

The background image shows a classroom with several students sitting at desks. Many of the students have their hands raised, indicating an active learning environment. The text is overlaid on this image. At the top left, there is a solid dark blue horizontal bar.

# **From Discipline to Dialogue**

## **Changing the Conversation About Classroom Discipline**

### **An AYPF Blog Series**

This blog series highlights the research, policies, and practices that are transforming schools, supporting teachers, and empowering youth voice. Each blog asks a different question related to the problem of discipline disparities, all pointing to opportunities for positive relationships between teachers and students.

With so much attention focused on the problems associated with school discipline, AYPF wanted to create a conversation around solutions. We set out to give thought to and ask questions about what students need in order to stay in the classroom and engaged in learning.

This series is intended to be a resource for those who wish to move the conversation from discipline to dialogue.

**Monday, September 8, 2014**

**“Starting the Conversation”**

**Erin Russ, AYPF Program Associate**

During my third year of teaching at a turnaround high school in a large suburb, a student came to me with an idea. “We need a student court,” he said. Alex, a sophomore, knew that students were being removed from class a lot for what was labeled “misconduct” – things like talking, rolling their eyes, or coming to class late. Still he said, “Nothing is changing around the school.” Students, teachers, and administrators continued to demonstrate the same patterns of behavior and consequences with no opportunities for authentic dialogue and individual supports. As a leader with the school’s student government association, Alex was tired of it.

Since then Alex’s idea inspired me to learn more about school discipline policies and practices, and I was recently able to publish a paper on this topic in *New Voices in Public Policy* entitled [“Zero Tolerance, Zero Benefits: The Discipline Gap in American Public K-12 Education”](#). In it I explore the very same issues that Alex brought to my attention years ago: the overuse of zero tolerance discipline, and the need for alternatives that go beyond discipline to create positive dialogue between educators and students, ultimately keeping students engaged in learning and on a path to success.

When students are suspended or expelled, they are more likely to fall behind academically, drop out of school, be referred to the criminal justice system, and eventually become disconnected from educational

opportunities. Minorities and students with disabilities are disproportionately affected by zero tolerance discipline, as reported by the [United States Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection](#).

If you're not familiar with the recent findings, here's what you should know:

- **Black males are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than that of their white peers for the same actions.**
- **Students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to experience exclusionary forms of discipline like suspension or expulsion.**
- **"Student misconduct" is among the most common reasons for student referrals, resulting in detention and/or suspension ([Dr. Anne Gregory](#) has written some thought-provoking pieces on this point).**
- **In January, 2014, the US Department of Education and the US Department of Justice released [federal guidance](#) on school district implementation of discipline policies, emphasizing their obligation under Titles IV and VI of the Civil Rights Act to ensure equitable treatment of all students (NASBE recently hosted an [informative webinar](#) on state-level interpretation).**
- **A growing field of research has also uncovered the long-term consequences of zero tolerance discipline and its disproportionate impacts on subgroups such as minorities or students with disabilities (for more reading, check out the [UCLA Civil Rights Project](#)).**

The problem of zero tolerance discipline has been well-documented, and a consensus has been built among practitioners, policymakers, and researchers that changes must occur. So, what's next? This blog series is meant to explore areas where schools, districts, and states can move beyond discipline and create a culture of learning and positive support that allows students to excel. The forthcoming blog posts are meant to confront the same challenges that we wrestle with at AYPF – how do we talk about this topic in a way that acknowledges the problem, but also provokes thoughtful, long-term solutions?

The questions we'll address throughout this series are:

- 1. What can we learn from research about the causes of student misconduct, the consequences of zero tolerance discipline, and evidence-based alternatives?**
- 2. What role can and should policy play in reducing discipline disparities and promoting alternatives?**
- 3. How are practitioners addressing these challenges?**
- 4. Where are the opportunities for students themselves to have a voice in addressing this issue?**

**Monday, September 15, 2014**

**“Relationships Matter”**

**Dr. Anne Gregory, Associate Professor, Rutgers University**

An African American fourth grader lit up with curiosity and an eagerness to learn in the library with me. He was interested in learning how books were catalogued. Then, together we returned to his classroom. He visibly shifted in his body language. He slouched and dragged his feet as he walked over to his desk, which was set off in the corner at a considerable distance from his peers. The fourth grader had been referred to me for behavior problems in the classroom. His teacher voiced her anger at him as she described his disruptive behavior. As she spoke, I mentally kept the vision of him in the library side by side with her description of him. The dueling portraits of that fourth grade African American boy have propelled my research over the last decade.

### **Early Insights**

In an early 2004 study, I found that most teachers embraced student-centered theories about why discipline problems occur. Such theories lend themselves to assumptions about the stability of negative behavior within the individual student (an assumption that seemed to be held by the fourth grade teacher described above). To test this pervasive assumption, I launched an investigation into the consistency of adolescents' negative behavior across classroom contexts. I conducted a large-scale review of discipline records at an urban high school. I found that the over-representation of African American students was largely due to referrals for “defiance.” I also found that variability in patterns of

defiance referral was more common than was consistency of referral across multiple adults. Thus, a majority of students had, what might be called, situationally-specific referral patterns linked to some adults and not others. In other words, most students experienced a range of adult interactions across their different classrooms. In another study, I also found that defiance-referred high school students tended to be perceived differently across their teachers. Those perceived as defiant and uncooperative by some of their teachers had other teachers who perceived them in a more positive light. That same study also found that students who reported unfair treatment with a particular teacher were more likely to receive a discipline referral and be perceived as defiant and uncooperative by that teacher. Thus, the students also detected the negative dynamic with specific teachers.

Together, these studies showed that “locating” the oppositionality solely within the African American adolescent falsely reinforces a deficit perspective and simplifies the setting-sensitive and interactive nature of student behavior.

### **Relationships Matter**

For discipline-referred students, relationships matter. I found in a 2008 study that many teachers successfully engaged the very same African American students who were perceived as “defiant” by other teachers. Teachers perceived as caring (supportive) and holding high academic expectations (structure) had student trust in and obligation to their authority. These teachers demonstrated an authoritative style. Another 2008 study showed that teachers who reported using a relational

approach to discipline were more likely to have students who exhibited lower defiant behavior and higher cooperation than those teachers who did not report using such an approach. The relationship-oriented teachers were intentional about building emotional connections with students in order to elicit cooperative behavior from their students. From these studies, I learned that good teacher-student relationships, including with African American students perceived as “defiant” in some of their classrooms, are fostered by teachers who are “warm demanders”—they expect the best, exercise their authority, and demonstrate care for their students. The findings also suggested that in order to leverage change in the entrenched racial disparities in school discipline, we need to focus on building strong relationships in classrooms.

### **Continuing Research**

To that end, I work with colleagues from the University of Virginia on a teacher professional development model called [“My Teaching Partner-Secondary” \(MTP-S\)](#). It is a coaching model in which veteran teachers pair with current teachers, view videotaped footage of their instruction throughout the school year, and use an empirically-validated observational tool to identify aspects of effective (or ineffective) instruction within the video footage. In our first randomized controlled trial (RCT), we found that the program raised achievement and increased student engagement. The second and most recent RCT was conducted more recently with a new group of teachers and students and showed after one year of coaching that MTP-S teachers eliminated the racial discipline gap between African American students and students from other racial/ethnic groups. Recent analyses showed that the effects were

durable and robust. The “gap-reducing” effects were replicated in the second year of coaching. I have been heartened by these findings. It suggests that teacher professional development focused on improving instruction and relationships in the classroom has the potential to disrupt persistent racial disparities in school discipline. It offers us new directions to ensure that all students, especially those from historically marginalized or vulnerable groups, experience their classrooms as engaging and supportive learning communities.

**Dr. Anne Gregory is an associated professor in Applied Psychology at Rutgers University. To read more about her research visit:**  
<http://gsappweb.rutgers.edu/rts/equityrsch/index.php>

**Monday, 22 September 2014**

**“What Role Can States Play”**

**Erin Russ, Program Associate**

I was challenged several months ago in a conversation with our executive director, Betsy Brand. We were discussing recent conversations happening at the national level about school discipline. She listened patiently as I described the innovative thinking happening around school discipline – from restorative justice practices to federal guidance. And, of course, there are the state policies. “So, what *can* states do?” She asked.

It was a simple question, but I honestly had trouble with a response. I managed to say something about data tracking, but our conversation left



me to wonder – If [relationships matter](#) for reducing discipline disparities and creating dialogue between students and teachers, is there a place for state policymakers in the conversation? If so, what *can* they do?

### **What *can* states do to reduce discipline disparities?**

Schools and districts are re-thinking their policies in order to minimize the use of zero tolerance discipline, keep students in the classroom, and build positive relationships between teachers, administrators, and students. Simultaneously, states are exploring a range of policies that support localities in their efforts. This means ensuring districts and schools have the flexibility to create and use alternative approaches to discipline, and providing support for teachers and other professionals, especially those who work with culturally diverse groups of students.

### **National Focus**

Several national organizations have been working to research, document, and implement state policies that are most effective for reducing discipline disparities. In June, The Council of State Governments Justice Center released “[The School Discipline Consensus Report](#)”, highlighting four key intervention areas for schools, districts and states to consider – conditions for learning, targeted behavioral interventions, school-police partnerships, and courts and juvenile justice systems. In the report they make thoughtful recommendations, particularly around data tracking and usage. Specifically, states can help build the capacity of schools, districts, and even juvenile justice systems to track and manage data more effectively in order to understand the characteristics of students who are

being suspended, expelled, and referred to the court system. As Nina Salomon, Senior Policy Analyst at the Council of State Governments Justice Center stated, “Reducing the number of suspensions and expulsions can’t be the ultimate goal. Ideally schools will also see a correlation between reducing exclusionary disciplinary actions and other positive student outcomes, like increased graduation rates and an overall improvement in school climate.”

### **State Support for Customizable Community Solutions**

[The National Association of State Boards of Education \(NASBE\)](#) is working with states to think about how they can support district efforts to reduce discipline disparities, and promote positive school climate. Five states (Michigan, Georgia, Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland) and the District of Columbia are partnering with NASBE’s [School Discipline Project](#). The goal of the project is to create a community of practice among state boards of education and identify specific areas of policy that can be enhanced in order to reduce discipline disparities. Beginning in 2014, leaders in Oregon are working with NASBE to think about ways to incorporate a restorative justice framework into existing state guidelines, enabling districts and schools to receive the training and support to offer this alternative approach to discipline. In Georgia, policymakers are working to take lessons learned from Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) at the district level and support it through state policy. By highlighting these successful practices, states are validating positive approaches to school climate and offering more options to districts, schools, and staff in place of zero tolerance discipline.

Elsewhere, states are considering their role to provide and support customizable community solutions that allow localities to serve their population in a flexible way. Connecticut is one such example. For decades, the state has supported a network of local [Youth Service Bureaus](#) (YSBs). Each YSB uses funding from the state and other sources (federal, local, and philanthropic) to assess and provide for the needs of youth. Beginning in 2012, the state of Connecticut selected five YSBs as pilot sites for [Juvenile Review Boards](#) (JRBs). JRBs are community panels established to divert at-risk youth, like discipline-referred students, from the justice system. Working in collaboration with local schools, the goal of JRBs is to determine the most appropriate intervention based on individual needs. These interventions can include counseling and emotional coaching, drug and violence prevention programs, community service opportunities, and other positive youth development services. Panels consist of local community members like clergy, police, school officials, social workers, and juvenile court officials. The value of JRBs and YSBs lies in the flexibility they have, with state support, to be responsive to the needs of the youth in their community by convening a range of local experts to address these needs on an individual basis.

### **Lingering Questions**

Momentum to address the problems caused by zero tolerance discipline and develop alternatives is encouraging. As states continue to consider their role in supporting local district, school, and community solutions for reducing discipline disparities, I hope they consider several questions.

- As states build the capacity to collect and track data on student discipline, what are they looking for and how will they know when a goal has been met? ([Michael Petrilli](#) had an interesting take on this).
- How are states considering the role(s) of multiple youth-serving systems to reduce discipline disparities, as in the case of Connecticut?
- Finally (and back to my original question), what is the connection between state policy and student-teacher relationships?

### “Student Voice, Teacher Supports”

Erin Russ

Monday, 29 September 2014

Throughout this blog series, we’ve been looking at the problem of discipline disparities and exploring the research, policy, and practice that creates positive classroom relationships, ultimately reducing exclusionary disciplinary practices. Keeping students in the classroom and engaged in the learning process is important for their educational success. It is also important that young people feel empowered to make decisions about their future with the support of adults who care for them. Creating opportunities for students to be heard, and for teachers to be supported as they teach and influence students should be at the center of conversations about reducing exclusionary discipline and its disparate minority impact.

### Youth Courts

I began the [series](#) by sharing the story of one of my former students, Alex. When he came to me nearly five years ago with the idea to start a student court, he was frustrated with the discipline situation at our school. Most of all, he believed that students should have the opportunity to voice their side of the story, as the disciplinary process was an otherwise one-way street. Together, he and I researched our options and eventually reached out to the [National Association of Youth Courts](#) (NAYC). NAYC is a national membership organization for the over 1,000 youth courts nationwide. In addition to schools, operators include juvenile courts and private non-profit organizations. Youth courts are not new, but have existed mostly in the community outside of schools. Now schools and districts are exploring how these courts can give students a voice in the discipline process.

### Surveys

One way schools are giving students the opportunity to be heard is through school climate surveys. In one survey, an urban public charter school with a diverse student body asked students to fill in two simple phrases – “I feel bad when my teachers...” and “I know my teachers care about me when they...” Over 170 responses were collected. They were simple and telling, and some of the most common responses are below:

#### “I feel bad when my teachers....”

- “Yell”
- “Raise their voice”

- “Disrespect me”

**“I know my teachers care about me when they...”**

- “Help me out”
- “Listen to non-school related things”
- “Push me to do better”

Students know they are cared for when teachers listen, help them, and push them. Students feel bad when teachers yell and show signs of distress. This is only a snapshot of the dynamic between teachers and students at one school, but it encourages us to ask questions about the needs of both in the classroom.

### **District and Community Opportunities**

How are schools and districts creating opportunities for students to be heard, and for teachers to be supported in the classroom, in order to ultimately reduce exclusionary discipline and disparate impact on minorities? Several places are re-thinking what “discipline” means and expanding opportunities for student voice and dialogue with adults. In each case, the program or initiative is focused on using student misconduct as an opportunity to build upon student assets, not amplify their deficits (for more on Positive Youth Development, see the [John W. Gardner Center’s](#) work in partnership with Redwood City, California).

- **Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia has established a [Restorative Justice Program](#) for older youth who receive their first suspension. The three goals of the program are accountability, character development, and school and community safety. Specialists work with students to help them**

understand the effects of their behavior on others and work to resolve those issues. Student participation is voluntary, and specialists also spend time educating teachers about restorative justice practices.

- Denver Public Schools are re-thinking the use of School Resource Officers (SROs) to be partners in conflict resolution on school grounds rather than catalysts for the criminal justice system. In 2013, Denver Public Schools signed an [Intergovernmental Agreement](#) with the Denver Police Department that outlines the role of SROs, including support they will give and receive as part of the school system. This type of agreement is another way that districts are encouraging more opportunities for conversation between students and staff, rather than the use of exclusionary discipline.
- The [Discipline Disparities Research-to-Practice Collaborative](#) is a three-year initiative whose purpose is to translate evidence-based practices for state education agencies, districts, and schools. Their research is focused on reducing the discipline gap in schools and encouraging policies that support positive interventions.

AYPF believes that student success along the pathway to postsecondary education and the workforce begins through engagement in the classroom. Caring, supportive relationships, opportunities for youth voice, and policies that support these practices are important. We hope the conversation around student discipline will continue to evolve and that policymakers, practitioners and researchers will explore opportunities to create positive dialogue between educators and students.

Suggested Resources for Further Reading:

- [\*The School Discipline Consensus Report: Strategies from the Field to Keep Students Engaged in School and Out of the Juvenile Justice System\*](#)  
The Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2014
- [\*\*The School Discipline Project\*\*](#)  
National Association of State Boards of Education
- [\*\*School Discipline Research\*\*](#)  
UCLA Civil Rights Project
- [\*\*Discipline Disparities: A Research to Practice Collaborative\*\*](#)  
The Equity Project at Indiana University
- [\*\*Ending the Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track\*\*](#)  
The Advancement Project
- [\*\*Implicit Bias in School Discipline\*\*](#)  
The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity
- [\*\*National Association of Youth Courts\*\*](#)  
[\*\*“Restorative Practices: A Guide for Educators”\*\*](#)  
The Schott Foundation’s National Opportunity to Learn Campaign
- [\*\*“Sowing Empathy and Justice in Schools through Restorative Practices”\*\*](#)  
*NEA Today*, June 18, 2014



### About the Authors:



**Erin Russ joined AYPF as a Program Associate in 2013. Her projects focus on policies and practices that enable a continuum of success for all students from K-12 to postsecondary and the workforce.**

**Prior to joining AYPF, Erin served as Education Initiatives Fellow with The Community Foundation for the National Capital Region in Washington, D.C. In this role, she partnered with the Prince George's County, Maryland community to focus on issues related to education including dropout prevention, parent engagement, early childhood services, and college and career readiness. Erin also previously served as an intern in the Department of Education's Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development. She taught middle and high school Government and Economics for five years in North Carolina and Virginia. Erin holds a Bachelor's degree in History from Anderson University in South Carolina and is currently pursuing her Master's degree in Public Policy at George Mason University.**



**Dr. Gregory's work addresses the persistent trend that African American adolescents are issued school suspension and expulsion at higher rates than adolescents from other groups. Through research and intervention, she aims to address this**

trend by strengthening characteristics of teachers, classrooms, and schools associated with the successful schooling of African American students. Her research interests also include disproportionality in school discipline sanctions, teacher-student relationships, and teacher professional development.