



School Climate, Safety, and Discipline

A positive school climate is critical to ensuring that all students have access to a high-quality education. Unsafe and unwelcoming conditions in school settings can negatively impact students' psychological well-being, social and emotional development, and academic success – often with long-term ramifications for growth and advancement. Federal policies must uphold the civil rights of all students and ensure that schools are safe, healthy, and inclusive environments. These policies should be grounded in principles of psychological science with the aim of ending bullying, fostering safe and supportive classrooms, and eradicating the school-to-prison pipeline by replacing exclusionary discipline practices with restorative, non-punitive approaches.

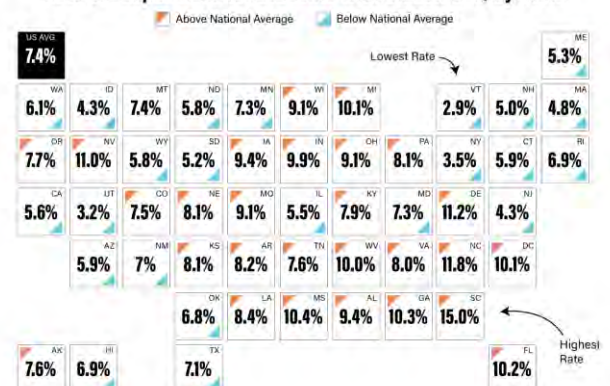
Bullying Leads to Negative Emotional and Physical Health Outcomes

Bullying is pervasive in schools and is linked to emotional and physical health consequences for both those who experience it and those who perpetrate it. Youth involved in bullying are at increased risk for depression, anxiety, self-harm, sleep disturbances, and physical injury. These effects can interfere with academic engagement and long-term well-being. For example, students who experience peer victimization—such as exclusion, manipulation, or gossip—are more likely to show reduced attentiveness and participation in the classroom. The broader school climate plays a critical role in shaping peer interactions and responses to bullying. Schools that foster strong student-teacher and peer relationships, safety, and engagement are more likely to encourage upstander behavior, where students intervene to stop bullying. Addressing bullying is essential not only for individual health but also for creating safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments for all students.ⁱ

Exclusionary Discipline Practices Impact Already Vulnerable Students

Exclusionary discipline encompasses any type of school disciplinary action that removes or excludes a student from their usual educational setting. These practices include out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions, expulsions, referrals to law enforcement, corporal punishment, seclusion and restraint, and school-related arrests. When applied disproportionately—especially for minor infractions—they can contribute to what is known as the school-to-prison pipeline. This term describes a disturbing trend in which students, particularly those from marginalized communities, are funneled out of schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Data consistently show that students of color and students with disabilities are disproportionately subject to exclusionary discipline practices, often for behaviors that could be addressed through supportive, restorative approaches.ⁱⁱ These disparities not only undermine educational access but also increase the risk of long-term negative outcomes, including academic failure, dropout, and incarceration.

Rate of Suspensions for Students with Disabilities, by State



Students with disabilities experience suspension and expulsion at a rate almost two times higher than students without disabilities.ⁱⁱⁱ In the 2022-23 school year, roughly 15 percent of special education students faced out-of-school suspensions for up to 10 days, nearly twice the national average.^{iv} Nationally, just over 7 percent of all students with disabilities received at least one out-of-school suspension for 10 days or fewer, with boys more likely than girls to be identified as having a disability, and disproportionately being removed from classrooms. Race further compounds these disparities, with Black, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native students facing higher rates of exclusionary discipline.^v The intersection of disability, gender, and race intensifies these inequities.^{vi, vii} Although Black students make up 16 percent of all students with disabilities nationally, they accounted for nearly a third of all students with disabilities who were suspended out of school for 10 days or less.

Alarmingly, nineteen states continue to allow the use of corporal punishment in schools as a form of discipline. This is despite clear and compelling evidence that the deliberate infliction of pain as a response to misbehavior is physically and psychologically harmful to students. It is ineffective in promoting positive student behavior, interferes with student learning, and contributes to a negative school climate.^{viii, ix} It is also used disproportionately with certain groups of students. For example, nationwide, students with disabilities make up 21 percent of all instances of corporal punishment, even though they are only 17 percent of the student population.^x This disproportionate use underscores the need to eliminate harmful and ineffective disciplinary practices in favor of evidence-based, supportive approaches.



Exclusionary Discipline Harms Students' Education, Well-Being, & Long-Term Success

Despite some arguments that suspensions and expulsions are necessary to keep schools safe, research shows these measures are ineffective as forms of behavior modification and, particularly for younger students, may exacerbate poor behavior.^{xi} Exclusionary discipline influences students' perceptions of their school climate; those suspended for minor infractions are more likely to report unfavorable school conditions.^{xii} In fact, such practices are

associated with a host of negative outcomes, including declines in the mental health of children and adolescents, increases in absenteeism, and poor academic performance.^{xiii}

Loss of instruction leads to significantly lower grades and decreased graduation rates, which can be particularly devastating for students with disabilities. Exclusionary and punitive discipline practices also perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline.^{xiv} There is a strong correlation between suspension and involvement with the criminal justice system, with students who experienced even just one suspension becoming twice as likely to be involved in the criminal justice system as those who received no punitive discipline.^{xv}

Policy Recommendations

Data show that increasing school-based behavioral health services, combined with evidence-based training and ongoing professional development for educators, can improve school climate, and educational outcomes. Training in areas such as social and emotional learning, classroom management, and positive discipline methods reduce the risk of student suspension and expulsion.^{xvi} Initiatives to improve school climate will have limited success if they are not embraced by the entire school community. They are built on strong collaborations between educators, students, parents, families, school districts, and school professionals, such as administrators and specialized instructional support personnel, including school psychologists.

- **Support school-based mental health services.** To better promote positive school environments, schools must be equipped with the tools necessary to institute and maintain evidence-based comprehensive behavioral health systems that provide a full complement of supports and services through multi-tier interventions.
- **Improve educator preparation and training.** To help improve discipline practices, further investments are needed in evidence-based pre-service training and ongoing professional development for educators, as well as greater involvement of school support staff.
- **Implement alternatives to exclusionary disciplinary actions.** Schools must be provided the resources to implement alternatives to disciplinary actions that remove students from the classroom, including through the integration of evidence-based social and emotional learning programs, trauma-informed approaches, as well as restorative practices, which often lead to a host of positive outcomes including improved academic success, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence, as well as relationship, consensus, and community building.^{xvii, xviii} In schools, often, restorative justice practices and more punitive measures are used simultaneously, through a tiered approach. However, educators and other school personnel must be given the training necessary to successfully implement these strategies.
- **Enhance data collection and reporting.** The Department of Education should continue to collect national data on school climate and safety, including instances of bullying, harassment, sexual misconduct, exclusionary discipline, and other forms of violence in schools. National data collection enhances the understanding of students most impacted by poor school climate and safety, and helps policymakers target interventions to improve educational outcomes. Doing so will allow the Department to better serve states and districts by providing them with the resources and tools to improve their school climate and the educational outcomes of their students.

Examples of federal legislation that aim to improve school climate, end bullying, and eradicate exclusionary discipline practices:

The Safe Schools Improvement Act would require school districts receiving federal funds to adopt codes of conduct specifically prohibiting bullying and harassment.

The Keeping All Students Safe Act would prohibit any school receiving federal funds from using seclusion and restraint as a disciplinary practice.

The Protecting Our Students in Schools Act would prohibit corporal punishment in all public schools receiving federal funds.

ⁱ Aklin, C. F., & Cernich, A. N. (2025, September 22). *School health and bullying*. Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research, National Institutes of Health. <https://obssr.od.nih.gov/news-and-events/news/directors-spotlight/school-health-and-bullying>

ⁱⁱ U.S. Government Accountability Office (2018). *Discipline Disparities for Black students, boys, and students with Disabilities*. Report to Congressional Requesters.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rhim, L., & Kothari, S. (2018). *Key trends in special education in charter schools: a secondary analysis of the civil rights data collection*. National Center for Special Education in Charter School. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED604731.pdf>.

^{iv} Geduld, A. (2025, June 24). *For students with disabilities, suspension is not just a matter of race and gender — but geography*. The 74 Million.

^v U.S. Department of Education. (2025). *EDFacts file specifications SY 2022-23*. <https://www.ed.gov/data/edfacts-initiative/edfacts-resources/edfacts-file-specifications>

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2024). *K-12 education: Nationally, Black girls receive more frequent and more severe discipline in school than other girls* (GAO Publication No. GAO-24-106787). <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-106787>

^{viii} Gershoff, E. T., Sattler, K. M. P., & Holden, G. W. (2019). School corporal punishment and its associations with achievement and adjustment. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 63, 1-8. doi:10.1016/j.appdev.2019.05.004

^x U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. (2020). *Civil Rights Data Collection, 2017-2018*.

^{xi} Nese, R. N. T., Nese, J. F. T., McCroskey, C., Meng, P., Triplett, D., & Bastable, E. (2020). *Moving away from disproportionate exclusionary discipline: Developing and utilizing a continuum of preventative and instructional supports* (ED604960). ERIC. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED604960.pdf>

^{xii} Del Toro, J., & Wang, M. T. (2021). The roles of suspensions for minor infractions and school climate in predicting academic performance among adolescents. *American Psychologist*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000854>

^{xiii} LiCalsi, C., Osher, D., and Bailey, P. (August 2021). *An Empirical Examination of the Effects of Suspension and Suspension Severity on Behavioral and Academic Outcomes*. American Institutes for Research. <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/NYC-Suspension-Effects-Behavioral-Academic-Outcomes-August-2021.pdf>.

^{xiv} Del Toro, J., & Wang, M. T. (2021). The roles of suspensions for minor infractions and school climate in predicting academic performance among adolescents. *American Psychologist*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000854>

^{xv} Ramey, D. M. (2016). The influence of early school punishment and therapy/medication on social control experiences during young adulthood [Abstract]. *Criminology*, 54(1), 113-141.

^{xvi} Reyes, C., & Gilliam, W. (2021). Addressing challenging behaviors in challenging environments: Findings from Ohio's early childhood mental health consultation system. *Development and Psychopathology*, 33(2), 634-646. doi:10.1017/S0954579420001790.

^{xvii} Darling-Hammond, S. (2023). *Fostering belonging, transforming schools: The impact of restorative practices*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/169.703>

^{xviii} Cipriano, Christina, et al. The state of evidence for social and emotional learning: A contemporary meta-analysis of universal school-based SEL interventions. *Child Development*, 94(5), 13 July 2023, pp. 1181-1204., <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13968>