

The Effect of Discipline Reform Plans on Exclusionary Discipline Outcomes in Minnesota

In 2017 the Minnesota Department of Human Rights identified 43 local education agencies in the state as being in violation of the Minnesota Human Rights Act for their use of exclusionary discipline practices (suspensions, exclusions, and expulsions) at higher rates for American Indian and Black students and students in special education than for White students and students not in special education as well as overall use. The department agreed not to pursue legal action against any identified local education agency that created and implemented a plan to reform its discipline practices. This study examined the use of exclusionary discipline practices by Minnesota local education agencies from 2014/15 through 2018/19 and the extent to which the creation of discipline reform plans by identified local education agencies was associated with changes in discipline outcomes. The study found that creating a discipline reform plan was not associated with a statistically significant change in exclusionary discipline actions experienced by students.

Why this study?

The Minnesota Department of Human Rights (MDHR) partnered with the Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest to examine the effects of the creation of a discipline reform plan on student discipline outcomes. Multiple studies have shown that Black students, Hispanic students, and students in special education programs are more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White peers.¹ In Minnesota in 2015/16 American Indian students were 10 times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White peers, and Black students were 8 times more likely. In addition, Minnesota students in special education were twice as likely to be suspended or expelled as their peers who were not in special education.² In 2017 MDHR identified 43 local education agencies in the state as being in violation of the Minnesota Human Rights Act because they were using disciplinary practices that remove students from the classroom (exclusionary discipline practices) disproportionately among racial/ethnic minority students and students in special education. Of the 43 identified local education agencies, 41 created discipline reform plans as part of their agreement with MDHR. Leaders at MDHR wanted to better understand the effect of creating a discipline reform plan on discipline outcomes for students in these 41 local education agencies.

1. Anderson, K. P., & Ritter, G. W. (2017). Disparate use of exclusionary discipline: Evidence on inequities in school discipline from a U.S. state. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 25(49), 1–32. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1144442>. Finn, J. D., & Servoss, T. J. (2014). Misbehavior, suspensions, and security measures in high school: Racial/ethnic and gender differences. *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk*, 5(2). <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1188491>. Losen, D. J., & Martinez, T. E. (2013). Out of school and off track: The overuse of suspensions in American middle and high schools. Center for Civil Rights Remedies at The Civil Rights Project at UCLA. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED541735>. Porowski, A., O’Conner, R., & Passa, A. (2014). *Disproportionality in school discipline: An assessment of trends in Maryland, 2009–12* (REL 2014–017). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED544770>.
2. Minnesota Department of Human Rights. (2018, March 2). *Minnesota Department of Human Rights finds suspension and expulsion disparities in school districts across the state*. <https://mn.gov/mdhr/news/?id=1061-328166>.

What was studied and how?

This study examined the use of exclusionary discipline actions (suspensions, exclusions, and expulsions) by Minnesota local education agencies over the course of five school years, 2014/15 through 2018/19, and the extent to which the creation of discipline reform plans by local education agencies identified by MDHR as being in violation of the Minnesota Human Rights Act affected student discipline outcomes.

The study examined the following research questions:

1. What were the characteristics of the 41 local education agencies that created a discipline reform plan and of all local education agencies in Minnesota in 2018/19?
2. From 2014/15 to 2018/19 did the rate of discipline actions differ between the 41 local education agencies with discipline reform plans and other local education agencies in Minnesota? Did these differences vary by students' race/ethnicity and special education status?
3. Was identification by MDHR and the creation of a discipline reform plan in 2017/18 associated with changes in student discipline outcomes in 2018/19?
4. What reforms were included in the discipline reform plans created by 41 of the local education agencies identified by MDHR, and how did the planned reforms differ across these local education agencies?

This study used a combination of administrative data received from the Minnesota Department of Education and publicly available data from MDHR's website and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.³ The Minnesota Department of Education provided data on the characteristics of K–12 students for 2014/15–2018/19, records for all discipline incidents reported to the Minnesota Department of Education for 2014/15–2018/19, and data on characteristics of local education agencies. The study team downloaded each local education agency's discipline reform plan from the MDHR website and identified the reforms in each plan.

For research question 1 the study team compared key characteristics of local education agencies with discipline reform plans to key characteristics of all local education agencies in Minnesota. The characteristics included student enrollment, percentage of female students, percentages of students by race/ethnicity, percentage of students eligible for the National School Lunch Program (a measure of economic disadvantage), percentage of students in special education, percentage of English learner students, and school locale. Differences of 5 percentage points or greater were considered meaningful.

For research question 2 the study team compared the rates of exclusionary discipline actions for students in the 41 local education agencies with discipline reform plans with the rates for students in other local education agencies by year for American Indian and Black students, all racial/ethnic minority students, White students, students in special education, and students not in special education. MDHR identified local education agencies based on the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline for these student groups as well as overall use of exclusionary discipline.

For research question 3 the study team performed statistical analyses to determine the extent to which the creation of a discipline reform plan was associated with changes in exclusionary discipline action rates. The statistical analyses adjusted for student characteristics (gender, race/ethnicity, eligibility for the National School Lunch

3. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *Common Core of Data: America's Public Schools*. <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/>.

Program, special education status, English learner student status, grade level, and whether a student experienced a discipline action in the prior school year). The analyses also adjusted for local education agency characteristics (such as whether the local education agency was a traditional district or charter network, student enrollment, percentage of students eligible for the National School Lunch Program, percentage of students in special education, percentage of students who were English learner students, average student performance on standardized tests in math and English language arts, and locale). The analyses also accounted for trends in exclusionary discipline actions prior to 2017. The study team examined two discipline outcomes: any exclusionary discipline action (a binary indicator of whether a student experienced a suspension, exclusion, or expulsion) and the total number of discipline actions per student per school year (the number of times a student experienced a suspension, exclusion, or expulsion).

For research question 4 two study team members reviewed the publicly available reform plans created by each local education agency and all available updates (which are shared with MDHR each year in February and September) to identify the reforms that the 41 local education agencies included in their discipline reform plans. The team conducted content analyses to determine whether different local education agencies included similar sets of reforms.

Findings

Local education agencies with discipline reform plans had a larger percentage of Black students and students eligible for the National School Lunch Program than the average Minnesota local education agency

Students who attended schools in local education agencies with discipline reform plans were more likely than all students in the state to be from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. In local education agencies with discipline reform plans, 46 percent of students were eligible for the National School Lunch Program compared with 39 percent of all students in the state. In addition, 21 percent of students in local education agencies with discipline reform plans were Black, compared with 12 percent of students in the state, and 48 percent of students in local education agencies with discipline reform plans were White, compared with 64 percent of students in the state.

Local education agencies with discipline reform plans were more likely to be located in cities and suburbs and less likely to be located in towns and rural areas than the average Minnesota local education agency, and they had a higher average enrollment

Of local education agencies with discipline reform plans, 37 percent were in cities, compared with 17 percent of local education agencies in the state, and 41 percent were in suburbs, compared with 15 percent of local education agencies in the state. Reflecting these more urban and suburban locales, local education agencies with discipline reform plans had higher average student enrollments (8,051) than did all local education agencies in the state (1,771).

Differences in exclusionary discipline action rates by race/ethnicity and special education status were larger in local education agencies with discipline reform plans than in other local education agencies

From 2014/15 (before creation of the discipline reform plans) to 2018/19 (after creation of the plans), local education agencies with discipline reform plans had higher overall rates of exclusionary discipline actions than did other local education agencies. Local education agencies with discipline reform plans had a rate of 7.8 discipline actions per 100 students, compared with 3.6 discipline actions per 100 students for other local education agencies. The higher rates of discipline actions in local education agencies with discipline reform plans were driven

by higher rates of discipline actions for racial/ethnic minority students. White students experienced discipline actions at similar rates in local education agencies with discipline reform plans and in other local education agencies. However, American Indian and Black students and all racial/ethnic minority students experienced discipline actions at a much higher rate in local education agencies with discipline reform plans than in other local education agencies (figure 1). The patterns were similar for students in special education and students not in special education.

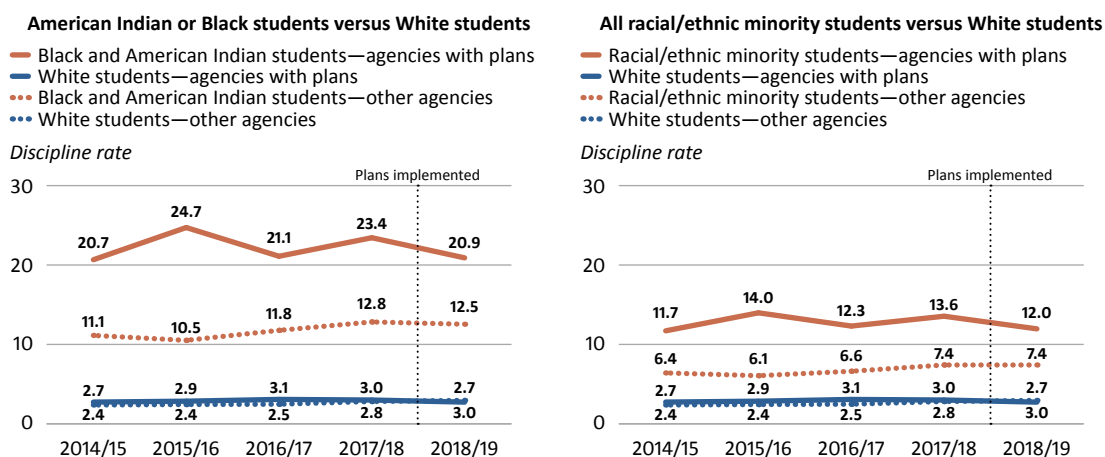
Creating a discipline reform plan was not associated with a statistically significant decline in exclusionary disciplinary actions, after student and local education agency characteristics and prior trends in exclusionary discipline actions were accounted for

From 2014/15 to 2017/18 there was an increase in the average number of discipline actions per student in both the 41 local education agencies with a discipline reform plan and in the 41 comparison local education agencies. However, from 2017/18 (when discipline reform plans were created) to 2018/19 (when plans were implemented), the number of discipline actions per student decreased in local education agencies with discipline reform plans (from 0.084 in 2017/18 to 0.075 in 2018/19) while remaining unchanged in comparison local education agencies (at 0.052). After student and local education agency characteristics and trends in exclusionary discipline actions were accounted for, the change in total discipline actions per student in local education agencies with discipline reform plans did not differ from the change in comparison local education agencies.

Local education agencies' discipline reform plans varied in specificity and content

Local education agencies included a wide range of reforms in their discipline reform plans, such as implicit bias training and discipline referral process reforms. Each local education agency's discipline reform plan included at least 7 and up to 18 reform components. Implicit bias training was the most common reform, appearing in all 41 plans, followed by community engagement, which appeared in 38 plans. Providing professional development on the discipline referral process was the least common reform, appearing in only 8 plans.

Figure 1. Differences in exclusionary discipline action rates by race/ethnicity were larger in local education agencies with discipline reform plans than in other local education agencies, 2014/15–2018/19



Note: Discipline rate is the number of suspensions, exclusions, and expulsions per 100 students and is unadjusted. Local education agencies with discipline reform plans created the plans in 2017/18 and implemented them in 2018/19. The sample of students in all local education agencies consisted of 1,174,713 unique students in 510 local education agencies in Minnesota over the five-year period, of which 495,172 students were in the 41 local education agencies with discipline reform plans.

Source: Authors' analysis of data provided by the Minnesota Department of Education.

Implications

Additional research is needed to determine whether the identification of local education agencies by MDHR and subsequent creation of a discipline reform plan are effective in reducing disproportionality in discipline actions by student racial/ethnic background and special education status. There was no clear difference in outcomes among local education agencies with discipline reform plans relative to outcomes in comparison local education agencies after student and local education agency characteristics and prior trends in exclusionary discipline actions were controlled for. Any effect on discipline outcomes of creating the discipline reform plans was too varied and not sufficiently large to be detected through this analysis. Variation in the use of exclusionary discipline in the local education agencies after they created discipline reform plans suggests that more rigorous follow-up studies with additional years of data are needed to determine whether creating discipline reform plans leads to meaningful reductions in the use of exclusionary discipline. If future research finds that creating and implementing a discipline reform plan are effective in reducing the use of exclusionary discipline, leaders at MDHR and the Minnesota Department of Education might consider designing a study that can provide additional information about the types of discipline reforms that are most effective.

This brief was prepared for the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) under Contract ED-IES-17-C-0007 by the Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest administered by American Institutes for Research. The content of the publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. The full report is available on the Regional Educational Laboratory website at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.

Linick, M. A., Garcia, A. N., & Dunn-Grandpre, H. (2021). *The effect of discipline reform plans on exclusionary discipline outcomes in Minnesota* (REL 2021–115). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest.