

# Positive School Discipline: Opportunities to Promote Behavioral Health

ALISON PERENCEVICH, M.P.H., *Grantmakers In Health*

Concerns about school violence have heightened awareness of how schools maintain a safe and productive learning environment. Public discourse surrounding school safety has largely focused on security, including the presence of law enforcement on campuses. Yet every day in the United States, school discipline policies have short- and long-term consequences for students and the school community.

School climate is not only important to students' academic achievement, but also to their healthy social and emotional development. Adolescence is a critical period of physical, emotional, and social growth; it is also a crucial time to recognize and address behavioral health needs. Although one-half of all chronic mental illness begins by age 14, many youth have undiagnosed or untreated mental health and substance use disorders (Kessler et al. 2005). Behavioral health issues may contribute to disruptive behavior but can also result or worsen from harsh disciplinary action.

School discipline practices vary by state and can take many forms, including suspension, expulsion, and school-related arrests. Recent data show that a considerable number of students are being suspended and that this number has increased significantly over the past 40 years. In fact, during the 2009-2010 school year over two million students were suspended and more than 2,600 secondary schools suspended over 25 percent of their total student body (Losen and Martinez 2013).

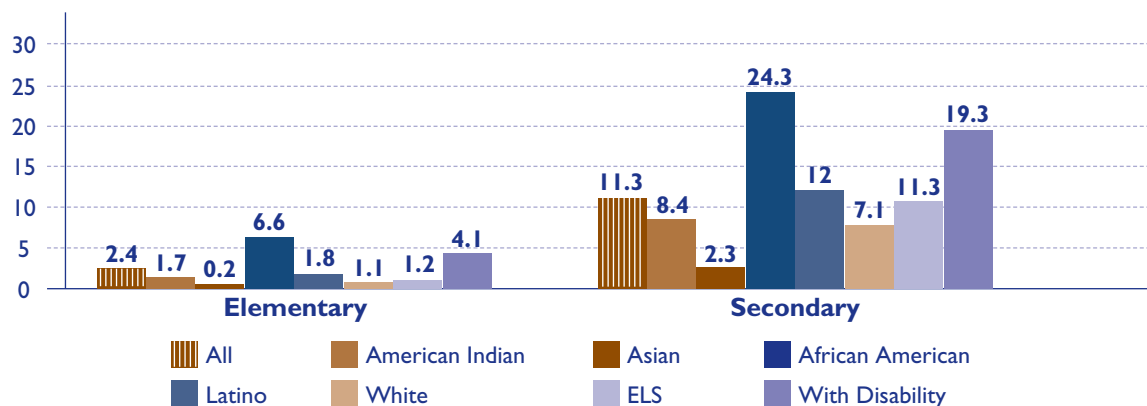
## WHY IS SCHOOL DISCIPLINE IMPORTANT TO HEALTH PHILANTHROPY?

**Vulnerable youth are disproportionately affected by punitive discipline policies.** Suspensions disproportionately affect youth from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds and students with disabilities (Figure 1). Suspension rates for African-American and Latino students have more than doubled over the past 30 years (Losen and Martinez 2013). Students with disabilities, particularly those with emotional and behavioral conditions, are twice as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions (CRDC 2012).

**The negative implications for behavioral health, academic achievement, and life success are significant.** Students who are suspended are at increased risk of dropping out of high school, as well as entering the juvenile justice system. Suspensions may either overlook or exacerbate underlying behavioral issues affecting the student or school, such as bullying, substance abuse, or unmet mental health needs. Feelings of alienation and shame often associated with exclusionary school discipline may create or enhance negative mental health outcomes by distancing youth from healthy peer communities and increasing the likelihood of marginalization (Skiba et al. 2006).

**Evidence shows that current disciplinary approaches are not working.** Most suspensions are for disruptive behavior or

FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE OF U.S. STUDENTS SUSPENDED AT LEAST ONCE, 2009-2010



Source: Losen and Martinez 2013

minor violations of school rules. For example, roughly 60 percent of student suspensions in California are for willful defiance, a loosely defined category that often includes dress code violations, profanity, or any behavior that disrupts class (The California Endowment 2013a). Research indicates that zero-tolerance discipline policies do not deter or reduce misbehavior, and in reality have negative impacts on student learning and school climate. Schools with higher rates of suspension tend to have lower academic quality, pay less attention to school climate, and receive lower ratings on school governance measures (Skiba et al. 2006).

## POSITIVE APPROACHES TO SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

Many schools are adopting alternative approaches to school discipline that hold students accountable in a constructive, healthy manner and promote social-emotional learning. Several promising approaches include:

- **Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS):** This school-wide system approach develops clear expectations and rules for students and addresses disciplinary issues with positive interventions such as counseling, conflict resolution, and mediation. PBIS consists of three tiers of intervention, including school-wide primary prevention, secondary prevention involving classroom management of students engaging in at-risk behaviors, and a third tier focusing on individualized behavioral intervention (PBIS 2013).
  - **Restorative Justice:** This approach encourages students to take responsibility for their actions and resolve conflicts by repairing harmed relationships. Restorative practices often utilize small group circles, peer juries, or fairness committees to facilitate conversations with students and staff about the causes of disciplinary issues and identify positive behavioral solutions (Dignity in Schools 2013).
  - **Trauma-Informed Schools:** This approach supports youth exposed to violence and other traumatic events and teaches productive coping mechanisms. Trauma-informed school practices involve training school personnel to recognize trauma responses, guidelines for assisting traumatized students in the classroom, and development of appropriate referral systems to provide students with linkages to behavioral health services and supports (NCTSN 2013).
- **Expanding School Mental Health Services** – The Connecticut School-Based Diversion Initiative (SBDI) brings stakeholders together to reduce punitive school discipline and expand school mental health care. Implemented by the Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut, a subsidiary of the Children’s Fund of Connecticut, SBDI’s goals include: 1) reducing the frequency of out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and in-school arrests; 2) linking at-risk youth to school- and community-based supports; and 3) increasing the skills of school staff to manage behavioral health crises. SBDI’s approach involves school disciplinary policy consultation; training school personnel on mental health and classroom management strategies; and enhanced linkages to school- and community-based supports, including emergency mobile psychiatric services. Evaluation data show decreases in suspension, in-school arrests, and court referrals, with increased referrals for school emergency mobile psychiatric services (Bracey et al. 2013).
  - **Scaling Up Models that Focus on Disproportionately Affected Students** – The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) has integrated positive approaches to school discipline into the foundation’s work to improve the health, education, and employment opportunities of boys and young men of color. In July 2013 RWJF announced 10 community innovation grantees as part of its \$9.5 million Forward Promise initiative. Several of the selected community-based programs are working to implement effective alternatives to suspension that promote positive behavior interventions and support the mental health needs of youth exposed to violence and trauma (RWJF 2013).
  - **Helping School Leaders Implement New Approaches** – As part of The California Endowment’s Health Happens in Schools and Boys and Men of Color campaigns, the Common-Sense School Discipline Initiative aims to reduce school suspension rates and build momentum for positive school discipline. In 2013 the endowment awarded a total of \$1.1 million to nine Central Valley school districts to assist with the development and implementation of positive discipline approaches. Previously the endowment created the Leadership and Learning Network for Positive School Discipline to provide school leaders with information and resources to reform discipline policies. Roughly 20 school districts participate, and the endowment recently invested additional funding to support operations and increase membership (The California Endowment 2013b).
  - **Supporting Research and Advocacy for Policy Change** – Reforming school discipline policies is a signature grantmaking initiative of The Atlantic Philanthropies’ youth programming. Atlantic has supported grantees across the country working to reduce punitive school discipline through research and advocacy for policy change. Funding has supported grassroots advocacy campaigns, legal counsel and advocacy services, and research and dissemination of best practices (The Atlantic Philanthropies 2013).

## HEALTH GRANTMAKER STRATEGIES

Philanthropy can play a vital role in educating parents, policymakers, and the public about the effects of school discipline policies. In addition to raising awareness about the importance of students remaining in school, health grantmakers can support positive approaches to school discipline that enhance social-emotional development by expanding school mental health services, scaling up models that focus on disproportionately affected students, helping school leaders implement new approaches, and supporting research and advocacy.

## SOURCES

The Atlantic Philanthropies, "Grants Database," <<http://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/search/grants>>, accessed August 28, 2013.

Bracey, Jeana R., Eric Arzubi, Jeffrey Vanderploeg, and Robert P. Franks, *Improving Outcomes for Children in Schools: Expanded School Mental Health* (Farmington, CT: Child Health and Development Institute of Connecticut 2013).

The California Endowment, *Fix School Discipline News*, <[http://www.calendow.org/uploadedFiles/FixSchoolsNews\\_FIN.pdf](http://www.calendow.org/uploadedFiles/FixSchoolsNews_FIN.pdf)>, Spring/Summer 2013a.

The California Endowment, "The California Endowment Awards \$779,000 to Support Central Valley Leadership and Learning Network on School Discipline Reform," <<http://tcevents.calendow.org/releases/the-california-endowment-awards-779-000-to-support-central-valley-leadership-and-learning-network-on-school-discipline-reform>>, accessed August 2013b.

Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, *CRDC Data Summary*, <<http://ocrdata.ed.gov/Downloads/CMOCRTheTransformedCRDCFINAL3-15-12Accessible-1.pdf>>, March 2012.

Dignity in Schools, *Fact Sheet: Creating Positive School Discipline*, <[http://www.dignityinschools.org/sites/default/files/Fact\\_Sheet\\_RestorativeJustice\\_PBIS.pdf](http://www.dignityinschools.org/sites/default/files/Fact_Sheet_RestorativeJustice_PBIS.pdf)>, accessed August 2013.

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), "Forward Promise," <<http://www.rwjf.org/en/grants/grantees/forward-promise.html>>, accessed August 2013.

Kessler, Ronald C., Patricia Berglund, Olga Demler, et al., "Lifetime Prevalence and Age-of-Onset Distributions of DSM-IV Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 62(6):593-602, June 2005.

Losen, Daniel J., and Tia Elena Martinez, UCLA Center for Civil Rights Remedies at The Civil Rights Project, *Out of School & Off Track: The Overuse of Suspensions in American Middle and High Schools*, <[http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/resources/projects/center-for-civil-rights-remedies/school-to-prison-folder/federal-reports/out-of-school-and-off-track-the-overuse-of-suspensions-in-american-middle-and-high-schools/OutOfSchool-OffTrack\\_UCLA\\_4-8.pdf](http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/resources/projects/center-for-civil-rights-remedies/school-to-prison-folder/federal-reports/out-of-school-and-off-track-the-overuse-of-suspensions-in-american-middle-and-high-schools/OutOfSchool-OffTrack_UCLA_4-8.pdf)>, April 2013.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), "Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators," <<http://www.nctsn.org/resources/audiences/school-personnel/trauma-toolkit>>, accessed August 2013.

National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs, "School-Wide PBIS," <<http://www.pbis.org/school/default.aspx>>, accessed August 2013.

Skiba, Russell, Cecil R. Reynolds, Sandra Graham, et al., *Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in Schools? An Evidentiary Review and Recommendations*, report by the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006).