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Learning Uninterrupted: Supporting Positive Culture and Behavior in Schools

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Introduction

Across the Commonwealth, educators work in our schools to support the academic and personal development of children. Central to student learning is the establishment of positive learning environments where all young people can be successful. Students across our state come from a variety of backgrounds. Our kids have diverse strengths that educators work to develop and challenges that teachers work to address each day.

Encouraging positive behavior is critical to creating the classrooms that our kids need. The overriding goal is to provide positive and safe classrooms while also keeping all kids on track to benefit from their education. As discipline for misbehavior, many students face exclusion through school suspension or expulsion, leading to interruption of their learning time. Though removing students with difficult behavior from classrooms may be an immediate means to address problems, there are significant drawbacks. Students who are excluded from learning due to disciplinary infractions have a greater risk of falling behind and becoming further disengaged, creating a negative cycle for some of our students most in need of additional support.

The evidence suggests that exclusionary discipline does not lead to safer schools, reformed behavior for students, or any other positive outcomes overall.[1] Furthermore, exclusionary school discipline tends to disproportionately affect youth of color, low-income kids, and students with disabilities, who already face many existing challenges.[2] Across the country, these students consistently have higher rates of disciplinary punishments, even when controlling for relevant social and economic factors, and when looking at discipline for relatively mild behavior incidents.[3]

There is growing recognition of problems related to traditional school discipline techniques and the "zero tolerance approach" that underpins exclusionary discipline. The Commonwealth has taken steps to help schools deemphasize exclusionary techniques and focus on keeping students in class, while promoting positive learning environments. However, it remains to be seen whether schools can get the resources and training to move beyond exclusion and put in place more effective alternative practices.

This report reviews the existing landscape of school discipline across the country and Massachusetts. It examines the long-term impact of suspensions and recent school discipline reform in Massachusetts. The paper explores alternative discipline approaches, as well as case studies of these practices in action in North Carolina and Denver, Colorado. Finally, the report considers challenges and estimates the resources that would be needed to implement these practices, including the provision of additional training and staff dedicated to discipline reforms.

The Effects of School Suspension and Expulsion

Though some communities have reconsidered their policies in recent years, school discipline practices of the past two decades have commonly been based on a zero tolerance approach. The approach is premised on the idea that quick and sure sanctions can deter future misbehavior and set a cautionary example for other students, while removing threats from our schools.

The zero tolerance approach in schools grew in the 1990s in response to alarm over drugs, weapons, and violence in schools. It expanded to cover less severe behaviors over time.[4] This approach was first codified in federal policy in 1994, within a law focused on preventing gun violence in schools, and reached over 90 percent of all schools nationwide in some form by 1997.[5] State and local school policies further expanded zero tolerance to apply to fights, alcohol, threats, and coarse language.[6] While the need to prevent disruption, violence, and substance use in schools is clear, some schools took zero tolerance to extremes. Examples include a Seattle sixth grader expelled for possession of a water gun, and two high school students in Maine expelled for sharing a headache medicine.[7]

Exclusionary discipline practices have not led to positive results, and have instead been linked to harm for young people. There is evidence that discipline practices that remove students from their classrooms can disrupt success in education.[8] Research studies have not found evidence that exclusionary discipline positively affects young people facing discipline, their peers, and school safety and climate in general.[9] In many cases, students may return to class further alienated from the learning process and community, leading to further disruptions.

There is a direct link between incidents of suspension and students subsequently dropping out of high school. Nationally, only 71 percent of 10th graders who were suspended graduate from high school, compared to 94 percent of those who avoided these sanctions.[10] However, being suspended is also related to a number of other risk factors that limit student success, such as poor attendance and lower grades, so it is important to isolate the impact of suspension. Recent research in this area found a 12 percentage point decline in the probability of graduating for suspended students after controlling for other background factors.[11]

The relationship of school suspension and dropping out is a particular problem because of the long-term consequences that fall on young people and communities when students fail to complete high school. With increasing numbers of jobs requiring advanced skills and training, education after high school is becoming more important. Those without a high school diploma face bleak economic prospects.

When school policies and practices lead to higher dropout rates, fewer young people are able to reach their full potential, and that hurts all of us. When students do not complete high school, they earn less over their careers, pay less in taxes to state and local government, and are less able to thrive as adults. It is difficult using existing research to isolate the economic losses that occur when students drop out. This is because students who do not complete high school are also likely different from graduates in other ways that affect future earnings and life outcomes, such as parental education, family stability, and engagement in school. The data we have compares high school graduates to high school dropouts without controlling for these differences.

Despite the data limitations, these studies that have looked at this issue have found large long-term losses associated with high dropout rates. One study of students who dropped out in California found

that federal, state, and local governments suffered $153,000 in lifetime losses for each student that the public schools failed to graduate. Considering the negative impacts to the California state economy at large brought total losses from each student to $387,000 on average.[12] A national analysis found similar results, pegging the lifetime impact of students who drop out of high school on state and local governments at $163,000 per student on average, a total of $11 billion nationally.[13] Lower revenue or greater expenses to state and local government alone translates to roughly $3,500 per student each year between when they were scheduled to graduate and age 65.

The data suggests that exclusionary discipline harms students of all backgrounds and that students of color are disproportionately subject to these harmful practices.[14] A pattern of disproportionate discipline of African-American students has been confirmed in various studies over the past several decades. A recent study suggests African-American students are removed from class with discipline referrals at twice the rate of White students at the elementary level and up four times more in the upper grades.[15] This analysis and similar research has not concluded that disparate treatment occurs because these students act out more severely or due to more difficult life circumstances. Instead, the evidence suggests that differential treatment results from racial bias in school discipline that harms students of color at the classroom and administrative level.[16] For example, African-American students have especially high rates of discipline for offenses open to subjective interpretation, such as disrespect.[17]

Unfair disciplinary practices can exacerbate the disadvantages that students face. Naturally, students missing out on learning time are set back academically. Exclusion from school also opens the door to other risks if students disengage from the structure, relationships, and other positive elements of education. Another challenge with the increasing use of exclusionary discipline is that school systems can escalate their responses to student behavior into the criminal justice system, a phenomenon often called "the school to prison pipeline." This occurs when school police officers cite or arrest students for behavior at school, entering them into the criminal justice system.[18] As severe consequences in schools increased, so did referrals from schools to the juvenile justice system, including for incidents that are not particularly dangerous or threatening.[19] Any bias in the referrals from schools can also contribute to disparate contact with the criminal justice system.

Current School Discipline Policy in Massachusetts

Massachusetts, like many states and communities across the country, has observed and acted on the evidence of the negative consequences of over-relying on exclusionary discipline. In the past several years, legislators and education experts in the Commonwealth have undertaken significant reform of our discipline policies. The goal is to reduce the negative impacts of exclusionary discipline and distinguish serious infractions from minor misbehavior.

These reforms were initiated through legislation approved in 2012 that took effect in the 2014-2015 school year. The law, "An Act Relative to Student Access to Educational Services and Exclusion from School" is also commonly known as Chapter 222, in reference to it being the 222nd bill signed into law in 2012.[20] The law has several components:

- **Distinguishing Minor Misbehavior from Serious Offenses –** Chapter 222 distinguishes routine, typical misbehavior as those issues that do not include drugs, weapons, assaults on school personnel, or felony charges. Sanctions and protections under the law distinguish between these categories of behavior and other kinds of problems.

- **Promotion of Alternative Discipline for Regular Misbehavior –** School administrators are directed to exercise discretion in dealing with typical behavior challenges and consider ways to re-engage students in learning. Under Chapter 222, the goal is to avoid long-term exclusion for routine behavior issues until other remedies have been attempted.

- **Due Process –** School administrators have to provide written notice to kids and their families explaining the reason behind suspensions, including translation into students' primary home language. Students and families must be provided a meeting with administrators to discuss the disciplinary action that could remove students from school. Parents can only be not included if reasonable effort to connect with them is unsuccessful.

- **Right to Appeal -** If students are suspended for more than 10 days throughout a school year, parents have the right to appeal the decision to their district superintendent soon after disciplinary sanctions are handed down.

- **Limits on Exclusion –** In cases where a student in Kindergarten through third grade is suspended, school administrators must provide advance notice to their superintendent to justify suspension. For all students, exclusion for routine behavior cannot exceed 90 school days throughout a year. Additionally, the Department of Education is directed to identify and offer support to districts with high levels of long-term suspensions, or where significant disparities based on race or disability are present.

- **Increased Data Reporting –** While the state already tracked school discipline data before the reform law, Chapter 222 reaffirmed the need for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to report all suspensions and provide this information to the public. The law requires disaggregation of the data by student categories, such as disability, race, and language ability.

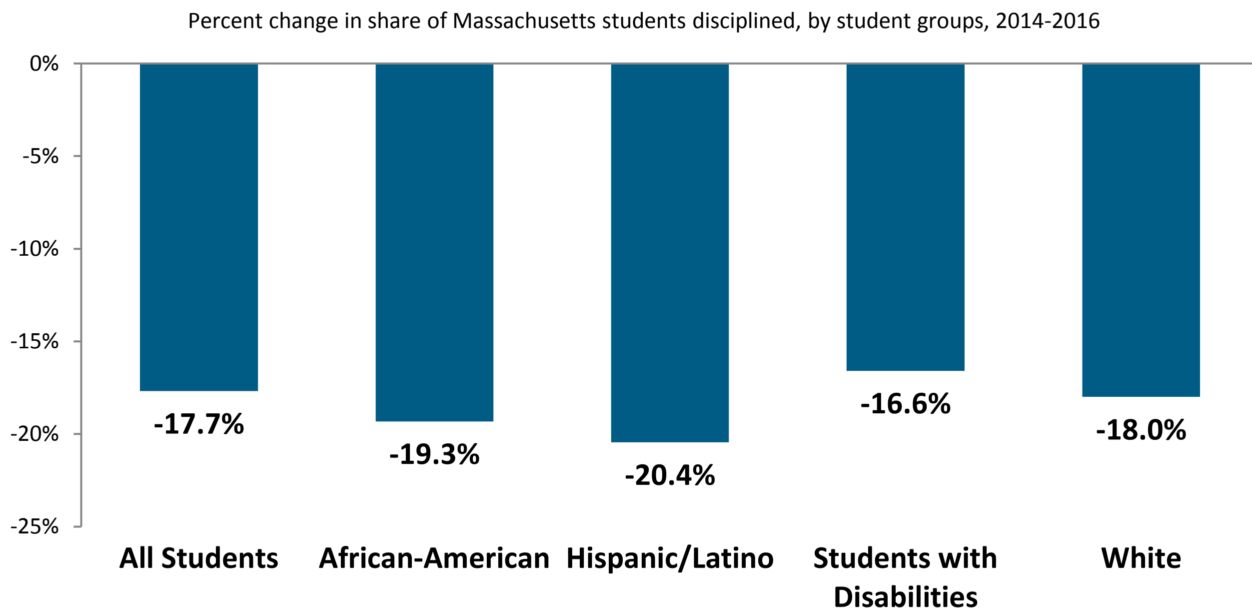
- **Attendance and Dropout Intervention –** As mentioned above, school discipline is linked with school disengagement. Chapter 222 addresses this issue by instructing school districts to enhance their outreach to families who have children with five unexcused absences. The goal of outreach is to develop action plans to increase attendance. The law contains a provision for students at great risk of dropping out from high school. This provision ensures that schools provide notice to families offering a conference in the weeks after a student misses two consecutive weeks of school. During this conference, school personnel provide information about the harms of dropping out, the benefits of completing high school, and the services available to support completion.

- **Provision of Services to Students Suspended for Severe Violations -** Districts that suspend students for a long period of time (10 days or more) for serious offenses are required to provide educational services, such as tutoring or Saturday school, during the period of exclusion. This is intended to allow students to make academic progress while out of school.

So far, some results of the discipline reforms have been encouraging. After two years of implementation (2014-15 and 2015-16) there was a decline of 18 percent in the number of students suspended or expelled across the state (from 50,700 to 41,700).[21] There was a drop of 7,700 students (22 percent fewer) disciplined for routine misbehavior, the key area of focus.[22] A decline in the number of students who faced exclusionary discipline occurred at all grade levels.[23]

However, there has been some inconsistency in the progress over two years. Notably, in 2015-2016, the total number of students suspended or expelled increased over the prior year by 4 percent, roughly 1,500 more students.[24] The number of students suspended or expelled for routine misbehavior similarly rose by 1,200.[25]

Even after the reform effort, students of color and students with disabilities remain more likely to face disciplinary action.[26] African-Americans had discipline rates 6.6 percentage points higher than White students in 2016.[27] Special education students had discipline rates 3.9 percentage points greater than students overall in 2016.



Though there was overall progress, some schools had greater challenges implementing discipline reforms. In June 2016, the Department of Education identified 25 schools in 18 school districts across the state as having excessive numbers of long-term suspensions or significantly higher rates of discipline for particular student groups.[28] These schools are working alongside state officials in a learning network focused on reducing reliance on exclusionary discipline in ways that also preserve orderly and safe learning environments.

Collaboration between the state and the schools looking to reform discipline practices is an encouraging step. However, in the current early stage of this reform, it is unclear if districts and schools will have the capacity, resources, and training to implement alternatives to exclusionary discipline. To some extent, additional resources are necessary to adapt practices that will redirect and reengage students. A lack of resources could put at risk the goals of the Chapter 222 law.

Overview of Alternative Discipline Practices

As evidence grows on the drawbacks of exclusionary discipline, alternative discipline strategies have emerged from across the country. Some are also already in practice in Massachusetts. These approaches can often work together to be consistent and mutually reinforcing, though they typically require significant added capacity, resources, training, and other supports. The alternative approaches can take a variety of forms:

- Improving school culture by clarifying discipline expectations, providing positive feedback, and supporting students in need of behavior strategies.

- Coaching adults on behavior management, communication, cultural awareness, and on distinguishing routine from serious misbehavior. [29] This includes training for teachers but also for school police and other staff. Some programs provided school police officers training on adolescent development and skills for working with special needs students, often with an emphasis on moderating conflicts and limiting arrests to only the most serious issues.[30]

- Redesigning the responses to student offenses to address the root causes underlying misbehavior and to provide more opportunities for student growth and development when kids are held accountable. Doing so will not necessarily eliminate the use of exclusion for serious incidents, but gives educators tools to complement such options. Examples include some schools that have introduced community service requirements on top of traditional discipline.[31]

- Rethinking responses to misbehavior to include providing services, such as substance treatment, alternative schools, or wraparound social services. [32] (See details on school-based social services in MassBudget's Uplifting the Whole Child: Using Wraparound Services to Overcome Social Barriers to Learning). Considering the needs of children more holistically is consistent with ongoing work across Massachusetts, including the Safe and Supportive Schools commission. This initiative created a framework to help schools create positive learning environments that account for social-emotional needs and that align services in related areas, such as trauma sensitivity, mental health, and bullying prevention.[33]

- Bringing together young people who have broken school rules and the parties affected to discuss the impact of the behavior and determine action steps to prevent future incidents. In doing so, students can potentially gain skills while improving relationships and community within a school, with greater benefits than a one-time punishment.[34]

Several of these alternatives are in place in other states across the country, including Massachusetts. Boston Public Schools has created a reform initiative called Succeed Boston, with several components.[35] District experts provide training at the school level to help educators use alternatives to suspension, prevent discrimination and bullying, and de-escalate conflicts in the classroom. These staff also support the implementation of social and emotional learning curriculum adopted across Boston Public Schools that can contribute to more positive environments and prevent behavior challenges. In situations where a student would have received a multi-day suspension after a major incident, Succeed Boston institutes a single-day suspension followed by a week-long diversion program at a central district location. This intervention includes tutoring that allows students to make academic progress, along with intensive

services, such as counseling, social work, and substance abuse treatment. There is also coordination with Boston Police and school security personnel when there are significant threats to student safety, such as gang violence, that are beyond the level that schools alone can handle.

Though Succeed Boston has not been rigorously evaluated, the overall discipline rate in Boston declined from 5.9 to 5.3 percent (349 fewer students disciplined) between 2014 and 2016.[36] Additionally, discipline rates in Boston Public Schools compare favorably to those in other cities who have undertaken effective reforms (see further discussion below). However, much like the situation statewide, it is unclear if funding will be made available and sustained to allow Succeed Boston to make additional progress. District administrators report that the funding for Succeed Boston declined significantly over the past several years, from roughly $2 million, to less than $1 million.[37] This has meant that staff cuts have occurred, and that the city has relied more on outside partners to fill gaps.

While several alternative approaches to discipline like Succeed Boston have been launched in a limited number of schools across the country, two promising approaches offer larger-scale evidence of success in decreasing discipline incidents and keeping kids in class: Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS) and Restorative Justice (RJ).

Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS)

Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS) is an alternative discipline approach with some of the strongest evidence of effectiveness. PBIS has several components that work together. It features three increasing tiers of support for kids based on their needs. PBIS is largely a preventative approach focused on creating supportive school climates that head off behavior challenges.

At the first tier, a school implementing PBIS teaches all students clear behavioral expectations, such as being prepared to learn, displaying integrity, and being respectful to others.[38] Educators teach a limited number of behavior expectations. This can also vary based on setting, such as by teaching how to meet expectations for classrooms, hallways, and the lunchroom. School staff subsequently reinforce and acknowledge students being successful in following these expectations with rewards and incentives. While there is a positive focus, there is also a range of logical consequences for problematic behavior.[39] Tracking discipline data to identify the challenges and successes of the behavior program is also a critical component of PBIS.

Implementing PBIS programs requires specific training and support for adults. To understand how PBIS is working, educators analyze the types of behaviors, the students having challenges, and other key information. The program is typically led by a school PBIS team. Such teams include school counselors, teachers, administrators, and mental health experts, who bring a broad range of skills and can help train other adults.

Tier 2 of PBIS provides additional support to students who do not stay on track with the initial level of the program. Adults provide these students additional tools, such as regular one-on-one meetings with adult mentors or small groups meetings to build skills to avoid negative behaviors.[40] Students receiving the second level of support are also more closely supervised, with data collected frequently. Educators on a school PBIS team are more likely to work with these students to help figure out what supports would help them be successful.

Tier 3 responds to students with the greatest need for additional support, and those who are not responding to the first two levels. Tier 3 of PBIS provides an intensive individualized behavior plan, developed with mental health professionals.[41] Support plans have several components, including addressing the context around students, working to prevent issues, and increased behavior reinforcement, such as specialized incentives. As with the second level, educators frequently monitor the students receiving the most intense support.

Results from Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support

There has been encouraging evidence from multiple rigorous studies of PBIS. All three levels of PBIS have had positive impacts on school behavior, helping to prevent problem incidents. PBIS has also had other positive benefits, such as reducing the number of kids sent out of class, reducing the number of suspensions, strengthening student relationships with supportive adults, and improving academic outcomes.

The first level of PBIS has shown several positive benefits. School personnel implementing Tier 1 of PBIS in a rigorous study reported having more positive school cultures where educators believed their efforts with students were effective.[42] Additionally, over half a dozen rigorous studies show connections between school-wide PBIS and reduced discipline incidents and referrals.[43] One study followed a set of elementary schools implementing Tier 1 PBIS for 5 years in comparison to control group schools. This study found schools were able to effectively implement PBIS, that problem behaviors were reduced, fewer students were sent out of class to administrators, and that the program reduced out-of-school suspension.[44] Schools implementing this level of PBIS also saw somewhat increased academic performance, though this was not only from the behavior program. These schools effectively used the additional academic time to boost achievement.

The second level of PBIS support has also shown success. One of these targeted support programs, Check and Connect, is a support system where teachers nominate students with behavior challenges for increased assistance. The support includes relationship building with adults, frequent monitoring, developing strategies to solve behavior incidents, and reengaging kids with school. Several studies of Check and Connect have found enhanced student engagement, reduced problem behaviors, improved academic outcomes, as well as a reduced probability of students dropping out.[45]

Research has also connected the third and final level of PBIS, individualized interventions for the students at the greatest risk, to better behavior, although not all of these approaches have been studied within schools.[46]

Case Study—North Carolina's PBIS Initiative

PBIS programs have reached large scale in several states across the country, such as North Carolina. This example offers insight for how Massachusetts could pursue PBIS or similar methods to improve school discipline.

Beginning with a single school using PBIS in 2000, North Carolina had over 1,100 schools using PBIS a decade later in 2012 (46 percent of all schools across North Carolina).[47] This significant growth was supported by building state and local capacity as well as dedicating federal funding.[48] At the state level, North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction (DPI) put in place a statewide leadership

team, head PBIS official, and eight regional coordinators. These staff in turn supported local school facilitators and coaches who brought PBIS to individual communities with local educators. The support provided by the North Carolina PBIS initiative includes regional and state conferences and workshops, interagency working groups, boot camps to prepare PBIS trainers at schools, professional development, and connections with community partners.[49]

While the North Carolina PBIS program reached large numbers of schools, some have adopted the approach in greater depth than others. The state uses a research-based evaluation tool developed by PBIS experts to gauge how well schools have implemented each part of the program. These components include defining and teaching expectations, creating reward and violation systems, monitoring student data, and providing leadership and district support.[50] Even as statewide PBIS grew, participating North Carolina schools on average achieved high levels of implementation. However, high schools in general have lagged behind the elementary and middle schools.[51] Additionally, as of 2012-2013, only 50 percent of all participating schools had fully met North Carolina's implementation criteria.[52]

North Carolina developed rigorous standards for schools utilizing PBIS. In 2007-2008, North Carolina began a recognition program to identify the most effective PBIS schools. Schools were evaluated on factors, such as the training offered to staff, complete data recording, and scores on the PBIS implementation tool.[53] Between 2007 and 2013 the number of recognition schools under this program grew from 68 to 476 (roughly 40 percent of all North Carolina PBIS schools in 2013).[54]

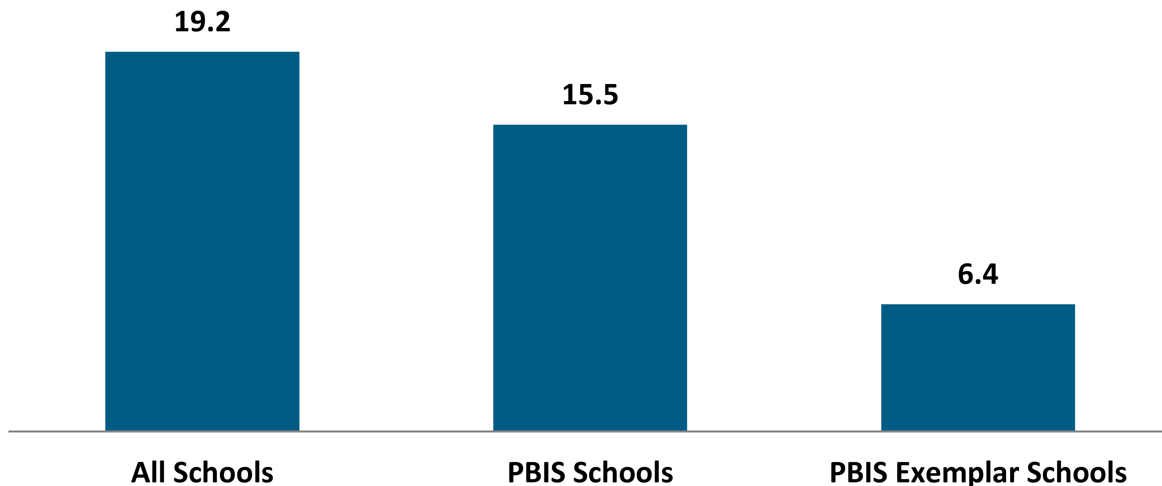
There have been encouraging results from the North Carolina PBIS initiative, particularly for schools that more fully implemented the program. In 2013, schools that met baseline standards for the program had lower out of school suspension rates compared to state averages.[55] North Carolina also reported somewhat higher academic scores on average for exemplar schools, the best at implementing PBIS among recognition schools.[56] Finally, North Carolina also reported slightly higher graduation rates at PBIS schools, with more gains coming at the schools best implementing the approach.

Within individual schools and districts, significant improvements in behavior and other positive outcomes have been connected to North Carolina's PBIS initiative. Gamewell Middle School, located in a rural county in western North Carolina, has implemented PBIS since 2007. Over the subsequent five years, Gamewell exhibited numerous positive results, such as increased attendance and a 65 percent reduction in out of school suspensions.[57] Reducing discipline challenges with PBIS was also part of increasing reading proficiency from 44 to 67 percent and math proficiency from 61 to 78 percent over four years.[58]

PBIS programs in North Carolina have shown evidence of contributing to reduced suspension rates (see chart below). Overall, North Carolina had an out of school suspension rate of over 19 students for each 100 enrolled in 2012-2013, however this rate declined to 15 students for schools implementing PBIS, and 6 students for exemplar schools.

North Carolina's PBIS Schools Have Lower Suspension Rates

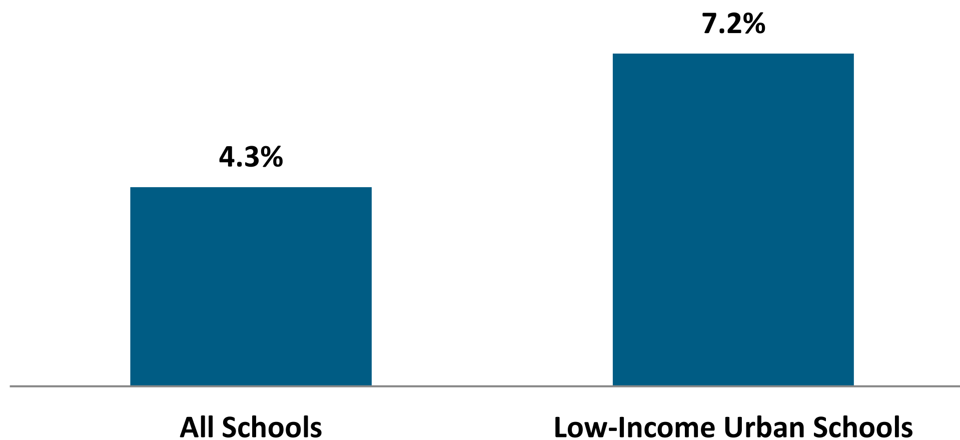
Number of students receiving out-of-school suspension, per 100 enrolled, in various North Carolina schools, 2012-2013



Source: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

While North Carolina's PBIS initiative is a positive example, it is important to consider key differences between Massachusetts and North Carolina. North Carolina reports its discipline rates differently than Massachusetts. North Carolina may count multiple suspensions of a single student towards its figures. North Carolina's student demographics are also more similar to students in Massachusetts' large urban districts. In 2015-2016, 51 percent of all public school kids in North Carolina were students of color, and 52 percent were identified as low-income through participation in free and reduced price meals.[59] This compares to 37 percent of all Massachusetts kids in 2015-2016 who were students of color, along with 27 percent identified as low-income through school meals.[60]

The overall discipline rate in Massachusetts in 2015-2016 was 4.3 percent.[61] However, 7.2 percent of students were disciplined in the nineteen large urban districts that serve the majority of kids in poverty across Massachusetts (see chart below).[62]



Given the differences between the two states, a program at the statewide scale of North Carolina's PBIS initiative may not be necessary for the Commonwealth. Instead, similarly effective structures for state oversight, training of local schools, and the diffusion of PBIS and similar practices, could be targeted more narrowly.

The Cost of PBIS Implementation

PBIS programs in North Carolina began with implementation at a single pilot school in 2000, followed by roughly 15 others over the first several years.[63] Data from university researchers and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction provide insights on both the effectiveness and the costs of the initial pilot site.

Evidence from North Carolina suggests that the first PBIS pilot program served large numbers of low-income and students of color and that the site was successful in reducing suspension rates. After the first year of implementation of PBIS the initial pilot site, Oak Grove Elementary in the city of Durham, had a decrease of roughly 50 percent in the number of students suspended and a decline of 30 percent in discipline referrals.[64] The school population during this period was 65 percent African-American, 25 percent White, and 5 percent Hispanic/Latino, with 40 percent of the students receiving free or reduced price meals.[65]

Oak Grove Elementary received a pilot grant of $88,000, along with some other support provided by the state of North Carolina, to provide its program for 960 students.[66] However, these costs would be greater if adapted today in Massachusetts due to inflation and regional price differences. After accounting for these cost differences, the same program could be expected to cost $142,000 in

Massachusetts in 2017.[67] This suggests current per student costs of $148 a year for a school level PBIS program in Massachusetts.

The costs at a single site, though useful for projecting adding PBIS at a school, is not fully reflective of the costs that the state of North Carolina incurred to support of local schools. As mentioned above, North Carolina created a leadership team within its state education agency that consisted of a head PBIS official and 8 regional coordinators. A similar team would likely be necessary to successfully oversee implementation of similar efforts in Massachusetts. However, given differences in the two states and the likely smaller number of schools that would be targeted to receive support, such a team would likely consist of fewer staff.

Data on North Carolina's costs for state oversight of PBIS are not available. Instead, we estimate state oversight costs using figures from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education that a smaller team of state agency personnel (4 staff as opposed to 9 in North Carolina) would cost roughly $476,000 when accounting for salary, benefits, and overhead costs.[68] Since a Massachusetts PBIS team would be supporting multiple schools, it is more difficult to assign these costs on a per-student basis. However, assuming a pilot program of similar size to North Carolina's in the first several years (16 schools) and student enrollment equal to the statewide average per-school across Massachusetts (516 children) such a program would serve over 8,200 kids. This would project the statewide administration cost of $58 per student.

Considering school-level costs together with state oversight yields a total estimate of $206 for a state administered PBIS program reaching 16 schools (see chart below). While this is a reasonable estimate of the state and local level costs of PBIS, some resources would likely need to be dedicated at the district level. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, a PBIS program serving 10,000 kids would require a district staff person dedicated to training, and nearly another full time position dedicated to administrative oversight and providing added support to schools dealing with acute challenges in their PBIS program.[69]

Adapting North Carolina PBIS Program to Massachusetts Would Cost $206 Per-Student

Element	Annual Cost Per-Student
PBIS Pilot Grant (North Carolina model with inflation and regional adjustment to Massachusetts)	**$148**
Estimated State Administration Cost for PBIS (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education)	**$58**
Total Annual Cost for PBIS	**$206**

Restorative Justice (RJ)

One of the discipline alternatives taking hold in schools today is a set of practices called Restorative Justice (RJ). Several communities and school districts across the country have undertaken this approach in recent years.[70] Restorative Justice shifts the focus of discipline from punishing student offenders to acknowledging the wrongdoing and its impact on victims, the wider community, and the offender themselves.

Within Restorative Justice, when discipline issues occur, students, school staff, and community members work together to discuss the impact of the issues, to understand how different parties were harmed, and to agree on an appropriate disciplinary response. Through a facilitated discussion, often in a circle or conference, affected students and community members hold others accountable. Instead of accountability through a suspension, restorative dialogues result in shared plans to prevent future issues and to repair harm. The action steps flowing from a RJ approach can include formal apologies, behavior agreements, community service, or other meaningful steps.

Restorative Justice has potential advantages over exclusionary discipline. Bringing stakeholders into the process can potentially increase ownership, making more young people believe that the discipline is legitimate. The process of restorative dialogues can be a learning experience for students with behavior problems, providing them with tools to solve issues and an understanding of the impact of their actions on others. This can give students skills and insights to handle future conflicts, which is not as likely to happen just from being away from school for a period of time. RJ still leaves suspension and

other traditional sanctions as options if situations are severe or if students and community members are uncooperative.

While there are upsides to employing Restorative Justice, there is also significant work for districts and educators to put the approach in place. It takes time, training, and resources to shift from exclusionary approaches to RJ. A recent review of schools using Restorative Justice across the country found that implementation requires significant and dedicated funding.[71] These resources are necessary in part to provide appropriate professional development that allows educators to become expert RJ facilitators on top of other duties.[72] Additionally, this review showed that Restorative Justice takes time to integrate into school culture. RJ benefits from being a part of formal policy and procedures with the buy-in of teachers and administrators.

Results from Restorative Justice

As it stands, the evidence on the effectiveness of Restorative Justice is emerging. Nearly all of the existing studies of RJ have shown positive results. However, these studies lacked control or comparison groups, making it hard to be fully confident with the results.[73] Other trends happening at the same time could be affecting schools as well. Nevertheless, the preliminary research findings should be considered. Restorative Justice has been associated with improved school climate, decreases in racial disparities in discipline, overall drops in suspensions, as well as reduced fighting and bullying.[74] This provides promise for future studies to test the impact of RJ under controlled conditions.

There are also examples of schools that have not coupled the goals of Restorative Justice with the training, support, and resources necessary to make it effective. In 2015, Los Angeles Unified School District struggled to effectively implement Restorative Justice, because it tried to expand across too many schools rapidly, and didn't provide the necessary training.[75] However, even in this example where RJ faced challenges, educators reported that with appropriate training and support, the move to reduce suspensions through RJ could be effective.

Case Study - Denver Public Schools Restorative Justice Initiative

Denver Public Schools (DPS) in Colorado has created one of the most successful Restorative Justice initiatives of the past several years. Like many communities around the country, Denver saw a rapid rise in discipline incidents between 2001 and 2005.[76] Denver had a unique situation, with one of the worst incidents of deadly school violence taking place in a nearby community in 1999. However, a move to harsher discipline intended to enhance school safety began to have negative side effects. Starting with one pilot school in 2003, the Denver Public Schools Restorative Justice Initiative grew over time, particularly focusing on schools with the greatest behavior challenges and racial gaps in suspensions.

Denver's Cole Middle School was the site of the original Restorative Justice pilot because of notorious suspensions, arrests, and a negative school culture with widespread violence.[77] A community organization called the Victim-Offender-Restoration Program came into the school to support Restorative Justice. It offered mediation between students who had broken school rules and those affected by them, where parties worked on repairing harms and empowering those affected.[78] There were larger community circles when issues involved many conflicting parties and situations. In the early years of RJ, there was significant success in diverting issues away from suspension. In the first

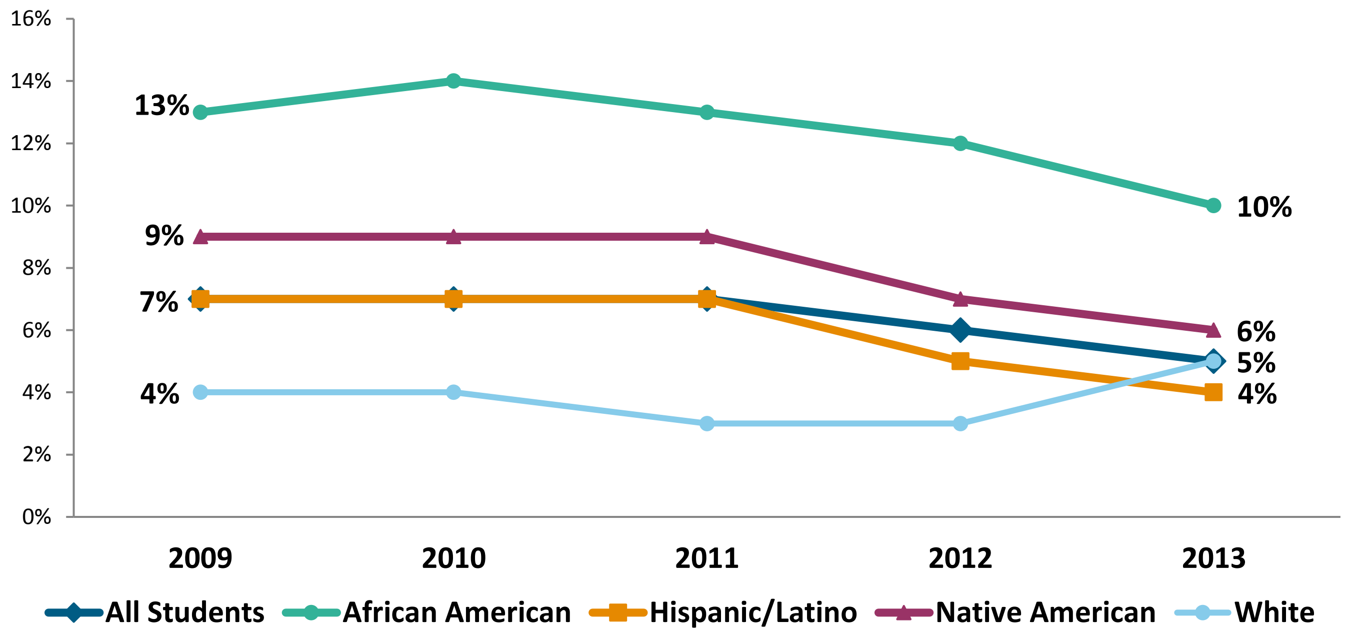
year, 11 of 14 cases of fighting were shifted to Restorative Justice and community agreements were reached in all of those cases.[79]

Due to this success, the Cole Middle School program was expanded and formally integrated into the school's discipline process. In 2004, the second year of the pilot program, 95 students were referred to Restorative Justice instead of suspension. Over 80 percent of those students were able to come to terms with other community members on agreements to rectify the issues. By the end of the pilot, police citations within the school declined by 86 percent and suspension by over 40 percent, and a previously troubled school was recognized for outstanding school safety.[80]

The initial successful effort led to expansion of Restorative Justice in Denver. District-wide discipline reforms in 2007 and 2008 led to Restorative Justice training for additional schools, increased central office support, and a focus on reducing racial discipline gaps.[81] These reforms did not eliminate suspensions, but reduced them and placed them within the restorative framework. Results from the program over several years were encouraging. Between 2008 and 2013, Denver's overall suspension rate decreased, as well as for subgroups of young people (see chart below).[82] However, racial gaps affecting young people of color were still present, and did not consistently decline.

Suspension Rates & Some Racial Disparities Declined in Denver After Restorative Justice

Share of Denver Public Schools students suspended, 2008-2009 through 2012-2013



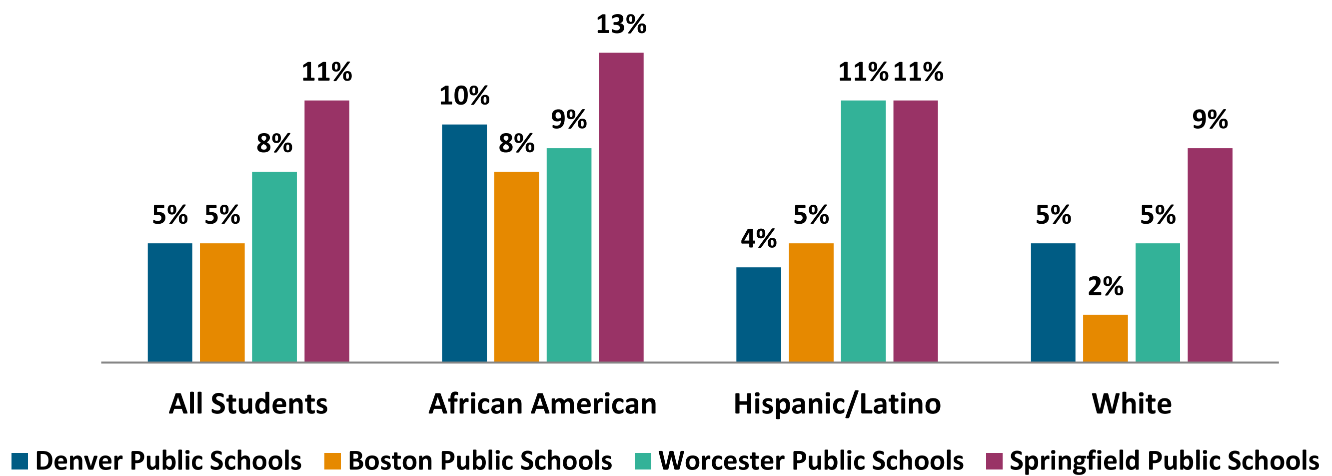
Source: Denver University & Denver Public Schools

There is no evidence from Denver's Restorative Justice initiative that academic performance was harmed by shifting from traditional approaches to RJ. In fact, there were moderate increases in academic scores over the same period. Scores increased across most grade levels and subject areas, including reading, writing, and math, while there were increases in the number of high school students graduating on time.[83] However, because there was no comparison group or controlled study, these impacts may be coincidental or related to other policies.

Suspension rates in Denver after implementing Restorative Justice and other discipline reforms compare favorably to the rates in large urban districts in Massachusetts after our Chapter 222 reform. After its RJ program was rolled out, Denver had lower overall discipline rates relative to schools in two of Massachusetts' largest cities, Worcester and Springfield in 2015-2016 (see chart below).[84] Boston Public Schools had similar discipline rates as Denver, suggesting that Boston has made more progress in addressing suspension rates.

Suspension Rates Higher in MA Large Urban Districts Than Denver's After RJ

Share of students suspended, Denver Public Schools 2012-2013, compared to Boston, Springfield, and Worcester, 2015-2016



Source: Denver University & Denver Public Schools, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Lessons on Successfully Expanding Restorative Justice from Denver Public Schools

Denver Public Schools has been a positive example showing that Restorative Justice has the potential to keep more young people in school, while improving school climate. Successful rollout of Restorative Justice practices in Denver provides tangible lessons. Research from the University of Denver pointed to several key pillars that led to the success.[85] These include:

- **Leadership Vision and Commitment –** School leaders and administrators concluded that exclusionary responses to misbehavior were ineffective and embraced RJ as an alternative.[86] This was a practical response to having the same students being suspended repeatedly and returning to school resentful and without the skills to prevent future problems. It wasn't necessary that principals participated directly in Restorative Justice, but they had to believe in the approach and communicate its importance to staff.

- **Staff Buy-In –** After some initial resistance to RJ among teachers in several Denver schools, principals received staff feedback and integrated their suggested adjustments. This process provided an opportunity to bring staff together and give teachers leeway in adapting

Restorative Justice to their classrooms. Progress with some teachers and positive results for students with behavior challenges increased staff buy-in.

- **Professional Development –** Training teachers on any new discipline approach is essential. Denver Public Schools provided significant, ongoing training on RJ practices, including several full-day trainings before the school year and regular "booster" sessions throughout. The focus of these sessions was hands on, working through reflection and feedback, responding to likely scenarios, and modeling approaches to handle conflict.[87] Professional development was not limited to classroom teachers, but also included office, support, and operational staff, such as custodians and bus drivers. This process led to having greater capacity at individual schools to train and support others, though outside support was available for challenging situations.

- **Integration into Behavior Policies and Structures –** Instead of being considered an isolated initiative, Restorative Justice was situated within school behavior policies.[88] Notably, these schools integrated preventative and positive behavior approaches, such as PBIS, culturally responsive instruction, and another similar system, with RJ.

- **Full-Time Restorative Justice Coordinators –** Given the additional duties required of educators using RJ, research found that full-time RJ coordinators were necessary to sustain the initiative.[89] These coordinators were tasked with building relationships across schools, facilitating conferences and mediations, following up on reparative agreements, and providing coaching to staff. Participating schools also featured teams of educators who focused on overseeing RJ, reviewed cases, monitored progress, and communicated with staff across their schools.

The Cost of RJ Implementation in Denver Public Schools

The Restorative Justice program in Denver Public Schools has grown from successful demonstration sites, into a district-wide initiative. This experience offers insight into what other large urban districts in Massachusetts would need to create RJ programs.

According to administrative data from Denver Public Schools, in the 2016-2017 school year, the district employed 44 individuals at 45 schools to implement Restorative Justice.[90] These were primarily full-time staff, most of whom (30 out of 44) were designated Restorative Practice Coordinators tasked with implementing RJ at the school level. Not all schools used this approach. Others have assigned RJ responsibilities to aides, student advisors, deans, classroom teachers, parent liaisons, counselors, social workers, or principals. These individuals are similarly trained in RJ practices and support other staff at their schools.

In 2016-2017, Denver Public Schools staffing costs for RJ leaders was $2.0 million.[91] These costs were spread out across 45 schools serving roughly 21,000 students.[92] Thus the costs are $95 per student. When analyzing by school, this funding amounts to $45,000 for each of the 45 schools involved. The participating schools have populations that are 82 percent low-income, 49 percent English Language Learners, and 13 percent students with special needs.[93]

Denver Restorative Justice Program Costs $95 Per-Student

Total Cost of Denver Public Schools RJ (2016-2017)	Total Students in RJ Schools (2016-2017)	Per-Student Cost of Denver RJ
$2,024,903	**21,230**	**$95**

Conclusions

There are many effective policy reforms that could help advance positive culture and behavior in schools across the Commonwealth. North Carolina's Positive Behavior Support program, Denver's Restorative Justice initiative, and other examples already at work in Massachusetts, provide useful lessons. These approaches have shown the ability to make important strides to create learning environments that facilitate kids staying on track. This has been achieved by providing teachers relevant training, exploring new ways to respond to behavior to drive down suspensions, and making school discipline more fair and attuned to the diverse needs of kids.

Schools across Massachusetts can consider weaving together the best elements of several promising discipline reform initiatives into a cohesive set of alternative practices. The ability to craft plans that are the best fit for local conditions, with the input of educators, community members, and youth will be critical.

Success in discipline reforms requires collaboration among the state, local school districts, and expert practitioners, along with sustained resources. None of the promising school discipline reforms discussed above have been undertaken without considering dedicated personnel, training, staff expertise, community engagement, and administrative oversight. All of these elements require focused attention and resources to be successful. Some efforts, such as the Los Angeles Restorative Justice program that expanded too rapidly and failed to provide adequate training, have faltered with insufficient resources.

However, given the significant costs that we face as a society when young people are not successfully supported in completing their education, and the modest cost of alternative programs, discipline reform has the potential to be a more effective approach. Promising discipline reforms can help create schools with supportive culture, clear expectations, and school climates where more of our young people can be successful. Progress so far under the Massachusetts discipline reform law provides a note of optimism that with appropriate support, further advances are possible in the years to come.

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