AUTHORIZERS ARE NOT MONOLITHIC ON SCHOOL DISCIPLINE:

HOW CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS DIFFER IN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE ENGAGEMENT

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS

AUGUST 2016

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) is an independent voice for effective charter school policy and thoughtful charter authorizing practices that lead to more great public schools. Our research, policy, and consultation work advances excellence and accountability in the charter school sector. With authorizers and other partners, we have built the gold standard for charter school authorizing. Through smart charter school growth, these authorizers will give hundreds of thousands of children an opportunity for a better education each year. For more on NACSA, please visit www.qualitycharters.org.

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Please cite this report as:

Rausch, M.K. & Conlan, S.K. (2016). *Authorizers are not monolithic on school discipline: How charter school authorizers differ in school discipline engagement*. Chicago, IL: National Association of Charter School Authorizers. Retrieved from: http://www.qualitycharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Authorizers-Are-Not-Monolithic-on-School-Discipline-August-2016.pdf

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In theory, authorizers play an important role in decisions regarding charter schools and student discipline, as they are the bodies responsible for protecting the public interest, while balancing school autonomy and accountability. Within public education, a rigorous debate is occurring about student discipline practices, particularly suspensions and expulsions. The practices of charter schools are part of this debate, yet little is known about what is currently happening on the ground. Are they too heavy handed? Or are they currently not doing enough?

As the nation's only organization that collects data on authorizers' practices and perspectives, we are tracking this debate and authorizers' practices closely. This year, for the first time, our annual survey of charter school authorizers included questions related to how authorizers view their role when it comes to student discipline, and what, if anything, they are doing in their day-to-day work.

This report further examines NACSA's recently released data on authorizer perspectives and practices on school discipline. While the big picture information demonstrated a range of approaches and perspectives, inspection of the data within each authorizer's individual responses appeared to reveal some patterns.

KEY FINDINGS

Our analysis found that all authorizers do not approach school discipline in the same way. There appears to be two distinct groups of authorizers: one group—termed the Monitor & Report group—uses a range of monitoring, collecting, and discipline reporting practices more frequently compared to the other group—termed the Hands Off group—comprised of authorizers that are much less likely to use those same practices.

After analyzing the two groups, we found:

- **When it comes to school discipline, the vast majority of authorizers are using transparency-based practices.** The "Monitor & Report" group, comprising nearly two-thirds of all authorizers sampled, overwhelmingly collects, monitors and reports information about discipline in the schools they oversee. In addition, nearly all authorizers in this group require charter school applicants to submit discipline plans.

- **A smaller group of authorizers are not actively monitoring and overseeing the school discipline practices of their schools.** The "Hands Off" group, consisting of about 40 percent of the authorizers surveyed, was much less likely to require charter school applicants to submit comprehensive discipline plans or to monitor and publicly report the suspension and expulsion rates of schools in their portfolio. None of the authorizers in this group set performance expectations for suspension or expulsion rates in their schools.

- **Currently, most authorizers are not heavy-handed in their approach to student discipline.** In fact, authorizers in both groups appear reluctant to—or unclear if and how to—intervene when disciplinary challenges emerge. Authorizers are not using a range of intervention practices, such as requiring changes to staffing or closing schools for persistent discipline violations, nor have they considered using these practices.

  This will certainly raise questions with readers about whether authorizers should be more interventionist in their practices, or should continue with the status quo. Yet the data are clear: most authorizers are not intervening in charter schools when school discipline problems occur, even eschewing less intrusive interventions.

- **There is no clear link between the size, type or number of schools an authorizer manages and its student discipline practices.** Despite the prevailing wisdom that school district authorizers (LEAs) are recreating the same largely ineffective, top-down models of student discipline that we find in some places in the traditional sector, our findings suggest that LEA authorizers are no more or less likely to require applicants to have comprehensive discipline plans or monitor and report discipline data.

NEXT STEPS

While most authorizers are active in monitoring and reporting the school discipline rates of schools in their portfolio, a large number are not. Even fewer authorizers across both groups are reporting disaggregated discipline data.

As the public debate about student discipline continues, NACSA will continue to promote tools that help authorizers smartly and publicly report on discipline information, such as Equity Reports by the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB).

As part of NACSA's Quality Practice Project, a new research project underway, we are specifically working to understand the student discipline practices of authorizers with outstanding academic and public interest outcomes. Our goal is to understand the similarities and differences in how our nation's top-performing authorizers are engaging their schools with this critical issue in education reform.

APPROACH & ANALYSIS

Cluster analysis and related methods were used to explore whether there are different groups of authorizing practices and perspectives on school discipline. Similar to other research that has used these methods to classify school leader/principal perspectives on school discipline,[1] we explored the degree to which there are reliable groups of authorizers that systematically differed on a range of practices, perspectives, and other attributes.[2]

SAMPLE

The sample of authorizers completing NACSA's 2015 annual survey and used in this analysis is expansive and highly representative of authorizers overseeing 10 or more schools, but may not be fully representative of all authorizers nationwide.[3] The sample includes authorizers from every state with charter schools. Collectively, sampled authorizers oversaw 4,686 charter schools, or about 70 percent of all charter schools across the country in 2015. NACSA intentionally oversamples authorizers with 10 or more schools, as this group of authorizers oversees the vast majority of charter schools, is where professional practices are most evident, and where most national attention is concentrated. Given this, caution should be taken in extending these findings to authorizers with only a few schools in their portfolio.

OUTCOMES

There appear to be two groups of authorizers with different practices related to the oversight of school discipline:

Group 1: "Hands Off" Authorizing Group

The first group of authorizers that emerged from the data might be termed "Hands Off," as they do not appear to take an active role in monitoring and overseeing a range of school discipline practices. This group of authorizers, which made up about 40 percent of the authorizers we surveyed, was much less likely to use a number of application, data collection, monitoring and reporting practices (see Table 1). About one-third of authorizers in this group reported doing things like requiring applicants to have comprehensive discipline plans that include suspension and expulsion practices (38 percent), and one in five reported monitoring suspension and expulsion rates (21 percent) or publicly reporting suspension or expulsion rates (21 percent). In addition, only six percent of authorizers in this group publicly report discipline data, and none publicly report disaggregated data or set performance expectations.

Group 2: "Monitoring & Reporting" Authorizing Group

Conversely, a second distinct group of authorizers emerged from the data, which might be termed the "Monitoring & Reporting" group. This group of authorizers is larger than the Hands Off authorizing group, comprising about 60 percent of authorizers we surveyed. Nearly all authorizers in this group require disciplinary plans that include suspension and expulsion practices at the application phase (96 percent) and collect and monitor disciplinary data (100 percent). In addition, more than two in three authorizers publicly report disciplinary data and about 40 percent publicly report disaggregated discipline data. Similar to the Hands Off Group, few set performance expectations for suspension or expulsion rates.

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[1] See e.g., Rausch, M.K. (2014) *Discipline, equity, and race: School discipline in public charter schools* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest/UMI Dissertation Publishing. UMI Number 3646708; Skiba, R., Chung, C.G, Trachok, M., Baker, T., Sheya, A., & Hughes, R. L. (2014). Parsing disciplinary disproportionality: Contributions of infraction, student, and school characteristics to out-of-school suspension and expulsion. *American Educational Research Journal, 51*(4), 640-670; Skiba, R.J., Edl, H., & Rausch, M.K. (2007, April). *How do principals feel about discipline?: The disciplinary practices survey.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association Conference, Chicago, IL.
[2] See Appendix A for a detailed methods description and a description of the survey. Exact questions used in the survey can be found in Appendix B.
[3] See Appendix A for a more complete description of the sample used in this analysis.

TABLE 1: AUTHORIZER GROUPS ON PRACTICES

	Percent Yes Responses	
	Hands Off Group	Monitor & Report Group
Requiring applications to have comprehensive discipline plans that include suspension and expulsion practices	38%	96%
Collect or receive suspension and expulsion data	38%	100%
Monitor school suspension or expulsion rates	21%	100%
Publicly report suspension or expulsion rates	6%	63%
Publicly report disaggregated suspension or expulsion rates (by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, special education status)	0%	41%
Set performance expectations for suspension or expulsion rates, beyond what is required in federal or state law	0%	16%

Note: All items are significant at the p<.001 level. Hands Off group comprised 39% of the sample, while the Monitor & Report group comprised 61% of the sample.

While authorizers differ tremendously in practices, far fewer differences exist on disciplinary philosophy, intervention practices and other attributes. While practices toward addressing exclusionary discipline differed markedly, they did not differ in intervention practices, philosophies on discipline, type and portfolio size.

Intervention Practices. While the "Hands Off" and "Monitor & Report" groups differed on a range of practices, both groups appear to be relatively inactive in intervention practices (see Table 2). For nearly every item surveyed, 25 percent or less of authorizers across groups said they have used (or would consider using) those practices. Even the one item the two groups of authorizers significantly differed (requiring schools to connect with discipline or climate experts), few authorizers in each group reported an affirmative response to those actions (6 percent compared to 20 percent).

TABLE 2: AUTHORIZER GROUPS AND INTERVENTION PRACTICES

	Percent Yes Response	
	Hands Off Group	Monitor & Report Group
Require schools to access effective practices	13%	19%
Require schools to connect with discipline/climate experts	**6%**	**20%**
Require changes to school staffing plans	4%	9%
Require changes to school discipline policies	21%	28%
Require changes/establishment of remediation/action plans	19%	25%
Revoked/not renewed charter for persistent discipline violations	2%	3%
Other penalties for rates deemed too high	0%	7%

Note: Bolded and italicized items are significant at the p<.001 level. Hands Off group comprised 39% of the sample, while Monitor & Report Group comprised 61% of the sample.

Authorizer Perspectives. Authorizers were asked to rate their level of agreement with four questions related to their philosophy on school discipline.[4] Authorizers did not significantly differ on any of those four questions across both groups (see Table 3). Most of the average responses to those questions were in the "neutral" range, and each group's average response did not differ much from each other.

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[4] Typically, the organization's day-to-day decision makers (e.g., charter school director, executive director, superintendent) respond to NACSA's annual survey and thus responses are best understood as the perspectives of those stakeholders and are not necessarily an official position of the authorizing institution.

TABLE 3: AUTHORIZER GROUPS AND PERSPECTIVES ON DISCIPLINE	Average Response	
	Hands Off Group	Monitor & Report Group
Charter school suspension and expulsion rates should be similar to community where charter school is located	3.2	3.6
Setting performance expectations is appropriate activity for authorizers	3.0	3.2
Setting performance expectations infringes on charter school autonomy	3.0	2.7
Charter schools should have full autonomy in suspension and expulsion practices within federal/state law	2.9	2.9

Note: Response scale was from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), with 3 representing "Neither Agree nor Disagree". None of the items are significant at the p<.001 level. Hands Off group comprised 39% of the sample, while Monitor & Report group comprised 61% of the sample.

Groups by Size & Type. Do the two groups of authorizers differ by size and type? The short answer is no. While there is some slight variation between the two groups of authorizers by type, those differences are relatively small and not statistically significant (see Figure 1). In addition, the numbers of schools overseen and total number of students in those schools were not significantly different by authorizer group.

FIGURE 1: PERCENT OF AUTHORIZERS BY TYPE IN EACH GROUP

HANDS OFF GROUP

MONITOR & REPORT GROUP

LEA ■ HEI ■ ICB ■ NFP ■ SEA
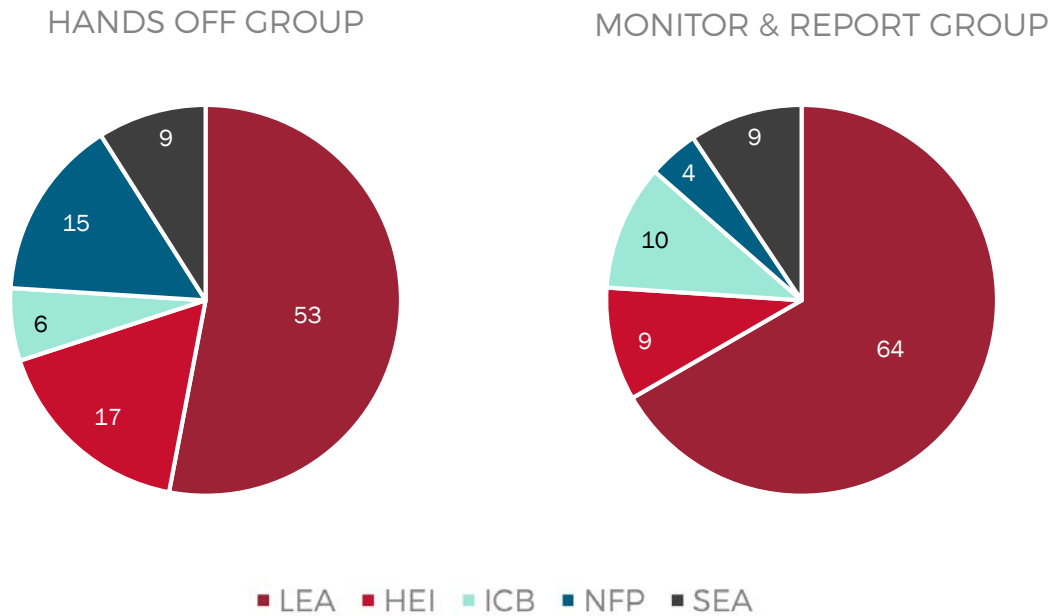
Note: None of the differences by type by group are statistically significant. Monitor & Report group comprised 61% of the sample, while Hands Off group comprised 39% of the sample. LEA = Local Education Agency; HEI = Higher Education Institution; ICB = Independent Charter Board; NFP = Not for Profit Authorizer; SEA = State Education Agency. Non-Educational Government (NEG) authorizers are not reflected due to a very small number in the country.

CONCLUSION

This analysis makes clear that authorizers do not approach school discipline in the same way. There appears to be two distinct groups of authorizers. Approximately two-thirds of authorizers are in the Monitor & Report group, using a range of practices, compared to the other third of "Hands Off" authorizers.

Factors beyond authorizer type, number of schools or students overseen, perspectives on discipline, and intervention practices appear to drive authorizer's use of broader monitoring and oversight practices. Practices such as requiring applicants to have comprehensive discipline plans and monitoring and reporting discipline data, are independent of a number of factors and attributes one might think is related to authorizer actions. This suggests other factors—perhaps state policy, perceptions of discipline use by schools in their portfolio, or other factors—need to be explored for relationships with authorizer practices on school discipline.

Authorizers appear reluctant to--or unclear if and how to--intervene when disciplinary challenges emerge. Few authorizers have used, or would consider using a range of intervention practices in response to school-level challenges related to school discipline. From requiring schools to access effective practices to requiring changes to staffing or closing schools for persistent discipline violations, authorizers are not using (and have not considered using) a range of intervention practices in response to challenges.

Readers of this analysis will no doubt have strong opinions about the degree to which these findings are positive or negative. While a majority of authorizers are using approaches that appear to promote oversight and transparency, a significant number are not. In addition, most authorizers are not intervening in charter schools when school discipline problems occur, even eschewing less intrusive interventions. More information is needed on the relationship between authorizer perspectives and use of practices, and perhaps most importantly, additional analysis is needed to examine whether authorizing perspectives and practices relate to actual use of suspension, expulsion and other important student and public interest outcomes.

APPENDIX A: STUDY METHOD DESCRIPTION

In order to increase transparency and potentially stimulate additional research, we provide a detailed description of the methods used undergirding the results of the paper. Below we attempt to provide sufficient detail on the analysis methods used to increase confidence in the paper's findings, and so that other researchers may critique and/or use it for replication purposes.[5]

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Questions from NACSA's annual survey of authorizers were used to measure charter school authorizer's perspectives on school discipline oversight. Seventeen questions from the 107-question survey were used in the analysis of school discipline perspectives, practices, and interventions. The discipline survey questions were designed to provide data on a broad range of disciplinary perspectives and practices from charter school authorizing day-to-day decision makers. Items were developed through an examination of media topics, from authorizers themselves, and questions of interest by NACSA staff and other key stakeholders. Items inquiring about authorizer perspectives on discipline ask authorizers to rate, on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), their level of agreement on each item. Items inquiring about authorizer practices and interventions ask authorizers to respond via one of three choices: Yes, No, Don't Know. The full set of questions can be found in Appendix B.

SURVEY DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

Similar to procedures (Rausch, 2014; Skiba et al., 2014) and recommendations (Weisberg et al., 1989) used by other researchers to maximize survey response rates, multiple response formats, follow-up correspondences, and a small financial incentive were used to encourage participation. The survey was first administered online, with an invitation email and study information sheet sent electronically to 100% of large charter school authorizers (i.e., those overseeing 10 or more charter schools in 2015-2016) and 34 percent of all small authorizers (i.e., those overseeing nine or fewer charter schools in 2015-2016) via email addresses collected by NACSA over the last five years from publicly available sources, typically state department of education websites. Each authorizer received a unique access password linked only to their authorizing organization. Approximately two weeks following initial invitation, a follow-up email was sent to non-responding authorizers. Approximately two weeks after the follow-up email was sent, a paper copy of the survey, with a pre-paid return envelope, was mailed to participants who had not yet completed the survey online. The hard copy survey noted that participants could either fill out and return the hard copy or complete the survey online. Approximately two weeks after the hard copy was mailed another follow-up email was sent to all non-responding participants asking them to complete either the online or paper copy survey. Two weeks after the final follow-up email was sent and spanning for an additional three weeks, individual outreach emails were sent to large authorizers until a 75 percent or higher response rate among large authorizers was reached. Mailed paper copies of the survey were accompanied by $5.00 as an incentive to participate in the study. Participants completing the survey online at any point had the same amount mailed to them.

Of the 429 authorizers invited to participate in the survey, a total of 164 completed the survey, yielding a response rate of just under 40 percent. By design—as the survey methodology prioritizes data collection from large authorizers—the response rate among large authorizers (76 percent) was much higher than small authorizers (25 percent).

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[5] Please contact the first author, M. Karega Rausch, at karegar@qualitycharters.org for questions and correspondence.

SAMPLE COMPOSITION

The sample of authorizers completing the survey and used in the analysis is expansive but may not be fully representative of all authorizers nationwide. The sample includes authorizers from every state with charter schools. Collectively sampled authorizers oversaw 4,686 charter schools or about 70 percent of all charter schools across the country. The sample contains a smaller proportion of small authorizers compared to the general population (50 percent in the sample compared to 90 percent in the population). The sample also contains a lower proportion of school district authorizers and a slightly higher proportion of higher education, state charter board, and state board/department of education and not-for-profit authorizers (see below). It also contains a lower proportion of authorizers from the west and higher proportion of authorizers from the south (see below).

AUTHORIZER TYPE	Sample Composition	Population Composition
Higher Education Institution (HEI)	13%	5%
State Charter Board (ICB)	8%	1%
School District (LEA)	61%	90%
Municipality (NEG)	1%	0%
Not-for-Profit Organization (NFP)	7%	2%
State Board/Department of Education (SEA)	9%	2%
TOTAL	100%	100%

AUTHORIZER REGION	Sample Composition	Population Composition
Northeast	10%	8%
South	28%	15%
Midwest	28%	28%
West	35%	49%
Total	100%	100%

CLUSTER ANALYSIS JUSTIFICATION AND METHODS

In order to describe the disciplinary philosophies and practices of charter school authorizers, all 17 disciplinary items from NACSA's survey were analyzed via a cluster analysis procedure. Cluster analysis is a multivariate procedure that organizes entities into distinct groups by maximizing between group, and minimizing within group, heterogeneity (Aldenderfer & Blashfield, 1984; Hair & Black, 2004). It is thus a method well-structured and appropriate to empirically create a classification of authorizers based on their disciplinary perspectives and practices.

The cluster analysis procedure used a number of specific methods as suggested by Norusis (2012). The analysis used a two-step cluster procedure, as it is among the only cluster analysis procedures robust enough to handle both continuous and categorical data. As the two-step procedure is highly dependent on the order of the cases in the data file, data were randomly ordered prior to analyses. The log-likelihood distance measure was used, as it is the only tool in cluster analysis designed to handle both categorical and continuous variables.

The number of clusters was not pre-determined, nor were filters applied for outliers. The number of clusters was determined via examination of changes to the Schwarz Bayesian Criterion (BIC). The goal of determining the appropriate number of clusters was to maximize within-cluster similarity (as measured by reductions in

the BIC) balanced by being able to interpret the underlying structure. This method ultimately resulted in the selection of two clusters, with each authorizer respondent assigned to one of those clusters.

Cluster interpretation and naming was guided by further statistical testing. Similar to methods used by Rausch (2014) and Skiba, Edl, & Rausch (2007) a series of univariate F tests (for continuous data) and chi-square tests (for categorical data) were conducted on each item to identify variables that differed significantly by cluster membership. A statistical significance adjustment was used to guard against Type 1 error when multiple statistical tests are used. Thus only items that differed by cluster membership at the $p < .001$ level were considered significantly different in the analysis. Descriptive names were given to clusters based on items associated with each cluster. IBM SPSS 23 was used for all analyses.

EXAMINING FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH AUTHORIZER PERSPECTIVES & PRACTICES

In order to understand the degree to which cluster membership is related to other factors, we examined data related to authorizer type, the number of schools the authorizer oversaw, and the total number of students in schools overseen by the authorizer. Data for these three areas are also reported by authorizers via NACSA's annual survey. In seven instances, authorizers did not report the total number of students or schools on the survey. NACSA staff manually collected those data via state department of education websites. A univariate F-test was conducted for the number of schools and number of students by cluster membership, and a chi-square test was used to analyze authorizer type differences by cluster membership. Only items that differed at the $p < .001$ level are described as significantly different.

ANALYSIS OF POWER AND PRECISION

Since cluster analysis groups or classifies entities, rather than making population based estimates with inferential statistics, the ability to accurately detect group differences in the population from a given sample (i.e., statistical power) is not applicable to cluster analysis procedures (Hair & Black, 2004). However, in order to maximize the ability to accurately discriminate between groups by maximizing between-group, and minimizing within-group, heterogeneity, sample size is an important consideration. Generally, as sample size increases, the likelihood that resulting clusters will accurately depict differences between clusters also increases (Hair & Black, 2004). While the overall sample of authorizers is moderate in size, the expansiveness of the number of schools overseen by authorizers in the sample—approximately 70% of all charter schools in the country—likely increases the robustness of the findings.

APPENDIX B: SCHOOL DISCIPLINE SURVEY QUESTIONS

PERSPECTIVE QUESTIONS

The next set of questions asks about perspectives on school discipline practices. Please choose the response that most clearly reflects the opinion of your authorizing office. Each question is on a 1-5 scale with 1 (strongly disagree) 2 (disagree) 3 (neither agree/disagree) 4 (agree) and 5 (strongly agree).

- Our authorizing office believes charter schools should have suspension and expulsion rates similar to the community where the charter school is located.
- Our authorizing office believes that setting performance expectations for school suspension and expulsion rates, as part of a school's performance framework or other methods that specify an authorizer's expectations of schools, is an appropriate activity for authorizers.
- Our authorizing office believes that setting performance expectations for school suspension and expulsion rates infringes on school autonomy.
- Our authorizing office believes charter schools should have full autonomy in suspension and expulsion practices (within federal and state law requirements).

PRACTICE QUESTIONS

The next set of questions asks about your practices related to school discipline and authorizing. Please answer "Yes," "No," or "Don't Know" for each of the following questions. Please answer "Yes" for practices your authorizing office has engaged in at least once over the last two years or if it is a current practice. Please check "No" if your office has not engaged in this practice over the last two years and it is not a current practice.

- Required charter applications to include comprehensive discipline plans that include suspension and expulsion practices
- Collected or received (from the school/network or other regulatory body) suspension and expulsion data
- Monitored school suspension and expulsion rates
- Publicly reported school suspension and expulsion rates
- Publicly reported school suspension and expulsion rates disaggregated by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status (e.g., free/reduced lunch, paid lunch), and/or special education status
- Set performance expectations for school suspension and expulsion rates, beyond what is required in federal or state law.

INTERVENTION QUESTIONS

The last set of questions in this section asks about your practices in addressing school discipline challenges among schools your office authorizes. Please answer "Yes," "No," or "Don't Know" for each of the following questions. Please check "Yes" for all practices engaged in over the last two years, if this is your current practice, or if you would engage in this practice in the future; please check "No" if you have not engaged in this practice over the last two years, is not a current practice or you wouldn't use this practice in the future. Otherwise, please check "Don't Know."

- Required schools to access effective practices (forums, annual meetings, virtual/electronic communication, etc.)
- Required schools to connect with school discipline/climate experts
- Required changes to school staffing plans
- Required changes to school discipline policies

- Required school remediation/action plans
- Revoked or not renewed a charter for persistent school discipline policy violations
- Other penalties for school discipline rates deemed too high

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