

# FIX SCHOOL

# DISCIPLINE

## MINI TOOLKIT

USE POSITIVE  
ALTERNATIVES  
TO CREATE  
BETTER  
PLACES  
TO LEARN.

Public  
Counsel 





Fix School Discipline – a project of Public Counsel – is a resource for anyone interested in learning how to eliminate harmful discipline practices that push students out of school and address racial disparities in school discipline. This Mini-Toolkit can help you implement or advocate for supportive, inclusive discipline policies, and improve your school climate and safety.

This Mini-Toolkit and the full Fix School Discipline Toolkits for Educators and Community Members are available at [FixSchoolDiscipline.org](https://FixSchoolDiscipline.org). Visit Fix School Discipline to learn more, download digital resources, or request support.

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# FIXING SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

## THE BIG PICTURE

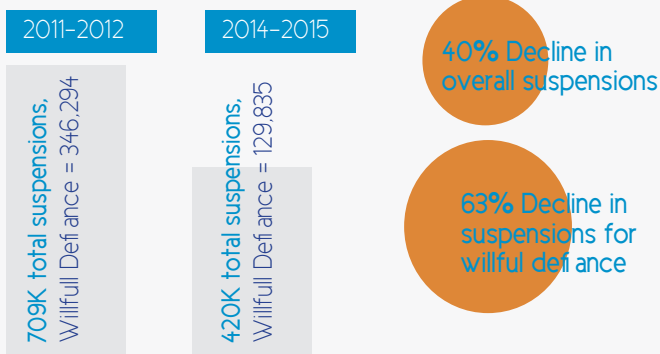
Public education is a human right and considered the foundation for opportunity and success. Unfortunately, some students are unnecessarily removed from school instead of having their needs met. Just one out-of-school suspension (a school administrator's decision to remove a student from school for one or more days) makes a student twice as likely to drop out and three times as likely to wind up in the juvenile justice system.<sup>1</sup> These practices hurt the most vulnerable students more: Black and

Latinx youth, foster youth, English language learners, and students with disabilities.

## HARSH SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

During the 2016–2017 school year, California schools issued 381,845 suspensions, and 233,478 students were suspended at least one time.<sup>2</sup> Many students in California are suspended for minor misbehavior.<sup>3</sup> For instance, students disciplined for “defiance” have been removed from school for behaviors such as chewing gum in class, talking back, or wearing the wrong

From 11–12 to 14–15, the total number of CA suspensions fell by 40% driven by a drop in suspensions for disruption/defiance.





clothes. During the 2016–2017 school year, one in five suspensions in California was for defiance only.<sup>4</sup>

In California, schools suspend students of color at much higher rates than white students. Black students are about 3 times as likely to be suspended as their white peers (9.8% vs. 3.2% in 2016–2017).<sup>5</sup>

There is no evidence that Black students misbehave at higher rates.<sup>6</sup> Rather, Black students are just more likely to be punished than their white classmates for things that require adults to make a judgment call, like disrespect, noise, and loitering. Students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension as students without disabilities (7.1 % vs. 3.2% in 2016–2017).<sup>7</sup>

## EXCLUSIONARY PRACTICES HARM OUR STUDENTS AND DO NOT IMPROVE BEHAVIOR

Suspensions put students at much higher risk for dropping out, and the earlier a suspension happens, the more harm it causes.<sup>8</sup> Not only do suspensions and expulsions set young people up for failure and increase their chances of incarceration, they make students feel shame, alienation, rejection, and that their relationships with adults have no value, leading to higher instances of depression, substance abuse, and other negative



mental health outcomes.<sup>9</sup> With all of these negative impacts, there is no research to support that suspensions and expulsions are even effective at helping students learn or making school safer. In fact, decades of research show that alternatives to suspension and expulsion -- including positive behavioral interventions and supports, restorative and trauma-informed practices, peer mediation, and social work and mental health counseling, just to name a few – are far better at preventing behavioral issues, resolving conflict, strengthening teacher–student relationships, and creating a healthy, supportive environment for all students.<sup>10</sup>



# RACIAL BIAS & DISCRIMINATION

Racial disparities in school discipline are stark in California, with 3 times more Black students being suspended than their white peers.<sup>1</sup>

Studies on race and school discipline do not support a conclusion that disparities are based on Black students misbehaving at higher rates. In fact, research has revealed that Black students receive harsher punishments than white students for the same behavior.<sup>2</sup> When implementing discipline strategies, it is important to consider the existence and root causes of disproportionate discipline for students of color and proactively use alternative approaches that directly address racial disproportionality.

## CAUSES OF DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT IN DISCIPLINE

### IMPLICIT RACIAL BIAS

Implicit or unconscious biases refer to stereotypes that operate without an individual's conscious awareness or control. We are all affected, in one way or another, by the society in which we

exist. These attitudes or stereotypes can affect a person's thoughts, actions, and decisions in reference to the subjects of their biases, especially when the person is stressed, tired, or forced to make a decision quickly. Implicit prejudice is understood to reflect associations between social categories (e.g. Black/White, old/young) and evaluations (e.g. good/bad, smart/dumb). Mental connections about the characteristics associated with people of each race develop early, and a study found that around 80% of children had already developed pro-White/anti-Black sentiments by age 6.<sup>3</sup> Latinx students have reported feeling the impact of such implicit bias, for example, in how some teachers have lower academic expectations of them and discourage their class participation.<sup>4</sup>

### INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

Institutional racism occurs in the education system when schools or districts remain unconscious of issues related to race, or more actively perpetuate and enforce a dominant racial perspective or belief – for instance, that the attitudes and abilities of students of color and their families are a basis for academic or discipline disparities, or that schools that are primarily attended by students of

color need more police because they are more dangerous. It can also be seen in the school context in discipline practices, in the tracking of students of color into lower academic coursework, and in allocating fewer resources to schools and classes with high proportions of students of color.

## CULTURAL CONFLICTS

Cultural conflicts exist between the culture of many students of color and the dominant culture of the schools they attend.

Verbal and nonverbal communication differences can further cultural conflict and misinterpretation between school staff and students of different backgrounds. For example, many teachers may misinterpret the more active and physical style of communication of Black males to be combative or argumentative.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, teachers who are prone to accepting stereotypes of adolescent Black males as threatening or dangerous may overreact to relatively minor threats to authority.<sup>6</sup>

Social class, as well as generational and experiential differences, can also increase the divide and subsequent misunderstanding between students and their teachers and administrators – even those with similar ethnic backgrounds.

## PROACTIVELY ADDRESSING DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT IN DISCIPLINE

Below are a number of suggestions for how schools can begin to address

the disproportionate impact of school discipline practices on their students of color:

### 1. Engage in ‘Courageous Conversations’ to Transform School Practice

The authors of Courageous Conversations About Race call upon educators to have real, authentic, and hard conversations about race and racism in their schools, to commit to equity for all students, and to practice “anti-racism” (an ongoing practice of assessing how everyone perpetuates injustice and prejudices toward those who are not members of the dominant race) to change the paradigm and effectively address racial disparities. They have developed a field guide to help create the space and structure for school staff to discuss and address racism in schools.

### 2. Teach Culturally Responsive Classroom Management (CRCM)

CRCM<sup>7</sup> is a pedagogical approach to running classrooms for all children in a culturally responsive way.

### 3. Revise Discipline Policies & Practices

In addition to incorporating the evidence based non-punitive alternatives to traditional school discipline practices – such as school wide positive behavior interventions and supports, restorative practices, social emotional learning, and trauma sensitive strategies

– removing subjective offenses like “willful defiance” from the menu of disciplinary offenses and ensuring that every offense has clear, objective parameters can help militate against the negative impact of implicit bias in disciplinary decision making.<sup>8</sup>

## 4. Examine Suspension and Expulsion Data

Regular examination of discipline data – disaggregated by ethnicity, gender, ability, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or any intersection of those identities – can inform decisions about discipline policies that systemically address disproportionate disciplinary outcomes.

## 5. Increase Awareness of Factors that Influence Discipline Decisions

Teachers and administrators can learn more about the potential for bias when issuing discipline referrals by taking the Implicit Association Test (IAT). Knowing the implicit associations one might make about people of certain identities can help a teacher or administrator begin to work against the effects of implicit bias. Take the IAT online here: [implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html](http://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html).

## 6. Hire Diverse Instructional and Administrative Staff

Hiring teachers and staff who are from similar cultural backgrounds as the marginalized students of a school

can help to positively shift culture in environments where implicit biases have been unchallenged in the past<sup>9</sup>

## 7. Actively Pursue and Maintain Relationships with Family and Community

Fostering collaborative relationships with individuals who are members of students’ culture will increase educators’ understanding of student background. These partnerships will, therefore, minimize the number of students who disconnect from the school environment, and assist schools to engage in effective, culturally competent management of student behavior.

## 8. Employ a ‘So What’ Test

When a student’s behavior doesn’t conform to a certain expectation, a teacher or administrator can ask him/herself, “So what if the students work together on an assignment instead of alone?” or “So what if the student wants to partially stand while doing his work?” By assessing the potential harm of a behavior, if any, a teacher can direct teaching time and effort at rules that protect and improve student education and learning environments.





# SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE

Over the last several decades, the number of police officers on K-12 school campuses has increased.<sup>1</sup> In many school districts, the presence of police on campus has led to more citations and arrests among students of color, especially for behaviors that used to be addressed in school without police.<sup>2</sup> For community organizers and advocates, these arrests and citations show that schools rely too much on police to handle school discipline matters. Having contact with the police increases the likelihood that a student will have to repeat a grade, or will end up in the juvenile or criminal justice system.<sup>3</sup> Arrests also harm young people. One arrest doubles a student's chance of dropping out of school, even if they don't end up being convicted of a crime.<sup>4</sup> In California, ninety percent of Black men without high school diplomas are in jail or prison by age 35.<sup>5</sup> This system, where children are funneled out of school and into juvenile and criminal justice systems is called the School to Prison Pipeline. In addition to these other harmful effects, relying on school police to handle school discipline can actually promote disorder and distrust in schools instead of increasing order and safety.<sup>6</sup>

Public Counsel is a member of the Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC), a national coalition of parents, youth, organizers, and educators who want to dismantle the school to prison pipeline by challenging the ways students get pushed out of school and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. In Fall 2016, DSC issued a statement to promote solutions and alternatives to having police in schools, such as moving funding away from school police and shifting it towards more counselors, peace builders and positive discipline.<sup>7</sup> The DSC statement also called for an end to stationed armed officers on school campuses. Some school communities are working toward reforms through strategic partnerships. These partnerships have come about through community organizing efforts that lift up the power of young people and their parents' stories of fighting for change at their schools.<sup>8</sup>



# TELL YOUR STORY

Without your voice, the student experiences that data represent are just numbers on a page.

You can tell your story at school board meetings, city council meetings, or even a small meeting with your school administrators. Here is a simple story telling format you can use:

1. **Introduce yourself** and the organization you are affiliated with, if any
2. **State** what school you or your child attends, and what grade you or your child are in
3. **Explain** what happened to you or your child
4. **Provide** data illustrating how common your story or your child's story is
5. **Offer** solutions and ask the decision-maker to work with you
6. **Thank** the decision-maker

You can find examples on the Dignity in Schools Campaign website, available here: <http://www.dignityinschools.org/our-work/school-pushout-story-bank>.

Using data to support the stories you've collected is an effective tactic to move the needle toward non-punitive school discipline practices.

## DATA RESOURCES

### NATIONWIDE DATA

**OFFICE OF CIVIL RIGHTS DATA COLLECTION (CRDC)** has information about suspension and expulsion rates nationwide, broken down by race, ethnicity, and gender. Visit <http://ocrdata.ed.gov>.

**THE CENTER FOR CIVIL RIGHTS REMEDIES** has suspension rates for different states and districts, based on data from CRDC. Visit [schooldisciplinedata.org](http://schooldisciplinedata.org).

### CALIFORNIA SPECIFIC DATA

**CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CDE) DATAQUEST** has basic data related to suspensions, expulsions, and truancy for each school and school district in California. The data can also be broken down by race, ethnicity, gender, and offense. Visit <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest>.

**CALIFORNIA SCHOOL DASHBOARD** shows how districts and schools are performing on several indicators including suspension rates, test scores, graduation rates and other measures. Visit <https://www.cadashboard.org>

**CALIFORNIA HEALTHY KIDS SURVEY** has information about students' perceptions of safety and violence in school, as well as information about their physical health. Visit <http://chks.wested.org/reports/search>.

**CALIFORNIA SCHOOL STAFF SURVEY** has specific information related to how teachers, administrators, and other school staff perceive school climate. Visit <http://csss.wested.org/reports/search>.

While collecting and reviewing your data, the following questions can help

you locate trends to lift and incorporate into your advocacy:

**What kinds of offenses** are producing the highest number of suspensions and expulsions?

**Are the majority of students** at a particular school being disciplined for dangerous offenses, or for non-dangerous and/or vague violations like disrupting class or willful defiance?

**Are certain demographics** of students, such as students of color or disabled students, suspended more often than their peers?

**How many days of school** are lost to suspension? A school loses between \$30 and \$50 for each day a student is suspended. How much money is a school district losing because of suspensions?





# WRITTEN REQUESTS FOR ADDITIONAL INFO

Sometimes the information you're looking for isn't available through online resources. You can always ask your school principals or district administrators to give you more information. If you do this, be sure to put your request in writing and to provide a timeline for them to respond.

Unfortunately, a general written request still may not get you the information you need in a timely manner. If it doesn't, you can write a letter formally requesting information under the California Public Records Act (PRA). A PRA request entitles any individual in the community to receive copies of any public documents. This means you can ask for overall discipline data, but not personal information about individual students.

## CALIFORNIA PUBLIC RECORDS ACT REQUESTS

An editable sample Public Records Act Request is available on [FixSchoolDiscipline.org](https://fixschooldiscipline.org) to help get you started. Here are a few other tips to help you write your letter:

- State that the request is being made under the California Public Records Act;
- Be sure to send it to your school Superintendent and the Custodian of Records;
- Follow up with a call to your school district to ensure the right person has received your request, and ask them when they will provide the records. Make sure they have the correct address and phone number of the person who will be receiving the records;
- Be very clear about the types of information that you want and the time periods for which you want the information;
- KEEP A COPY of the request you submit in your records, along with PROOF that you mailed it or sent it in; and



- If it's easier for you, let the school district know that you are happy to receive the documents electronically, for instance, on a CD or USB drive, by email, or through a cloud-based sharing site like Dropbox or Google Drive.

In your letter, you can specifically ask for any fees for the documents to be waived if you are unable to pay them yourself. The school district may still ask you to pay for the basic cost of copying the documents. If you have a scanner, copier, or printer, you can bring it to the district and avoid the fee.

The district may also try to charge you for the time it takes its staff members to run a special electronic query for the documents from its database. However, you should NOT be charged for the cost of putting together ANY existing documents or for queries that they have already run for other school business.

The district must provide you with some response within 10 days of receiving of your request, even if it is just to let you know that they will need more time to collect the documents. If you don't receive a response, keep calling and reminding the Custodian of Records of the deadlines.

If you've tried everything you can to get the documents and they still refuse to give them to you, you can [email Public Counsel at info@fixschool-discipline.org](mailto:info@fixschool-discipline.org) for further support.





# THE VISION:

## SUPPORTIVE SCHOOLS FOR ALL STUDENTS

Photo Credit: Flickr/Ryman Arts

Every young person has the right to a high quality education, and to learn in a safe, respectful school environment that protects human dignity. To make these rights realities for all young people, we must end punitive, zero-tolerance approaches to discipline given the significant negative impact they have on learning, and on the community at large. There are alternatives to the use of out-of-school discipline practices that are proven to help create environments for students to be successful, while maintaining consistent and equitable accountability for their actions. Research-based alternatives to traditional school discipline also result in higher student attendance and lower suspension rates, which can increase school funding. Below is an overview of a few school-wide solutions that are being implemented successfully in California and nationwide. These practices work in concert with one another through a framework that is responsive to the needs of students and families.

### SCHOOL-WIDE POSITIVE BEHAVIOR INTERVENTIONS & SUPPORTS (SWPBIS)

School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) is a comprehensive, school-wide research-based system<sup>1</sup> that is "based on the assumption that actively teaching and acknowledging expected behavior can change the extent to which students expect appropriate behavior from themselves and each other."<sup>2</sup>

### RESTORATIVE JUSTICE & RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Inspired by indigenous values, Restorative Justice is a philosophy and theory of justice. In the education context, Restorative Justice uses Restorative Practices to build school community and prevents conflict by creating positive relationships. This is accomplished through the use of regular "restorative circles" where students and educators work together to set academic goals and develop core values for the classroom community.<sup>3</sup>

## SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)

Social Emotional Learning is the process of acquiring and effectively applying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to recognize and manage one's own emotions, develop caring and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations capably. Students are taught five key competencies which are actively modeled, practiced and reinforced in class, and during school instruction and programs.

### THESE COMPETENCIES ARE:

1. Self-awareness—Identification of one's own emotions
2. Social awareness—Empathy, respect for others

3. Responsible decision-making—Evaluation and reflection
4. Self-management—Impulse control, stress management, and persistence
5. Relationship skills—Cooperation and communication.<sup>4</sup>

## OTHER PROMISING STRATEGIES

Other promising alternatives, such as utilizing trauma-sensitive strategies and addressing implicit racial bias, have also been shown to improve school climate and student well-being, while reducing out-of-school discipline practices.





# SCHOOL- WIDE POSITIVE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION AND SUPPORT (SWPBIS)

SWPBIS is a comprehensive and preventative approach to improving school climate. With the use of SWPBIS, serious behavior problems decline and overall school climate improves.

SWPBIS establishes a framework for positive school and classroom climate, in which expectations for students are predictable, directly taught, consistently acknowledged, and actively monitored.<sup>1</sup>

## ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL SWPBIS POLICY

Define and teach a common set of three to five positive behavioral/social expectations throughout the school.

Acknowledge and reinforce the behavioral/social expectations you want to see.

Establish and use consistent, equitable consequences for problem behavior.

Collect and record when, where, why, and to whom disciplinary interventions are given to make informed decisions about resources and assistance.

Develop and utilize multi-tiered support: primary/ universal interventions for all students, secondary level prevention for students who are at risk, and tertiary/intensive interventions focused on students and families who are the most chronically and intensely at risk of negative behavior, and in need of greater supports.

## IMPLEMENTING SWPBIS BEST PRACTICES

### 1. Train Faculty.

Schools that successfully implemented SWPBIS have first sent a team – which

has included teachers, administrators, classified staff members, parent leaders who reflect the community's culture, and other adults who are part of the campus – to specific training and coaching.



## 2. Establish specific behavioral expectations and consistently enforce them.

For SWPBIS to work, all classrooms must have the same set of common classroom-level rules. It should also be clear to everyone on campus which behavioral problems are handled in a classroom, and which would be handled by administrators with higher level interventions.

## 3. Acknowledge positive, desired behavior/social expectations.

Strategies might include sending home positive notes or providing a reward that can be redeemed for prizes when a student exhibits behavior consistent with the school wide established rules. More important, though, is the relationship that is developed through these conversations.

## 4. Evaluate results and make changes as needed.

Successful implementation of SWPBIS at a school site requires tracking data around attendance, achievement, school climate, discipline, and fidelity of interventions. It should also bring in parents, students, and community to help create solutions!

## 5. Create systems and structures that will sustain change, and remain in place.

Community members and parents should participate in PBIS trainings, PBIS team meetings walk through schools, and learn about the intervention systems in place. Frequent data monitoring

and feedback are critical to sustainable implementation.

## IMPLEMENTING SWPBIS BEST PRACTICES

In general, schools that adopt a proactive approach to improving school climate, demonstrate low rates of suspension and up to a 50% reduction per year in office discipline referrals.<sup>2</sup>

In California, the adoption of PBIS across the state has increased significantly from 500 schools to just over 2,000. Schools adopting PBIS are continuing the implementation and sustaining the adoption of positive practices.

In the 2007–2008 school year, before PBIS implementation, the administration at Garfield High School in Los Angeles, California issued 510 suspensions and 2 expulsions.

The school's Academic Performance Index (API) was 591. After implementing PBIS for more than 3 years, Garfield issued one suspension and zero expulsions, and raised its API score to 714.

For the 2017–2018 school year, Garfield issued no out of school suspensions or expulsions.



# RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Restorative Justice is a set of principles and practices, centered on community members holding people accountable for their actions while collectively repairing harm and strengthening relationships.

The term "Restorative Practices" (RP) is used by a number of practitioners to describe how the concepts of Restorative Justice are used to create change in school systems. Because retributive punishment is ingrained in the fabric of our society, implementing RP requires a significant culture shift.

## ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

The core belief of Restorative Practices is that people will make positive changes when those in positions of authority do things with them, rather than to or for them. Instead of the traditional student-teacher-administration hierarchy, Restorative Practices emphasize every school members' responsibility to the school community. A successful restorative system:

- Acknowledges that relationships are central to building community.
- Engages in collaborative problem solving.
- Builds systems that address misbehavior and harm in a way that strengthens relationships.
- Focuses on the harm done rather than only on rule breaking.
- Gives voice to the person harmed.
- Empowers change and growth.
- Enhances responsibility.

## IMPLEMENTING RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS

The Restorative Practices "circle" is a critical way to emphasize community, relationship building, and build trust. Regularly sitting in circle affords school communities the opportunity to get to the root of unwanted behavior. Certain behaviors may actually be coping mechanisms for trauma, so if we address the root of a student's behavior, we can stop the cycle of harm. Circles typically use the following elements:

Chairs are placed in a circle with no additional furniture blocking any participants. A facilitator, the "circle

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keeper,” can be a student or a teacher who makes introductory comments, including a discussion about the values and positive agreements that will govern that circle.

A talking piece, which has some significance to members of the circle, allows only the person holding it the right to speak. Participants can “check-in” to talk about how they are feeling physically, mentally, or emotionally and “check-out” to discuss how they

are feeling as the circle ends. Circles are used to help prevent conflict by building a sense of belonging, safety, and social responsibility in the school community.

Depending on the gravity of the harm, these conflict-resolution circles may include the person who caused harm, the person who experienced harm, the families and supporters of both parties, and a trained, neutral facilitator.

## TRADITIONAL APPROACH

**SCHOOL RULES ARE BROKEN.**

**JUSTICE FOCUSES ON  
ESTABLISHING GUILT.**

**ACCOUNTABILITY = PUNISHMENT**

**JUSTICE DIRECTED AT THE OFFENDER;  
THE VICTIM IS IGNORED.**

**RULES AND INTENT OUTWEIGH WHETHER  
OUTCOME IS POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE.**

**LIMITED OPPORTUNITY FOR EXPRESSING  
REMORSE OR MAKING AMENDS.**

## RESTORATIVE APPROACH

**PEOPLE AND RELATIONSHIPS ARE HARMED.**

**JUSTICE IDENTIFIES NEEDS AND  
RESPONSIBILITY.**

**ACCOUNTABILITY = UNDERSTANDING  
IMPACT AND REPAIRING HARM.**

**OFFENDER, VICTIM, AND SCHOOL ALL HAVE  
DIRECT ROLES IN THE JUSTICE PROCESS.**

**OFFENDER IS RESPONSIBLE FOR HARMFUL  
BEHAVIOR, REPAIRING HARM AND WORKING  
TOWARDS POSITIVE OUTCOMES.**

**OPPORTUNITY GIVEN TO MAKE AMENDS AND  
EXPRESS REMORSE.**

RP reduces out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, and has also been shown to improve student engagement and achievement.<sup>1</sup> A good general rule is that about 20% of a school's restorative practices respond to

conflict while 80% are proactively creating shared cultures and building strong relationships. This approach cultivates a climate where destructive responses to conflict are less likely to occur.<sup>2</sup>

# SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) focuses on developing the individual qualities, strengths, and assets of a child related to social, emotional, cognitive, and moral development as well as positive mental health.

School-based educational initiatives that focus on youth development, health promotion, and problem prevention can be organized through SEL instruction.<sup>1</sup>

## ELEMENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL SEL SYSTEM

Through various pre-packaged curricula, SEL can be taught and reinforced in concert with other frameworks such as School-Wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (SWPBIS) or Restorative Justice (RJ) and can easily be coordinated with a broad array of prevention and promotion efforts.



## THROUGH SEL PROGRAMS, STUDENTS LEARN FIVE KEY COMPETENCIES:

**Self-awareness**—Identification and recognition of their own emotions, recognition of strengths in themselves and others, sense of self-efficacy, and self-confidence.

**Social awareness**—Empathy, respect for others, and perspective taking.

**Responsible decision-making**—Evaluation and reflection, as well as personal and ethical responsibility.

**Self-management**—Impulse control, stress management, persistence, goal setting, and motivation.

**Relationship skills**—Cooperation, help seeking and providing, and communication.<sup>2</sup>

## IMPLEMENTING SEL BEST PRACTICES

SEL instruction can be implemented either through a pre-set curriculum



taught in every classroom and/or in coordination with other school-wide prevention and promotion efforts, such as SWPBIS or RJ.

## TANGIBLE RESULTS OF SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

An in-depth study found that students who receive SEL instruction had more positive attitudes about school and improved an average of 11 percentile points on standardized achievement tests compared to students who did not receive such instruction.<sup>3</sup>

Positive Action, an evidence-based SEL approach that promotes an interest in learning and encourages cooperation among students, was found to have reduced disruptive behaviors by 72% and suspensions by 24% when implemented.<sup>4</sup> In a rigorous study,

*An evidence-based SEL approach, was found to have reduced disruptive behaviors by 72% and suspensions by 24%.<sup>4</sup>*

Positive Action reduced suspensions and grade retention by 73% each.

Here in California, Sacramento City Unified School District has implemented SEL and seen improvements in attendance rates and school engagement, along with a 6.4% graduation rate increase (up to a total of 85%), and an 18.2% drop in bullying.<sup>5</sup>

Other examples of demonstrated benefits of SEL instruction include improved graduation rates, reduced violence, lowered substance abuse, and decreased teen suicide attempts.<sup>6</sup>





# TRAUMA SENSITIVE STRATEGIES

Studies estimate that between 3.3 million and 10 million children in the U.S. witness violence in their own homes each year<sup>1</sup> Children who have experienced early, chronic trauma – such as family or community violence – can develop emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and relationship difficulties that can adversely affect their ability to learn and function well in school. The area of a child's brain that is associated with the fear response may become overdeveloped, causing the child to act out using a fight or flight response when triggered by a trauma reminder, even when there is no actual threat to fear.

Exposure to trauma is associated with a higher risk for school dropout and, in turn, dropping out of school increases the risk of being imprisoned.

The goal of creating a "trauma sensitive school" is to reduce problem behaviors and emotional difficulties, as well as optimize positive and productive functioning for all children and youth. When schools are able to address the behavioral health needs of students in a proactive manner, rather than a reactive one, they can increase the resources available to promote educational goals. It is also crucial to support the wellness of school staff, addressing chronic stress, burnout, and vicarious trauma.

## ELEMENTS TO ADDRESS TRAUMA AND PROMOTE SOCIAL EMOTIONAL WELLNESS

**Leadership** by school and district administrators to create supportive school environments and promote collaborative services. The leadership team must reliably address each of three levels of services – whole school, preventative supports and services, and intensive services.

**Professional development** for school administrators, educators, and behavioral health providers – both together through cross-disciplinary trainings, and separately. Trainings should respect and take into account ethnic and cultural diversity, and ensure that staff is actively engaged respectfully and supportively with students and families.

**Access to resources and services** by identifying, coordinating, and creating school and community behavioral health services to improve the school-wide environment. These resources should also be clinically,



linguistically, and culturally appropriate for students and their families.

**Academic and nonacademic approaches** that enable all children to learn – including those with behavioral health needs – and that promote success in school.

**School policies, procedures, and protocols** that provide a foundation for schools to implement and support the work, such as school curricula that includes Social Emotional Learning instruction in areas like problem solving, life skills, social-emotional development, interpersonal community, self-regulation, and violence prevention.

**Collaboration with families** where parents and families are included in all aspects of their children's education and able to participate as equals in the planning and evaluation of programs and services.<sup>2</sup>



# BUDGET TRANSPARENCY & LCAP ADVOCACY

In 2013, the way schools are funded in California changed dramatically with a new finance system called the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF).<sup>1</sup> LCFF, requires school districts to tailor their funding decisions to support those students who face the most significant obstacles. LCFF asks districts to focus on three high-need student subgroups in particular – low income students, foster youth, and English language learners.

By July 1 of every year, each district must create a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) to show how its money is being spent on eight state priorities – one of which is *school climate*.

The LCAP must describe a district's goals with respect to the priorities, the actions it will take to meet these goals, and the type and amount of funds to be used for each action. The goals and actions should also focus on specific subgroups of students who have been impacted differently by the district's practices: including different racial and ethnic groups and students with disabilities, as well as low income students, foster youth, and English language learners.

Districts receive one pot of funds from the state based on how many students they enroll every year, called "base funds," and an additional pot of funds based on how many high-need students they enroll, called "supplemental and concentration funds," or "S/C funds" for short.<sup>2</sup> *Generally, a district's LCAP must justify how its intended use of S/C funds are "principally directed" and "effective" in meeting the goals for high-need students.*<sup>3</sup> In districts with less than 55% high-need students, districts must further demonstrate that its intended use of S/C funds is the most effective use of these funds to meet goals for the high-need students who generate those funds.

LCAP's must demonstrate how a district intends to meet goals related to school climate, reduce suspensions and expulsions,<sup>4</sup> and increase or improve services for high-need students in particular.

## ELEMENTS OF AN LCAP THAT IS STRONG ON SCHOOL CLIMATE

1. Ambitious goals that reduce suspension, expulsion, and student contact with law enforcement.
2. Clear baseline data and benchmarks set for individual student subgroups to easily measure progress.
3. Actions and funding allocations that can get the district to the goal line.

### INFLUENCING YOUR DISTRICT'S LCAP

Most district LCAP's are released as a draft to the public in April or May, for discussion in June and final approval by the school board by July 1. These drafts are often available on the district's website and in board agendas when they are discussed. By law, your school district must obtain community input

on the LCAP before adopting it! At a minimum, the school district must obtain comments and feedback from:

*A Parent Advisory Committee* that can also include representatives of community-based organizations, students, and district staff, such as school psychologists;

*An English Learner Advisory Committee* if the district is 15% or more English learners;

*From the community*, in at least ONE public hearing before another meeting at which the school board votes to approve the LCAP; and

*Students*, through surveys, focus groups, student advisory committees, or other methods of obtaining feedback.<sup>4</sup>

Access a model school climate LCAP, and our LCAP Toolkit online at [FixSchoolDiscipline.org](https://www.fixschooldiscipline.org)







# IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

Passing a local policy or statewide bill will not alone change students' experiences in schools and classrooms. Real change only comes when those on the ground – like students, parents, teachers, and community members – keep track of how the specific steps and timelines that were promised are rolled out in classrooms and schools. Only then can you hold your schools and districts accountable.

Too often a good or well-intentioned policy sits on the shelf and never becomes a reality. By establishing a comprehensive and well thought out monitoring and accountability plan, you can make certain this does not happen.

## 1. A Timeline and Specific Steps for Implementation in Writing

Obtain a written plan for how your school or school district will provide training and support to ensure that the alternatives are put in place and truly implemented. Make certain that plan has real, actionable timelines. Any plan that a school district or school creates is a public record, so you should be able to get a copy with a simple request for any plans for implementation, schedules for trainings, and anything else that you would like to know.

## 2. Evidence of the Alternative In Practice

Ideally, your community group will be at the table during the implementation process and invited to the trainings and meetings. If not, you can request documents in writing, using the Public Records Act to request evidence that implementation is occurring.

To ensure that everyone is looking for the same thing, you may want to create a Monitoring Tool or a Survey. You can find the [Rubric of Implementation](#) used to assess compliance and provide feedback in Los Angeles Unified School District on [FixSchoolDiscipline.org](#). You can also find monitoring reports published by CADRE and Public Counsel.

## 3. Review of Discipline Data

Reviewing data such as office discipline referrals, suspensions, expulsions, and academic achievement is helpful in determining whether the alternatives in place are making a difference. In the best case, an adopted policy already requires the school district and schools to collect and review this data frequently, and to meet regularly with all school-site leadership teams to discuss progress, challenges, and solutions. If not, you can request data in writing or use a Public Records



Act request. If the data shows that problems still exist, continue to tell the story at school board meetings, with the press, and with school leadership to put more emphasis on the immediacy of the need to implement alternatives.

## HOLDING DISTRICTS ACCOUNTABLE

Even though school district leadership may report changing their discipline practices at school sites, the experiences of students and families might suggest otherwise. For instance, some community groups have reported that – even with a good board policy or resolution in place – their school sites have sent students home without providing proper notice, or without reporting it. It is much harder to monitor these illegal practices, but here are a few tips:

- Parents and students know what is happening at their schools.
- Document those stories if you begin to hear that this is happening.
- Collect records. Students have an absolute right to their records.

Once you collect as much information and as many stories as possible, write a letter or make a presentation at your school board meeting about what you are hearing and seeing. If you send a letter, be sure to send it to the Superintendent, Principal, the person responsible for implementation of alternatives (if there is a school district staff person), and the School Board with a specific request that the problem be investigated and that intervention be provided so that good practices are put in place.

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