



Promoting Equity in Education

Fostering Positive School Climates Where All Students Learn

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ALL STUDENTS DESERVE TO BE IN SCHOOL. SOLUTIONS NOT SUSPENSIONS.

Issue Statement

Students of color and students with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by exclusionary discipline in our schools. Suspensions, removals, and expulsions do not work. There is strong evidence to suggest that such punitive practices do not deter misbehavior. They are a pathway to students dropping out of school and a gateway to involvement with the criminal justice system. Minnesota must end exclusionary disciplinary practices and replace these punitive approaches with practices that create opportunity and foster a positive, supportive, affirming school climate where all students can learn, grow, and thrive.

Overview of the Problem

The experiences of students of color in the education system are often at odds with those of their white peers.

Imagine for a moment the following two real-life scenarios:

- One student is experiencing divorce in their family. He gets upset at school and ends up kicking a hole in a door. His mother offers to pay for repairs and takes him home for the day. He does not receive a suspension.
- Another student is also experiencing family difficulties at home. He gets upset and knocks over a vase, breaking it in pieces. School staff report that he vandalized school property and he receives a suspension.

Exclusionary Discipline refers to [exclusion, expulsion, or suspension](#) of any student from a school that prevents them from attending their regular classes for an extended period of time.

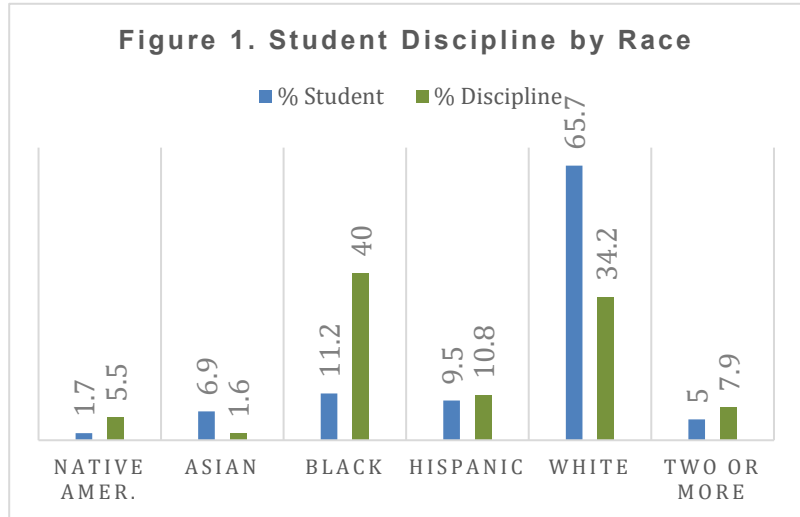
The main difference between these two situations is that the student who received the suspension was black.

The preceding examples were provided as part of Dr. Bernadeia Johnson’s (Assistant Professor at Minnesota State University Mankato and former Superintendent of Minneapolis Public Schools) testimony to the Minnesota House of Representatives, [Committee on Education on January 25, 2021](#). Dr. Johnson discussed at length the disparities she has observed.

Exposing the Problem Through Numbers

While the nation is seeing a [downward trend](#) in school suspensions, a large racial gap remains. Students of color and students with disabilities are disproportionately subjected to exclusionary practices in Americas schools ([Morgan et al., 2014](#); [Kamentz, 2018](#); [Weir, 2016](#)).

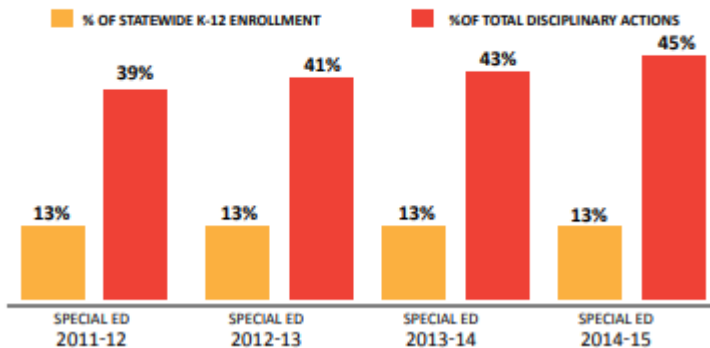
In 2019, the Minnesota Department of Education published the [State of Our Students](#). Included in the report is information about discipline rates, including out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and exclusions. Figure 1 documents the sizable racial gap between disciplinary action taken against black students and white students.



An investigation by the [Minnesota Department of Human Rights](#)

(2018) of school districts across the state looked only at suspensions and expulsions, with American-Indian students **10 times** more likely and African-American Students **8 times** more likely to be suspended or expelled than white peers.

DISCIPLINE AND SPECIAL EDUCATION IDENTIFICATION RATES, 2011–2016 Figure 2



The 2018 report [Excluded: The Role of Race and Exclusionary Practices in Minnesota's Special Education](#) examines disability and race. The key finding was students of color and Native American students are overrepresented in 1) special education identification, 2) placement into restrictive educational settings, and 3) discipline, including suspensions and expulsions.

Students receiving special education services are only 13% of Minnesota’s student population, but they are disproportionately subjected to disciplinary action (Figure 2).

The numbers tell only a part of the story. The cost to students is lost learning and lesson time, delayed graduation, more likely to repeat a grade, a higher likelihood of dropping out of school and greater involvement in the criminal justice system. There is also a financial cost. In the state of [California a study](#) estimated that the financial cost of student dropouts because of suspensions total \$2.7 billion.

Minnesota Policy Governing Exclusionary Practices

Minnesota’s policy governing dismissal of students from school is [The Pupil Fair Dismissal Act](#). In 2020, Minnesota took the first step in banning exclusionary practices in schools by enacting “[full and equitable participation](#)” legislation that prohibits disciplinary dismissal in preschool or prekindergarten programs. While a good first step, this leaves thousands of Minnesota’s children susceptible to exclusionary disciplinary practices.

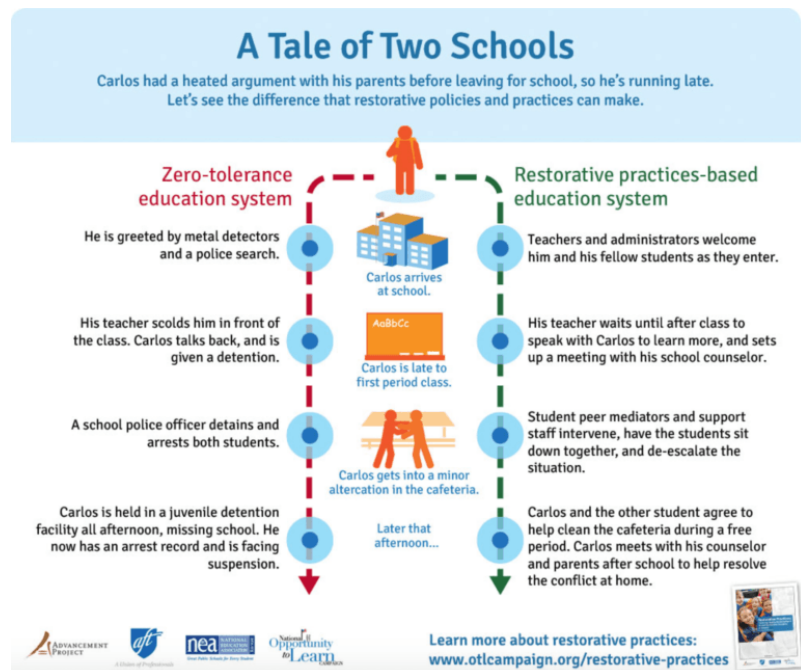
Minnesota’s policy stipulates what is allowable for student discipline, but it is lacking in several critical ways: 1) There are no clear steps or standards to meet before excluding a student, 2) There is lax oversight from the State and minimal accountability for policy violations, 3) Disciplinary practices vary widely across schools (in part due to the lack of oversight). However, the biggest gap in Minnesota’s policy is a lack of investment in equitable opportunities ([Miseducation Minnesota](#)) and alternatives to exclusionary practices.

Approaches that Promote a Positive School Climate

Trauma-Informed Schools. In 2019, the [Trauma-Informed Schools Act](#) was introduced in the U.S. House of Representative. If enacted, the legislation would define “[trauma-informed practice](#)” for the first time in federal education law. Trauma-informed practice encourages a shared understanding for all school staff that trauma is common among students and can impact relationships, behavior, and learning. [Disciplinary practices](#) should include holistic assessments and positive behavioral interventions aimed at addressing the underlying cause of the behavior; avoid harsh, punitive, or exclusionary discipline; incorporate restorative justice practices; and does not discriminate. [Trainings and activities](#) for teachers and staff should promote a culture of acceptance, safety, positive student and adult relationships, teamwork and communication, social-emotional skills, and prevention of implicit bias in adults. [States](#) across the country are enacting trauma-informed policies focused on four areas: 1) educator and school staff training, 2) task forces/committees, 3) school discipline, and 4) funding.

Restorative Justice. [Restorative justice practices](#) are compatible with a trauma-informed approach, focused on building relationships, involving stakeholders, and providing opportunities for voluntary conversations and decision making. Restorative justice practices have been shown to decrease the total suspension referrals and decrease the likelihood that a second intervention will be needed for a student.

The example of [A Tale of Two Schools](#) shows how a restorative practice approach works in schools.



Social Emotional Learning Programs. [SEL](#) is the way all young people “acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions”. SEL programs [improve learning conditions, attendance, and student behavior](#). SEL [reduces out of school suspensions](#) and disciplinary incidents. An? SEL intervention includes [replacing detention with meditation](#).



Policy Position Statement

“Build a more racially just education system where the humanity of every student is uplifted and celebrated”. — Minnesota Equity in Education Partnership

Minnesota has taken some steps to address the problem of exclusionary practices used in our schools that are disproportionately harming students of color and students with disabilities. Minnesota must end exclusionary disciplinary practices and replace these punitive approaches with practices that create opportunity and foster a positive, supportive, affirming school climate where all students can learn, grow, and thrive.

For these reasons, we recommend the following:

- Enact legislation that would expand the prohibited exclusionary practices for students through 3rd grade.
- Enact Minnesota’s own Trauma-Informed Schools Act.
- Requires schools to invest in restorative justice practices and social-emotional learning programs.
- Ensure efforts to create a positive, culturally affirming school climate are geared towards building positive adult-student relationships; increasing parent-involvement; incorporating consistent school values; hiring diverse teachers and student support personnel; training on trauma, restorative practices, mediation, and social-emotional learning.
- Develop clear standards, protocols, data collection methods, and oversight of disciplinary practices in Pre-K to12 schools. Data collected should include the type of incident, the disciplinary practice used, grade level, and demographics data (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, disability) of students involved. Schools must be transparent with the community and school staff about the data.

References

Full text online sources were used to create this policy advocacy brief and are [linked](#) throughout the document.

To access this and other policy advocacy briefs go to: <http://link.mnsu.edu/mswbriefts>