

# Reforming Discipline Practice in Oklahoma City Public Schools: Changing the Mindset and Changing the Outcomes

AASA, the School Superintendents Association, and the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) believe that all schools should be welcoming and productive places for children to learn and for teachers to teach. We believe that exclusionary discipline – suspending or expelling a student from school for a disciplinary reason – should be used sparingly and as a last resort. Measures can and should be taken to build positive school climates, respond to special circumstances of students, prevent student misbehavior, and address violations of school rules in a restorative manner.

School and district leaders have shown that positive discipline strategies can be effective in advancing the district’s responsibility to keep all people safe, ensure students are learning and treat everyone fairly. The consequences of harsh and punitive discipline policies, including zero tolerance and the overuse of suspension and expulsion, can be devastating in the lives of children. AASA and CDF are profiling leading districts that have taken the challenge to reform discipline policies and practices. These districts are leading the charge to improve school climate and culture, reduce racial disproportionality in discipline, and improve the odds for children and youth.

## GETTING STARTED

Superintendent Aurora Lora has helped lead Oklahoma City Public Schools (OKCPS) toward greater equity in discipline outcomes and student success since 2014. First as Associate Superintendent and now Superintendent, Lora is committed to ensuring justice and fairness for all students in Oklahoma's largest school district. One of the cornerstones of OKCPS' success has been their commitment to engaging each and every child in school every day and working hard to keep students in front of their teachers. OKCPS has seen impressive drops in out-of-school suspensions (OSS), long-term suspensions, and repeat discipline offenses from students.

How did Oklahoma City Public Schools accomplish this work?

It all started with the DATA.

Dr. Teri Bell, Executive Director of Student Support Services on how it all began: "Our new superintendent had concerns with discipline procedures. We started running some data and sent monitoring teams out to different schools to observe. We know what's in our student information systems, but what about what's happening at the buildings? We were over-suspending; and we were over-suspending African-American males in particular. What we discovered was: not only if we looked at OSS and ISS were we over-suspending, but we also had a lot of informal suspensions that weren't even included in the data. **We not only had a problem we could identify through data, we had an even bigger problem.**"

Superintendent Lora: "I went on a listening tour with teachers, staff, and principals on how this was all playing out – what would support look like? – I made a commitment that even though we were cutting \$30 million (from the budget), we would invest \$250,000 – not a lot of money, but all I could come up with – in discipline supports and coaches that could work with schools on how to deal with challenging behaviors." Further discussions and analysis continued which identified several issues. One issue was that there wasn't anyone charged specifically with monitoring discipline data. It was not, at the time, analyzed and collected consistently, nor tied to any evaluative or performance tools.

So, OKCPS started a new department focused explicitly on school climate and school discipline. Chuck Tompkins became the Director of School Climate and Student Discipline for OKCPS. Mr. Tompkins explains the department's beginnings, "We started the department with three people. Myself and two

*"This work has been a process. How do we get schools supports and give schools extra tools? Through really listening, sharing, and reflecting we've helped the community to see that we're working hard with limited resources to get schools more supports."*

*~ Superintendent Aurora Lora, Oklahoma City Public Schools*

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*"In urban districts, our time is completely eaten up by the tyranny of the urgent. This process has created an opportunity where the urgent and the important have come together. It gives me hope that it will continue and the changes will be real and impactful."*

*~ Rebecca Kaye, Chief of Staff Oklahoma City Public Schools*

Oklahoma City Public Schools (OKCPS) is the largest school district in Oklahoma. OKCPS has over 45,000 students and more than 4,000 teachers and staff in just under 100 schools.

Demographics:  
52% of OKCPS students are Hispanic, 24% are black, 15% white, 3% Native American, 2% Asian, and 4% multi-ethnic. 80% of OKCPS students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

climate specialists. We immediately started pulling data on a weekly basis. Year one was really an exploratory year. We were able to work proactively with our schools and, importantly, we took over the hearing officer role for the district so that we could instill impartiality into the discipline appeal hearings.”

The department wanted to work on a preventative system that would decrease discipline issues and enhance climate so they implemented PBIS. The other early key piece was awareness – pulling the data, sharing the data, shining a light on what’s happening: “once you find that you have a problem, then admit the problem is real, and then you start getting that buy-in and folks looking for tools and assistance on how to improve.”

## STRATEGIES

The OKCPS strategic plan, the Great Commitment, was approved in June 2015 but arose from a long process of community engagement and planning. One of the four pillars of the Great Commitment is ‘Safe Climate and Strong Relationships with Families & Community’. The discipline reform work in OKCPS aligns with this strategic pillar of the overall OKCPS agenda. Goals for this pillar include 1. Provide training and revise policies to support safe and respectful environments and equitable enforcement of disciplinary procedures; 2. Create a safe climate that celebrates diversity and fosters culturally inclusive practices among all staff; and 3. Provide ongoing training and two-way communication to parents, families, and community. Chief of Staff Rebecca Kaye on how the Great Commitment aligns with this work, “the Great Commitment, which bubbled up from our community, talks a lot about cultural inclusiveness. There has been a lot of attention in working with our staff to develop cultural competence and culturally relevant teaching practice.”

OKCPS implemented a series of strategies to change the culture, policies, and practices for student discipline to meet these goals. Chuck Tompkins on where that starts, “the number one strategy, the number one priority is trying to change adult behavior. We cannot, as a district, change student behavior unless our own adult behavior is aligned with good educational practices.” Another important mindset shift was examining the relationship between behaviors and consequences. If a child was truant or skipped a day of school, they might be suspended for three additional days. “What’s the logic in that? Other than the logic which the student certainly understands which is ‘I might get four days off if I skip one’”, said Dr. Bell.

OKCPS has also made a strong commitment to PBIS implementation. PBIS in OKCPS started with school-wide expectations and a focus on consistency. School were also required to form a school climate committee to perform two

key tasks – 1. Examining discipline data and 2. Devising/refining whole school PBIS strategies at the building-level.

*“We had a team meeting with central office and principals about our role as educators, the way we are going to do business going forward, and about how this is not going to be a punitive culture.”*

*We’re going to look at things we can do differently.*

*We are going to work with families.*

*If this is not the type of system you want to work in, then this is not going to be the place for you moving forward, because what we’re doing right now is not acceptable.”*

~ Superintendent  
Aurora Lora,  
Oklahoma City  
Public Schools

OKCPS also set about altering the Code of Conduct. In part, the work involved reducing consequences for some offenses, but more than that, it centered on using the code consistently and in a progressive nature rather than reaching for the most severe punishment ‘allowable’ under the code. OKCPS also developed an 10 day alternative-to-suspension program. This program incorporates a Charter School partner and provides alternative placement to keep students academically engaged and on-track; the program also includes a social skill-building and decision-making curriculum.

Another strategy includes deeper community involvement and inter-agency cooperation. Superintendent Lora on the need to be strategic in supporting students and their families, “as we are getting deeper into PBIS implementation, for next year – even though we face another \$10 million in cuts – we are committed to investing more in health supports and wrap-around service supports. We’ve learned that schools cannot do this alone. A lot of our kids come to us having experienced trauma or have undiagnosed mental health issues. We think this is something we can address more effectively”. For example, the OKCPS response to minor drug offenses has changed and includes a mandatory counseling component. Chuck Tompkins on cooperation, “in OKC we have a systems of care referral which deals with the major providers in our area and connects students to counseling – not just for the student but for whatever the family may be in need of – which has been excellent for us.”

## OUTCOMES & NEXT STEPS IN OKCPS

Oklahoma City’s system-wide commitment to alternatives to OSS and expulsion are paying dividends. Engaging community partners and sharing accountability has allowed for greater sustainability and coordination. Mindset shift and change in processes are changing outcomes.

OKCPS has, to date, seen a 26% decrease in overall suspensions from 2016, down almost 30% from the 2015 school year. Long-term suspensions are down 48% from 2016 and down 62% from 2015.

The biggest outcome shows that OKCPS students have logged **11,471** more school days with their teachers. The number one goal is for this work to impact academic success and the best strategy for student success is to ensure students are in-school to receive great classroom instruction

## **The interventions are changing behaviors and the policy changes are getting results.**

The next steps in OKCPS include continuing to use data to drive decision-making and to continue to link and align interventions, supports, discipline, and academic success. OKCPS is continuing critical conversations with building and instructional staff about behavior issues impacting academic success and a lack of academic success impacting behavioral issues.

Chuck Tompkins on what's next, "We see PBIS as transitional. We're making a change. What would be transformational though, is to get to restorative practices. That's where we get to student behavior. Once we have traction on adult behavior and can add restorative practices, then students start taking ownership of their behavior to a higher degree."

Reforming school discipline is about more than changing codes of conduct and finding alternatives to OSS. Reforming school discipline and school climate are about better serving the needs of the whole child and supporting students and families before, during, and after behavior problems surface.

All of the stakeholders in school systems – district staff, principals, teachers, support staff, students, and their families – deserve the tools, resources, and supports to be successful. The challenge that OKCPS has taken on successfully is how to find cost-effective ways to provide those supports and how to align and strategically coordinate those tools and supports around strategic goals, data, and new programs.

**Superintendent Lora on why this work in OKCPS is so necessary, "We were really forthcoming with the outcomes of the current year data to show that obviously we need changes and we need to do a culture shift in this district. For me, part of it is, we have to change mindsets around our role as educators and our obligation to meet kids where they are. We have to figure out ways to engage them and keep kids in the system rather than push them out if we want to be successful as educators, as a school system and as a community."**

OKCPS has challenges similar to many urban districts: high levels of poverty, budget shortfalls, and achievement gaps. But with a small budgetary allocation and a great deal of challenging and intensive work, OKCPS is making a difference for their children. More than eleven-thousand more student days with their classroom teacher tells its own story. Oklahoma City Public Schools has taken on the challenge of school discipline reform, enhancing student supports, and addressing bias and disproportionality and your school district can too.