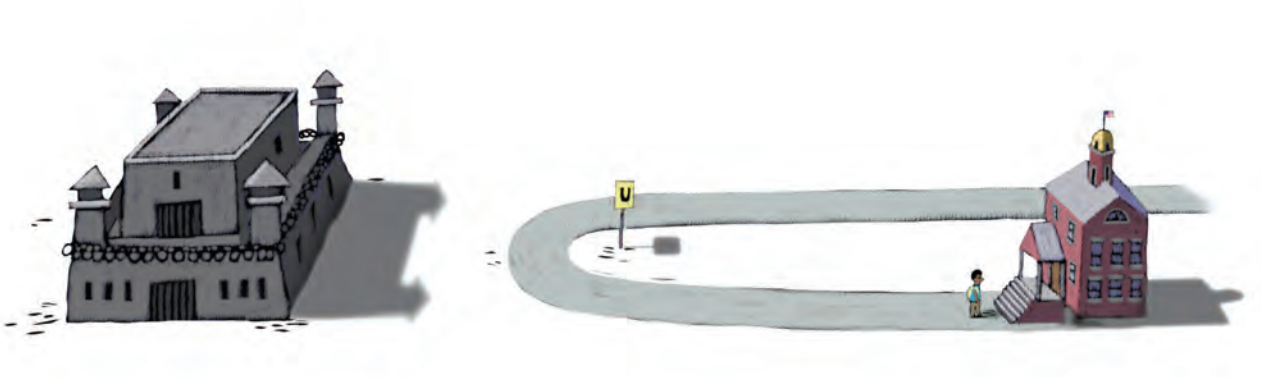

Bringing Everyone to the Table to Eradicate School Discipline Disparities

Allison Brown and Kavitha Mediratta

Representatives from Open Society Foundations and The Atlantic Philanthropies discuss philanthropy's role in school discipline reform.

The Atlantic Philanthropies funded the work of the Positive and Safe Schools Advancing Greater Equity (PASSAGE) initiative, which is a unique approach to ending discipline disparities focused on partnerships between districts and community organizations (for more on the initiative, please see the preface of this issue). Open Society Foundations is considering funding similar work. *VUE* editors asked Allison Brown and Kavitha Mediratta to discuss what brought them – and their foundations – to tackle the issue of school discipline disparities and what they have learned about challenges to and opportunities for reform.

Q Atlantic and Open Society Foundations provided significant funding and leadership nationally to build awareness about the school-to-prison pipeline and its disproportionate impact on children of color. Thinking about your individual background and experiences, how did you come to this work?

A *Allison Brown*: I come to this work as a civil rights attorney. I worked for many years in the Educational Opportunities Section of the Civil Rights Division in the U.S. Department of Justice, where I litigated school desegregation cases. In many of those cases, it was clear that the vestiges of the racially segregated school

At the time of this interview, Allison Brown was a program officer at Open Society Foundations. Kavitha Mediratta is chief strategy advisor for equity initiatives and human capital at The Atlantic Philanthropies.

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systems of old remained. Although the unanimous Supreme Court opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education* had declared segregation in schools unconstitutional, we were monitoring school districts whose schools remained racially segregated. We also were investigating districts where students, primarily Black and Brown, were segregated out of the regular classroom environment as punishment for perceived or actual, and usually developmentally appropriate, misbehavior. We heard complaints from Black students who were suspended or expelled from school for things like school uniform violations, talking back to teachers, chewing gum in class, and, worst of all, being tardy to school or class. We heard stories of Black students being disciplined for the same behavior for which White students who engaged in the same behavior – talking on a cell phone, shirt untucked from their pants or skirt, wearing flip-flops to school – were not punished. School officials cited zero-tolerance school discipline policies as the impetus for their discipline decisions, although racial disparities in discipline often indicated that Black and Brown students were more likely to be suspended, expelled, and referred to law enforcement or arrested out of school for minor or perceived misbehavior.

At the Open Society Foundations, the school discipline portfolio is wedded to the racial narrative portfolio. So often, the disparities that we see are based not on a discrepancy in actual behavior but on a discrepancy in the way that children and their families are perceived. That broken racial narrative originates from a false racial hierarchy that has been the cornerstone of this nation's founding and existence. Under the country's broken racial narrative, Black boys – even the littlest ones – are to be feared, and Black girls are to be despised or ignored. It is no wonder, then, that children who talk during quiet time or engage in a schoolyard fight where no one is injured are perceived as malicious and in need of stern and punitive rebuke and intervention rather than loving and nurturing guidance and redirection.

I came to this work to ensure that all children are perceived only as children, not as criminals, and that they are permitted the privilege of their childhood, regardless of their race or ethnicity or national origin or any other thing that may be used against them.

Kavitha Mediratta: Similar to Allison, it was young people who introduced me to the school-to-prison pipeline. I was doing research on grassroots organizing in New York City and elsewhere around the country and also working closely with the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC), a high school student–led coalition in New York City. Like a lot of people at the time, my first reaction to news stories about tougher discipline and safety measures was supportive. But as I listened to students, I realized that I did not have the full picture. Instead of creating a welcoming and supportive environment for learning, this "zero tolerance" approach was undermining students' sense of connection, belonging, and investment in school in very deep and troubling ways.

At the time, there was a growing focus on improving rates of high school graduation and college access. And yet, in New York City and nationally, schools serving low-income neighborhoods and communities of color were increasingly reliant on disciplinary and safety strategies that were at odds with these goals. The racial undertones of this punitive approach were not lost on the UYC youth. They could see the vast difference in how students were treated and supported in their schools compared to those in schools serving more affluent, White communities.

From my days as a teacher, I know that most educators truly want to do right by children. The profound disconnect between those intentions and students' experiences of their schools was painful to see. As a society we tend not to listen to what young people have to say, especially when those young people are of color. As a result, we often do not fully understand what is needed to support them successfully. We also do not see the ways in which damaging racial narratives permeate the very fabric of our schools, undermining how we treat children and what we believe they are capable of achieving.

These experiences brought me to Atlantic. Our funding to end discipline disparities aims to build equity in opportunities for children and youth of color and to support their leadership and voice in their schools and communities. Both facets are vitally important because, as Allison notes so eloquently, discipline disparities are a function of our collective beliefs. We will not achieve the goals of equity and opportunity until we see all children for who they truly are, deserving of all the supports, caring, and second chances that all children need.

Q PASSAGE was designed deliberately to focus on discipline disparities and to engage school district leaders and community members in developing reforms. Why this specific focus and approach?

A *Kavitha Mediratta:* Atlantic's goal in funding PASSAGE was to create a learning lab of how to reduce disciplinary disparities. Early work by CADRE in Los Angeles, *Padres y Jóvenes Unidos* in Denver, and Allison's colleagues in Baltimore had demonstrated that it was possible to bring down rates of suspensions without creating chaos in schools. But the disparities were much harder to shift, and in some cases, got worse as the reforms progressed.

A key question was: What could districts do to reduce these disparities? We supported a variety of initiatives to build interventions, including Oakland Unified School District's piloting of full-service community schools, restorative justice, and academic and other supports for African American youth. We also supported the Research-to-Practice Collaborative on Discipline Disparities, convened by Russ Skiba at Indiana University to identify emerging strategies to reduce disparities, and the University of Virginia to develop tools to improve teacher cultural competency as part of its My Teaching Partner professional development program.

Very few districts were focused on discipline disparities, however, and there was no clear guidance on steps they could follow. So the idea in creating PASSAGE was to use the foundation's funding to open up a space to examine causes of and remedies to school discipline disparities from multiple perspectives. This involved helping community and district leaders to look at the data, assess what was working and not working, learn about alternative approaches, and work collaboratively on implementation. This kind of focused effort to address disparities hadn't happened before, and we hoped that

other districts would benefit from the experiences and lessons learned from the PASSAGE sites.

Q What are some of the lessons you've gleaned from the PASSAGE initiative?

A *Kavitha Mediratta:* We've learned so much from the tremendous work underway. First is the importance of educating district and school administrators about the role of punitive discipline in the school-to-prison pipeline. Most educators don't know about the research and data on suspensions, expulsions, arrests, and ticketing and are unaware of the long-term negative consequences of these strategies. Before they will invest seriously in addressing this issue, they need to understand why it is a concern and what they can do about it.

A second lesson is the importance of high-level leadership. District staff need to know that shifting away from punitive discipline requires change at all levels and that they are being asked not simply to reduce suspensions but to transform the cultural norms of schools. For teachers and other school staff to take the risk to try out new strategies in their classrooms, they need to know that district and municipal leaders will have their backs and see these changes through.

Another lesson is that it takes time to build collaborative relationships among diverse stakeholders. There are not many opportunities for government and community members to come together to problem-solve an issue. Most of us are used to more adversarial ways of interacting, and establishing a truly collaborative and participatory process does not come naturally. But investing in this process can enable more informed, effective, and sustained reform by building understanding and trust among the parties involved.

Districts face many pressures and, in the absence of knowing about the harms of punitive discipline, can dismiss the concerns of students and parents. Working closely with community partners can build greater understanding of the motivations of students and parents advocating for change. This experience also can help to challenge educators' misconceptions about who their students are and what they need.

On the community side, there is also a big learning curve about the economic and political challenges the district may face in terms of collecting data, training staff, and so on. It is one thing to call for change from outside the system and a very different matter to make it happen on the inside. Working together can provide community members with a window into how public school systems operate and the constraints and pressures that system leaders need to resolve in order to move forward. Ultimately, the time spent in collectively defining the problem and reform priorities will bear fruit, but it's important to understand that the road can be a long one.

Q What opportunities do you see in funding this kind of work? What are some of the outcomes you're hoping to achieve?

A *Allison Brown:* I have seen PASSAGE firsthand in Nashville and had the great privilege to witness teachers and administrators, students and family members, community advocates and researchers, juvenile court judges and law enforcement officers, and local government officials coming together to occupy their respective roles but to do so in a shared space of understanding and compassion for one another and with a common goal of keeping children in school.

It has taken several years on the national stage for community organizers to hammer home to the public and to key stakeholders the need to revise school discipline policies and procedures to eradicate the school-to-prison pipeline. As their focus shifts to a more expansive frame and to keeping children in school, promoting best practices, and creating healthy school climates, it is imperative that philanthropy support collaboration efforts between key stakeholders so that, for example, organizers can work closely with school district administrators and personnel to develop the school environments we all want to see and where all of our children can flourish. PASSAGE is an opportunity to support that type of collaboration.

I am hoping that success in the mere process of collaboration that PASSAGE creates will serve as a model for other districts and localities. I also hope that the relationships that develop as a result of PASSAGE will last long-term, that PASSAGE will bring about systems change in schools and between the systems that must interact with one another in order to protect and serve young people. I hope that PASSAGE ultimately will change hearts and minds of the public about young people of color and their families, and the hearts and minds of communities about the systems they access and the human beings who operate those systems.

Thanks to Kavitha's leadership on this issue, foundations are primed to understand the need for multi-stakeholder advocacy, planning, and implementation, and it is my hope to facilitate sustained attention and resources to the evolution of this issue and of the field because, as Kavitha describes, this road will be long.

Q What can districts do to effectively shift environments in schools and communities from a punitive to a positive culture? What can community leaders do?

A *Kavitha Mediratta:* For starters, we need to understand that school climate and discipline are integral to effective teaching and learning. So often these are treated as unrelated issues when, in fact, they are deeply intertwined. The sad reality is that teachers and school staff often have so little support for developing strategies for building positive relationships with students. And they may know very little about the communities where their students live. School districts need to help principals, teachers, and other school personnel to develop a vision for a culturally inclusive school climate and an understanding of the role of implicit bias in shaping classroom interactions, including academic expectations as well as disciplinary actions, and how to build effective relationships with students.

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Better use of data is also important. Collecting and tracking data can reduce the need for disciplinary actions by enhancing the ability of school administrators and teachers to respond

proactively to issues that may be going on for students. Many school systems collect data on suspensions, but other indicators they should look at include office referrals, arrests, and summonses, as well as attendance, grades, and students' perceptions of fairness and support in school climate and discipline.

In addition, and to underscore a point that Allison made: schools cannot do this alone. There is a need for much greater collaboration with other systems, such as health agencies, to better serve children. Just as importantly, as the work of PASSAGE suggests, youth, parent, and community leaders can be a tremendous resource to school districts by providing ideas, pinpointing challenges that need to be addressed, and building public and political support for reform. Young people are an enormous untapped resource, and need to be part of the process of improving their schools.

Q What are some of the levers that must be used to enact policy change at the district, city, state, or federal level to end discipline disparities and create a healthy school climate for all students?

A *Allison Brown:* As Kavitha indicated previously, student voice is the most important lever. I cannot overstate the need for meaningful inclusion of student voice in conveying what they experience in their school environments and what they want in their schools. At the Department of Justice, it was the voices of students that fueled our investigations and propelled us forward in our litigation and in the creation of viable remedies. We heard from students what it was like to be and feel policed in their communities and in their schools, to be placed in handcuffs for things that would not rise to the level of criminal activity if committed by adults, to be under suspicion before ever uttering a word.

Parents also have a role to play. Meaningful parent engagement is inviting parents to participate, as PASSAGE does, in the creation of action plans and in partnering with educators for the healthy development of their children. State leaders – governors, legislatures, state boards of education – are critical levers as well. And, of course, the federal government is the biggest lever. As we have seen with the school discipline guidance and the release of the Civil Rights Data Collection, the federal government wields tremendous power to shape a public discourse and effect change at the national, state, and local level by mere mention of a term or concept. The federal government's stated priority of eliminating the school-to-prison pipeline continues to have ripple effects at the state and district level that has turned the wave of activism into a tidal wave of reform.

We all have roles to play, including philanthropy, and it is crucial that we understand our respective roles. The most difficult lever to operate is the one that is all of us. For instance, advocates and activists must continue to push government in the right direction, even when that government is friendly to the advocates' position. Government is not in the lead, but should follow its constituency in the direction that is right and that reflects our nation's fundamental values of freedom and equality.

Q How does work around eliminating discipline disparities tie into current national issues of equity, police brutality, and the school-to-prison pipeline? Why is this work so important right now?

A *Kavitha Mediratta:* As Allison's opening remarks make clear, the tendency to respond punitively to young people of color with suspensions

and other sanctions in school arises from the same underlying narrative of youth criminality that has fueled the tragic killings of unarmed Black men in communities across the country. Whether in school or in their communities, young people of color – particularly African American youth – are viewed as threats to order and safety. This is why young people and parents rose up to challenge the school-to-prison pipeline, beginning more than a decade ago, and why they are mobilizing to challenge police brutality today.

At Atlantic, we see the effort to reduce discipline disparities as striking at the very heart of those false racial beliefs in society and the biases – conscious and unconscious – that justify unconscionable treatment. The successes young people have had in putting school discipline and racial injustice on the national agenda give me great hope about what can be achieved in the coming years.

Allison Brown: "Black Lives Matter" has become a rallying cry. We all suffer when we lose souls whose talents are stifled and whose genius is isolated to wither and die on the vine instead of being cultivated and nurtured to the benefit of us all. Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, John Crawford, Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, the Charleston 9 – the shock of their senseless and race-based killings have shaken the nation to its core. Justice and equity have yet to be fully realized by a large subset of people in this country.

When students, especially Black boys, are at best misunderstood and at worst feared, when there is no belief in their abilities and little incentive to keep them in school, when there are active attempts to remove them from the school environment, we all lose. Schools are a microcosm of society. Systemic failures of children by their schools reflect societal failures of communities. By the same token, systemic successes for children in school reflect our potential as a society. Now is the time for us to focus on coordinated and cooperative efforts like PASSAGE to address the inequities that ail our schools and thus our nation, lest the lives we've lost be in vain.

As Charles Hamilton Houston said, "We beg you to save young America from the blight of race prejudice. Do not bind the children within the narrow circles of your own lives." It is through the schools that America – young and old – will be saved, from itself. Although the issues we face as a nation are very big, there is hope if we focus on the schools and on ensuring equitable access to educational opportunities – and life opportunities – for all of our young people.

For more on The Atlantic Philanthropies, see http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/. For Open Society Foundations, see https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/.