# A 5-Point Intervention Approach for Enhancing Equity in School Discipline

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Discipline disproportionality is one of the most significant problems in education today (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2013). The results of decades of research consistently show that students of color, particularly African American students (and even more so for African American boys and those with disabilities), are at significantly increased risk for receiving exclusionary discipline practices, including office discipline referrals and suspensions (e.g., Fabelo et al., 2011; Girvan et al., in press; Losen & Gillespie, 2012). These differences have been found consistently across geographic regions and cannot be adequately explained by the correlation between race and poverty (Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010; Morris & Perry, 2016). Given the negative effects of exclusionary discipline on a range of student outcomes (American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health, 2013), educators must address this issue by identifying rates of discipline disproportionality, taking steps to reduce it, and monitoring the effects of intervention on disproportionality. Disproportionality in exclusionary discipline blocks us from the overall objective of promoting positive outcomes for every student.

## Components of Effective Intervention to Prevent and Reduce Discipline Disproportionality

No single strategy will be sufficient to produce substantive and sustainable change. Multiple components may be needed, but not all components may be necessary in all schools. We describe here a 5-point multicomponent approach to reduce discipline disproportionality in schools.

## 1. Collect, Use, and Report Disaggregated Discipline Data

Any school or district committed to reducing discipline disproportionality should adopt data systems that can disaggregate student data by race, ethnicity, and disability and provide instantaneous access to these data for both school and district teams. Some discipline data systems for entering and analyzing office discipline referrals

and suspensions, such as the School-wide Information System (SWIS; www.swis.org), can automatically produce disproportionality data for identifying and monitoring the extent of disproportionality in office discipline referrals and suspensions. Risk ratios and rates of discipline by racial/ethnic group are two recommended metrics for assessing and monitoring disproportionality. These data can easily be added to monthly school team meeting agendas, as well as built into district and state accountability systems. The OSEP Center on PBIS (www. pbis.org) has produced a free guide for school teams in using discipline data to address equity across race, ethnicity and disability (http://bit.ly/DisproGuide).

## 2. Implement a Behavior Framework that is Preventive, Multi-Tiered, and Culturally Responsive

Whether they do it with intention or implicitly, school staff are responsible for establishing a school culture. That culture can engage students or make them more likely to drop out. School staff can use a common framework to develop a school culture that supports every student. Effective frameworks are evidence-based, have a teaching focus, and are flexible enough to be adapted to meet the needs of students, families, and the community.

One example of such a framework is school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS). SWPBIS focuses on improving behavior by teaching students prosocial skills and redesigning school environments to discourage problem behavior (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Core features of SWPBIS include (a) defining and teaching a small set of positive, school-wide behavior expectations to all students, (b) establishing a regular pattern in which all adults acknowledge and reward appropriate student behavior, (c) minimizing the likelihood that problem behaviors will be inadvertently rewarded, and (d) collecting and using discipline and implementation data to guide efforts. SWPBIS also incorporates a multi-tiered system of support so that students needing more intensive support gain access to increasingly individualized support options.

SWPBIS is particularly relevant to the challenge of discipline disproportionality for three reasons. First, because of its focus on establishing a clear, consistent, and positive social culture, identifying and teaching clear expectations for behavior can reduce ambiguity for both students (e.g., it is not assumed that all students know what being respectful at school "looks like") and adults (e.g., expectations and violations are clearer, reducing ambiguity). These expectations can be developed collaboratively with students, families, and community members, as well as assessed for their congruence with the range of student and family cultural values in the school (Fallon, O'Keeffe, & Sugai, 2012). Second, the SWPBIS focus on clear discipline definitions and procedures can reduce ambiguity in discipline decisions, decreasing the effects of implicit racial and ability bias (Kelly & Barnes-Holmes, 2013; Lai, Hoffman, Nosek, & Greenwald, 2013). Third, the focus of SWPBIS on instructional approaches to discipline and integration with academic systems can keep students in the classroom and learning instead of removed from instruction (Sugai, O'Keeffe, & Fallon, 2012).

Research to date on the effects of SWPBIS on discipline disproportionality is promising. Recent case studies have shown decreased discipline disparities over time for schools implementing PBIS (Betters-Bubon, Brunner, & Kansteiner, 2016; McIntosh, Ellwood, McCall, & Girvan, 2018). Evaluation studies have shown statistically significantly reduced discipline disproportionality in schools implementing SWPBIS than those not implementing SWPBIS (Vincent, Swain-Bradway, Tobin, & May, 2011). In addition, a recent national study showed decreased racial disparities in suspension for schools implementing SWPBIS when compared to national averages (McIntosh, Gion, & Bastable, 2018).

Although implementing SWPBIS without specific attention to student culture may reduce rates of exclusionary discipline, it is unlikely to reduce discipline disparities. Instead, school teams can consider the cultural responsiveness of their SWPBIS

systems. The Center has developed a PBIS Cultural Responsiveness Field Guide (Leverson et al., 2016; http://bit.ly/CulturalResponsivenessGuide) for coaches and district teams to aid in improving contextual fit of their SWPBIS systems.

## 3. Use Engaging Instruction to Reduce the Opportunity (Achievement) Gap

Because of the well-documented relation between academic achievement and problem behavior (McIntosh, Sadler, & Brown, 2012) and the opportunity gap between students of color and White students (Gregory et al., 2010), ensuring that each student has access to effective academic instruction may reduce disproportionality.[1] An evidence-based definition of engaging instruction includes the following strategies: (a) using explicit instruction, (b) building and priming background knowledge, (c) increasing opportunities to respond, and (d) providing performance feedback (Chaparro, Nese, & McIntosh, 2015; Hattie, 2009). Using these strategies has been shown to decrease the opportunity gap (Chaparro, Helton, & Sadler, 2015). The Center on PBIS has released a brief on using engaging instruction (http://bit.ly/EngagingInstruction).

## 4. Develop Policies with Accountability for Disciplinary Equity

Many policies include an explicit commitment to equity in general and special education, but it is more important for policies to have clear steps to achieve equity and accountability for taking these steps (Devine, Forscher, Austin, & Cox, 2012; Petersen & Togstad, 2006). Effective policies include clear, actionable procedures for enhancing equity (e.g., remove harmful practices, data collection, hiring preferences, professional development). Hiring procedures should include a preference for individuals with a commitment to educational equity. In addition, the procedures should have true accountability, such as inclusion of racial and disability disciplinary equity

outcomes into administrator and teacher evaluation processes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The Center has released a guide for enhancing discipline policies to achieve equity (Green et al., 2015; http://bit.ly/DisproPolicyGuide).

## 5. Teach Strategies for Neutralizing Implicit Bias in Discipline Decisions

New research is showing that there are specific situations in which implicit (unconscious) bias is more likely to influence decision making, also known as vulnerable decision points (McIntosh et al., 2014). In school settings, the following situations may be more likely to be prone to biased decision-making: subjective student behavior (e.g., defiance, disrespect, disruption) in classrooms at the start of the school day (Smoklowski, Girvan, McIntosh, Nese, & Horner, 2016). However, these situations may vary from school to school or individual to individual, and teams can use the aforementioned data guide (http://bit.ly/DisproGuide) to identify these patterns (McIntosh, Ellwood, McCall, & Girvan, 2018).

In these situations, using a self-review routine just prior to a making a discipline decision may neutralize the effects of implicit bias, especially in situations that are chaotic, ambiguous, or seem to demand snap judgments (Lai et al., 2013). Research in other fields (Mendoza, Gollwitzer, & Amodio, 2010) suggests that short "if-then" statements are most effective (e.g., "If a student is disrespectful, then handle it after class").

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1. We use the term opportunity gap in place of achievement gap because it focuses on the support we can provide (i.e., what educators can do) rather than within-student deficits.

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