should learn more about the struggles—and strengths—of the families they serve. And they should get more PD training about it.
- Teachers could also benefit from increased training to understand how best to use mental health information and increase empathic understanding of children.

For the full report, see <http://DAmag.me/96>.

### Implicit bias study needed

But disparities remain, according to a 2015 report by Maurice Woods, chief strategy and operations officer for Broward County schools. Black students were involved in behavioral incidents and suspended at twice the rate of white students.

To combat the discrepancy, the district—along with other civil rights and law enforcement groups—is conducting an implicit bias study to consider deep-seated attitudes and stereotypes that might



influence a person's behavior, sometimes subconsciously. Researchers are surveying students, police, school faculty and other members of the community to reveal how prejudices contribute to the racial discipline disparity. Results, which are expected to be released in summer 2018, should help Runcie further dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline.

### Support teams, planning centers

In October 2007, a 14-year-old student shot four people at SuccessTech High School in Cleveland before committing suicide. In reaction, Cleveland Metropolitan School District leaders installed metal detectors and hired additional security officers. Then they worked to improve school climates.

They recruited violence prevention expert David Osher, vice president at the American Institutes for Research, to help prevent another tragedy. The institute, which studies behavioral and social science, recommended a comprehensive approach using social-emotional learning, exclusionary discipline, social services and school climate.

Social-emotional learning teaches students to manage their feelings, form positive relationships and solve problems. All the district's elementary and middle schools have incorporated social-emotional learning activities that provide lessons on communication, regulating emotions and decision-making.

The district also created special planning centers to better support students who have been kicked out of class or suspended. Instructional aides help students improve behavior, develop self-esteem and set goals. Students can refer themselves to the planning center or be referred by a parent or staff member.

### Community lends hand

More recently, the district partnered with the United Way of Greater Cleveland, Cleveland State University and Boys & Girls Clubs of Cleveland, among others, to provide social services for students at the neediest schools.

Each participating school has a site coordinator who organizes outside services that students might need: food, clothing, arts enrichment, sports programs, mentoring and tutoring. The program started with 17 of the district's lowest-performing schools, and was expanded about two years ago to 25 buildings, says the United Way of Greater Cleveland.

And finally, school climate is assessed via the American Institutes for Research's conditions for learning survey, which examines safety, academic expectations, student support services and other areas to improve programs.

### Negative behaviors decrease

Although discipline disparities remain in

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Cleveland, negative behavior incidents decreased per school by nearly 50 percent, and out-of-school suspensions have decreased by nearly 60 percent, according to Indiana University researchers.

Violent and disruptive behavior in the district declined significantly from 2008-09 to 2010-11, according to a report by the Civil Rights Project in Los Angeles. Infractions worthy of suspension per school declined from 233 to 132, including fights and serious bodily harm.

Disciplinary incidents decreased more at schools that focused greater attention on alternative thinking curricula, student support teams and planning centers, the civil rights report states. And perceived safety also increased more significantly at such schools during the same period.

## Healing circles

The goal for districts revamping discipline policies should be to set high expectations for students while sustaining supportive learning, says Derek Mitchell, CEO of Partners in School Innovation, a nonprofit that helps transform low-performing public schools.

One strategy is restorative justice, which is not a "program" as much as it is a philosophy, says Harry Lawson, director of NEA's human and civil rights department. In lieu of punishing students, restorative justice seeks to transform negative behavior and provide healing for the victim, the offender and the community.

Oakland first implemented restorative justice in 2005 as a pilot program at Cole Middle School. In one example, students and teachers learned to sit in a circle to discuss behaviors and consequences.

During implementation, suspensions declined by 87 percent. The school climate also improved, with many students and teachers reporting the building felt more peaceful, with fewer fights between students and better behavior in the classroom, according to a report from the University of California, Berkeley's School of Law.

Based on that initial success and a groundswell of support from the commu-

nity, in 2010 the Oakland school board passed a resolution to implement restorative justice districtwide, says Yusem, the restorative justice coordinator.

In the 2011-12 school year, the discipline gap between white students and their black peers was nearly 25 percent, according to a report by Data in Action, which provides assessment tools to advance social change. During the 2012-13 year, the gap decreased to 19 percent.

## Role of law enforcement

School resources officers are also key to a healthy school climate. And it is imperative that SROs have the proper training because many incidents that occur can be classified as crimes, says Mo Canady, executive director of the National Association of School Resource Officers. Instead of making an immediate arrest, the

association trains officers in conflict resolution, and recommends that SROs have no role in administering formal school discipline. The association is also updating its basic course to include diversity training, which will address implicit bias.

During training, SROs learn to develop relationships with students, such as speaking in classrooms, modeling appropriate behavior, using de-escalation techniques and offering advice to students who ask for assistance. For example, an SRO can discuss how a student's behavior contributed to a problem. This approach promotes personal growth.

"We don't ignore bad behavior," Canady says. "But we are not necessarily going to lock people up because of it." DA

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## Make discipline more equitable

### Quick tips for administrators

Today's administrators may not have created the discipline divide, but many are searching for solutions. "It's really about moving away from harsh, severe punishment," says Robert Runcie, superintendent of Broward County Public Schools in Florida. "Trying to make sure we keep our students in classrooms and out of courtrooms."

Here are some tips, based on conversations with experts and administrators:

- **Be transparent.** Be honest about your problem, and share ongoing results—such as suspension and expulsion data—with faculty and community.
- **Change starts at the top.** District leaders, including superintendents and principals, must be committed to a long-term process. High turnover can lead to uneven implementation.
- **Don't go it alone.** Look for community allies, such as the school board, PTA, law enforcement and social services to provide food, clothing or counseling. Creating consensus takes more time, but it builds the critical mass of support the district needs to embark on systemic change.
- Partners can also include nonprofit organizations, higher education, elected officials and law enforcement.
- **It's about relationships.** Change requires improving the quality of relationships between students, between faculty and students, and between the district and the community. Restorative justice and social-emotional learning have strengthened relationships and improved educational climates.