

## National Association of State Boards of Education

### FIFTH INDICATOR:

## ➔ School Climate and Student Discipline

By Kimberly Charis and Daniel J. Losen

**A positive school climate, supported by equitable discipline policies, is a critical but often overlooked driver of academic achievement and school success. Adding an indicator in statewide accountability systems on school climate is one way that states are considering to move the needle on improving school quality. Discipline data, which states are already collecting, is a particularly useful way for states to assess school climate.**

States are adopting varied approaches. For example, in its state plan for implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), **Tennessee** includes school discipline as a subcategory of its chronic absenteeism indicator. A few other states that submitted their state plans in April are including climate surveys.<sup>1</sup> **California**, in contrast, plans to have a stand-alone “fifth” indicator on school discipline that looks at rates and disparities by race and disability. As of May 15, only a handful of states are using discipline data as a lead indicator to measure school climate.

There are many compelling reasons why state boards should be proactive, regardless of whether they elect to hold schools accountable for their climates. Schools with high suspension and expulsion rates typically score low on school climate ratings compared with schools that have low incidences of student discipline. Schools with low climate ratings are in turn more likely to also see poor academic outcomes.<sup>2</sup> By urging state education agencies to collect school climate and discipline data and develop strategies to identify and support struggling districts, state boards can encourage better outcomes.

Students who receive only one suspension in the ninth grade are at greater risk of dropping out of high school than their peers.<sup>3</sup> Students who have been suspended or expelled have a greater chance of becoming involved with the juvenile justice system the following year.

### DISCIPLINE DISPARITIES

While African American students represent 15 percent of the student population, they receive almost four times as many suspensions as other students. Those without disabilities are nearly four times as likely to be suspended or expelled as white students without disabilities. Yet these higher rates of severe disciplinary sanctions against students of color are not the result of more frequent or serious incidents of misconduct.<sup>4</sup>

According to the latest Civil Rights Data Collection (from the 2013–14 school year), the number of students suspended and expelled decreased from the preceding school year.<sup>5</sup> However, the gap between white students and students of color remained wide and persistent.

For example, black children in public preschool in 2013–14 represented 19 percent of enrollment but 47 percent of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions, whereas white children represented 41 percent of enrollment but received only 28 percent of out-of-school suspensions. Black boys made up the majority of preschool children who were suspended.

Racial disparities were also apparent in elementary and secondary public schools. Six percent of all students received one or more out-of-school suspensions. However, the percentage was 18 percent for black boys, 10 percent for black girls, 5 percent for white boys, and 2 percent for white girls.

### STATE ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) template for state plans leaves selection of a fifth indicator for purposes of statewide accountability up to states. State accountability systems must meaningfully measure student success beyond reading, math, and science. State boards of education can use their policymaking authority and convening power to build consensus on how to meaningfully differentiate schools using data that are already available: attendance, student discipline, and graduation rates, for example.

To meet their obligation to ensure that all students have access to the best educational opportunities, states should create accountability systems that can support districts and hold them and their schools accountable for addressing the root cause of persistent discipline disparities. States that already collect disaggregated discipline data are well prepared to support local jurisdictions with the greatest disparities.

Many states are considering chronic absenteeism as their fifth indicator.<sup>6</sup> For example, California is considering chronic absenteeism as part of its accountability system, although it has already selected school discipline as its added measure of school quality.

But there are many reasons other than disciplinary exclusion for students to fail to attend, some of which are difficult to address through school policy. In contrast, being suspended has consistently been found to predict lower graduation rates after controlling for other factors. In addition, school policies and practices are the most important contributors to high rates of disciplinary exclusion. For this reason, states ought to consider inclusion of a discipline measure in state accountability systems, whether as its own indicator or as part of a broader measure.

We recommend using either the rate of school exclusion or days of instruction missed due to disciplinary exclusion. Both measures can be disaggregated by race,

gender, disability status, English learner status, and other subgroups. The latter measure is particularly useful because one can further separate instruction missed due to serious violence and unsafe behavior from that which occurs when schools suspend students for minor offenses with no link to safety concerns.

One concern is that it is difficult to measure progress on reducing rates or days of missed instruction. Special education regulations encourage states to focus only on relative values involving comparisons of subgroups known as risk ratios. Often, suspension rates or missed instruction days can decline, but the ratios do not change or because of their relative properties can even register an increase.

ESSA indicators have the advantage of aiming for reductions for all students while also being evaluated for subgroups. The goal can be narrowing gaps between groups while reducing missed instruction or exclusion overall. States like Maryland do plan on using state averages based on rates for all students to help generate reasonable and realistic targets.

## DATA REPORTING AND DISTRICT SUPPORT

Regardless of what states decide to measure in their accountability systems, ESSA requires each state, in the context of school improvement, to support districts in reducing the overuse of exclusionary discipline, which removes students from the classroom.

In addition to reviewing data collected by the state education agency, states may also want to examine their data collection and reporting systems and review state and local school climate and discipline policies to make sure they align with state guidelines.

In 2014, the US Departments of Education and Justice released federal guidance to help public schools and districts reform school discipline procedures, eliminate racial disparities, and meet legal obligations set forth in Title IV and Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The U.S. Department of Education subsequently launched the Investing in Innovation Program to support innovative alternatives to suspension.

Many state policymakers do not yet fully understand the federal guidance and resources available to help school districts and schools meet their legal obligations. State requirements on data collection and reporting vary considerably, and in many states, regulatory guidelines differ from federal requirements. In some instances, state boards only became aware of the severity of the school climate and discipline problems in their jurisdictions when the US Departments of Justice or Education initiated an investigation of a local school district's policies and practices.

State policymakers across the country are working to address the adverse outcomes associated with exclusionary discipline policies and their disproportionate impact on students of color and those receiving special education. They understand that when students are excluded from school for behavior that does not pose a threat to school safety, they unnecessarily lose valuable instruction time, which significantly affects their academic achievement and success and their perception of school climate as a hostile rather than nurturing space.

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## NOTES

1. Kate Stringer, "3 States Cite School Climate Surveys in Their ESSA Plans. Why Don't Others Use Culture for Accountability?" *the 74.com* (April 30, 2017).

2. Amrit Thapa et al., "A Review of School Climate Research," *Review of Educational Research* 83, no. 3 (2013): 357–85.

3. This finding is based on several rigorous, independent studies that tracked students for many years and controlled for competing reasons for students to drop out. Texas commissioned the best-known of these: Tony Fabelo et al., "Breaking Schools' Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students' Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement" (New York: Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011). In a follow-up study, Marchbanks et al. found that being suspended predicted a greater risk for grade retention and in many other ways contributed to an avoidable economic burden on the state's taxpayers. "The Economic Effects of Exclusionary Discipline on Grade Retention and High School Dropout," In Dan Losen, ed., *Closing the School Discipline Gap: Equitable Remedies for Excessive Exclusion* (New York: Teachers

College Press, 2015): 59–74. Recent studies, specifically for students in Florida and California, have yielded similar findings.

4. Michael Rocque and Raymond Paternoster, "Understanding the Antecedents of the 'School-to-Jail' Link: The Relationship between Race and School Discipline," *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology* 101, no. 633 (2011); Russell J. Skiba et al., "Race Is Not Neutral: A National Investigation of African American and Latino Disproportionality in School Discipline," *School Psychology Review* 40, no. 85 (2011); A. Gregory and A.R. Thompson, "African American High School Students and Variability in Behavior across Classrooms," *Journal of Community Psychology* 38, no. 386 (2010); R.J. Skiba et al., "The Color of Discipline: Sources of Racial and Gender Disproportionality in School Punishment," *Urban Review* 34, no. 317 (2002); Michael Rocque, "Office Discipline and Student Behavior: Does Race Matter?" *American Journal of Education* 116, no. 557 (2010).

5. U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, "2013–14 Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look" (2016).

6. See Maya Boddie, "Fifth Indicator: Chronic Absenteeism," *Policy Update* 23, no. 6 (Alexandria, VA: NASBE, 2017).