

POLICY BRIEF

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Positive Discipline in the Era of COVID-19 to Increase Student Engagement

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School closures related to COVID-19 have taken an emotional and cognitive toll on students, parents, and teachers alike, with no clear end in sight to the demands and challenges ahead. Now more than ever, conventional school discipline approaches like disciplinary referrals or school suspensions are unlikely to work – and may even cause harm. Punitive tactics like these have never been an effective response to difficult student behavior and are prone to excessive use, particularly with Black students. Prior to COVID-19, Black students nationally were three times as likely to be suspended out-of-school as all other racial and ethnic student groups.¹ Racially disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic prompt reasonable concern that disparities could grow when students return to the classroom.

Now more than ever, we must turn our attention to upstream prevention. Below are recommendations based on the evidence-base supporting a multi-tiered approach to promoting student engagement and preventing unnecessary use of punitive discipline. Each of these recommendations has implications for reducing educational inequities and applications of the recommendations in virtual and in-person classrooms are given.

“Fix Injustices, Not Kids” Principle²

Let us begin with a core principle of focusing our energy on fixing injustices, not kids. A lot of the time, we default to thinking about discipline and behavioral data as a reflection of a problem *within* students. This is a trap that can quickly lead to deficit thinking – the idea that students, particularly Black, Indigenous, and students of color from low-income backgrounds, struggle because of internal problems in themselves, their homes, their families and their neighborhoods. This type of thinking places the burden of behavioral challenges squarely within students and their families, and *denies* the impact and role that surrounding, intergenerational

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and present-day structural inequalities and interpersonal biases have on kids. Ibram X. Kendi, the author of the book *How to Be an Antiracist*, has said that denial is the heartbeat of racism. Striving to be antiracist means letting one's defensive guards down and not denying what is there. It also frees one to focus more on student, family, and community strengths and assets that can be tapped as funds of knowledge and resources for learning in schools. This shift in focus to fixing injustices, not kids, is a first step that can lead to meaningful change in the way that punitive school discipline strategies are used.

Create Connection – Relationships Matter

It is critical to invest in relationship building and connection student-to-teacher and student-to-student, particularly in physically-distanced learning circumstances.³ Furthermore, culturally responsive teaching is predicated on having authentic relationships with students. To create connection in remote learning context, educators can leverage technology in creative ways, including:

- Distance learning online “check-in” assessments (“Today I am...[check all that apply]: Happy, excited, sad, anxious, hungry, silly, tired, lonely, bored, overwhelmed”).
- Daily morning meetings to orient students to the day, answer questions, provide an opportunity to connect with their classmates, and share their concerns and needs.
- Peer-to-peer chat times to encourage and initiate peer interaction.
- Scheduling 1:1 video calls with students and/or parents to check-in and recognize their efforts

These strategies also apply for in-person class opportunities to build and sustain high-quality relationships and connections.

Use Empathic, Data-Driven, and Effective Responses to Disruptions and Off-Task Behavior

When disruptions to learning and off-task student behaviors do occur, function-based thinking, based on evidence-based intervention, can help to understand underlying drivers and root causes of the behavior.⁴ In addition, teachers can use daily check-ins or track patterns in student behavior problems to observe the what, where, when, who, and why applying data-based decision-making strategies.⁵ Correcting the behavior with quick, empathic, and private communication and praising around the behavior are other effective strategies that avoid shaming the student. Group contingencies (e.g., games like the Good Behavior Game) have extensive evidence to support their positive effects and can be used in online or in-person settings.⁶

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Make Schools “Softer”, Not “Harder”

School hardening approaches (e.g., increased surveillance, policing, and punishment) have been linked to students feeling less safe, less like they belong, and less fairly treated at school.⁷ Increasingly, school districts are instead investing in social emotional learning (SEL) programs as part of their school improvement plans, as evidence supports the effectiveness of well-implemented SEL on student academic and developmental outcomes. Such investments are a step in the right direction. Softening schools does *not* mean being soft on misbehavior and offenses; it means proactively providing universal and targeted supports for students’ and school staff’s “soft” social-emotional and interpersonal skills, as well as preventively intervening with mental health supports. SEL curricula can be adapted for remote learning with support of district and school leadership.

Develop School Staff and Student Equity Literacy as Part of SEL Initiatives

SEL initiatives have potential to foster trusting, respectful, and emotional safe learning environments for all students. However, there is a danger that SEL initiatives could be delivered superficially, as just another way to police student behavior, which could have disproportionate, negative impacts for Black and Brown students.⁸ SEL programming should address the harmful effects of racism and other systems of oppression experienced by students in and out of school and can be delivered in ways that empower youth agency to create healing spaces. Equity literacy curricula can help teachers and students alike gain fluency in equity concepts and practices and create an avenue for honest dialogue and relationship building. Such curricula must avoid teaching students to “cope” with forces of oppression like racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. Instead, lessons can teach skills for recognizing when bias and inequities are occurring, strategies for self-care, and approaches for speaking up when it is safe to do so. Incorporating equity literacy into SEL initiatives must be done with care and with coaching and professional growth opportunities provided to teachers.

Support the Wellbeing and Growth of School Staff

School staff and administrators themselves have experienced COVID-19 as a traumatic event. They have faced the enormous stress of rapid conversion to virtual teaching in the context of their own and students’ personal losses due to the pandemic.⁹ It is essential to encourage educators to take time needed for self-care. Teacher stress can lead to emotional exhaustion and a deteriorating classroom climate, which in turn can have long term effects on student academic outcomes.¹⁰ Lowering stress is also associated with reduced enactment of implicit

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biases.¹¹ Administrators should support school staff with specific suggestions to engage in self-care practices such as mindfulness, healthy eating, exercise, and connecting with loved ones. But administrators can go further too by encouraging school staff to start with self-care, and move from there to self-work. Eighty-three percent of teachers in the U.S. are White, and the majority are White women. Someone quoted Maya Angelou the other day to me saying “Do the best you can until you know better. When you know better, do better.” For our schools to equitably support all students, including Black, indigenous and students of color, in the wake of COVID-19, we have to create actively anti-racist learning spaces, and that will take embracing Maya Angelou’s call for us all to do the work that is needed to know better and do better for our students.

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¹ Gage, N. A., Whitford, D. K., Katsiyannis, A., Adams, S., & Jasper, A. (2019). National Analysis of the Disciplinary Exclusion of Black Students with and without Disabilities. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 28(7), 1754-1764.

² Equity Literacy Institute. (2020). Basic principles for equity literacy. EdChange.

<http://www.edchange.org/handouts/Equity-Literacy-Principles.pdf>

³ Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2006). Student-Teacher Relationships. In G. G. Bear & K. M. Minke (Eds.), *Children's needs III: Development, prevention, and intervention* (p. 59–71). National Association of School Psychologists.

⁴ Ingram, K., Lewis-Palmer, T., & Sugai, G. (2005). Function-based intervention planning: Comparing the effectiveness of FBA function-based and non—function-based intervention plans. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 7(4), 224-236.

⁵ <https://www.pbis.org/topics/data-based-decision-making>

⁶ Bradshaw, C. P., Zmuda, J. H., Kellam, S. G., & Ialongo, N. S. (2009). Longitudinal impact of two universal preventive interventions in first grade on educational outcomes in high school. *Journal of educational psychology*, 101(4), 926.

⁷ Bottiani, J.H., Bradshaw, C.P., & Mendelson, T.M. (2017). A multilevel examination of racial disparities in high school discipline: Black and White adolescents' perceived equity, school belonging, and adjustment problems. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 532-545; Lindstrom Johnson, S., Bottiani, J., Waasdorp, T. E., & Bradshaw, C. P. (2018). Surveillance or safekeeping? How school security officer and camera presence influence students' perceptions of safety, equity, and support. *The Journal of Adolescent Health: Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*, 63(6), 732–738.

⁸ Communities for Just Schools Fund. (2020, May 7). When SEL is used as another form of policing. Medium. <https://medium.com/@justschools/when-sel-is-used-as-another-form-of-policing-fa53cf85dce4>

⁹ Gewertz, C. (2020, April 20). Exhausted and grieving: Teaching during the coronavirus crisis. Miami Times. https://www.miamitimesonline.com/covid-19_hub/exhausted-and-grieving-teaching-during-the-coronavirus-crisis/article_d494c94c-8357-11ea-bcb7-075cf66f7c06.html

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¹⁰ Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research, 79*(1), 491-525; Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2001). Early teacher-child relationships and trajectory of school outcomes through eighth grade. *Child Development, 72*(2), 625-638.

¹¹ Kang, Y., Gray, J. R., & Dovidio, J. F. (2014). The nondiscriminating heart: Lovingkindness meditation training decreases implicit intergroup bias. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 143*(3), 1306.