Falling Through the Cracks:

Disparities in Out-of-School Suspension in St. Louis at the Intersection of Race, Disability, and Gender

By:

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Alexis Duncan, PhD
Jennifer Kocher
Pranav Nandan
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FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS
About The Authors

**Karishma Furtado, MPH**, is the Research and Data Catalyst at Forward Through Ferguson and a doctoral candidate in Public Health Sciences at Washington University in St. Louis. She works at the intersection of race, racism, health, and policy and systems change. She received a great public school education from kindergarten through 12th grade and believes every child is entitled to a similarly nurturing, welcoming, and enriching experience.

**Alexis Duncan, MPH, PhD**, is an Associate Professor of Public Health at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis, where she does research on the epidemiology of mental illness and teaches courses on research methods. She began advocating for alternatives to suspension when her children with disabilities entered grade school and she began to experience the devastating effects of out-of-school suspension on children and families first-hand.

**Jennifer Kocher** Jennifer Kocher participated in the Fred Saigh Parent Leadership Institute and in Missouri’s Partners in Policymaking program about disability inclusion. She promotes equity for students of color with disabilities through the West County Community Action Network (WE CAN). Having been a 2e student, she hopes all children experience opportunities to meet challenging objectives like she did. To general education teachers who actively support disability inclusion: she sees you and appreciates you.

**Pranav Nandan** is a Master of Public Health candidate at the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis, a Research Assistant to Dr. Duncan, and a Research Fellow at Forward Through Ferguson. His interest in equitable education stems from his experience as a teaching fellow where he witnessed the human impact of unjust policy. As he pursues a career in healthcare, he hopes to continue researching education disparities and exploring their relationship to health.

Acknowledgments

We would like to sincerely thank Gary Parker Associate Dean for External Affairs at The Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis; Mary McKay, Dean of The Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis; Washington University’s American Cultural Studies Department; Tim Poor, Publications Editor at the Brown School’s Health Communication Research Laboratory, Washington University in St. Louis; Research Assistant Sarah van Alsten, Joy Weese Moll of WE CAN ASSIST, and Ann Frey of WE CAN ASSIST for their support of this project. Design by Jessica Payne, Osiyo Design + Engagement.

A high-quality education is critical to lifelong well-being. But such an education is far from guaranteed in the St. Louis region, and whether or not a child receives one can all too often be predicted by his or her race and other characteristics. Out-of-school suspension (OSS) is a serious form of school-based discipline that affects the quality of a child’s education. OSS is widely used inequitably, leading to “discipline gaps.” Black students, males, and students with disabilities are all more likely to receive an OSS.

However, zooming in on one characteristic like race, sex, or disability status paints a misleading picture. Students — and people in general — are more than just one thing, more than just one identity. When we look at characteristics simultaneously, we can see that students with some combinations of these characteristics are far more likely to be suspended than it appears when we look at these characteristics one at a time. In this study, we looked at how race, sex, and disability status intersected to impact rates of out-of-school suspension among K-12 students in the 2015-16 school year in 30 school districts in the St. Louis region.

What we learned was deeply troubling.

What We Found

When looking at factors one at a time, being Black, male, or having a disability all placed students at greater risk of OSS. While our findings are similar to those from previous studies, the St. Louis region’s racial discipline gap is especially large compared with state1 and national2 numbers.

When we look at all three factors (race, sex, and disability) together, the picture becomes especially grim. Although White girls with a disability were only 1.4 times as likely to receive an OSS than the least at-risk students, White girls with no disabilities, White boys without a disability were 2.7 times more likely to receive an OSS. White boys with a disability were 9.1 times more likely. Black girls without a disability were 11.0 times more likely. Black girls with a disability were 18.1 times more likely. Black boys without a disability were 18.3 times more likely. The most at-risk students, Black boys with disabilities, were an astonishing 24.6 times more likely than White girls with no disability.

The magnitude of the combined effect of race, sex, and disability on risk of OSS in the St. Louis region (a 24.6-fold increase in risk) is astronomically high and nearly unheard of in public health. A person could smoke a pack of cigarettes every day for 30 years and face a lower risk of getting lung cancer than the risk of OSS for a Black boy with a disability. In some districts, Black boys with disabilities are 40-, 50-, even 60 times more likely to get an OSS than a White girl without a disability.

Why It Matters

The discipline gap is unfair, ineffective, and highly costly. It’s easy to think that kids who are suspended deserve it, that the suspension makes them
less likely to misbehave in the future, and that it’s someone else’s problem anyway. But each of those thoughts is flawed. A lot of research shows that:

- The way we enforce rules and assign penalties like OSS is biased. Differences in rates of misbehavior do not explain the difference in the rates of suspension.\(^3\)

- Suspension is not effective at preventing future misbehavior. Most students suspended once go on to be suspended again.\(^4\)

- The cost of the discipline gap lies in the billions of dollars. Lost education time and increased risk of incarceration lead to diminished productivity and income long into adulthood.\(^5\)

Every time a child is pushed out of the classroom, his or her chances of future success — in school and beyond — diminish. Children belong in school. By pushing out some kids far more than others, discipline gaps feed lifelong disparities in income, health, wealth, incarceration and more.

Students with disabilities receive valuable services in school, making the loss of classroom time even more damaging. As education law and policy expert Daniel Losen explains, “That is why the huge racial difference in the amount of instruction time lost suggests that Black students with disabilities face an especially grave problem.”\(^6\) Missouri’s racial gap in days lost to OSS by children with disabilities is the 4th largest in the country.\(^6\)

**What We Can Do**

These kinds of disparities don’t happen by accident or simply because of individual bad actors. They are the result of systems, policies, and practices. Closing the discipline gaps will require intentional policy and systems change.

**We have identified three categories of strategies for educators to reduce the discipline gap:**

- **Reducing disparities in administering discipline.** Even if the overall need for and number of suspensions decreases, disparities will likely continue unless action is taken to reduce biased thoughts and actions related to race, gender, and disability among teachers, administrators, and other school staff.

- **Promoting alternatives to suspension.** Many school districts are experimenting with alternatives to suspension. These methods, collectively known as restorative practices, still hold students accountable for their behavior and can be beneficial to students, schools, and communities.

- **Preventing challenging behaviors.** The less challenging behavior occurs in schools, the less need there is for discipline. Many approaches are available, such as trauma-informed practices, that decrease the likelihood of challenging behaviors in students and complement the individualized supports that some students require.

**The success of any of the measures above will require that educators, leaders, and policymakers commit to raising the bar, not just checking the box.** We need to change our culture of education to prize equity. Living into a culture of trying will require a dedication to continual learning by:

- **Choosing** programs that are evidence-based when possible;

- **Reporting** accurate, timely, and unbiased data; and

- **Disaggregating** data by characteristics, like race, sex, and disability status individually as well as intersectionally to understand what is working (or not) and for whom
The Injury of OSS

Students suspended (OSS) for the first time were:

... **8%** less likely to graduate from high school

... **2.7x** more likely to be expelled

... **24%** less likely to graduate from college

... **40%** more likely to be arrested

... **94%** more likely to be arrested as a minor

... **3.8x** more likely to be convicted as a minor

... **23%** more likely to go to prison

... than similar* non-suspended students.

*Matched on 60 variables including gender, race, socioeconomic status, health and risk behavior, standardized test scores, and personality factors.

Most suspensions and expulsions are for non-violent behaviors. Below is a breakdown of reasons for suspension of expulsion in public schools in one state from 2008-2009:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disobedience</td>
<td>65.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truancy</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misc.</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theft</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vandalism</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance Abuse</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Disparities in OSS and Why We Should Care

For as long as they have existed, schools have played an active role as disciplinarians, managing student behavior using not only carrots but sticks (sometimes quite literally: some states, including Missouri, allow corporal punishment, like spanking). One of the more serious forms of discipline is suspension, when a student is removed from the classroom, often for multiple days. Suspensions can be either in-school (ISS) or out-of-school (OSS), with OSS being the more serious form of suspension. Despite its severity, OSS is commonly used. About 2.7 million public school students in the U.S. received at least one OSS in 2015-16.2

This is a problem.

The Injury and Ineffectiveness of OSS

First of all, research shows that OSS is harmful to students. OSS makes it harder for students to do well in school,7 it makes them more likely to feel unwelcome and unwanted in school,4 and it leads to lower interest in learning and participation in school activities.9 Students who receive OSS are more likely to drop out of school10 and even to end up in the juvenile or adult criminal justice system (also known as the “school-to-prison pipeline”).11 In addition to missed class time, students with disabilities who are given OSS also miss services, such as speech and language therapy, that they need to achieve their full potential in school and in adult life.6 When students with disabilities are given OSS for longer periods, upon their return to school they may be relegated to alternative classrooms where there is less focus on academics and they have less interaction with their typically-developing peers. This is a big concern because students with disabilities who are put in alternative classrooms are less prepared to live on their own when they are adults.12 Since education is strongly tied to lifelong well-being, by damaging students’ education, OSS does harm for years and years.13

Plus, OSS doesn’t seem to prevent future misbehavior. The majority of students who are suspended once go on to be suspended again — often within the same school year.4 This is hardly surprising: time off of school can feel more like a vacation than a punishment for many kids, especially if they didn’t like school to begin with.14 Suspension also doesn’t teach children appropriate behavior or address the reasons the misbehavior occurred in the first place. More and more, suspension is being recognized as an inappropriate disciplinary action that may do more harm than good. These harmful effects seem to be especially important for the youngest students. This is likely because early childhood is a critical developmental phase and a time when students are plugged into the services and supports that they need to thrive for years to come.15

The Inequity of OSS

Second, time and again, the data have shown that OSS is not used equitably. Some students are far more likely to be suspended than others. For example, Black students are 3-4 times more likely to receive OSS than their White classmates. This racial disparity is sometimes called the “discipline gap.” In Missouri the racial discipline gap is especially large. According to a 2015 study, in Missouri, the discipline gap at the elementary school level was larger than in any other state.18 It had the fourth-largest gap at the secondary school level.18 While the racial disparity is among the largest of the discipline gaps, it’s certainly not the only one. Boys are about 2 times more likely to be suspended than girls.2 Students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be suspended than students without disabilities.19

As shared above, kids who are pushed out of class due to OSS or for other reasons usually go on to do worse in school and are more likely to drop out, leading to lower incomes in adulthood and a higher chance of ending up in jail. In this way, discipline gaps feed into other disparities we see in education, income, wealth, and incarceration.10-13

The Complex Question of Why

The answer to the question of why discipline gaps exist is...complicated. We know it is not just that the students who tend to be suspended more misbehave more.3 We also know that school discipline policies tend to be pretty subjective. This can be a good thing when it allows school officials to take context and intent into consideration, but subjective policies can also allow bias to affect officials’ decisions. For example, studies have shown that teachers tend to discipline Black students more harshly than White students for the same behavior.21 Schools also may use OSS for children with disabilities in an attempt to manage challenging behavior, rather than amending their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs; see definitions on page 7) to better support the student and prevent the behavior in the future.12 Additionally, school discipline policies don’t encourage a full consideration of underlying causes, such as trauma or unmet basic needs. As scholar Jason Purnell explains, “a child who can’t hear, can’t see, hasn’t slept, can’t breathe, has been traumatized, hasn’t eaten, and doesn’t know where they’re going to sleep, doesn’t have the opportunity
Similarly, a child who has experienced all of these things may well struggle to sit in one place and pay attention to a lesson—a feat even the most nurtured children struggle with on occasion.

So, simply put, there is no simple explanation for the discipline gaps. There are causes at the student, teacher, school, household, and neighborhood levels. However, we cannot use complexity as an excuse for allowing the discipline gaps to persist. It is unacceptable that some groups of students are disproportionately experiencing the damaging consequences of OSS. And our research suggests that the inequities may be far worse than previously understood.

Marginalized Multiple Times Over

The problem with the way we’ve looked at the discipline gap so far is that no one is just one thing. Zooming in on race or sex or disability status alone ignores the fact that students occupy all of those identities—and many others—at the same time. When we don’t zoom out and see the whole child, we forget that the real-life risks for some kids are greater and more complicated than the simplified picture suggests. As this analysis shows, some students are experiencing shocking disparities in school discipline. This can have a profound impact on their education and well-being that lasts well into their adult lives.

Our Goal

Education is critical to lifelong well-being. We know this. But we also know that, in the United States, and especially in the St. Louis region, a high-quality education for all children is not a foregone conclusion and that, too often, who receives such an education and who does not fall along the lines of race, gender, disability, and many other factors. We want to add our voices to the growing chorus that these inequities are not acceptable and that we can do better if we work together. Specifically, we have three goals for this report:

- **Extending** the work of existing efforts (like the ACLU’s report from 2018, the Keep Kids in Class campaign to ban OSS among pre-K through 3rd grade, the Ferguson Commission’s call to action to do the same across the state, etc.) to make the case for leaning into complexity and intersectionality when considering the discipline gaps.
- **Providing** regional educators, policymakers, and advocates with specific, relatively timely information about intersectional discipline disparities in their school districts.
- **Advancing** regional efforts to achieve education equity.

**Definitions**

**Discipline Gap**

The “discipline gap” refers to the disproportionate rate at which some groups of students are disciplined in school compared to others. For example, Black students, boys, and students with disabilities are all more likely, on average, to be suspended than their White classmates, female classmates, or classmates without disabilities.

**Disability**

In this report, a “student with a disability” is a child who receives educational supports and services in school through an *Individualized Education Program (IEP)*. For a student to be eligible for an IEP, a group of education specialists must first determine that they have a disability listed in the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The IDEA lists 14 categories of disabilities, including learning disability (such as dyslexia), autism, and “emotional disturbance” (i.e. mental illness). In addition, the committee must believe that the student with the disability needs special education services to be able to achieve their full academic potential and to socialize with peers without disabilities. Nationwide, 14% of students ages 3-21 have IEPs, but notably, not all students with disabilities have IEPs.

**Implicit Bias**

Although people may not wish to be—or think that they are—biased, we all hold unconscious beliefs, attitudes, and stereotypes about certain groups that cause us to behave in a biased way without recognizing it. This phenomenon is called implicit bias.

**Intersectionality**

You will see us use the words “intersectional” and “intersectionality” throughout this report. The terms were coined in 1989 by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how characteristics like race, gender, and class “intersect” with one another. Crenshaw originally used the term to observe how the experiences of Black women could not be described using the language of sexism or racism alone, or described by simply adding the two together. We think Crenshaw’s work is a powerful reminder of the limitations of looking at characteristics one at a time but failing to recognize how they come together. When it is applied to the discipline gap and the characteristics of race, sex, and disability, we are reminded that looking at just one at a time is oversimplified at best. At its worst it can be flat-out false and negligent.

**Education Equity**

We define education equity as a state in which all students have what they need to thrive in school—a state in which their academic outcomes and experiences cannot be predicted by factors like their race, gender, or disability status.
What We Did

Every other year, the Office for Civil Rights in the federal Department of Education requires all public schools to participate in the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), a survey of education and civil rights indicators. We used publicly available data from the 2015-16 school year to investigate how race, sex, and disability came together to affect risk of OSS for kindergartners through 12th grade in the St. Louis region. We focused on the 30 public school districts primarily in St. Louis City, St. Louis County, and St. Charles County to align with the previous work by the Keep Kids in Class Coalition.

We used these data to calculate some key numbers: incidence and relative risk of OSS in and between racial, sex, and disability groups. Bear with us for a moment as we delve into some statistics—some of us are epidemiology instructors, after all. Incidence of OSS is the percentage of students in a given group who have been suspended. It can also be thought of as the risk or frequency of suspension in that group. For example, an incidence of OSS of 10 among White students means that for every 100 White students enrolled, 10 were suspended. Put another way, the risk of suspension among White students was 10%. We can use a statistic called the relative risk ratio, oftentimes shortened to the relative risk, or RR, if we want to compare the incidences between two groups. To compute the relative risk ratio, we divide the incidence in one group by the incidence in another group. This allows us to say that one group is more, less, or just as likely to experience an outcome as a second group. So, if the incidence of suspension among Black students is 20 and among White students it is 10, we can say that the relative risk of suspension of Black students compared to White students is 2 (20÷10). An RR of 2 means that Black students are two times more likely to be suspended than White students.

We calculated the incidence (or rate) and relative risk of suspension by race, sex, and disability as separate characteristics and all together for each of the districts as well as for all the districts together. We defined race, sex, and disability pretty simplistically. Race was broken down into Black, non-Hispanic vs. White, non-Hispanic. Other race/ethnic categories were not adequately represented in the large majority of school districts for statistics to be reliably calculated. Sex was defined as either male or female because that’s how the CRDC defines it. We defined students with disabilities as those with an IEP. (see definitions on previous page).
What We Found

We know that Black students are more likely to be suspended than White students, that boys are more likely to be suspended than girls, and that students with disabilities are more likely to be suspended than those without a disability. Our analysis confirms this.

But as Kimberlé Crenshaw encourages us to remember—and what we all know from our lived experiences—is that we occupy multiple identities simultaneously and seamlessly. Some studies have started looking at how race and disability work together to amplify a student’s risk of suspension. We are going to take that same logic one step further and add in sex.

Here are the numbers overall for the St. Louis region in the 2015-16 school year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>Females</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Males were 2.0x more likely to receive OSS than females
- Black students were 6.0x more likely to receive OSS than White students
- Students with a disability were 2.4x more likely than students without a disability

Each of these variables, race, sex, and disability have two categories (see What We Did for a brief explanation of why we had to simplify things in this way). That means students fall into one of eight groups:
So, how do these incidences compare to one another? Let's set the least at-risk sub-population as the comparison group: white girls without disabilities.

**Compared to White girls without disabilities...**

- White females with a disability: 1.4X more likely
- Black females with a disability: 18.3X more likely
- Black males with a disability: 24.6X more likely
- White males without a disability: 9.1X more likely
- White males with a disability: 18.1X more likely
- Black females without a disability: 11.0X more likely
- Black males without a disability: 10X more likely

Note: circle sizes are descriptive, not to scale.
Key Takeaways

When looking at factors one at a time, being Black (RR = 6.0), male (RR = 2.0), or having a disability (RR = 2.4) all place students at greater risk of OSS. While our findings agree with the literature, the St. Louis region’s racial discipline gap (RR = 6.0) is especially large compared with state and national numbers (RR = 4.5-5.0 and 2.0-3.0, respectively).

When we look at all three factors (race, sex, and disability) together, the picture becomes especially grim. White girls with a disability are 1.4 times as likely to be suspended than their counterparts with no disability. White males without a disability were 2.7 times more likely to receive an OSS than the least at-risk students, White girls with no disabilities. White boys with a disability were 9.1 times more likely. Black girls without a disability were 11.0 times more likely to receive an OSS than White girls without a disability. Black females with a disability were 18.1 times more likely. Black boys without a disability were 18.3 times more likely. The most at-risk students, Black boys with disabilities, were an astonishing 25 times more likely.

The magnitude of the combined effect of race, sex, and disability on risk of OSS in the St. Louis region (i.e., RR = 24.6) is astronomically high and nearly unheard of in public health. In some districts, Black boys with disabilities are 40-, 50-, even 60 times more likely to get an OSS than a White girl without a disability.

The discipline gap is unfair, ineffective, and highly costly.

Putting Things Into Context

Some of the authors of this report work in public health, where we look at the relationship between risk factors (e.g., sugar consumption) and health outcomes (e.g., diabetes). In our work, it’s rare to see relative risks greater than 4 or 5. To get a sense of how large the effects documented in this report are, consider this:

A man who smokes a pack of cigarettes per day for 30 years has 17x greater odds of developing lung cancer than a man who does not smoke. That means a man who smokes 219,000 cigarettes has a lower risk of getting lung cancer than a Black boy with a disability had of getting an OSS compared to a White girl without a disability in the 2015-2016 school year in the St. Louis region.

It’s easy to think that kids who are suspended deserve it, that the punishment makes them less likely to misbehave in the future, and that it’s someone else’s problem, anyway. But each of those thoughts is flawed. A lot of research shows that:

- **The way we enforce rules and assign penalties like OSS is biased.** Differences in rates of misbehavior do not explain the difference in the rates of suspension.
- **Suspension is not effective at preventing future misbehavior.** Most students suspended once go on to be suspended again.
- **The cost of the discipline gap lies in the billions of dollars.** Lost education time and increased risk of incarceration lead to diminished productivity and income long into adulthood.

Every time a child is pushed out of the classroom, his or her chances of future success—in school and beyond—diminish. By pushing some kids out far more than others, the discipline gaps are feeding lifelong disparities in income, health, wealth, incarceration and more.

Students with disabilities receive valuable services in school, making the loss of classroom time even more potentially damaging. As expert Daniel Losen explains, “That is why the huge racial difference in the amount of instruction time lost suggests that Black students with disabilities face an especially grave problem.” Missouri’s racial gap in days lost to OSS by children with IEPs is the 4th largest in the country.

In addition, we must continue to look for opportunities to apply an intersectional lens to how our education system (and other systems) treat various groups. Simply looking at one characteristic at a time will allow extreme disparities like the ones found here to persist.
### All School Districts

<table>
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<th>District Name</th>
<th>w/a Disability vs. w/o a Disability</th>
<th>Black vs. White</th>
<th>Boys vs. Girls</th>
<th>White boys vs. a disability</th>
<th>White girls vs. a disability</th>
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### Relative Risk of OSS

The numbers displayed in this table come from the 2015-16 publicly available Civil Rights Data Collection. All data are for students grades K-12.

**NOTE:** N/A is used to indicate a relative risk that had a 0 in either the numerator or the denominator and therefore could not be calculated.

### Key Points

- At this school district, the risk of OSS for this group is higher than...
  - 0 - 25%
  - 26 - 50%
  - 51 - 75%
  - 76 - 100%

... of all school districts.
WHAT WE CAN DO

These kinds of disparities don’t happen by accident or because of individual bad actors. They are the result of systems, policies, and practices. Closing the discipline gaps will require intentional policy and systems change.

In the following section we discuss evidence-based strategies for closing the discipline gap. You might notice that we skipped the part where we explain why these extreme differences in risk of being suspended exist. That wasn’t an accident. Some of that explanation is embedded in the recommendations for educators that we share below. But most of it needs to come from a far wider audience of experts of all sorts than the four of us. We need help from parents, students, educators, policy makers, and service providers to understand why these disparities are so large and how we can close them in a sustainable way. Our first call to action is for these honest conversations to happen.

Many strategies are available to decrease disparities in the exclusionary disciplinary practices, such as OSS, as well as their overall use. These strategies tend to fall into three overlapping categories: (1) promoting alternatives to OSS; (2) reducing disparities in the use of discipline; and (3) preventing challenging behaviors. More than one strategy can be used simultaneously, and each can complement the individualized supports that some students require. Indeed, changing our education system will require coordination among multiple approaches by various stakeholders. Examples of strategies in each category are given below. We are happy to report that school districts in the St. Louis area are already using many of these programs. We encourage the level of coordination that is needed but currently missing to operationalize a fundamental systems change towards education equity.²⁷

Promoting Alternatives To Suspension

In response to calls from organizations, communities, and individuals to end the ineffective and harmful practice of suspending students, many school districts are experimenting with alternatives. These methods, collectively known as restorative practices, still hold students accountable for their behavior and benefit students, schools, and communities. Restorative justice is a form of restorative practice in which the wrongdoer and the victim come together so that the victim can tell the wrongdoer how they were harmed. The wrongdoer can tell the victim how they will work to make amends for their behavior and prevent it from happening again in the future. Some other restorative practices are peer mediation, community service, and restorative circles.²⁸ These practices foster social and emotional learning (see above), so it shouldn’t be surprising that research shows that these methods have also reduced challenging behaviors and suspensions in schools where suspension has not been eliminated.²⁹ Restorative practices have been shown to reduce the racial discipline gap, too! We also endorse the growing call to ban OSS for pre-K through 3rd-grade students.

Reducing Disparities

Even if the overall need for and number of suspensions decreases, it is likely that disparities will continue unless action is taken to reduce bias related to race, gender, and disability. There are many strategies for reducing bias. For example, implicit bias training³⁰ may help school personnel recognize their unconscious biases and reduce overall rates of suspension, as well as the discipline gaps associated with race, gender and disability.

We know that children of color with disabilities are disproportionately affected when the procedures of the IDEA and other disability-rights laws are not well-followed. The National Council on Disability

SCHOOL DISTRICT PROFILES

On this report’s website you can find intersectional profiles of each of the school districts we studied. These have been formatted to print onto one page. We hope they will be a useful tool for regional advocacy and improvement efforts.
recommends improving the use of these laws to reduce racial disparities among children with disabilities. We also recommend that schools follow the U.S. Department of Education’s “significant guidance” on using IEPs to help improve behavior regardless of the disability. Doing so will minimize OSS and keep kids in class.

Preventing Challenging Behaviors

The less challenging behavior occurs in schools, the less need there is for discipline. Many practices decrease the likelihood of challenging behaviors in students. A few frequently used examples:

- **Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)** reward desirable behaviors instead of punishing misbehavior. Research has shown that PBIS has many benefits, including reducing suspensions and increasing academic performance.

- **Social-Emotional Learning Programs** reduce disruptive behaviors and increase academic achievement by teaching children to manage their emotions and develop positive relationships with others.

- **Trauma-informed education practices** may reduce the acting out that can be caused when children experience trauma, which is especially common among children of color and children with disabilities.

- **Expanded professional development and support** regarding childhood development and classroom management, particularly regarding adolescents, can help facilitate positive classroom and student-teacher dynamics and minimize the impact of challenging behavior.

Changing Systems by Cultivating a Culture of Trying and Commitment to Continuous Learning

The success of any of the measures above will require that educators, leaders, and policymakers commit to raising the bar, not just checking the box. We need to change our culture of education to prize equity. Without a fundamental commitment to education equity, disparities will reemerge in new and old ways. The recommendations above are not an exhaustive list. That’s why, more than anything, we call for a culture of trying—for an affirmation of the egregiousness of the disparities we have allowed to persist, the damage that they are doing, and the importance of doing what is necessary to eliminate them.

Living into a culture of trying will require a dedication to continual learning. We strongly recommend that whenever possible school districts choose programs that are backed by scientific evidence, as mandated by the IDEA and the Every Student Succeeds Act. It is also important that school districts report accurate, timely, and unbiased data on school discipline following the recently expanded reporting requirements so that community members can monitor districts’ progress on closing the discipline gap. Data should be disaggregated by individual characteristics, like race, sex, and disability status. But, as we’ve seen here, we should also assess how factors come together—that is, we must apply an intersectional lens to our assessments of what is working (or not) and for whom.
CLOSING THOUGHTS

The disparities that exist in our school discipline practices are horrifying. On average, in the 2015-16 school year Black boys with disabilities were 26 times more likely to be suspended than White girls without disabilities. In some school districts, they were 40, 50, even 60 times more likely to be suspended. Underlying these numbers are policies, processes, and practices that have systematically mistreated some students for decades. And while our children, especially Black boys with disabilities, are paying the price most directly, we all suffer indirectly—to the tune of billions of dollars—when we push our youth out of the classroom.¹

We know how to make this right. As we share above, there are already a number of solutions out there. Some school districts in the region have committed to reducing or eliminating suspensions and reducing disparities in school discipline by implementing these and other solutions. Given this recent and ongoing work and the fact that our data are a few years old, the gaps may likely look different today. However, systematically putting solutions into place will be no small task.

As a region (and a nation) we do not adequately resource education. The discipline gaps are not simply a failure on the part of educators—they are the result of systems failures. Sure, we might not all be the ones disciplining students, but we have failed to build an education system that prevents these disparities, and we have failed to correct that system when they emerged.

So, we are all responsible for creating a more equitable education system through intentional changes to policies, programs, and practices. We each have a role to play—be it as a parent applying pressure, a non-profit providing support, a researcher providing data and analysis, a policymaker allocating funding, an educational leader creating a space that values innovation, or an educator who’s willing to try something new. Perhaps the most obvious recommendation we make is for a more intersectional approach to examining how and for whom our systems—of all sorts—are working.

Every child, regardless of their race, sex, or disability status, deserves to go to a school where they are welcomed and given what they need to thrive. We have what we need to make that vision a reality.

We will all benefit when we succeed.
APPENDIX: REFERENCES


APPENDIX: RESOURCES

Below is a selection of resources we came across while writing this report. It’s not intended to be a comprehensive list, nor are we endorsing their content by including them. We are providing them as a potential starting point for readers who are interested in learning more.

Ongoing Work in the Region
Educators for Social Justice
Forward Through Ferguson
Keep Kids in Class Coalition
Metropolitan Congregations United
Missouri ACLU
Shut It Down
West County Community Action Network

Reports and Evidence on The Discipline Gaps
Disabling Punishment: The Need for Remedies to the Disparate Loss of Instruction Experienced by Black Students with Disabilities (2018). The Civil Rights Project at UCLA.
Discipline Disparities Risk Assessment Tool
The School to Prison Pipeline: The Intersection of Students of Color with Disabilities.
ChildTrends.
Guides for Taking Action


Kickboard for Schools
Evidence-based software that helps schools manage culture regarding positive behavioral interventions & supports, social–emotional learning, response-to-intervention, & multi-tiered systems of supports. Used by St. Louis Public Schools.


Prevent Challenging Behavior

Disability Focus

BIPTrack
Online software to help manage students’ behavior, skills, & goals.


Evidence–based practices from The National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder

Federal Office of Special Education Programs Discretionary Grants Database

IDEAs That Work


The SCERTS® Model
Helps communication partners support children with difficulties in social communication & emotional regulation.

General Focus

Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS)
Social–Emotional Learning (SEL)
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)
Trauma-informed education practices
Alive and Well Communities.
Provides training, technical assistance, & intensive coaching to educators.
How Trauma Affects Kids in School, Child Mind Institute.
The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Info for educators regarding recognizing & responding to traumatic stress.
The Trauma-Informed Care Project
Located in Iowa, this organization provides training & maintains a directory of publications, web links, videos, & books.

Reduce Disparities

Implicit Associations Test. Project Implicit®, Harvard University. Measure your implicit associations about race, gender, & other topics.

Alternatives to Suspension

International Institute for Restorative Practices.

Topics in Race, Gender, Disability, and Education

Black, Disabled, and Proud: College Students with Disabilities
A website for college students. Created by the HBCU Disability Consortium & the Association on Higher Education and Disability.

Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates
Educational equity for students served under IDEA.


The Intersection of Race, Culture, Language, and Disability, (2009). Wanda J. Blanchett, et al. Examines the intersection of these characteristics & how it relates to special education identification, special education service delivery, & access to an equitable education.


National African American Autism Community Network

National Black Disability Coalition
Improves community leadership, family inclusion, entrepreneurship, civil rights, service delivery systems, education, & information about the identity & culture of Black individuals labeled with disability.

Preparing Teacher Education Candidates to Work With Students With Disabilities and Gifts and Talents, Michelle Trotman Scott, Donna Y. Ford. Discusses racial & cultural equity regarding special education, advanced classes, & gifted education.


What Works Clearinghouse Find evidence-based approaches that work in education.
Full report at forwardthroughferguson.org/falling-through-the-cracks