A District's Use of Data and Research to Inform Policy Formation and Implementation

Andrew Seager, Education Development Center
John P. Madura, Education Development Center
Joshua Cox, Education Development Center
Rebecca Carey, Education Development Center
In collaboration with the Urban School Improvement Alliance

REL NORTHEAST & ISLANDS | Regional Educational Laboratory at EDC

November 2015

EDC designs, implements, and evaluates programs to improve education, health, and economic opportunity worldwide.

EDC Learning transforms lives.

Summary

A mid-sized urban district in the Northeast and Islands Region formulated and implemented a new discipline policy using data and research. To do so, the district examined a national report on districtwide suspension rates, conducted a detailed analysis of internal data, compared suspension rates with those of other urban districts, and consulted research on the relationship between out-of-school suspensions and academic outcomes. A 50-person task force used the research, data, as well as policies to draft a new discipline policy, the Code of Conduct, Character and Support. In addition to articulating expectations for student conduct and providing guidance about how to address various discipline infractions, they wrote the policy to support uniform implementation of the new policy across the district and to improve the quality of data on student discipline. The school board approved the new policy, and the district not only trained staff on its content but also put in place structures and data systems to support its implementation.

Contents

Boxes

Tables

A District's Use of Data and Research to Inform Policy Formation and Implementation

How do school boards and districts better use research and data to inform policy decisions? This question was raised by members of the Urban School Improvement Alliance (USIA), a network of district leaders in research, assessment, and accountability roles from nine mid-sized urban districts in the Northeast, supported by the Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands (REL–NEI) at EDC.[1] It was prompted in part by the national impetus to promote the use of data to inform school improvement (Park, Daly, & Guerra, 2013; Schildkamp, Lai, & Earl, 2013; Wayman, Jimerson, & Cho, 2012). This brief describes how the Syracuse City School District in New York used data and research to address a policy issue of national interest.

Box 1. Data and methods

Researchers used interviews and artifacts to describe how the district developed a new discipline policy entitled the Code of Conduct, Character and Support. The researchers recorded semi–structured interviews with six participants in the policy study: a school board member, three district office staff, a principal, and an external consultant. Interviewees were asked to identify publicly available documents or other materials that were used to inform the policy decision or that played a part in the process. Researchers developed an interview coding scheme, analyzed the interviews using commercially available software, and examined publicly available documents.

District Context

High out–of–school suspension rates had been a concern for many years in the Syracuse City Schools, but no comprehensive action had resulted. The district did an initial analysis which confirmed the high out–of–school suspension rates. In addition, several external influences added momentum to the new superintendent's commitment to addressing high out–of–school suspension rates and disproportionate suspension rates among black and Hispanic students and students with disabilities, including the following:

- An initial analysis performed by the district confirmed the high out–of–school suspension rates.
- The district was featured in the publication *Out of School and Off Track: The Overuse of Suspensions in American Middle and High Schools* (April 2013).
- A local newspaper ran an article on the disproportionate use of out–of–school suspensions.
- Groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Action Network, and the Spanish Action League advocated before the school board.

---

[1] REL–NEI is one of 10 Regional Educational Laboratories (RELs) funded by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES). The RELs work in partnership with school districts, state departments of education, and others to use data and research to improve academic outcomes for students.

- The New York attorney general formally intervened because data indicated disproportionate suspension rates for black and Hispanic students and students with disabilities.

Designing and Implementing a Data-Informed Policy

These factors led the district to develop and implement a new discipline policy, the Syracuse City School District Code of Conduct, Character and Support. The district developed the new policy using a wide range of research and data-related activities. (See Table 1 for a summary of the policy change phases and the data and research used by the district.)

Table 1. Summary of work phases and research or data-related activities

Work phase	Dates	Research or data related activities
Developed strategic plan and analytic capacity	2012 and ongoing	• Established districtwide student outcome benchmarks • Built internal analytic capacity through staff hires
Used data and research	September 2013 to June 2014	• Reviewed *Out of School and Off Track: The Overuse of Suspensions in American Middle and High Schools* (Losen & Martinez, 2013) • Compared district suspension rates with national averages • Examined suspension rates by building and student characteristics • Compared data from districts of similar size and demographics • Analyzed characteristics of students receiving contracted support services from outside organizations
Formulated policy informed by data	November 2013 to May 2014	• Reviewed data and research on the relationship between suspension rates and graduation and drop-out rates. • Compared drafts against other urban district codes
Worded policy to facilitate consistency and data quality	January 2014 to June 2014	• Developed closed-ended codes describing and differentiating behaviors requiring disciplinary action
Provided structural supports and staff training	May 2014 to September 2014	• Set school goals for diminishing suspensions • Changed support staff roles and service provider agreements to direct additional services to students flagged for code of conduct infractions
Monitored data	June 2014 and ongoing	• Purchased and installed a data system to monitor code of conduct infractions • Established supports and expectations to change practice and uniformly implement policy (e.g., required support staff to coach/mentor students, required schools to set goals for limiting suspensions)

Source: Author's analysis based on interviews and artifacts

The school board developed a strategic plan; the superintendent built analytic capacity. In 2012, under the leadership of the new superintendent, the school board ratified a 2012–17 strategic plan containing student outcome benchmarks, one section of which proposed creating an infrastructure to support student success, including revising the student discipline system. The plan changed the school board and community conversation. Instead of board members talking about programs they either liked or disliked, or about what they had done, they began asking, "How are the kids doing?" The school board began to monitor progress toward five-year goals and to identify issues that impeded their achievement. One of the goals of this strategic plan was to draft a coherent, fair, and equitable districtwide discipline strategy by the end of the 2013–14 school year. Informal inspection and analysis of discipline data found inconsistencies in application and reporting. Misbehaviors in the prior discipline code fell under titles such as "disruptive," "defiant," or "insubordinate." Different schools (and teachers within them) had different understandings of what these terms meant and also assigned different punishments for behavior classified under the same code.

The new superintendent also built district analytic capacity to focus on student outcomes through the following activities:

- Hiring a researcher to serve as director of the Office of Accountability, who in turn assigned a team to conduct program improvement evaluations and analyses so the district could extend its analyses beyond those required by state and federal accountability systems
- Providing the school board with data to inform policy discussions, decision making, and reporting to the public
- Instituting a weekly data briefing of the superintendent by the chief accountability officer so the superintendent had ready access to the most recent data for decision making

The school board used data and research to examine the extent of the suspension issue. The school board funded a researcher to assist with an analysis of district suspension data. Comprehensive analyses of suspension rates by building and by race and ethnicity, as well as comparisons with national data, were provided to the school board, policy task force, and district staff (see Table 2 for an example). The researcher and district staff used the following steps and sources of data and research to present the issue:

- Visited individual schools to review documentation and determine why infractions had been coded in certain ways
- Revised coded incident reports in instances where evidence indicated they were incorrect
- Found a strong negative correlation between graduation, drop-out rates, and numbers of suspensions for three cohorts of students; presented the data to the school board and task force
- Identified the types of behaviors that led to out-of-school suspensions; found that more than 80 percent were for disruptions in classrooms or other locations in schools and less than 20 percent were for serious or dangerous incidents
- Compared district data to other districts of similar size and demographics
- Cross-referenced names of students who had been suspended from school with those being provided assistance by agencies contracted to provide student support; found

only a 40 percent overlap—students receiving additional support were often not the students that schools considered most likely to be suspended or most needing help

Table 2: Comparison of district out-of-school suspension rates with national averages, 2009–10

Secondary school students	National average	District average	Difference
All	11.3	30.8	+19.5
White	7.1	19.1	+12.0
Black	24.3	38.2	+13.9
Hispanic	12.0	29.5	+17.5
English learners	11.3	15.2	+3.9
All students with disabilities	19.3	44.1	+24.8

Source: 2009–10 Civil Right Data Collection, which includes 5,675 districts with more than 3,000 students across the nation

The researcher, supported by district staff, presented the findings, setting the district's data within a national context. Community members added anecdotal evidence of the negative effects of suspension on families and their children through presentations to the school board and the task force formed to propose recommendations on the issue. Findings from data and research, along with information about student and family experiences, helped to communicate the consequences of district suspensions and to describe the inconsistent way in which current policy was being implemented throughout the district.

The task force proposed a new Code of Conduct, Character and Support that was informed by data and research. The superintendent, using an approach she had instituted for policy decisions in which there was extensive community and district interest, recommended that a task force be formed to develop a new code of conduct. The school board created a 50-person task force that included district leaders, union-nominated teachers and principals, community leaders, and students. School board members were excluded so they could independently evaluate the resulting proposal. A second consultant, an expert in school discipline issues and group process, was contracted to facilitate the task force. Reflecting on the process, one participant stated, "What was unique about the code of conduct process was the number of people who were involved . . . and the time that was taken to listen to their points of view and carve out a document that captured those points of view." District data and research on district suspension rates, how they compared with other districts, and their impact on students remained the focus of the task force discussions. They ultimately proposed a move from a policy based on zero tolerance to one rooted in restorative justice principles (Elliott & Gordon, 2005; Sumner, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010), an approach that (1) involves victims, offenders, and the wider community in resolving conflicts and (2) encourages offenders to take responsibility for their actions.

A subgroup of eight task force members drafted the new Code of Conduct, Character and Support. They developed a rating system to assess the different codes of conduct they reviewed and to guide their own drafts. They took input from the initial task force conversations, benchmarked against codes of conduct from five other major cities, and revised drafts based on feedback from other task force members. The task force as a whole then formulated a new

discipline policy that it considered to be enforceable, that would promote a positive climate in the district's schools, and that it believed would improve student accountability and outcomes.

The task force worded the policy to facilitate consistency and data quality. The discipline policy proposed by the task force included guiding principles and beliefs and defined three levels of violations and consequences. In contrast to the prior code, violations described specific behaviors, which were exhaustive and mutually exclusive. The task force thought this approach would increase the probability that similar behaviors in different classrooms and schools would be identified in the same way. For example, under the prior code, a student in any grade might or might not be suspended for what was termed "defiance or severe insubordination," a category that was defined as behavior that "includes intentionally defiant behavior or attitude and resistance to the authority of an administrator." Misbehaviors in the new code were categorized into four levels, with out–of–school suspension a possible outcome only for students in grades 6 through 12 and for levels 3 and 4 (the most serious) violations. An example of a Level 4 violation and its much more specific behavioral definition is "Attack on student with serious bodily injury with or without provocation (hitting, kicking, or punching another student)."

The school board approved the Code of Conduct, Character and Support, structural supports, and staff training. The Syracuse City School Board approved (1) the proposed Code of Conduct, Character and Support, (2) an implementation and monitoring plan and (3) a consent agreement negotiated with the New York attorney general. In order to implement the plan, the following structural or organizational changes were made:

- Revising memorandums of understanding with outside service providers to increase support for students with code violations
- Placing school counselors, special education staff, and administration of the discipline system under a single district executive director
- Requiring each school to create a Code of Conduct, Character and Support implementation plan with target outcomes based on the overall goals of the disciplinary code, including decreasing out–of–school suspensions
- Requiring every student support staff member (e.g., school counselors, social workers, health and special education staff) to serve as a coach to at least five students
- Changing school counselor role descriptions so that teachers were able to use school counselors as a resource who could come into a classroom, observe a student with whom the teacher is having difficulty, and strategize with the teacher
- Creating school–based intervention centers to which teachers could refer students for a "cooling off" conference

All district personnel, including bus drivers, security, and kitchen staff, were trained in the new Code of Conduct, Character and Support and the restorative justice principles behind it. In addition, the summer before implementation of the new code, school leadership teams met for three days to learn about the code; put together school discipline plans, with targets for diminishing disciplinary actions and suspensions in particular; and learn how to construct student support teams, intervention teams, and school climate teams.

The district purchased an online data system to monitor discipline and suspension rates. The online data system the district purchased provided a dashboard that all school leaders could access. The dashboard made it possible for leaders to examine, for example, whether a student

or group of students was being referred by a single teacher or by multiple teachers, which allowed leaders to address the issue accordingly. Moving forward, district leaders anticipate that the data system will help the district to determine the extent to which the Code of Conduct, Character and Support is diminishing disruptive student behavior in the district's schools, whether some schools need additional assistance, and whether the policy will require revision.

Study Implications

This case study does not support broad inferences, but it does suggest components of a coherent strategy to increase use of data and research to inform policy and practice that other districts might consider. In summary, this district did the following:

- Developed a strategic plan that included data-based benchmarks to which the superintendent and school board regularly referred
- Built analytic capacity within the district and assigned staff to program evaluations, not just accountability tasks
- Brought in an outside researcher to assist with data analysis and presentations to increase confidence in the validity of data
- Brought in an outside consultant to facilitate consideration of the data and engage multiple perspectives in policy formulation
- Used multiple sources of data to create common understanding and buy-in
- Presented comparison data from districts with similar demographics to help the staff and the community better understand their own district's data
- Adopted the Code of Conduct, Character and Support with descriptive language and closed-ended categories to improve consistency and data quality
- Purchased software and provided staff with instruction that gave them quick access to discipline data to inform school-based decision making
- Provided all staff with professional development once the policy, role changes, expectations, and other administrative supports were in place

References

Elliott, E., & Gordon, R. (Eds.) (2005). *New directions in restorative justice: Issues, practice, evaluation.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Losen, D. & Martinez, T. E. (2013). *Out of school and off track: The overuse of suspensions in American middle and high schools.* Los Angeles, CA: The Civil Rights Project. Retrieved from http://eric.ed.gov/?q=ED541731

Park, V., Daly, A. J., & Guerra, A. (2013). Strategic framing: How leaders craft the meaning of data use for equity and learning. *Educational Policy, 27*(4), 645-675.

Schildkamp, K., Lai, M. K., & Earl, L. (Eds.) (2013). *Data-based decision making in education.* New York, NY: Springer.

Sumner, D., Silverman, C., & Frampton, M. (2010). *School-based restorative justice as an alternative to zero-tolerance policies: Lessons from West Oakland.* Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley, School of Law.

United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2010). *Civil rights data collection. 2009-2010 district and school reports.* Retrieved from www.ocrdata.ed.gov

Wayman , J. C., Jimerson, J. B., & Cho, V. (2012). Organizational considerations in establishing the data-informed district. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement: An International Journal of Research, Policy and Practice, 23*(2), 159-178.