



# DISCIPLINED AND DISCONNECTED

**How Students Experience Exclusionary  
Discipline in Minnesota and the Promise  
of Non-Exclusionary Alternatives**

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# Foreword

Disciplinary actions in schools often represent a missed opportunity. Teachers often do not receive the support necessary to simultaneously teach and respond appropriately to challenging student behavior, and routinely cite behavior management as a key job stressor. In many cases, the systems in place are purely reactive and lack a preventative component to address challenging behavior. These current systems do not consider what the child is experiencing in and outside of school that might affect their behavior. The Center for Promise examined the current exclusionary discipline landscape in Minnesota by speaking with young people there who had personally experienced it. Their stories illuminate the need for improved culture and climate in their schools, the yearning for an opportunity to have a voice—to defend themselves or to communicate what is really going on in their lives—and the feeling of frustration and being misunderstood. These stories are not altogether uncommon, as many who work with young people every day can attest.

# Introduction

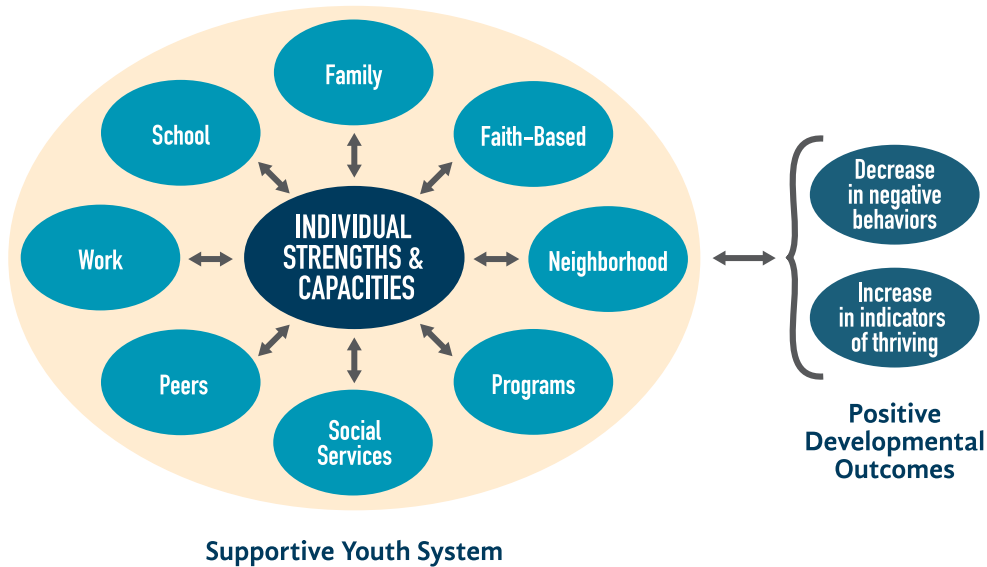
School discipline policies and practices have a significant impact on the educational and life outcomes of students in our nation's schools, in large part due to the links between student discipline and their engagement with school and the extent to which they feel connected to the institution of school and the people within it. However, this link between discipline practices and sense of connectedness is rarely discussed. Young people want to feel respected, trusted, and heard.<sup>1</sup> Because of heightened emotional intensity in adolescence and the punishments typically associated with “getting in trouble,” disciplinary interventions represent pivotal opportunities for students to feel either included and respected or shut down and ignored by schools.<sup>2</sup> How schools respond to student behavior may be an indication of how young people are viewed by school personnel and the institution of school at large.<sup>3</sup> When school responses to behavior communicate respect, trust, and attention, students tend to feel more connected to school and are more likely to exhibit positive behaviors.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, when responses to student behavior fail to account for student perspectives and experiences, youth can experience feelings of alienation and disconnection.<sup>5</sup>

Youth are embedded within a multi-level ecology filled with people, institutions (e.g., school), cultural norms, and public policies, which are called a **youth system**. A youth system is considered supportive when its resources and services are aligned with the young person's strengths and needs. Youth need to feel safe, valued, and respected,<sup>6</sup> especially at school. When that occurs, young people may feel a greater sense of connection and engagement in school.<sup>7</sup> Thus, discipline practices cannot be considered separately from the rest of the youth system.

The research of *Disciplined and Disconnected* was conducted for the GradNation State Activation Initiative, a collaboration between America's Promise Alliance and Pearson which aims to increase high school graduation rates by encouraging statewide innovation and collaboration, sharing knowledge to accelerate the adoption of proven strategies, and developing successful models all states can replicate. The Minnesota Alliance With Youth (“the Alliance”) is one of three grantees in this national effort. The Alliance identified exclusionary discipline as an area worth further examination given the connection between school discipline practices and graduation outcomes. Thus, the Center for Promise—the applied research institute of America's Promise Alliance—developed and implemented a research project to examine the issue.

## STUDENT BEHAVIOR IN THE CONTEXT OF A YOUTH SYSTEM

All young people have strengths and the ability to thrive. Positive developmental outcomes occur when the needs and strengths of a young person align with the assets and supports present in their environments, creating what is called a *supportive youth system*.<sup>8</sup> The supportive youth systems perspective is predicated on the notion that all young people can succeed, and they have a wealth of assets to be nurtured and supported. This runs counter to the notion that young people primarily have deficits that need to be eradicated. From this perspective, a young person's behavior is not simply the result of a problem within the student, but it can be better understood as an indication of a misalignment between the strengths and capacities of a young person and the demands or expectations of their developmental contexts.



Source: Center for Promise (2013). *Impact models: Comprehensive community initiatives*. Washington, D.C.: America's Promise Alliance.

Historically, schools' discipline practices have operated on a deterrence model of behavior management, seeking to motivate compliant behavior through the fear of punishment.<sup>9</sup> Often, these punishments take the form of removing the student from school for a prescribed amount of time (e.g. suspension, expulsion). Exclusion from school contributes to a youth system that deprives youth of opportunities to connect with their schools and the people in them. Suspension and expulsion can lead to social isolation and a lack of adult supervision and support,<sup>10</sup> leaving students without the resources to learn from their mistakes and educators without the opportunity to learn how to better support their students.

Exclusionary discipline in particular forces many youth off track, leading them to further disengage from their education and threatening their ability to succeed in school and life. As research increasingly demonstrates the detrimental impact of exclusion on educational and future outcomes, policymakers and schools are seeking ways for school discipline policy and practice to be more rooted in understanding the needs and experiences of students.<sup>11</sup>

# Primer on Exclusionary Discipline

Exclusionary discipline, a disciplinary approach that relies on removing students from the learning environment through suspension and expulsion, has a long-standing history in American schools. Its recent history dates back to the passage of the 1994 Guns Free Schools Act—a “zero-tolerance” measure that mandated student removal for at least a year for having a firearm in school. The Gun Free Schools Act was a response to growing concern about school-based violent crime, and reflected the belief that swift and certain punishment for misconduct would promote compliant behavior and productive learning environments.<sup>12</sup>

While zero-tolerance policies were initially introduced to address dangerous student behaviors, suspensions and expulsions were increasingly applied to non-dangerous student behaviors as well.<sup>13</sup> As the “Broken Windows”<sup>i</sup> theory of policing<sup>14</sup> grew in popularity in the 1990s and 2000s, educators were encouraged to “sweat the small stuff” (e.g., tardiness, disrespect, cell phone use, etc.) by harshly punishing students for minor infractions to maintain order and compliance in their schools.<sup>15</sup> Even today, a significant portion of suspensions nationwide are issued for non-dangerous infractions. A landmark study in 2011 found that only three percent of disciplinary actions in Texas were for behaviors where state law mandates suspension or expulsion (e.g., for weapons or drug possession, violence, etc.); all others were administered at the discretion of school officials for non-dangerous infractions.<sup>16</sup> Notably, many non-dangerous infractions are subjective in nature (e.g., disrespect), which may lead to inconsistencies in determining who gets punished for behaviors and by what means.<sup>17</sup>

**Despite its popularity in American schools, exclusionary discipline is consistently shown to undermine academic outcomes.** Students who have been suspended lag behind their peers academically, often by multiple grade levels.<sup>18</sup> Even when controlling for socioeconomic status, school type, and race, studies find that suspension has a significant and negative association with grades and test scores, especially during the academic year in which students were suspended.<sup>19</sup> Research also shows that being suspended even once in ninth grade is associated with a three times higher likelihood of leaving high school before graduating, in addition to being associated with truancy and antisocial behavior.<sup>20</sup> This is noteworthy given that those who do not graduate from high school are less likely to be employed, are more likely to become incarcerated, and earn less than their peers over the course of their lives.<sup>21</sup> Further still, the negative effects on academic outcomes are not limited to students who get suspended. Even students not suspended who attend schools with high rates of suspension fare worse academically than their peers in schools with lower suspension rates.<sup>22</sup>

There is limited evidence to suggest that there are benefits to exclusionary discipline that offset its detrimental impacts on academic performance. Most notably, **exclusion does not make schools safer.** As schools have begun to rely on exclusion, there has been little effect on the number of violent incidents and reported fights as well as evidence that shows students demonstrate the same behaviors after returning from suspension.<sup>23</sup> Research also suggests that exclusionary policies may undermine school-wide trust.<sup>24</sup> Because relational trust is considered foundational for school improvement efforts,<sup>25</sup> practices that erode trust could affect a school’s ability to improve other elements of its programming and performance.

Moreover, **exclusion is disproportionately levied at students of color and students with disabilities.**<sup>26</sup> As of the 2015-16 school year, black students were almost four times as likely to be suspended than white students, and more than two times as likely to be referred to law enforcement for school-related behavior.<sup>27</sup> Nationally, nearly two out of three black males are suspended at some point during their K-12 education,<sup>28</sup> and nearly three quarters of students with disabilities are suspended at least once during secondary school.<sup>29</sup> Black boys with disabilities fare the worst. Though they represent nineteen percent of students with disabilities nationally, they account for thirty six percent of suspensions among students with disabilities.<sup>30</sup> These patterns raise questions about implicit bias in exclusionary discipline practices, especially since a significant portion of referrals are the result of subjective interpretation of student behavior. For example, a set of empirical studies found that disparities in discipline outcomes are, in fact, partially driven by racial stereotypes that influence the way teachers

i Broken Windows theory posits that low level disorder and neglect in a community, characterized for example by a broken window or abandoned car, can easily devolve and ultimately leads to higher rates of more extreme violent crime. Though not necessarily intentional, Broken Windows Theory led many major cities across the country to adopt “zero-tolerance” or “quality of life” policing tactics—punishing low level violations such as loitering, public drinking, and graffiti with steep consequences.

perceive and interpret specific student behaviors. These perceptions and interpretations inform the disciplinary actions that principals and teachers ultimately take.<sup>31</sup> Research also suggests that interventions that function to address implicit bias are associated with reduced discipline disparities.<sup>32</sup>

Beyond school-related outcomes, **exclusion is associated with subsequent involvement in the criminal justice system.** The connection between in-school infractions and involvement in the criminal justice system is partially attributed to the growing presence of police officers in schools called school resource officers (SROs). Between 1975 and 2008, the percentage of schools with SROs increased from 1 percent to 40 percent, the majority of whom were placed in urban schools that served a high proportion of students of color.<sup>33</sup> The most recent data from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights indicates that schools serving majority black student populations typically have more school police officers than support and guidance personnel.<sup>34</sup> Police presence in schools is notable because behaviors that once were handled by educational personnel are instead referred to police, yielding criminal penalties for student behavior. In 2013-14 black students represented 16 percent of public school enrollment but 27 percent of referrals to law enforcement, and that disparity is widening. In the 2015-16 school year, black students represented 15 percent of enrollment but 31 percent of referrals to law enforcement.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, research indicates that, on average, more than 75 percent of black boys suspended for 10 days or more, will be arrested by their late 20s.<sup>36</sup> This well-documented connection between disciplinary involvement and criminal justice involvement is referred to as the *school-to-prison pipeline*.<sup>37</sup>

**Momentum for discipline reform is growing nationwide as evidence about the detrimental effects of exclusion and the promise of non-exclusionary practices accumulate.** This movement toward non-exclusionary discipline practices has led to action at federal level. In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Justice issued a joint letter addressing the discriminatory nature of punitive discipline practices and urged schools to implement non-exclusionary practices.<sup>38</sup> Federal guidelines have since provided more recommendations for preventive and positive approaches to discipline as a route towards equity, improved school climate, and increased academic gains.<sup>39</sup>

In addition, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 mandates planning for discipline practices in light of growing national concern about the pitfalls of exclusionary discipline. Specifically, it requires local educational agencies to create plans for reducing "the overuse of discipline practices that remove students from the classroom."<sup>40</sup> In order to support those efforts, the law includes several provisions for supporting disciplinary reform as part of the new school quality indicator, including permitting the use of federal funding for practices such as parent engagement, promoting positive school climate, school-based mental health services, and multi-tiered intervention services.<sup>41</sup> However, while ESSA permits the use of federal funds to support a broader understanding of what promotes school quality and student success, specific recommendations are not mandated. Including discipline data in ESSA accountability plans and passing state-specific legislation remains up to individual states.<sup>42</sup> According to a brief by the Education Commission of the States, legislation was filed in 16 states to change exclusionary discipline policies in 2017.<sup>43</sup>

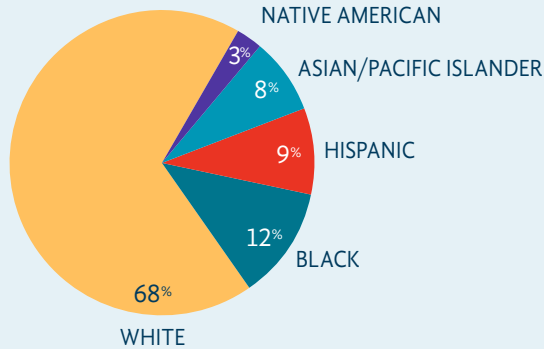
Now more than ever, American schools are contending with their discipline practices. Minnesota is one state where there has been significant interest in reforming exclusionary discipline policies and practices.

# Public Education in Minnesota

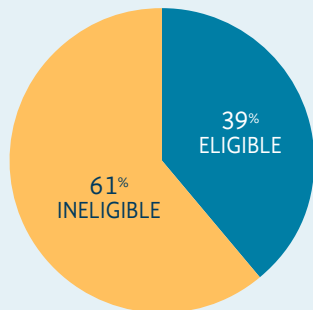
## STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

856,687 K-12 Public School Enrollment (SY 16-17)

### Race/Ethnicity (SY 17-18)



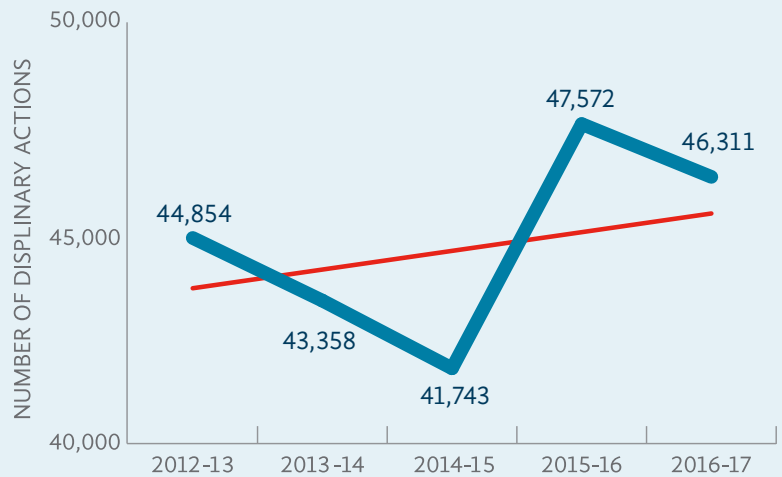
### Free & Reduced Lunch (SY 17-18)



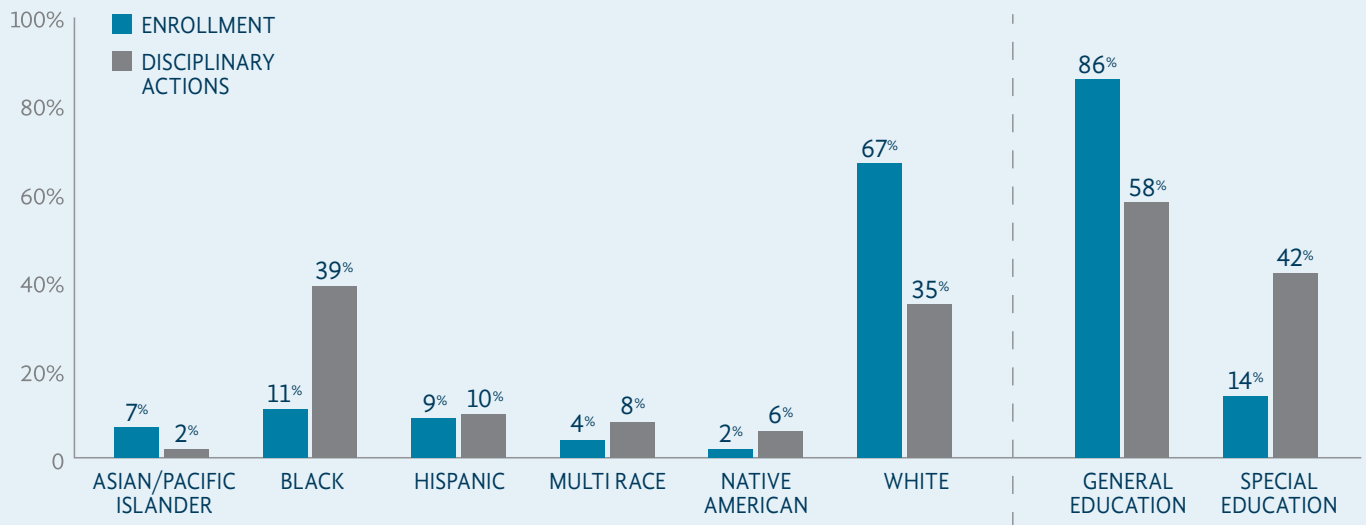
## GOVERNANCE

- **Minnesota Department of Education (MDE):** State education agency; releases statutes for school boards to interpret and implement; chief state school officer is appointed by the governor
- **School boards:** Each school district is governed by a school board; school boards interpret and implement MDE mandates and recommendations
- **Minnesota School Board Association:** Organization that convenes and supports the work of public school boards, often by offering model policies
- **No state board of education.**
- **372** public school districts and **2,072** public schools (SY 17-18)

## DISCIPLINARY ACTIONS BY SCHOOL YEAR



## DISCIPLINARY ACTIONS BY RACE/ETHNICITY & EDUCATION STATUS



Source: Minnesota Department of Education (2018)

# Minnesota Reform Context

In 1974, Minnesota adopted the Pupil Fair Dismissal Act (PFDA) to reduce the use of exclusions overall, reduce disparities in discipline outcomes, and promote positive academic outcomes for students. The original measure limited the number of days a student could be suspended, required that schools create readmission plans for each suspension, and clarified grounds for exclusion. Yet over time, updates to the PFDA have made it easier for schools to exclude students for non-violent and non-drug related behaviors. The most current version of the law allows for twice the number of days a student can be suspended when compared to the original law (from five to 10 school days), no longer requires the use of readmissions plans, softens requirements for the provision of alternative educational services, expands the grounds by which students can be excluded, and allows schools that violate the law to avoid penalty by claiming that their violation was made in “good faith.”<sup>44</sup>

Current school discipline data in Minnesota suggests potential consequences of having too few restrictions on exclusion. Data from the 2016-17 school year indicates that nearly half (48 percent) of all suspensions, exclusions, and expulsions were for non-dangerous student behaviors: “Computer” use, “Attendance” issues, “Verbal Abuse,” “Disruptive/Disorderly” behavior, and “Other.”<sup>45</sup> This is notable, as removal for non-dangerous student behaviors is not federally mandated and are not directly related to the physical safety of students, school personnel, and school property. (Under ESSA, local education agencies are required to expel a student for at least one year if they are found to have possessed a firearm at school.)<sup>46</sup> In addition, the most common reason for removing a student in Minnesota in 2016-17 (35 percent of cases) was for “Disruptive/Disorderly” behavior,<sup>47</sup> which is determined subjectively. Without clear and objective standards, students may be subject to individual school personnel biases about what constitutes disruption. See [Appendix 1](#) for more information about the incidents that have led to student removal in Minnesota.

While the current version of the PFDA provides limited regulation about removing students, some Minnesota schools and districts have begun to adopt discipline accountability measures and non-exclusionary discipline approaches on their own. After receiving heightened scrutiny about the districts’ discipline practices that led to a federal civil rights investigation,<sup>48</sup> Minneapolis Public Schools banned the use of suspensions for elementary students for non-violent behavior.<sup>49</sup> However, these actions are relatively new and are not common throughout the state. The Minnesota Department of Education is also encouraging the use of non-exclusionary discipline practices in the absence of PFDA requirements. In addition to launching a grant initiative to incentivize the adoption of non-exclusionary discipline practices,<sup>50</sup> the Department features a variety of resources on its

## ABOUT THE PUPIL FAIR DISMISSAL ACT (PFDA)

### KEY DEFINITIONS

**Dismissal:** Denial of a student’s current educational program, which includes suspension, expulsion, or exclusion (does not include removals from the classroom)

**Suspension:** Dismissal from school for more than one and up to ten school days

**Expulsion:** School board action to remove a student from the district or charter school for up to one calendar year

**Exclusion:** School board action to prevent a student from enrolling in the district or charter school or to prevent a student from re-enrolling after an expulsion has ended for up to the end of the current school year

### KEY PROVISIONS

- Districts must have a school discipline policy
- School officials must hold an informal hearing before suspending a student and a formal hearing before administering a long-term suspension or expulsion
- Districts may, under certain circumstances, suspend, exclude, or expel a student with a disability
- School boards must expel a student who brings a firearm to school unlawfully
- Students must not carry a dangerous weapon on school property or buses
- Students may appeal an exclusion or expulsion decision to the commissioner of education within 21 calendar days

Source: Pupil Fair Dismissal Act (2016)



website, including reports and trainings for students, families, and schools about implementing existing systems such as restorative practices (RP) and school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS).

Given strong local control, the state's efforts to prompt the use of non-exclusionary discipline practices have not yielded significant changes in practice across the state. As a result, community initiatives and organizations have emerged to advocate for definitive statewide action. A notable initiative of the last several years is Solutions Not Suspensions, a statewide campaign housed at the Minnesota Education Equity Partnership that coordinates collective action among a variety of organizations working to improve school discipline in Minnesota. This effort, and others like it, advocates for legislation that clarifies the following:

- **What students can (and cannot) be excluded for** by imposing limits on exclusion for misconduct that is determined on a subjective basis (i.e., “willful defiance”),
- **How schools are held accountable** if high rates of exclusion, disciplinary disparities, and low school climate ratings persist, and
- **Data that should be made available** to help schools and the public understand who is subject to exclusion and the progress being made toward reducing removal and promoting equitable disciplinary outcomes.

As Minnesota confronts the state of disciplinary practice in its schools, it must examine the policies and practices that shape the current school discipline landscape and contend with the experiences of the individuals affected by those policies and practices. These experiences, along with relevant data and history, can be used to ground and inform improvement initiatives.



## Study Overview and Methods

Against this backdrop, the Center for Promise sought to better understand the school discipline experiences of young people in Minnesota that tell the story behind the state's education data and recent headlines. The research team conducted a qualitative study that involved leading five group interviews with a total of 38 young people between the ages of 11 and 19 in three Minnesota communities: Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Chisago City. All participants had firsthand experience with exclusionary discipline. Each group interview was between 60 and 90 minutes in length. Participants were asked to speak about their experiences with school discipline, including, but not limited to, what led to the incident, who was involved in the resolution process, and their subsequent experiences in school. Participants spoke about a variety of experiences they had with school discipline, ranging from the time they were in elementary school to the present day, in middle school or high school.

Transcripts from the group interviews were then systematically analyzed. The Center for Promise's method of analysis was axial coding, a process for identifying themes ("codes") in the transcript content and parsing the relationships between the different themes that emerged. For more information about the protocol for group interviews and analysis, see [Appendix 2](#).

# Findings

Across all group interviews, youth participants explained how their experiences with disciplinary interventions led them to disconnect from school. Specifically, the interventions they experienced often did not address the root causes of their behavior, made them feel unvalued and unwelcome, and disrupted their learning. Participants expressed a desire to engage in school and succeed, but overwhelmingly find that their schools' disciplinary practices inhibit their ability to do so.

## Root Causes of Behavior Must Be Explored and Addressed

Behavior does not occur in isolation. What happens in one context of a young person's life may reverberate throughout other contexts of the young person's life. The youth participants explained that schools responded to their behavior without seeking to understand them, or why the behavior occurred. While all misconduct, especially dangerous behaviors, must be responded to, the stories the young people share indicate that the root causes are not often examined and managed. The participants expressed wanting to share their stories and explain their behavior, but often felt that they were not given the chance to do so. Not considering the full context of student behavior can leave students feeling wrongfully penalized and ignored.

For example, one female participant explained that the bullying she was facing at school further compounded challenges she was facing at home. While she engaged a variety of strategies to avoid conflict with those bullying her at school, these challenging situations became overwhelming and ended in her violent response toward the bullies.

### TOP REASONS PARTICIPANTS WERE DISCIPLINED

- Defensive Actions Against Bullying
- Fighting
- Phone Use
- Absenteeism
- Defending Others
- Social Media Posting
- Skipping Class
- Truancy

“ [It] started in freshman year. I was gone for a month because I went to Mexico to see my great grandma that has cancer...When I came back, I sort of stopped talking to some of my friends. There were rumors that I was supposedly talking smack about one of them when I wasn't, and...she tried to fight me, from freshman year. I ignored her, 'cause I thought it was just a joke or something, but one day she was waiting for me outside too. It wasn't by herself. It was like two more girls, and I was by myself. All my friends went home. I was waiting for my mom. Yeah, I was scared, 'cause it's like... a group of people right next to them. I didn't feel safe at that moment... since this year, they start talking smack about my mom, saying that, oh, she's not worth it, she's this and that, she's a whore... Yeah, my mom is not a perfect mom, but it's because she's been through a lot... I took that super serious, 'cause it's my mom. If y'all talking smack about me, yeah, I'm cool with that, but my mom, I won't let it happen. That's my mom. If y'all going to talk smack about my mom, don't do that.”

The participant further described how school personnel did not account for bullying as an antecedent for her behavior, nor did they account for the challenges she was facing at home when imparting the discipline action. Rather than acknowledge and strive to understand the young person holistically, and how experiences in each setting—home and school—might be contributing to her behavior, the school simply penalized her, leaving her feeling misunderstood and mistreated.

Another youth participant indicated that the context for his behavior was often ignored, and that no one took the time to speak with him about the disciplinary infraction.

YOUTH PARTICIPANT

“I said, school discipline is unfair because you get detention for like, simple things they could handle by talking.”

RESEARCHER

“If you feel like that was unfair, what do you think they should have done instead?”

YOUTH PARTICIPANT

“Just talk to me about it.”

Responses from the young people interviewed suggest that student behavior should not be seen as a reflection of a single incident or influenced by what occurs in one context of their lives. Rather, student behavior needs to be seen as reflective of students' experiences in all of their developmental contexts. Similarly, youth participants understood the need for discipline, but questioned it being administered without a conversation. Seeking to connect with and understand students and the opportunities and challenges present in all aspects of their lives can help students feel understood by school personnel and give school personnel the information they need to effectively help students work through challenging situations in their lives.

## DISCIPLINARY ACTIONS MENTIONED\*

- Suspension
- Confiscation of Offending Item
- Detention
- Mediation
- Call Home
- Meet with Teachers
- Community Service
- Meet with Parents

\*The actions are listed from most mentioned to least mentioned.

## Exclusion Interrupts Learning

Suspension is the discipline approach most frequently mentioned by youth participants as the one they have experienced, and the disciplinary action with which they had particularly negative associations. They explained that being suspended takes them out of class, making it harder for them to succeed academically as they are not given the opportunity to further their academic progress while suspended. For these young people, exclusionary discipline impedes opportunities to learn, threatening their connection to their school and educational experience. For example, one participant who was chronically absent was ordered to go to a truancy court to clear up her truancy. However, she had to miss school in order to go to court, which incurred another mark against her truancy. This, in turn, led her to miss school again to meet her court obligation.

“Why do they make you go to court during school for missing school? And I got trancies for the days that I missed for going to court, too.”

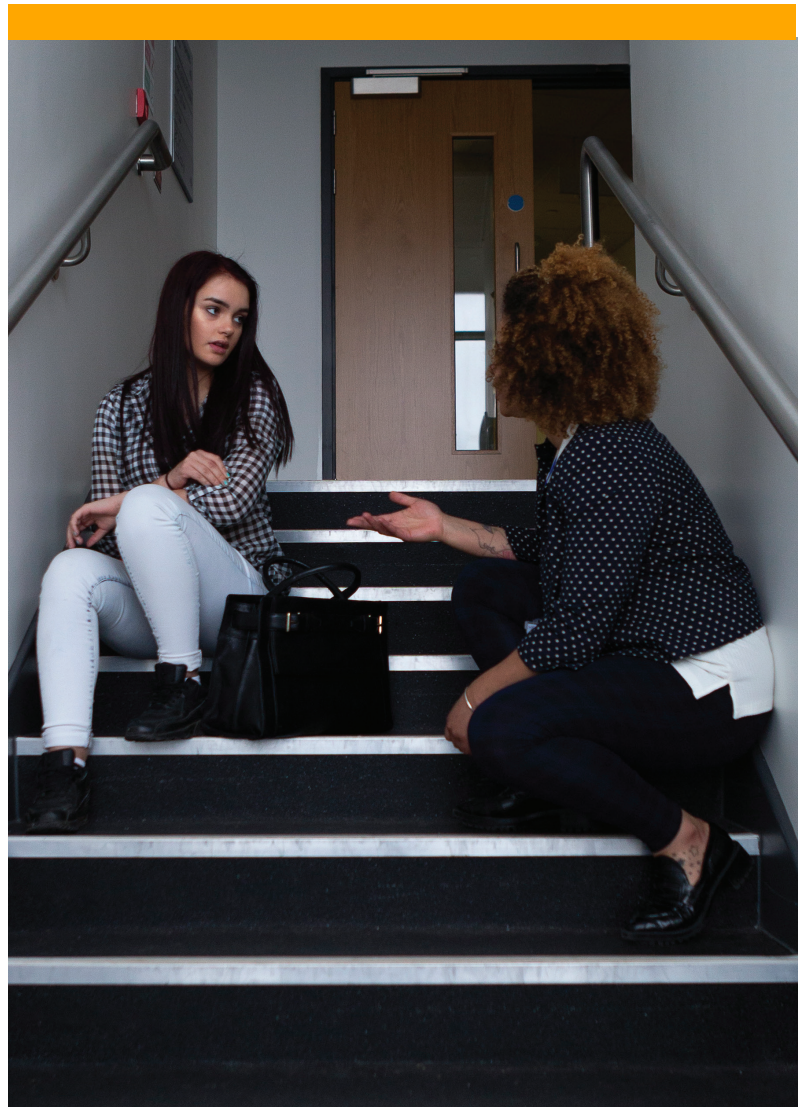
In addition, another middle school student explained that being suspended interrupted his ability to engage academically.

“Because, you miss your learning. So say if you're held back or something, you're like in Special Ed or something and you have someone else and you're like, ADHD or something like that and you act wild all the time and you get detention. That's like they're holding you... you're already held back. So why hold them back anymore?... They can stay after school or something like that. Not try to take away instead of learning, even more.”

Similarly, a high school student who was suspended for an incident that took place on social media spoke about the negative impact of removal on her academics.

**“It’s really dumb, ‘cause my grades dropped because of it. I missed a lot of school. It was really stupid, and it didn’t even happen during school... They didn’t give me any of my work... I got suspended on finals. I didn’t get to take them, so... I didn’t get full credits for my final, and then sometimes I still didn’t get my final, so, I didn’t get all my finals turned in, and they didn’t give me any coursework.”**

These examples demonstrate that these students want to be in school and engage with their education. These examples also make clear why exclusion is particularly painful for students given its ability to interrupt young people’s ability to make academic progress and receive academic support during the time they are disciplined. This can also contribute to feelings of disconnection from their education and impact their ability to form positive relationships with school personnel and peers.



## Students Need to Feel Valued, Welcome, and Connected

Young people discussed feeling undervalued and unwelcome at school, noting that racism and other forms of labeling were often drivers of treatment that led to those feelings. Feeling undervalued and unwelcome can strain young people’s relationships with school personnel and peers, a profound form of disconnection at school. In interviews, youth frequently mentioned that “*teachers need to listen more*,” “*we need to have teachers that care*,” “*teachers need to get to know their students*,” and “*we need more engaging teachers*.” Many of the youth recalled differential treatment, which made them feel unwelcome. For example, one female student recalled her principal’s reaction when she spoke of a teacher who made a racially insensitive remark.

**“This white girl pulled my hair...and like...I told the principal, I was like you know what? All these teachers are being racist...and...they straight up say they have their favorites. Like...this one teacher says to me, oh y’all Mexicans need to go back to Mexico. I was like...no. I need to leave...[S]o I went up to the principal. I was like, ‘This teacher’s being racist.’ He was like, ‘If you want to leave, then go ahead.’ So I left.”**

In this example, the young woman was being bullied by another student. Instead of the bully being disciplined, she herself was removed from school. Like this young woman, many of the young people interviewed experienced bias in the way that disciplinary decisions were made. In some cases, this bias was so extreme that students felt the need to leave the school entirely.

**“Because that’s the reason why me and him moved out of that school... The deans would care about your safety only if they had a favorite student, but they wouldn’t care about all the peoples’ safety, just one in particular.”**

Another example of bias is demonstrated through the treatment of English Learners and the lack of attention given to engaging meaningfully with them during the disciplinary process. One female student spoke about a disciplinary incident that occurred shortly after she immigrated to the U.S. She was given a week-long suspension but no one explained it to her, so she never realized she was in trouble.

**“It was in 5th grade. I was new to America. There was this group of girls who was trying to bully me...One day, was during recess, like break time, I was going out to play and...this girl behind me trying to push me, tried to grab my hair and stuff... I turned, and I slap one of the girl face, and then the teacher, they saw it. They were like, ‘Come to office with me.’ They didn’t say nothing to me— ‘What’s wrong,’—because, you know, I don’t speak English. They sent me home and say, ‘You have one week off school.’ ‘Oh cool, a day off.’ I didn’t know I was in trouble or anything.”**

Previous Center for Promise research suggests that having limited English proficiency may make it difficult for students to understand the discipline process or advocate for themselves when they are accused of misconduct, which can lead to unfair or unwarranted punishments. In addition, experiences of this kind may lead young people to avoid seeking support from adults in their schools even after they reach English proficiency.<sup>51</sup>

Youth also described feeling differentially treated based on being negatively labeled (e.g., “bad”). Students found it difficult to transcend these labels and felt that labeling led to experiences of victimization and unfair blame in the school.

**“Yeah. It’s not hard to get labeled. You can get suspended for headphones and stuff like that, and they’re like, ‘Oh, yeah, we got to watch you.’”**

**“All you got to do is to get suspended one time and you’re labeled. I see it, like they follow the same kids around, like everybody knows, ‘Hey, those are the bad kids...’ Every time something happen, they either go to them or they [c]ome to me and [my friend], and...be like, ‘You know what happened?’ Like, no.”**

Other students described being labeled as “dangerous” and “violent” and how that contributed to their feeling of being undervalued by school personnel.

**“Yeah, ‘cause I’m labeled to this day as the aggressor, the fighter, and I get mad too easily and stuff like that. But the reason why I get mad too easily is because they don’t send one dean to me. They send multiple people to me and it frustrates me. Y’all saying it’s like I’m Hulk and I’m gonna smash or something. It irks me. You all don’t need all these people to calm me down or anything like that.”**



Another student explained that processes in the school sent the message that he could get in trouble for anything. He likened his experience at school to that of a prison.

**“Because [school name] was bad, there was teachers over there always trying to get you in trouble for no good reason. Like even for you to go to the bathroom bro, you need an escort... Everybody, not just me...It was prison. In lunchroom, you need to raise your hand and ask for you to grab your tray and throw it away and then go back on the seat, stay there until the bell rings...”**

The educational environment the students describe contributed to their feelings of disconnection, disengagement, and made them feel as if their voices did not matter. Without connection, an individual does not have the opportunity to receive support from educators, peers, and others within the school environment. Students’ disengagement is accelerated when they feel no one is listening to them and looking out for them. Without this support, the young people are left without all of the pieces necessary to form a “supportive youth system” to support them and their academic, work, and life goals.

# Moving Away from Exclusion

Given the numerous challenges presented by exclusionary discipline shown in research and evident in the youth interviews conducted by the Center for Promise, leaders at various levels of the education sector are exploring promising, non-exclusionary discipline approaches for addressing student misconduct and supporting student success and well-being. The three most promising and popular practices<sup>ii</sup> are restorative practices, school-wide positive behavioral intervention systems, and social emotional learning.<sup>52</sup> See [Table 1](#) on page 15 for information about each.

- **Restorative practices (RP)** can be understood as both a philosophy and as set of educational practices. They are used to address student behavior and as a strategy for building positive relationships in general.<sup>53</sup> Under restorative practice models of school discipline, student misconduct is framed not simply as a violation of a rule, but in terms of the effect of that behavior on relationships.<sup>54</sup> In order to address challenging behavior, the school or community seeks to identify and understand the harm done, address harm through an appropriate reparation or other reconciliatory action, and restore damaged relationships. Restorative practice interventions typically involve facilitated encounters between the individual(s) who did harm, the individual(s) harmed, and other relevant members of the school community.<sup>55</sup> These encounters often take the form of “circle” discussions, mediations, peer courts, and family group conferences, depending on the incident. The reconciliatory action that a student takes is often directly related to the act of misconduct (e.g., a student must clean the wall that she vandalized). While research about the efficacy of restorative practices is still emerging, restorative practices have been associated with positive outcomes for schools and their young people, including decreases in suspension, lower rates of discipline referrals, improved academic performance, and increased trust between students and teachers.<sup>56</sup> Some studies suggest that restorative practices may be effective for reducing racial disparities in discipline outcomes, because the perspective sharing that restorative practices facilitate may undercut the strength of implicit biases in recommending reconciliatory actions.<sup>57</sup> However, racial disparities are shown to persist in some restorative practice contexts, indicating that more work remains in closing the “discipline gap.”<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, restorative practices are increasingly becoming mainstream and are currently mandated in some form in at least 27 states.<sup>59</sup>
- **School-wide positive behavioral intervention systems (SWPBIS)** is a multi-tiered system of support aimed at promoting positive behavior through school-wide behavioral expectations and corresponding individualized interventions for those who struggle to meet expectations. These expectations are often tied to schoolwide values and are explicitly taught and promoted through positive reinforcement. SWPBIS is associated with a number of positive outcomes for schools and their students, including improved school safety ratings, reductions in disciplinary referrals, lower levels of aggression among students, and increased reading proficiency, especially at the elementary school level.<sup>60</sup> Some form of SWPBIS is currently being implemented in more than 25,000 U.S. schools. Thirty-five states have high schools implementing SWPBIS, and at least 17 states have passed legislation that encourage the use of positive and preventative school discipline practices such as SWPBIS.<sup>61</sup>
- **Social emotional learning (SEL)** involves strategies, interventions, and curriculum designed to help students better understand and regulate their emotions and behavior, empathize with others, and form positive relationships.<sup>62</sup> SEL programs and instruction can take many forms: as add-on programs or as distinct curricula. Examples include Zones of Regulation, Open Circle™, or Second Step™, and “homegrown” structures and programming that schools create themselves.<sup>63</sup> SEL is a well-regarded approach for addressing student behavior because it is associated with a variety of positive outcomes for youth, including reduced aggression, higher rates of school attachment, improved academic performance, and greater levels of emotion regulation strategy use.<sup>64</sup> SEL can be understood as a preventative approach to school discipline. As students develop greater control over their emotions and behavior, they may be less likely to engage

ii In this report, the term “alternative practice” is not used to describe the discipline practices schools use instead of exclusion. “Alternative practice” suggests that exclusion and the other disciplinary approaches are equally valid. The state of the evidence, however, suggests that exclusion is a harmful practice. Thus, the non-exclusionary approaches described will be referred to as “promising practices.”



in negative behaviors. As a result, SEL is playing an increasingly prominent role in schools' strategies for promoting positive student behavior. While SEL is associated with improved academic outcomes and reduced aggression among students,<sup>65</sup> more research is needed to identify the full impacts of its implementation, particularly since SEL can be implemented in a variety of ways.

**TABLE 1. Promising Practices in Discipline**

NAME	CONCEPT	DETAILS	RESULTS	PENETRATION
Restorative Practices	Emphasis is on identifying harm, undoing harm, and restoring damaged relationships <sup>66</sup>	Interventions involve facilitated encounters between those who did harm, those harmed and the community; <sup>67</sup> reconciliatory actions are often directly related to the harm done	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fewer suspensions</li> <li>• Fewer discipline referrals</li> <li>• Increased school climate ratings</li> <li>• Improved academic performance</li> <li>• Increased trust between students and teachers<sup>68</sup></li> </ul>	Mandated by schools, districts, and communities in 27+ states <sup>69</sup>
School-Wide Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems	Promote positive behavior through school-wide behavioral expectations	Schools using SWPBIS <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) codify a set of core values,</li> <li>(2) teach behaviors associated with core values,</li> <li>(3) reinforce behaviors through positive recognition, and</li> <li>(4) provide supports to students struggling to meet expectations<sup>70</sup></li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased school safety ratings</li> <li>• Fewer discipline referrals</li> <li>• Reduced student aggression</li> <li>• Increased reading proficiency<sup>71</sup></li> </ul>	25,000+ U.S. schools <sup>72</sup>
Social Emotional Learning	Learning how to understand and regulate emotions and behavior, empathize, and build positive relationships <sup>73</sup>	Can be delivered through distinct add-on programming or curricula or be embedded into existing practices <sup>74</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced aggression</li> <li>• Higher rates of school attachment</li> <li>• Improved academic outcomes</li> <li>• More emotion regulation strategy use<sup>75</sup></li> </ul>	Included in federal education guidance; featured in K-12 standards in 49 states <sup>76</sup>

# Insights From the Field

Even as promising practices have become more widely adopted, little is known about how school leaders experience, understand, and implement them. To gain further insight into these practices, the Center for Promise conducted three key informant interviews with Minnesota school administrators at middle and high schools implementing discipline practices other than exclusion at their schools. The administrators discussed the mindsets that orient their schools' approaches to discipline, the disciplinary practices they use and how they implement them, and any challenges they face. Most of the administrators interviewed serve schools that use restorative practices (RP), where facilitated encounters (usually restorative circles) are a primary method used for responding to student behavior. Each of the schools is a non-traditional public school (alternative education center, charter school, etc.) and has been using approaches other than exclusion for at least one year. While these settings are not representative of the full range of public schools in Minnesota, important lessons can nonetheless be drawn from their example. The school leaders' insights are summarized below in two sections: what schools can do differently and how schools can implement such changes.

## Collective Mindset Shifts

### MAKE STUDENT LEARNING THE ULTIMATE GOAL

School leaders discussed how particular mindsets about the overarching goals of school discipline ground their approaches to managing student behavior. One of the foundational mindsets they spoke about is that disciplinary interventions should always support and be driven by student learning. One school leader articulated this vision, saying, *"Discipline means to teach and to learn. That's really what we're here for."* As a result, this school leader considered disciplinary interventions based on the goal of keeping students connected to school. She described the school's mindset in the following way: *"For us, it's about keeping kids in school, keeping kids connected. 'Cause we all know the research: the more connected a kid is, the better they do."* This mindset represents a fundamental departure from retributive forms of discipline, in which the primary purpose of discipline is to inflict a punishment. As another school leader explained, *"Punitive disciplinary action doesn't work. I've been doing this long enough [to know] you give a kid 150 lunch detentions, you think that's gonna stop him from saying the 'F' word? Probably not."*

Another school leader emphasized that when discipline is tied to learning, behavior improves as well, saying, *"If you don't collaborate with restoration, all your [behavior] management needs increase. And, we're not managers. We're supposed to be instructional leaders and guides on a growth mindset for kids."* Instead, these school leaders implemented restorative practices, a relationship driven disciplinary model focused on interpersonal understanding.

### INTERPRET BEHAVIOR AS A COMMUNICATION OF NEEDS

Instead of punishment being a deterrent, these school leaders described their approach to discipline as being rooted in understanding student behavior as a communication of their needs. A principal explained, *"Every unmet need is presented in purposeful behavior. We don't think about it, but we meet our needs by behaving."* Students can experience a great deal of adversity in their lives, and this impacts their behavior. Judging behavior through a trauma-informed lens, recognizing that past traumatic experiences can lead students to behave in a temperamental fashion when triggered by their settings or others' behaviors, is necessary if school personnel are to address the needs that young people bring to school. A principal explained the connection by saying that discipline has to be embedded within other services to address the mental health needs of young people. They explained, *"Adverse childhood experiences [ACEs], the trauma these kids have dealt with, until we can deal with where they're at emotionally and mental health wise, we have a hard time tapping into the academia. So I have three different mental health services that come into the building to do actual therapy with kids. The higher the ACEs, the more trauma-based the kids tend to act and react."* In order to address those needs, these school leaders use circles to create a context for all parties to be heard and for schools to connect students with the needed supports.

## BUILD TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are at the heart of the disciplinary approaches implemented at the school administrators' schools. They repeatedly emphasized that trusting relationships matter, explaining that when students feel safe and trusted by staff, they can be open about what they are experiencing and where they need support. These educators explained that they use restorative practice because it *"kind of builds relationships, just having that quiet time one-to-one with the kid, really analyzing what happened."* These relationships allow school staff to meet the individual needs of students and contribute to a climate of care and compassion throughout the whole school. One principal, responding to a question about whether or not they think the new approaches have worked, said, *"Yeah, I think it has and will continue to create an environment where students feel safe, and they can trust the staff, and that they can come here and be themselves and work through things and not just move past them or overlook what's actually going on in their lives and conflict that might be happening between other people."*

When these practices are embedded within a school it does not just change the relationships between staff and students, but there is a push for congruence in how the adults in the building engage with one another as well. Principals discussed how adopting restorative practices helped staff feel connected to one another as well: *"You talk about really bonding as a team... [restorative practice training] was the best start to a school year I've ever had in terms of making those connections with the people who are in charge of running schools and being with kids."* When all staff share the same mindset about the importance of caring and supporting one another, the entire school climate changes. One principal explained the effect on the entire community by saying, *"I think the biggest impact is that it creates a community here in the school where we can all coincide and be here for each other. It's more of like a family environment than anything. There's always conflict within families but you can't just suspend your loved one, you work through things and you have conversations and you resolve things, that's kind of the environment that we create here."*

## SHARE POWER

School leaders interested in implementing discipline practices other than exclusion, particularly restorative practices, talked about the necessity of sharing power with the various members of the school community, especially students. This represents a major break from the traditional discipline approach, where disciplinary action is unilaterally taken by an administrator who alone has the power to convene the individuals involved, determine the harm inflicted, and decide on the punishment. One dean described the difference saying, *"You've got to be willing to give up a little power and that's hard for some people."*

Another principal elaborated, explaining, *"It's no longer, 'I am the principal: you must listen to me because I'm the omnipotent...'* But no, it's a culture of, 'we are all in this together,' and when those kids call that circle or if I call a circle... it's not me going to point in their face yelling... but it's a calm environment with which we have a circle keeper that directly identifies what was the issue, what do each of you need to have success in school, [and] how can we help you."

Just as trusting relationships are embedded within the school and thus influence individual as well as collective experience, sharing power permeates the entire school culture. One principal emphasized that they start the school year with questions, rather than answers: *"What's a quality school? What's my job as a teacher? What's your job as a student?" And it's a very restorative conversation and it's not rocket science, man. It's just, give your feedback, so from the beginning we don't give you the rules of the school. We ask, 'What do you think? Who are we?'"* Another principal elaborated, *"You have to be able to allow other people, whether it's the kids or the staff or outsiders coming in, to take lead. We really believe in letting the scholars drive what this place looks like and how we do things in our practices. I think they're always put first and their opinions are always acknowledged... that's inside and outside the classroom, whenever they're in our space."* Having a culture where power is shared among all members of the school community is a critical shift for a school to make.

**“We’ve got to change  
what we’re doing  
because what we did  
before isn’t working.”**



## How to Implement Changes in Practice

Implementing restorative practices, among other non-exclusionary practices, is difficult work. Research from Denver, Brooklyn, and Oakland suggests that full adoption of restorative practices can take several years, as it often requires a whole school transformation.<sup>77</sup> The school leaders featured in this report represent stories of success, but each engaged in years of work and benefited from a variety of supports in order to build their school's internal capacity for restorative work.

### ADDRESS STAFF SKEPTICISM

Some teachers may be skeptical about restorative practices. School leaders described the pivotal importance of engaging the skeptics and how impactful it can be to get them on board. When the local county approached this principal and asked the principal to identify staff to go to a restorative practice training, the principal intentionally selected a group of staff members who represented a range of levels of buy in. *"I picked three people to go, two who I knew would love RP and one that I kind of figured would be a skeptic, 'cause if she didn't buy in, nobody's buying in, because she's our senior member here...she came back, she said, 'we're doing it, I'm sold,' and it's been a positive thing for our staff all along."*

In addition to training for school personnel, school leaders described the importance of trust for getting everyone on board and building their capacity to successfully implement non-exclusionary discipline practices. One noted, *"It's that kind of trust all the way round that has made this so successful, and continues to make it successful. We're not perfect, right, but [staff are] the ones that come up with ideas, and I allow that latitude."* While trust is vital, this principal also emphasized that using restorative practices across an entire school means empowering other stakeholders, including teachers and young people. One principal explained how they use circles to address faculty concerns as well as in their work with students: *"In fact, today is our staff circle, monthly meetings and staff circles. Because we find that in that staff circle it's almost like therapy for free, where people can kind of just let it out, what's going on and how they're feeling about it, and we encourage that. Because what we do is hard. Whether we're alternative ed. or in mainstream, it's hard. It's hard work."*

## INVEST IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Once they decided to utilize restorative practices, each school leader emphasized both the work they did to help their staff learn about them and the crucial importance of support from district and state policy makers. For instance, [this principal] described bringing a core group of people from their school to a conference to begin building internal knowledge about RP. The conference was run by the county, who brought in an RP expert from New Zealand, where they have been doing this work for decades. The principal leveraged interest from several staff, and with the support of the county, was able to build momentum and skills needed to properly implement restorative practices. *“We met during the summer with our rep...who does restorative [practices], and we met with an independent contractor [who] just retired from the Minnesota Department of Corrections [and] has been doing R[P] down there forever. So between those two women and my core group, we just met monthly during the summer a couple times. Then we had a two-day training with all staff, which was unbelievable.”* The same principal described the process her whole staff went through. *“[The training] was on circle and what does it mean and...all the scaffolding that goes with restorative practices.”* The administrators also discussed the importance of learning from others’ expertise. As one administrator described, *“We go down there periodically and do RP stuff with them [Department of Corrections] because they are really good at it; they’ve been doing it for years.”*

Multiple school leaders also described the importance of support from district and state policy makers, and the power of that support in generating momentum and excitement. *“We did a ginormous kick off with county commissioners here, we had senators here.”* Experiencing support from district personnel and policymakers paved the way for adopting non-exclusionary discipline practices, and gave school leaders the latitude to connect with other organizations and people for professional learning and support.

**“Take it slow.  
Find people that  
know what they’re  
doing. Talk to other  
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trying to do it.”**

## ENGAGE STUDENTS AS LEADERS

Other principals talked about the importance of engaging students in the process and creating structures to leverage their leadership. *“So we have what’s called student ambassadors who are trained specially to work with our new students, and to assist students in various ways. Whether it be in restorative chats, restorative conversations, restorative circles, always with that ultimate goal of identifying what happened and how can we fix it.”* Another principal expressed this same sentiment, describing how students who have internalized the RP process can help other students understand the RP process. *“Those kids become our shining stars, the ones that have successfully completed R[P]...they know how it works, they know what the impact is and can have, so they’ve been our shining stars here with that.”*

## BUILD CAPACITY BY SHARING BEST PRACTICES

Once schools begin to gain expertise, they can then teach others. One principal talked about the support she received from the superintendent, and how her school is now hosting trainings for other schools on restorative practices. *“In fact, we’re doing the state conference on RP in June up here at my school. It’s just that important to us.”* She closed by offering advice to other schools wanting to begin this work at their own sites. *“So just take it slow, find people that know what they’re doing. Talk to other schools that are trying to do it.”*

# Considerations for Policy and Practice

All students deserve to go to school in a safe, welcoming environment. As the research of this report suggests, school discipline policies and practices can influence how safe and welcome students feel in school. This can ultimately shape how connected youth feel to school, the adults in school, and to their education overall. Existing research and insights from Minnesota youth experiencing exclusionary discipline and school leaders implementing non-exclusionary discipline practices present a number of broader implications for policy and practice. They are organized in three sections: general, across-the-board implications; implications specifically for school personnel and district leaders; and implications for state-level policymakers.

## General Implications

**Listen to young people.** Young people should be given the opportunity to contribute to conversations about policies, programs, and interventions that will impact their lives and educational experiences, including those on exclusionary discipline. The Minnesota Youth Council, a regularly convened body of Minnesota youth who represent a broad range of issues impacting young people, could be an appropriate avenue for engaging in these conversations at the state level. Similarly, the discipline interventions that schools ultimately implement should provide opportunities for young people involved to be heard and lend their perspective.

**Invest in research to determine effective non-exclusionary discipline practices.**

As the insights from Minnesota school leaders suggest, improving discipline practice requires ongoing work and evaluation. As non-exclusionary practices increase in popularity, more research is needed to determine which elements of each approach are most effective and how these approaches to discipline impact a young person's ability to succeed in school and in life. By investing in the continuous improvement of discipline policy and practice, schools can create productive and positive learning environments for all students.

**“For us, it’s about keeping kids in school, keeping kids connected. Because we all know the research: the more connected a kid is, the better they do.”**

## Implications for School Personnel and District Leaders

**Strengthen relationships among school personnel, students, and families.** Understanding who a young person is and their lived experience can offer tremendous insight into their behavior. For young people, feeling supported and having someone to talk to at school can help reduce incidents that require removal from school, and it can allow students to feel like the school supports them. Similarly, strengthening relationships between the school and adults at home can help all adults who have a role in a young person's life to better understand when challenges arise and provide appropriate supports. Families are too often a neglected stakeholder in discipline, and, like students, should be provided full information about school rules and students' rights. This may be particularly important for families of English Learner students and students with disabilities, families that may already experience difficulty engaging with their schools and advocating for their students.

**Allow disciplinary action to provide an opportunity for conversation about educational options.** Depending on the incident and frequency of the infraction, schools and districts should use interventions as an opportunity to engage students and families in discussion about the appropriateness of their current education placement and the alternatives that exist. For example, a student may benefit from moving to smaller educational environment, a feature of many alternative settings. With the goal of on-time graduation in mind, time and resources should be devoted to informing students and their families about the educational options available to them.

**Provide opportunities for students to make academic progress while disciplined.** The prevailing research on exclusionary discipline and the research of this report make clear that exclusion can undermine students' academic performance. In addition, exclusion can make it difficult for a young person to maintain connections with school personnel and peers who

may provide essential support for them. As such, districts and schools adjusting their discipline practices should prioritize students' ability to make academic progress during their discipline intervention. For example, offering in-school instead of out-of-school suspension may allow young people to stay on-track with their classes and maintain important school-based connections in ways that are more difficult if they are removed from the school building entirely. However, in-school suspensions should be regularly evaluated to ensure that students maintain the ability to make academic progress during the time that they are being disciplined.

**Limit subjectivity and inconsistency in discipline decisions.** Young people interviewed for this study expressed frustration over inconsistencies in how rules are enforced within the same school and sometimes within the same classroom (e.g., differing severity of discipline for a given behavior, which students' safety is prioritized, etc.). Without consistency, students lack clear expectations about how to act in school. Providing guidance and professional development to school personnel at all levels will help ensure that there is a clear understanding of the school and district's discipline rules that school personnel should follow when making discipline decisions. Institutions of higher education also have an important role to play, preparing educators to be culturally sensitive and attuned to implicit bias.

**Ensure that students know school rules and their own rights.** In this study, students did not always understand why they were being disciplined, many did not agree with the ultimate outcomes, and others did not even realize they were being disciplined. It is important that all young people know their schools' discipline policies and their rights. Having full information can limit the frustration often felt by students and ensure that they have what they need to properly advocate for themselves.

## Implications for State Policymakers

**Create learning communities for educators and school leaders to discuss effective strategies for lowering the rate of school exclusion.** School and district leaders need opportunities to learn from one another. Bringing together schools and districts with high and low rates of exclusionary discipline will provide opportunities for educators to understand the "how" behind reducing exclusion rates. This deeper understanding can lead other schools to adopt changes to their policies and practices and provide the state with better insight into promising practices.

**Support district exploration of non-exclusionary discipline practices and provide dedicated, sustainable resources for professional development.** In Minnesota and nationwide, schools and districts are seeking out the best approach to discipline—restorative practices, school-wide positive behavior intervention and supports, social emotional learning principles, or another approach. Scarce resources and limited time are two impediments to schools implementing these approaches. The state can support districts by offering start-up funding as well as resources to support training. In addition, the state should consider additional investments for school counselors.

**Provide guidance documents and model policies and protocols for local adoption.** Within the bounds of the current law, there is an opportunity for the state to improve consistency in how disciplinary decisions are determined and recommend non-exclusionary discipline practices. Sample guidance documents include: sample interview protocols to use with young people when they are leaving school at the beginning of a suspension and upon their return to better understand their stories, how they spent their time away from school, and their plan for re-integration into the school environment. Model policies could be developed to guide school leaders on how to determine the appropriate disciplinary action for common infractions. In addition, sample protocols could be adapted and adopted to guide personnel on how to manage behavior and misbehavior in their classrooms and throughout the entire school building (e.g., hallways, cafeteria, outdoors). The U.S. Departments of Education and Justice provided a package of guidance documents through their Supportive School Discipline Initiative that can be used or adapted.

**Ensure transparency by expanding publically available discipline data.** All state education agencies should make school and district level student discipline data, disaggregated by race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status, readily available to the general public directly on their websites. Misconceptions about the reasons for exclusions are prevalent in popular discourse. Equipping the public with data on an annual basis will help ensure transparency statewide.

# Conclusion

Overall, the young people interviewed expressed a desire to go to school in a safe environment, be treated fairly, and experience care and support from school personnel. Often, however, they explained that discipline felt inconsistent, that they felt negatively labeled based on their race and other factors, and that they were not given the opportunity to explain their perspective or advocate for themselves. School leaders implementing non-exclusionary practices affirmed many of the sentiments expressed by young people and offered insights about the promise of non-exclusionary practices and what is necessary for their successful implementation. Taken together, these perspectives make clear the harms associated with exclusion as a dominant approach to school discipline and the importance of sharing practices from across the country that lead to better outcomes for schools and the young people who attend them.



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## APPENDIX A

## Reasons for Minnesota Student Removal

TABLE 2. Minnesota Suspensions, Exclusions, and Expulsions (2016-17)

REASON FOR REMOVAL	COUNT	% OF TOTAL
TOTAL	50233	100.00%
DISRUPTIVE/DISORDERLY	17903	35.64%
FIGHTING	8876	17.67%
ASSAULT	3993	7.95%
THREAT/INTIMIDATION	2902	5.78%
OTHER	2368	4.71%
ILLEGAL DRUGS	2031	4.04%
VERBAL ABUSE	1945	3.87%
ATTENDANCE	1646	3.28%
TOBACCO	1503	2.99%
HARASSMENT	1418	2.82%
WEAPON	1357	2.70%
THEFT	1050	2.09%
VANDALISM	802	1.60%
BULLYING	683	1.36%
ALCOHOL	537	1.07%
TERRORISTIC THREATS	320	0.64%
CONTROLLED SUBSTANCES	223	0.44%
CYBER BULLYING	223	0.44%
COMPUTER	217	0.43%
PYROTECHNICS	62	0.12%
OVER-THE-COUNTER MEDS	61	0.12%
GANG ACTIVITY	44	0.09%
ARSON	37	0.07%
BOMB THREAT	15	0.03%
HAZING	7	0.01%
EXTORTION	4	0.01%
ROBBERY (USING FORCE)	4	0.01%
BOMB	2	0.00%
HOMICIDE	0	0.00%

Source: Minnesota Department of Education (2018)

## APPENDIX B

# Youth Interview Methods

### Overview

The Center for Promise research team sought to understand the types of incidents young people were involved in and the actions taken by the schools in response. As such, the research team conducted five group interviews with Minnesota middle and high school students who have experienced exclusionary discipline. Participants spoke about a variety of experiences they have had with school discipline, ranging from the time they were in elementary school to the present day in middle or high school.

### Procedure and Participants

The research team conducted five focus groups with 38 young people in five different educational programs in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Chisago City in Minnesota. Education programs were recruited by the Minnesota Alliance With Youth. Once recruited, the research team worked with the programs to identify young people who had experienced school disciplinary actions who were also interested in participating in a group discussion of these experiences. The research team attempted to get approximately 6 young people per group. Ultimately the team engaged two groups of five young people, one group with eight, one group with nine, and another group with eleven young people (N=38). Participants ranged in age from 11 years to 19 years of age (mean=15.74 years, SD=2.04.).

Prior to each focus group, participants under the age of 16 years were given informed consent forms for their parents to complete. Participants were then asked to bring the completed forms to the group interview. If young people under the age of 18 did not have a signed parental consent with them on the day of the group, they were not allowed to participate. Prior to commencing the group interview, the two facilitators went through the letter of informed consent with all of the young people in attendance. Young people who were under 18 years old and who had brought a signed parental consent form were asked to complete an assent form and youth over the age of 18 years old were asked to complete an informed consent form.

Once informed consent forms were completed, the groups began the interview session with rapport building activities. Group facilitators asked the young people to participate in three activities: “group count,” “the wind blows,” and working in pairs discussing two things they would like to change at their school and why. These activities helped to raise awareness about similarities among group interview members and fostered positive group dynamics. After sharing the two things that they wanted to change at their school and why, the facilitators segued into the primary portion of the group interview by asking participants to share their experiences with school discipline. The facilitators then asked the young people to share if and how they might change school disciplinary practices and procedures. Each group interview was between 60 and 90 minutes in length.

At the end of the group the young people were given a debrief form summarizing the purpose of the study and provided information regarding resources available to them to address any challenges they might face regarding issues raised in the group interview. The young people were given a \$20 gift card as an incentive for participation in the group interview.



**TABLE 3. Participant Sample**

SAMPLE SIZE (N)	GENDER	AGE	RACE	GRADE
38	Female = 19 Male = 17	11-19 Mean = 15.74 Standard Deviation = 2.04	White = 11 Native American = 6 Latino = 9 Latino/Native American = 4 Asian = 4 African American/White = 1 African American/Native American = 1	6th = 3 7th = 2 8th = 1 9th = 4 10th = 10 11th = 7 12th = 10

## Analysis

The Center for Promise systematically analyzed transcripts from the group interviews to identify common themes and the factors underlying the participants' experiences with discipline. Specifically, the Center for Promise used open coding, a process for identifying themes ("codes") in the transcript content and parsing the relationships between the different themes that emerged, paying particular attention to the disciplinary incidents and actions that the young people discussed, and aspects of their lived experience that might contribute to these disciplinary incidents. In this instance, the data are the young people's recollections of their experiences with school discipline. Through open coding, the direct insights of participants guided the analysis and the findings that emerged.

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The Center for Promise is the applied research institute of America's Promise Alliance, housed at the Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development and dedicated to understanding what young people need to thrive and how to create the conditions of success for all young people.

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America's Promise Alliance is the nation's largest network dedicated to improving the lives of children and youth. The Alliance brings together more than 400 national organizations and thousands of community leaders to focus the nation's attention on young people's lives and voices, lead bold campaigns to expand opportunity, conduct groundbreaking research on what young people need to thrive, and accelerate the adoption of strategies that help young people succeed. GradNation, a signature campaign, has helped to increase the nation's high school graduation rate to a record high. In the past 18 years, an additional three million young people have graduated from high school.



The GradNation State Activation initiative is a collaboration between America's Promise Alliance and Pearson working to increase high school graduation rates to 90 percent. The three-year initiative focuses on increasing graduation rates by investing in three key things: encouraging statewide innovation and collaboration; sharing that knowledge and replicating what works; and developing successful models all states can replicate. America's Promise Alliance and Pearson have made a \$600,000 investment in grants to bolster organizations with innovative approaches to increase U.S. graduation rates. The grantees, located in Arizona, Massachusetts, and Minnesota, have each received a \$200,000 grant and have demonstrated a commitment to preparing more young people with the skills necessary to graduate from high school and succeed in college, work, and life. The Minnesota Alliance With Youth was the GradNation State Activation initiative grant recipient on behalf of the state of Minnesota and is using the grant funds to catalyze action to close the achievement gap and reach a 90 percent graduation rate in Minnesota by 2020. To learn more, visit [www.GradNation.AmericasPromise.org](http://www.GradNation.AmericasPromise.org).



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