Eliminating Disparities

Disparities in suspension rates for White, Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students are more often a result of inequitable disciplinary actions than differences in behavior.

Being removed from classroom instruction for behavioral reasons is a common experience for too many students of color. Nationally, Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students experience suspensions more frequently and for longer periods than their White peers. One out of six Black students is suspended: that's more than three times higher than for White students (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Studies suggest that the reason for this disparity is not because of differences in rates of misbehavior, but because of differences in discipline actions by teachers and principals (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002).

Exclusionary discipline undermines students' academic achievement by weakening their connection with school and removing them from the classroom. Students who experience multiple suspensions are at risk for academic failure, dropping out, substance use, and delinquency (Fabelo et al., 2011). Consequently, exclusionary discipline may explain some of the achievement gap between White students and students of color (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010).

Inequitable application of school discipline that is based on race, ethnicity, sex, or disability also raises concerns about equity and the school's legal responsibility to protect the civil rights of each student (Civil Rights Act, 1964). Although it is challenging, eliminating disparity in school discipline is an achievable and worthwhile goal. Education research highlights the features of schools that have addressed this issue successfully.

Lead through collaboration and by example. Prevention is the most effective way to eliminate disparities in school discipline. Building and sustaining a culture that embraces diversity requires strong leadership and a shared mission to promote equity among all staff members. The policies and actions of school leaders influence school climate, how staff members interact with students, and the classroom management practices of teachers (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012; Murkuria, 2002). Collaboration and the active involvement of teachers, staff members, parents, and students in setting school discipline strategies help ensure that maintaining a school climate that welcomes each student is a shared priority for all stakeholders.

in School Discipline

By Vicki Nishioka

A positive school culture and culturally relevant instructional practices make a difference in safety and behavior.

Supporting teachers and involving parents early are among the factors that reduce problems.

> Like adults, students must learn how to build positive relationships with peers from culturally different backgrounds.

Use data to identify problems and inform decision making. Disparities in school discipline exist in every state, but the pattern of disproportionality varies widely among districts and different student subgroups (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). Discipline data can help school leaders pinpoint the source of discipline disparities and monitor the effectiveness of selected intervention strategies. School climate teams should regularly review discipline data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, sex, and disability to identify concerns and monitor progress of school discipline reforms.

Develop positive, caring relationships with each student. Students experience fewer suspensions if they have positive relationships with school leaders, teachers, and school staff members. Adults who foster positive relationships with students learn about their cultural backgrounds and communication styles. Positive relationships also help administrators and staff members become sensitive to bias in their attitudes and actions that could lead to misunderstandings and trigger unnecessary discipline issues (Milner & Tenore, 2010; Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008). Characteristics of caring teachers and adults include:

- Making active efforts to learn about students' backgrounds
- Believing that all students can succeed and telling them that they can
- Recognizing each student's academic and social needs
- Establishing a classroom culture that invites students to share their ideas
- Recognizing students for academic and behavior achievements (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2011; Tobin & Vincent, 2011).

Establish high expectations for each student. Administrators and teachers must set high academic and behavioral expectations for each student, regardless of his or her race, ethnicity, or sex (Brackett et al., 2011; Eitle & Eitle, 2004; Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011). In addition to setting high expectations, administrators and teachers must tell students that they can succeed academically in a way that is genuine and believable (Murkuria, 2002). Using classroom instruction that challenges students to use higher-order thinking skills is another way that teachers and administrators can convey their belief that students can meet high expectations (Brackett et al., 2011; Morrison et al., 2008).

Teach social and emotional learning skills. Like adults, students must learn how to build positive relationships with peers from culturally different backgrounds. Research indicates that students who have skills in problem solving, conflict resolution, self-management, and relating positively with others have fewer discipline problems than students who don't have such skills (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Like core academic subjects, the selected social skills curriculum should be evidence based and taught by qualified teachers. Features of effective curricula include clearly stated outcomes for students, sequential training approaches, and active instruction strategies.

Structure school and classroom environments. Students experience fewer discipline problems in well-organized learning environments that have clear expectations for their behavior, orderly routines, efficient transitions between instruction and noninstructional activities, and positive recognition systems (Raffaele Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002; Murkuria, 2002; Tobin & Vincent, 2011). Successful teachers invite student participation in classroom decisions regarding lesson plans, the curriculum, assessment options, and behavior policies. They also enforce behavior expectations consistently and use interventions that focus on

Principals of successful schools use progressive discipline policies that emphasize teaching students how to resolve problems with peers or their teachers in responsible and respectful ways.

teaching students alternative ways to address problems that arise (Morrison et al., 2008).

Provide teachers with professional development and resources. Because most discipline referrals that lead to suspension occur in classroom settings, it is important that teachers have the professional development, resources, and support they need to meet the needs of their students (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Horner, Fireman, & Wang, 2010; Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002; Tobin & Vincent, 2011). All teachers, particularly in middle school, require professional development that will help them implement culturally responsive classroom management and behavior intervention strategies. Teachers of diverse classes also require training to understand how their personal biases may cause them to misinterpret the communication or behaviors of students whose cultures are different from their own (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clark, & Curran, 2004).

Involve parents early and often. Parents can help develop schoolwide discipline plans that address the needs of diverse student populations, especially at the high school level. Murkuria (2002) identified parental involvement in school activities and school improvement decisions as essential to reducing suspension rates for students of color and the "most effective way of dealing with disciplinary challenges" (p. 445). Teachers who have fewer discipline problems involve parents early by discussing discipline concerns with them before issuing their children office referrals (Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002).

Use preventive and proactive discipline practices. Effective school discipline practices ensure the safety of each s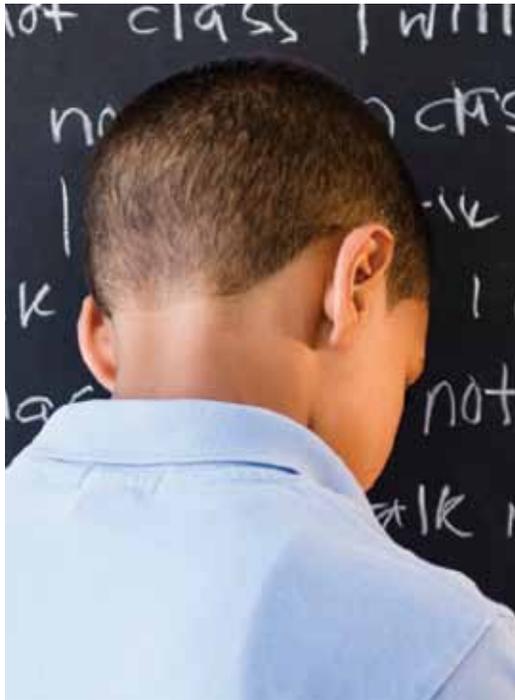tudent while teaching respectful ways to interact with others. Principals of successful schools use progressive discipline policies that emphasize teaching students how to resolve problems with peers or their teachers in responsible and respectful ways (Brackett et al., 2011; Murkuria, 2002). They also are more likely to refer students with discipline concerns to school counselors and engage in conferences with students and parents to identify strategies to prevent reoccurrence of the discipline problem. Moreover, instead of suspension, students receive consequences that are designed to teach them to take responsibility for their actions, such as restitution or community service (Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002; Payne & Welch, 2010).

Conclusion

Given the strong relationship between loss of classroom instruction time and school failure, the elimination of disparities in school discipline could also help close the achievement gap. Although challenging, the elimination of this practice is possible through strong leadership and the collaborative efforts of teachers, staff

Teachers who have high expectations, positive and caring relationships with their students, and structured classroom environments have fewer discipline problems.

members, and parents. Teachers who have high expectations, positive and caring relationships with their students, and structured classroom environments have fewer discipline problems. Schools that teach social skills, have well-organized routines, and use a continuum of discipline responses also report lower rates of suspensions.

Providing teachers with sufficient support and resources to implement effective classroom management is important, particularly for middle school grades. Those resources should include professional development in culturally responsive classroom management and strategies for teaching students social behaviors. **PL**

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