

Decoding Race, Gender, and Discipline



Biased perceptions of girls of color often lead to their unfair exclusion

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The first time Ne’Jahra was “dress-coded,” she was 8 years old. The offense? Wearing a tank top with thin straps. “Too distracting,” school officials explained to her parents as she was sent home. Stories like this are all too common, and the result is needless missed class time—all due to subjective, biased determinations that should be less important than providing the opportunity to learn.

Girls of color face race- and gender-based barriers embedded within school discipline policies, dress codes, and codes of conduct. These barriers manifest themselves in higher disciplinary rates. Black girls are five times as likely as white girls to be suspended at least once from school and four times as likely to be arrested at school. Native girls are twice as likely to be suspended at least once.

The impacts of exclusionary discipline are far-reaching, according to “‘And They Cared’: How to Create Better, Safer Learning Environments for Girls of Color,” a recent report from The Education Trust and the National Women’s Law Center. “When students are pushed out of school, it makes it less likely that they’ll complete high school or attend college, which limits [their] economic opportunities,” says report co-author Adaku Onyeka-Crawford, director of educational equity at the National Women’s Law Center. “Having limited economic opportunities increases the chance you become involved in underground economies, which increases the chance you fall victim to the criminal legal system. But even for students who don’t end up in jail or prison, it creates and perpetuates this cycle of poverty, which has a ripple effect on that person’s economic security and entire communities.”

Evidence shows that girls of color tend to be excluded for who they are instead of what they do. Subjective offenses such as “defiance,” “talking back,” or dress-code violations make up a disproportionate share of reasons Black girls are suspended, and such offenses are typically informed by race- and gender-based stereotypes.

Consider, for example, strict dress codes that subjectively tell girls they cannot wear “revealing” or “distracting” clothing. Now look at this through the lens of girls of color, who are often unfairly targeted for wearing culturally specific attire such as headwraps, or because their curvier bodies attract more attention than those of white peers dressed in similar outfits. This intersection of gender and racial bias leads to exclusionary practices that disproportionately harm girls of color.

The consequences of excluding students from school include immediate harms such as sending the message that students don’t belong and forcing students to miss out on critical class time. “They say that they want us to get the best education, but when you take us out of class and take us out of the school and suspend us, we don’t get the education because we don’t get to be in the classroom and get the information they want us to get,” one Black girl quoted in the report said.

It’s no surprise, then, that when schools change their policies and culture with the explicit intent to reduce exclusionary discipline, students not only feel safer but see academic gains, as well. And that’s not all: Replacing exclusionary discipline practices and policies with alternatives that focus on building, maintaining, and repairing relationships can have longer-term impacts.

Students who attend schools with lower suspension rates are less likely to interact with the prison system as adults and more likely to attend a four-year college. And because restorative discipline practices create opportunities for students to voice themselves (supporting a sense of belonging) and learn to address conflict in positive ways (supporting student learning to build and repair relationships), we know this is a critical factor in creating an equitable learning environment that fosters social and emotional development.

“A large body of research, practice, and policy points to clear strategies to create safe and inclusive schools,” says Linda Darling-Hammond, president and CEO of the Learning Policy Institute and president of the California State Board of Education. “District and state policymakers can play a role in making changes that address discipline policy in order to create positive and equitable learning environments

that also support whole-child development. These include eliminating zero-tolerance policies, providing training on implicit and asset-based youth development, developing and implementing model school discipline policy, and creating relationship-centered schools.”

The Power to Change Policy and Practice

In the coming months and years, school leaders should anticipate a bigger push toward alternative disciplinary practices that minimize lost class time. In 2014, the Department of Education and the Department of Justice issued guidance on identifying and addressing disparities in discipline. As a result, more than 50 of the country’s largest districts made changes to discipline policies. Unfortunately, to the dismay of many parents and advocates, then-Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos rescinded that guidance in 2018.

The Biden administration has the opportunity to outline solutions for districts and schools to address this persistent problem. In the meantime, school leaders should follow existing civil rights law to ensure that all students attend schools with policies that are not discriminatory or harmful to the social and emotional well-being of students of color.

That’s why The Education Trust and the National Women’s Law Center partnered to create “And They Cared,” a discipline guide that can help leaders revisit their policies and practices to ensure they’re creating safe and equitable learning environments for girls of color.

Districts Effect Positive Change

Two districts that provide promising examples of what can be done to change discipline policy are the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and Chicago Public Schools (CPS). OUSD has gradually decreased exclusionary discipline for girls and decreased disparities in discipline for Black and Latina girls. For example, in the 2011–2012 school year, 12 percent of middle school girls and 8 percent of high school girls were suspended. By 2018, those numbers had decreased to 6 percent and 5 percent, respectively. The percentage of Black girls suspended in OUSD middle schools decreased 10 percent. This is a result of policy changes such as a ban on suspensions for willful defiance, engagement with the community on policy issues, and a requirement for school leaders to review discipline data and address disparities.

CPS saw similar decreases in suspensions for girls, with reductions from 17 percent to 4 percent for out-of-school suspensions from 2012 to 2018. Out-of-school suspensions



Read More

“And They Cared”: How to Create Better, Safer Learning Environments for Girls of Color”: edtrust.org/resource/and-they-cared-how-to-create-better-safer-learning-environments-for-girls-of-color

“Social, Emotional, and Academic Development Through an Equity Lens”: edtrust.org/social-emotional-and-academic-development-through-an-equity-lens

“Protecting Students’ Civil Rights: The Federal Role in School Discipline”: learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/student-civil-rights-school-discipline-report

dropped from 33 percent to 8 percent for Black girls during that time, and from 7 percent to 2 percent for Latina girls. What's more, research shows that the changes didn't just correlate with CPS' policy changes—they were the direct result of things such as using student-led disciplinary proceedings; allocating resources to support, implement, and evaluate positive discipline; and making discipline rules clear and transparent.

Importantly, the Oakland and Chicago school districts made efforts to listen to their communities and address the overcriminalization of Black students in school. Too many schools overinvest in “hardening” schools with school police and metal detectors while underinvesting in critical support staff such as counselors, psychologists, restorative justice coordinators, and nurses. Research shows that school police do not increase safety, but creating a positive school climate does. School leaders should therefore prioritize staff and resources that provide positive supports over structures that are known to target and criminalize Black children.

Taking the Next Steps

School leaders have the power to adopt policy and practice changes in their own schools, rather than waiting for district leaders, states, or the federal government to intervene. Principals in particular set the stage for the type of school climate adults work toward, what discipline practices are expected of educators, and whether minor “offenses” such as wearing a short skirt should result in disciplinary action.

“And They Cared” outlines concrete actions that can be taken by district and state leaders, but principals can adopt a number of these changes in their own schools, as well. Examples include:

- Working with families and students to co-create dress codes and codes of conduct that are race- and gender-neutral;
- Ensuring that codes of conduct and other discipline information are accessible on school websites, available in diverse languages, given to all families, and written in a way that clarifies to families what students can and can't be disciplined for;
- Requiring or encouraging educators to participate in professional development on restorative discipline practices, cultural responsiveness, and anti-bias training;

- Setting a culture that expects restorative discipline rather than punitive or exclusionary consequences;
- Discouraging the use of disciplinary action for dress or grooming violations, as well as subjective offenses such as willful defiance, insubordination, and “attitude”; and
- Using school climate data to make changes to school policies.

These changes can make a difference in the lives and experiences of students and educators in schools, foster belonging, increase engagement and positive academic outcomes, and improve school climate for all students. As research continues to show the harmful impacts of exclusionary discipline and punitive measures, school leaders who make changes such as these will likely be ahead of the curve—and have results to show for it. ●

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Suspension's Impact on Adulthood

Strict school disciplinary policies might expose suspended students to the criminal justice system at a younger age, according to “The School to Prison Pipeline: Long-Term Impacts of School Suspension on Adult Crime,” a working paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research. While strict discipline acts as a deterrent to additional misbehavior, students who attend schools with higher suspension rates are 25 percent more likely to be arrested as adults and 20 percent more likely to be incarcerated, with males and minorities suffering the worst impacts.