



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGISTS

Effective School Discipline Policy and Practice: Supporting Student Learning

Effective school discipline is critical to promoting students' successful learning and well-being. Effective practices ensure the safety and dignity of all students and staff, preserve the integrity of the learning environment, and address the causes of a student's misbehavior in order to improve positive behavioral skills and long-term outcomes. Specifically, effective school discipline:

- is viewed within the context of a learning opportunity and seeks to teach and reinforce positive behaviors to replace negative behaviors;
- is clear, consistent, and equitably applied to all students;
- employs culturally competent practices;
- safeguards the well-being of all students and staff;
- keeps students in school and out of the juvenile justice system; and
- incorporates family involvement.

In contrast, purely punitive "get tough" approaches such as zero tolerance policies do not work. They simply suppress unwanted behavior temporarily while increasing negative consequences, such as reduced perceptions of safety and connectedness among students and the perpetuation of the school-to-prison pipeline. While the robust research on the negative effects of overly harsh discipline has grown exponentially in recent years, it has been known for decades¹.

One evidence-based approach that has demonstrated broad success in many different school contexts across the country is positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS). The PBIS approach operates within a multitiered system of supports (MTSS) framework that encompasses universal prevention and skills building, early identification and intervention, and targeted supports for learning and behavioral concerns. This approach has proven instrumental in enabling schools to shift from ineffective punitive discipline to more effective positive discipline that functions in concert with efforts to support students' mental health and promote positive school climate and safety.

Legislative Priorities

School safety, positive school climate, and effective discipline practices are key components of a successful school. One of the most important investments we can make in improving student outcomes and stopping the school-to-prison pipeline is to support public policies that:

- promote a shift to more effective positive discipline;
- ensure safe, supportive conditions for learning;
- provide comprehensive and coordinated learning supports to address student social-emotional wellness, positive behavior, and academic achievement;
- provide training and support for teachers and other school personnel; and
- ensure access to specialized instructional support personnel.

Several pieces of legislation have been introduced in the 113th Congress directly address these policy priorities.

Mental Health Awareness and Improvement Act of 2013 S. 689. This bill would allow states to use Title I funds to expand the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports and early intervening services to improve student academic achievement and behavior.

Safe Schools Improvement Act of 2013, H.R. 1199 & S. 403. This bill establishes policies that prohibit bullying and harassment in schools. It also encourages the use of positive and preventative approaches to school discipline that minimize students' removal from instruction.

Partnerships for Achieving Student Success Act (Introduced April 16). This bill would authorize grant funding for university–school district partnerships to increase the number of school psychologists, counselors, and social workers in schools.

Student Support Act, H.R. 320. Allows for grants to increase the number of school mental health services providers—like school psychologists, social workers, and counselors—in order to provide more early intervention and prevention services.

Youth PROMISE Act, H.R. 1318. Enables communities, in collaboration with schools, social services, mental health providers, and other community stakeholders, to develop coordinated prevention and intervention strategies to target students at risk of entering the juvenile justice system.

Selected Supporting Research

Fair and Consistent Discipline

- Consistent enforcement of school discipline and the availability of caring adults are associated with less bullying and victimization, suggesting that discipline practices should not be polarized into a “get tough” versus “give support” debate because both contribute to adolescents' healthy functioning².
- Students who perceive greater fairness and clarity of rules in their schools exhibit less delinquent behavior and experience less student victimization^{3,4}.
- Students view teachers as reacting to classroom misbehavior by increasing coercive discipline, which inhibits the development of responsibility in students⁵. More school rules and higher perceived strictness predict more disruptive behavior in school—not less, and more severe punishments generate defiance among certain youth⁶.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

- School-wide behavior management that is implemented by supportive leadership and dedicated and collegial staff can help minimize the risks for youth delinquency⁷.
- Positive behavioral interventions and supports have been shown to significantly reduce student suspensions, office discipline referrals⁸, tardiness, unexcused absences⁹, bullying, and feelings of rejection among students¹⁰, while improving academic performance^{11,12}.
- School-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports are associated with more equitable discipline practices among students from all racial and ethnic backgrounds¹³.
- The more family and community involvement activities are implemented, the fewer students are disciplined by being sent to principals' offices or given detention or in-school suspension. Thus, creating more connections and greater cooperation among the school, family, and community contexts helps schools to improve student behavior and school discipline¹⁴.

Social and Emotional Development

- Students who participate in school-based social and emotional learning programs show significant improvement in social and emotional skills, caring attitudes, and positive social behaviors, and a decline in disruptive behavior and emotional distress¹⁵.

- Social and emotional learning programs have significant preventive effects on rates of aggression, social competence, and academic engagement in the elementary school years¹⁶.

School-Based Mental Health Services

- School-based mental health services are integral to students' success because mental health directly affects children's learning and development¹⁷.
- School-based mental health services in elementary schools have been found to reduce special education referrals and improve aspects of the school climate¹⁸.
- Reduced absences, discipline referrals¹⁹, and conduct problems are evident in children with severe emotional and behavioral difficulties when school-based mental health services are available²⁰.

School-Employed Specialized Instructional Support Personnel

- More support personnel are needed to support teachers, who cite student discipline problems²¹, lack of student motivation²², and issues with workplace conditions or the administration²³ as reasons for leaving the profession—issues that specialized instructional support personnel are trained to address.
- School psychologists work with teachers and administrators to collect and analyze data on risk and protective factors related to student outcomes²⁴, and there is evidence that addressing these factors in schools promotes children's well-being and resilience²⁵.
- Data from nearly 500 studies indicate that the impact of promotion and prevention interventions is at least two to three times higher when programs are carefully implemented by qualified personnel who have expert knowledge of the relevant issues being addressed²⁶.

Zero Tolerance Policies

- Zero tolerance policies strengthen the link between schools and prisons^{27,28}, and they negatively impact a disproportionately large number of minority students²⁹.
- Empirical evidence has not shown zero tolerance policies to be effective in reducing violence or promoting learning. In fact, they can inhibit academic achievement and increase problem behaviors and dropout rates among middle and secondary school students^{30,31}.
- Zero tolerance policies ignore adolescents' lapses in judgment—a normal part of their development, potentially resulting in more severe punishment than is warranted and exacerbating the normal challenges of adolescence^{32,33}.

Suspension, Expulsion, and Office Disciplinary Referrals

- Student discipline is increasingly viewed by American schools as a crime control issue³⁴, with many states criminalizing student misbehavior and referring students to the juvenile justice system for infractions that were once handled in the schools^{35,36,37}.
- In Texas, more than 275,000 nontraffic tickets are issued to juveniles each year, the vast majority for common school-related misbehavior³⁸. And tens of thousands of Texas students have been placed at least once in juvenile justice alternative education programs³⁹.
- Suspension and expulsion are often administered unfairly and they increase the likelihood of students' poor academic performance and dropping out of school⁴⁰, while having no measurable deterrent effect or academic benefit⁴¹. Even worse, there is a direct link between suspension and expulsion and the likelihood of being sentenced to prison⁴².

- More than 3,328,000 students were suspended and more than 102,000 expelled from public elementary and secondary schools in 2006⁴³. Overall, more than 29% of all public school students in grades 9–12 in 2007 had ever been suspended or expelled.
- Referring students to the juvenile justice system can actually increase their involvement in serious delinquency⁴⁴.
- Disciplinary actions are harsher and employed more frequently with minority students. In 2007, 49% of Black students and 27% of Hispanic students were suspended or expelled, compared to 15% of White students⁴⁵. Black students are also more than twice as likely in elementary school and nearly four times as likely in middle school to be referred to the principal's office for problem behaviors⁴⁶.

Endnotes

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