

School Discipline:

Dismantling Racism against Black Youth and Promoting Restorative Practices

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Racial disparities plague the educational system, leading to poorer educational and health outcomes including impaired childhood development, academic failure and dropout, and emotional and psychological distress [1]. This disparity is evident in disciplinary outcomes among Black children, as the behaviors of Black students are perceived as more problematic and punished more harshly compared to white students [2]. As investigators and educators affiliated with the largest long-term study of brain development and child health in the United States, the Adolescent Brain Cognitive DevelopmentSM (ABCD) Study, we have seen these punishment techniques disproportionately affect Black students. Our recent publication on suspension and detention rates among 11,875 9- and 10-year olds across the U.S. found that Black and multiracial Black children had 4.7 times greater odds of receiving a detention or suspension than white children. Even after controlling for behaviors associated with disciplinary actions including externalizing symptoms (“acting out”), special education needs, and demographics (age, sex, family income, family education, family conflict), Black youth had 3.5 times the odds of receiving discipline than white youth [1]. This was not the case for other children of color. Exposure to harsh disciplinary practices as early as ages 9-10, is particularly concerning, as

these practices have been shown to push Black students into a school-to-prison pathway [3]. To truly address systemic racism in the educational system, it is necessary for education policy makers, school administrators, and teachers to consider the following:

1) School districts must acknowledge racism and take action to create school wide responsibility for diversity, equity, and inclusion goals.

Research shows that observed disparities in disciplinary practices are not explained by students' actual behavior [1, 4]. Other studies found that Black pre-school children, specifically Black boys, were observed more closely by their teachers and were expected to require more attention, even when no challenging behaviors were present [5]. Black children, particularly Black males, are viewed to be more responsible, older, and capable of malice at an early age, while their white peers benefit from the assumption of fundamental innocence [6]. Negative racial associations such as these lead to more referrals to special education testing and disciplinary action for Black children [4].

Although implicit bias trainings can be used to foster awareness, bias has been shown to be difficult to change, and trainings are not the sole solution. School administrators must prioritize increasing and retaining diverse school leadership and teachers, while implementing structures that foster organizational responsibility for diversity, equity, and inclusion goals. Specifically, administrators should change policies that support inherent bias and microaggressions and embed antiracist principles into school-wide initiatives that improve school culture. Performance metrics that include efforts to dismantle racial bias in the school and classroom should also be tied to pay



and contract renewal to promote compliance with anti-racist policies.

2.) Schools should commit to reducing inequities in disciplinary practices that disproportionately impact Black students and promote restorative practices for all children.

A commitment to reforming disciplinary policies to focus on serious, objectively disruptive offenses such as carrying a weapon or violence, instead of oppositional behavior and classroom disruptions, would reduce disparities ingrained within systems of education [1]. To promote objectivity in disciplinary practices, impartial criteria for disciplinary actions should be created with input from diverse voices and disciplinary decisions should be reviewed by an independent body to ensure they meet these criteria.

School leadership should recognize that harsher and more frequent disciplinary practices among Black students do not deter disruptive behaviors [7, 8]. Rather teachers and administrators should consider adopting restorative practices which emphasize belonging, social engagement, and accountability rather than control and punishment. These practices have been found to create a more

positive school climate and help students build relationships with others, develop problem-solving skills, and foster an understanding of collaboration and emotional expression [9]. In a cost-benefit analysis of restorative practices in schools, the benefits of increasing graduation rates, reducing crime and victimization, and contributing to a more educated workforce outweighed the costs to implement the program by 50 to 1 [10].

Black children should be able to view the school building and the educators in it as a safe place, free from racism and discrimination and filled with opportunity. To create racially safe schools, policy makers, administrators, and teachers should hold each other accountable for fostering and maintaining anti-racist policies, anti-discriminatory practices, and an equitable culture.

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