

## Reforming School Discipline Policies to Improve Children's Success

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In recent months, we have seen an outpouring of protest by communities of color against aggressive policing and the trauma and violence these tactics engender. A similar phenomenon is occurring in our schools, where students, parents, and civil rights advocates have sparked a movement to challenge the over-use of “zero tolerance” suspensions, arrests, and expulsions, and their role in pushing children of color into the justice system. With reform underway in schools across the country and the beginnings of a narrative shift regarding punishment and prevention, the path from zero tolerance offers a window into steps that philanthropy can take to challenge racially discriminatory policies and practices and increase opportunities for communities of color.

### ZERO TOLERANCE DISCIPLINE POLICIES HURT CHILDREN

Zero tolerance suspensions, arrests, and expulsions from school—initially intended for violence and drug possession—have become the default response to children's misbehavior, even for nonthreatening offenses like talking back to teachers, tardiness, and dress code violations. As a result, rates of disciplinary actions have skyrocketed in public schools across the country.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, more than 3 million students were suspended in 2010—nearly 1 in 14, and double the rate of suspensions in the 1970s. Research indicates that African American students are suspended at three times the rate of their white peers, with some school districts suspending more than half of their African American student population once or more (Losen and Martinez 2013). Particularly shocking, one in three African American middle school boys has been suspended at least once (Losen and Martinez 2013).

Many Americans believe that a swift, severe response to disruptive behavior will set children straight. But evidence suggests that an overly punitive response actually erodes trust and escalates misbehavior—in short, compounding problems, rather than resolving them. Research found that even one suspension in the ninth grade doubled the risk of high school dropout (Balfanz 2013). A statewide study in Texas revealed that exclusionary discipline tripled the likelihood of juvenile justice contact (Fabelo et al. 2011).

For more information about how school discipline policies affect children's healthy social and emotional development, see the September 23, 2013 Grantmakers In Health Issue Focus article “Positive School Discipline: Opportunities to Promote Behavioral Health.”

In response, a growing number of school systems are reforming their disciplinary policies. For example, the Syracuse City School District in New York recently instituted a prevention-oriented approach to school discipline (Engaging Schools 2014). Its new policy limits the use of suspensions and trains school faculty on youth development and restorative justice approaches.

### THE PLAYBOOK FOR A NATIONAL MOVEMENT

The Atlantic Philanthropies is a limited-life foundation dedicated to bringing about lasting changes in the lives of disadvantaged and vulnerable people. In recent years, we have deliberately honed our investments and focused our grantmaking on a small number of big bets with potential for significant impact. Zero tolerance rose to the top of our priorities because of its little-known role in pushing growing numbers of children out of school and into a justice system that fails them. We recognized that the use of aggressive school disciplinary practices was limiting the long-term health and prosperity of communities, particularly communities of color. In the past four years, we have committed nearly \$50 million to enhance public awareness of this issue, and to catalyze a national effort to rethink school discipline policy and practice.

Here's what Atlantic is helping to achieve:

- 1) **Building bottom-up demand for district and state policy reform** – Direct pressure on local and state policymakers, who set most discipline policies, is essential to build awareness of the harmful consequences of zero tolerance and encourage school systems to shift away from this approach. Accordingly, we began by supporting grassroots organizing by young people and parents in 16 states as well as a complement of legal

advocates. Many of these groups had a long history of work on these issues, without resources or visibility. We put them at the core of our investment strategy via the creation of the Just and Fair Schools Fund, a pooled donor fund, and the Legal Strategies Collaborative, a national network of public interest law firms convened by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund.

- 2) **Leveraging top-down pressure and support to scale reform** – Although local influence and pressure is important, especially in a country of 16,000 school districts, it is not possible for philanthropy to resource advocacy in each and every district. We realized that federal action would be essential to accelerate adoption of reform by local districts, by putting a national spotlight on the issue, as well as through accountability pressure and resources. Organizations like the Advancement Project and Dignity in Schools Campaign played key roles in training local advocates to become national spokespeople, and bringing them to Washington to educate federal lawmakers and urge them to act. Communications, data, and policy reports also have been critical to gaining policymakers' attention.
- 3) **Cultivating influential champions for reform inside the system** – Strategic investments in leadership can accelerate the pace of reform, by increasing stakeholders' receptivity to reform and by giving them tools to meet the calls for change. Professional associations, such as the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, are building this vital capacity by training judges to engage their communities in reform. Prominent national players, like teacher unions and school and state administrator associations, similarly are assisting their constituents to develop positive, restorative alternatives to suspension.
- 4) **Identifying what works to reduce disparities** – Underlying the troubling rise in suspensions is their disproportionate impact on children of color, particularly African American boys. Even in districts that have succeeded in reducing rates of suspension, disparities remain a persistent challenge. To focus attention on this vexing problem, Atlantic made grants to develop and share knowledge on reducing disparities. The Discipline Disparities Collaborative, a group of 26 expert researchers, educators, and advocates, was convened to identify and disseminate research on emerging innovations in the field. Comprehensive recommendations from the Council of State Governments as well as the American Institutes for Research's National Clearinghouse on Supportive School Discipline also offer valuable insight.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Today, reform progress is in full swing in at least a dozen states, combined with new federal civil rights guidance on

school discipline and more aggressive data collection and enforcement. Media coverage and polling point to changing public attitudes and declining support for zero tolerance. Not only has the number of news stories on the issue grown significantly, from 400 in 2011 to more than 3,000 in 2014, but the characterization of zero tolerance discipline has also shifted from being a necessary response to youth violence to a punitive strategy that defies common sense (The Hatcher Group).

We have been proud to contribute to this progress, in partnership with nonprofits, other donors, and the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice. In our final phase of grantmaking, we are focused on sharing what we've learned through a series of case studies and evaluations to foster more successful efforts in the future. Below are two key lessons to keep in mind.

- 1) **Aligning public-private action is a powerful tool for big impact** – Alignment of regulatory reforms by the public sector with private philanthropic investment has been at the core of this effort and offers a promising model for achieving significant change. The actions of community organizations, advocates and researchers—in coordination with the public sector and philanthropy—built new awareness of the need for better policy and practice, including among teachers, principals, school board members, and lawmakers. These actions also helped bring more foundations to the issue.
- 2) **Effective implementation begins with supporting educators** – With more districts revising their policies, attention is shifting toward issues of implementation and how to help educators improve practice. Unfortunately, teachers and administrators currently receive little preparation in classroom management. As schools of education retool their teacher preparation programs in accordance with new federal guidelines, they must develop educators' competency to recognize the signs of trauma and build positive relationships with diverse students.

In addition, educators need alternatives to suspension when problems arise, to ensure children's access to critical services, such as counseling and mental health supports. School districts like Oakland and Baltimore are successfully demonstrating how the combination of school discipline reform, full-service community schools and school-based health centers can improve outcomes. In fact, following the adoption of these critical reforms, Oakland's suspension rate dropped by 25 percent from 2012 to 2013, and suspensions for African American males dropped by 33 percent.

Efforts like these, we hope, are the beginning of a cascade to redirect resources and practices from punishment to prevention, creating schools that truly support children's success, and challenging racial inequity in our communities.

## SOURCES

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