School Discipline Practices
A Public Health Crisis and an Opportunity for Reform

Introduction

A child's early years set the foundation for lifelong health and prosperity. In particular, data has conclusively shown that early childhood education is the roadmap for a person's well-being.[1] Yet children of color continue to be deprived of academic opportunities because they are being pushed out of schools at disproportionately higher rates.[2] As early as preschool, Black students face harsher and more frequent punishment than their white peers.[3] To make matters worse, the same students who find themselves on the receiving end of harsh school discipline policies are also more likely to face adversity and toxic stress outside of school.

Instead of mitigating the impacts of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and toxic stress, the use of exclusionary school discipline (ESD) practices—including in-school and out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, referrals to law enforcement, and corporal punishment—can have the opposite effect. These punitive policies can increase feelings of fear and isolation, compound stress, and foster mistrust.[4]

This issue brief explores two seemingly independent barriers to a young child's healthy development and educational success: ACEs and ESD practices. The connections between ACEs and ESD practices is an underexplored, yet critical area. The goal of this brief is to look more closely at their connections as well as their impact on subpopulations of children (particularly those in preschool and early elementary

ChangeLab Solutions created this issue brief to explore the connection between racial disparities in exclusionary school discipline practices and the prevalence of ACEs. The goal of this brief is to identify how these barriers to young children's healthy development and educational success represent an intersectional health justice issue and to illustrate how schools can effectively address discipline issues while promoting positive school environments where all students have the opportunity to learn, thrive, and heal.

ChangeLab Solutions

school) who are at the greatest risk for experiencing both at disproportionate rates.[i] The brief then presents an alternative vision for schools, one grounded in evidence-based practices that improve the learning environment, build resilience, and promote healthy development of the whole child. Combining knowledge from public health, child development, and student learning with promising policy levers like the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides an opportunity for public health practitioners and advocates to support educators, parents, students, and other community members in building positive school environments that improve educational outcomes and advance health equity.

Barriers to Healthy Development and Educational Success

ACEs and toxic stress

Growing up, all children are confronted with stressors of varying intensities, from minor anxieties, like feeling nervous before presenting in front of their classmates, to much more consequential situations, like facing emotional neglect at home. While some stress can be positive, constituting what researchers consider a "normal and essential part of healthy development,"[5] more serious adversities—like abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, or violence—can lead to chronic stress.[6]

Forty-five percent of all children in the United States have experienced

In the absence of protective factors – like support from a caring adult – a child exposed to prolonged adversity may develop a toxic stress response that interrupts healthy brain development.

at least 1 adverse childhood experience (ACE),[6] but children of some races and ethnicities face a greater risk of experiencing multiple ACEs.[6,7] For example, 33% of Black non-Hispanic children have experienced 2 to 8 ACEs, compared with 19% of white non-Hispanic children.[6] This situation is troubling because as the number of ACEs increases, so does the risk for negative health outcomes.[8] In the absence of protective factors—like support from a caring parent or other adult[9]—a child exposed to repeated or prolonged adversity may develop a toxic stress response that interrupts healthy brain development[10] and increases their risk of low educational achievement, social and economic instability, chronic disease, and short life expectancy.[11] The effects are especially pronounced when ACEs occur in early childhood, when brain development is most sensitive to external factors.[12]

THE TOLL OF ACES AND TOXIC STRESS
ACEs are negatively correlated with a student's academic trajectory.
• ACEs are associated with chronic absenteeism, a more accurate predictor of dropping out of school than poor standardized test scores or low grades.[13] • Children exposed to ACEs are more likely to have behavioral and learning issues[14,15] and are more likely to struggle in school.[6]
ACEs are positively correlated with detrimental socioeconomic outcomes.
• According to a 2016 multi-state study of adults, individuals reporting 4 or more ACEs were more likely than those with no ACEs to report high school non-completion and household poverty; those with 3 or more ACEs were more likely to report periods of unemployment.[16]
ACEs and toxic stress are linked to a myriad of negative health outcomes.
• There is a strong dose-response relationship between ACEs and various behavioral problems. For example, ACEs correlate with increased risk of suicide attempts, sexual risk behaviors, and lifetime depressive episodes.[17] • The toxic stress response to ACEs affects biological systems (for example, potentially disrupting metabolic and immune systems), which may result in a greater likelihood of becoming physically ill over one's lifetime.[9] • People who experienced 6 or more ACEs died nearly 20 years earlier, on average, than those who experienced 0 ACEs.[18]

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i *Although this brief focuses on racial disparities for preschool and early elementary school students, we recognize that the issue is prevalent across all age groups and also disproportionately impacts students with disabilities.*

Exposure to ESD practices and increased risk of negative health and educational outcomes

As places where children spend the majority of their formative years, schools can play a critical role in mitigating the effects that ACEs and toxic stress may have on a young person's healthy development and educational success.

Despite their potential to play a positive role in students' lives, many schools—beginning as early as preschool—continue to suspend and expel students, particularly students of color, at alarming rates. An analysis by the Government Accountability Office released in March 2018 revealed that Black children continue

ESD practices undermine critical protective factors that can support children's healthy development, even in the face of adversity.

to be disciplined at disproportionate rates compared with their white peers, often for similar offenses.[2] According to the report, "the types of offenses that Black children were disciplined for were largely based on school officials' interpretations of behavior," suggesting that implicit bias may contribute to disparities in discipline, particularly when teachers and staff have discretion in making disciplinary decisions.[19]

Advocates of ESD practices often claim that they are needed to control classroom behavior and to keep students and teachers safe. However, multiple studies have found that

suspensions early in the school year were not an effective deterrent to behavioral issues later in the year,[20] nor did they create safer environments for students and staff.[21] In fact, in 2013, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued a policy statement declaring that ESD practices are an inappropriate form of discipline in all but the "most extreme and dangerous circumstances."[22] AAP is not alone; the US Departments of Education and Health and Human Services,[23] the National Education Association,[24] and the National Association for the Education of Young Children[25] have all publicly recognized the ineffectiveness of ESD policies and practices and the resulting harm to students during their first few years of schooling.

THE TOLL OF ESD PRACTICES

ESD practices are negatively correlated with a student's academic trajectory.

- ESD practices are associated with future disciplinary actions, chronic absenteeism, low academic engagement and performance, dropping out, and failure to graduate on time.[26]

ESD practices are positively correlated with detrimental socioeconomic outcomes.

- A state-level study found that students expelled or suspended for a discretionary violation were nearly 3 times as likely to come into contact with the juvenile justice system the following year.[27]

- In 2014, the poverty rate for people aged 25 and older with no high school diploma was 29%—more than double the overall poverty rate for people in this age range (12%).[28]

ESD practices are linked to a myriad of negative health outcomes.

- ESD practices undermine critical protective factors—specifically, safe, stable, and nurturing relationships;[4,29] safe environments;[29] and positive academic experiences[30]—all of which can support children's healthy development, even in the face of adversity.[26]

- ESD practices are linked to lower levels of connection between students and schools.[31] School connectedness is a critical protective factor against issues like emotional distress and suicidal ideation and attempts.[32] When students feel connected to school, they are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors.[32]

- Students of color experience racial discrimination in schools due to ESD practices.[33] Studies on the impact of discrimination on health have found it to be associated with poorer physical health, unhealthful behaviors, and higher rates of anxiety, depression, and schizophrenia.[34]

- The negative effects of ESD practices on educational attainment, mentioned earlier, are linked with worse health outcomes over one's lifetime. For example, students who fail to graduate from high school on time are less likely to "attain higher education, practice health-promoting behaviors, earn living wages or access social capital,"[35] the latter of which allows people to acquire or access goods and services that promote better health.

Relationship between trauma and experience of ESD practices

The same children who are more likely to experience high rates of adversity and trauma outside the classroom are more likely to face ESD practices in schools.

- According to national data, a greater percentage of Black non-Hispanic children (61%) and Hispanic children (51%) have experienced at least 1 ACE compared with their Asian non-Hispanic (23%) and white non-Hispanic (40%) peers.[6]

- Disparities in ESD practices emerge as early as preschool, often for developmentally appropriate behaviors.[36] Black preschoolers, for example, are 3.6 times as likely to receive 1 or more out-of-school suspensions as their white peers.[37]

- The impact of ACEs on educational success can also be seen among preschoolers: 76.3% of children ages 3-5 in the United States who were expelled or "asked to stay home" from preschool had at least 1 ACE.[38]

- The disparities in ESD practices persist throughout a child's academic career. Black K-12 students, for example, represent 16% of the student enrollment but accounted for 39% of students who received 1 or more out-of-school suspensions.[39]

Early childhood education is critical to building the foundation for a person's health and well-being.[23] Instead of creating a safe environment of inclusive learning, ESD practices can transform schools into spaces that compound stress,[23] have poorer understanding between families and schools,[40] and deprive children of critical protective factors that mitigate the effects of ACEs and build resilience. For students who have experienced at least 1 ACE and are also disproportionately exposed to ESD practices, the loss of these protective factors may result in a widening of existing health disparities. The disparities in ESD practices that emerge when children are 3 and 4 years old do not stop when they leave preschool. For more information on ESD disparities in grades K-12,[39] see the figures in Appendix A. The persistence of disparities in discipline throughout a child's school career may amplify the effects of ACEs throughout their youth, which can follow them into adulthood, leading to a lifetime of health inequities.

For students who have experienced at least 1 ACE and are also disproportionately exposed to ESD practices, the loss of protective factors may result in a widening of existing health disparities.

An Alternative Vision for Schools: Healthy Development of the Whole Child

The connections between disparities in ESD practices and the prevalence of ACEs highlight the need to keep students who would benefit the most from a positive school environment in the classroom. By pushing students out, ESD practices exacerbate racial disparities and external stressors that threaten the health and well-being of developing children. These practices undermine both the traditional purpose of schools—creating a safe, nurturing learning environment—and the important role of adults in schools in advancing healthy development of the whole child.

The good news is that momentum in schools across the country is increasingly shifting away from ESD practices. What was once considered a radical shift is becoming the new norm in many states and school districts. Between January 2017 and April 2018, 19 states and the District of Columbia enacted or proposed legislation aimed at reducing exclusionary school discipline practices, and 10 of the 13 legislatures that acted in 2018 also provided positive disciplinary alternatives.[41] These efforts also align with recent developments in policies and guidance at the federal level. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), for example, provides states with an important opportunity to implement healthier alternatives that cultivate a positive school environment and build resilience in the face of ACEs and toxic stress. For more information on how ESSA can promote academic and health equity, see the "Promising Policy Opportunity" sidebar.
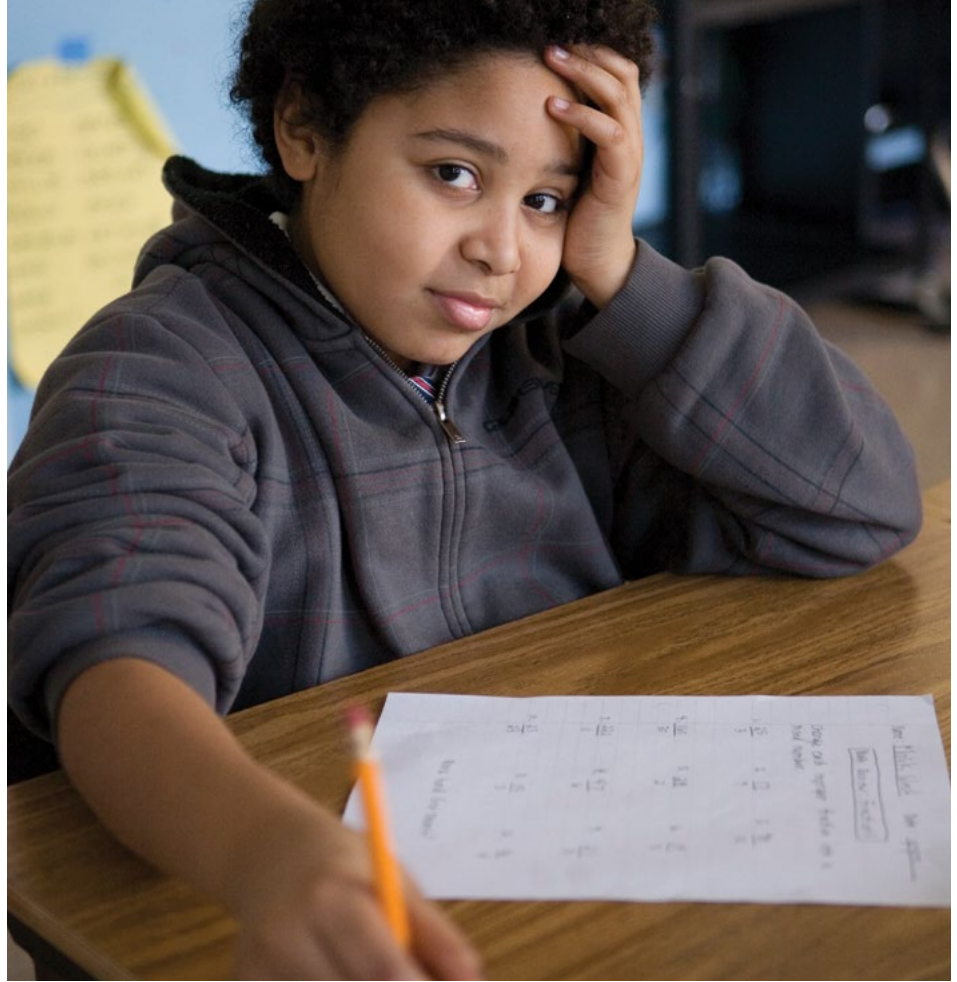
PROMISING POLICY OPPORTUNITY: EVERY STUDENT SUCCEEDS ACT (ESSA)

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)—which governs federal K-12 education policy—was signed into law in December 2015, replacing No Child Left Behind.[42] ESSA seeks to ensure equity for traditionally underserved students and provides federal funds to help states and school districts meet their needs.[42]

Under ESSA, states and districts are granted greater flexibility to allocate funds in ways they deem appropriate in order to pursue the stated equity goals. ESSA also expands the criteria by which schools are measured to include at least one non-academic indicator, a recognition of the importance of healthy development of the whole child in school success.[42,43] ESSA's provisions afford opportunities for states and local districts to support students' health and well-being in an equitable manner. A few promising opportunities to leverage ESSA policies are listed here.

- ESSA's expanded measures for evaluating school success can include indicators pertaining to school climate and safety, school discipline, school connectedness, and social and emotional learning (SEL).[44]

- Through professional development funds, ESSA creates opportunities to train school staff—including teachers and administrative leadership—in SEL and other skills that promote a healthy school environment.[26]

- ESSA requires educational plans from each state and local jurisdiction to describe how they will support efforts to reduce overuse of discipline practices that remove students from the classroom.[45]

- ESSA presents an opportunity for schools identified as in need of "comprehensive support and improvement" to include school climate indicators in their needs assessment and then use ESSA funds to address their needs related to school climate.[46]

Equally important as reducing the use of ESD practices are identifying and implementing supportive alternatives that empower students and remove barriers to education so that all students can reach their full potential. This section uses a science-based framework to map out how 2 alternative approaches to school discipline–specifically, restorative justice practices and social and emotional learning–can remove educational and health barriers and provide health-promoting skills that can lead to improved educational outcomes.

Supportive alternatives to ESD practices

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University recently identified a trio of design principles grounded in science that policymakers can use to improve outcomes for children and families across a variety of domains, including education.[10] The principles (hereafter referred to as *the design principles*) are as follows: (1) support responsive relationships for children and adults; (2) strengthen core life skills; and (3) reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families.[10] These principles are interconnected and reinforcing; "progress on any of the three makes progress on the others more likely," but conversely, "significant challenges in any one of these areas can lead to problems in the others."[10]

Application of the design principles to restorative justice practices and social and emotional learning reveal that these 2 complementary approaches positively reinforce each of the principles in order to cultivate healthier school environments, empower students, remove barriers to educational attainment, and equip students with the skills to thrive in and outside of the classroom. In the rest of this section, we briefly describe the supportive approaches and then offer a side-by-side comparison that applies the design principles to ESD practices and to the 2 supportive alternatives,[47] to illustrate how schools can effectively address discipline issues while improving the chances of positive outcomes for children and families.

Restorative justice practices

The first adoption of restorative practices in schools took place in the 1990s, when restorative justice pioneers used pilot programs to rethink acceptable models of school discipline, address violence and safety, and build community capital.[48] Restorative justice practices (RJP) are defined as "a relational approach to building school climate and addressing student behavior that fosters belonging over exclusion, social engagement over control, and meaningful accountability over punishment."[49] RJP can play out in different ways, depending on the school setting, but is based on 3 core principles that positively reinforce the design principles: repairing harm, involving stakeholders, and transforming community relationships.[50] No longer a concept "at the margins of educational policy," RJP is now being used in

schools in more than 35 states[51] and is recognized as "an essential element of discipline reform."[48] It has grown from a few pilot programs to "a comprehensive theory and diverse set of practices."[52] At the national level, the National Education Association,[53] the Council of State Governments Justice Center,[54] the National Association of School Psychologists,[55] the American Federation of Teachers,[56] and other organizations have recognized the importance of RJP in reducing the use of ESD practices and building safe and supportive learning environments. Implementation of RJP in schools across the country has been linked to impressive outcomes, including decreases in the suspension gap between Black and white students and improved school climates in Oakland, CA;[48] dramatic reductions in fighting in Pottstown, PA;[57] and promotion of meaningful relationships between students and staff in Denver, CO.[50]

Social and emotional learning

CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions."[58] The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development recognizes over a dozen specific social and emotional skills associated with success in school and life, grouping them into three categories: cognitive skills, emotional competencies, and social and interpersonal skills.[59] High levels of social and emotional competence have been linked to an increase in educational attainment, including high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment and completion.[60]

ESD practices are a barrier to equitable access to high-quality SEL education;[61] however, RJP has been identified as an approach to school discipline that creates more equitable access to opportunities for SEL development,[61] highlighting the complementary nature of these alternative approaches. For additional resources on SEL, RJP, and the design principles, among other topics, see Appendix B.

APPLYING THE DESIGN PRINCIPLES TO 3 APPROACHES TO SCHOOL DISCIPLINE: A SIDE-BY-SIDE COMPARISON

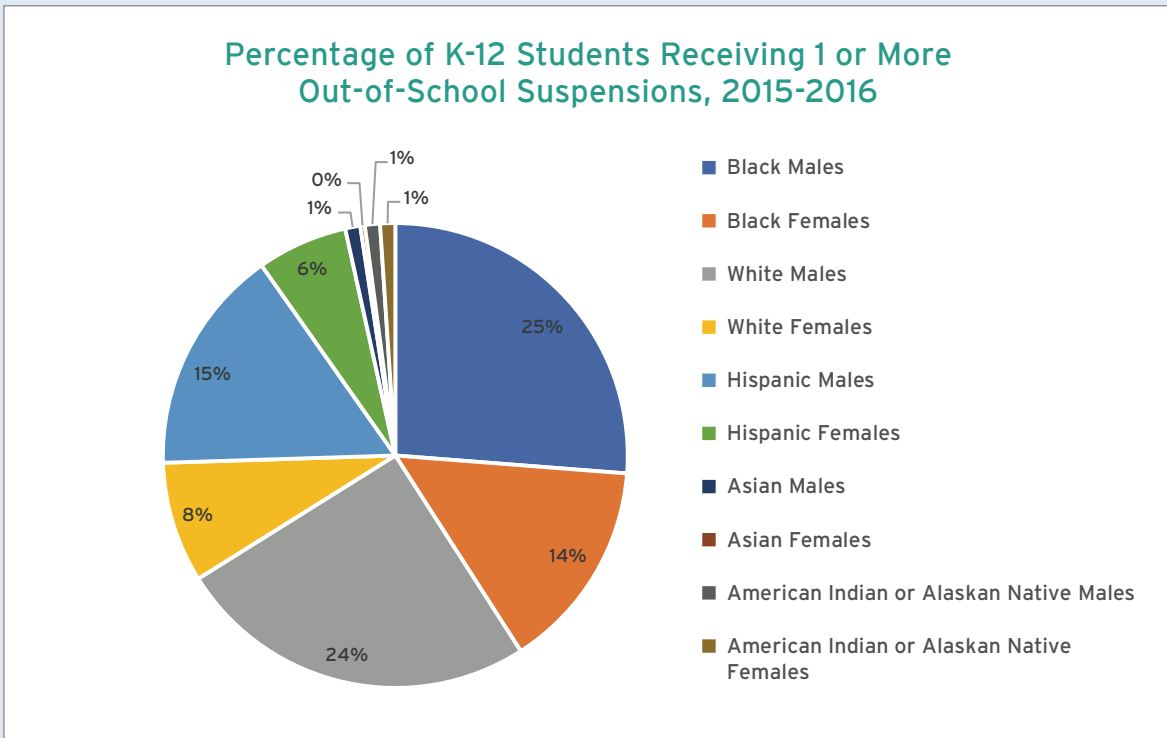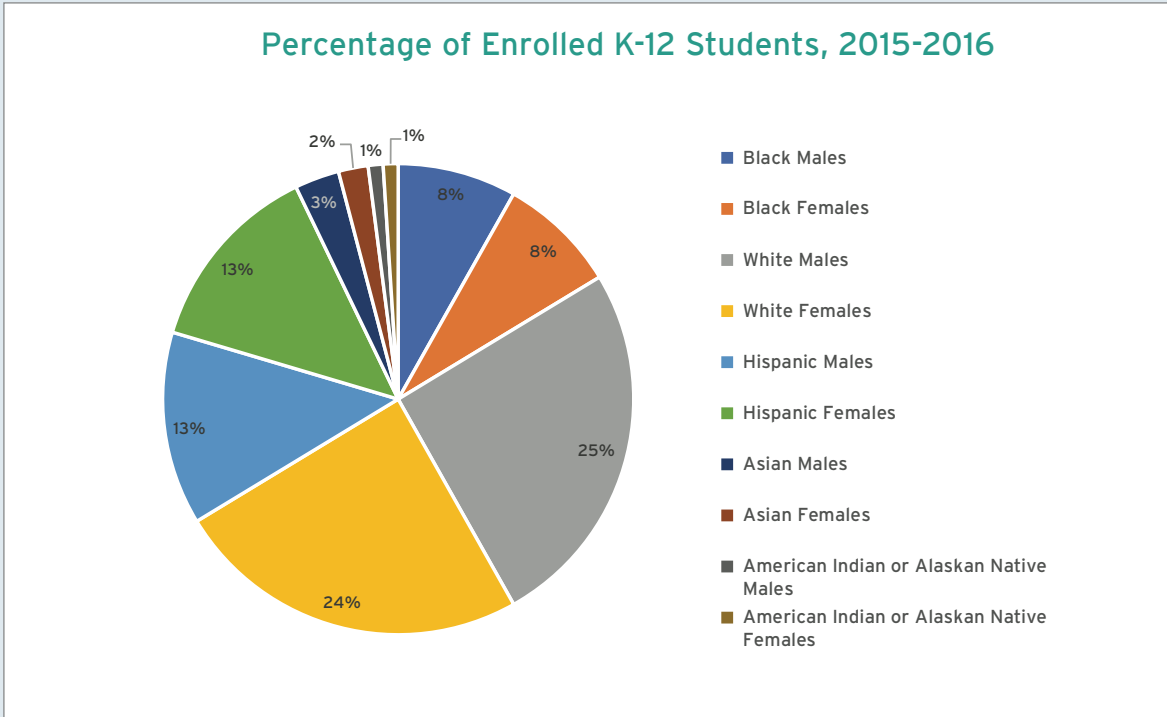|		APPROACHES TO SCHOOL DISCIPLINE		
		PUNITIVE	NON-PUNITIVE	
		Exclusionary School Discipline Practices	Restorative Justice Practices	Social and Emotional Learning
DESIGN PRINCIPLES	1. Support responsive relationships for children and adults	Foster feelings of mistrust between students and teachers.[4,29] Linked to social isolation of students.[31] Linked to negative impacts on parents' views of schools as safe and accepting places.[3]	Foster healthy relationships in schools built on a foundation of trust, respect, and care.[62] Positively affect student-teacher relationships.[63] Increase engagement for students and families and improve two-way communication between the parties involved.[62]	Leads to safe classrooms and schools characterized by a supportive culture and climate, positive relationships, deeper learning, improved classroom management, and fewer behavioral problems.[59]
	2. Strengthen core life skills	Schools that rely too much on ESD practices forfeit teachable moments that can help students develop skills like self-regulation and self-efficacy.	Aim to create a school climate that develops social and emotional skills and understanding, enhances teaching and learning, and increases social and human capital.[64] Replace fear, uncertainty, and punishment as motivators with belonging, connectedness, and a willingness to change.[64]	Can foster more empathy and prosocial behaviors; enhanced self-efficacy and confidence; greater attachment, commitment, and engagement in school; and improved academic performance.[65] Self-regulation, self-efficacy, and empathy skills are linked to one's ability to cultivate resilience.[26]
	3. Reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families	Produce stressful and negative experiences for children and families (especially at the preschool level).[23] May retrigger histories of trauma for children if someone in their household has been or is incarcerated.[66]	Can reduce the suspension rate across a school district.[50] Contribute to narrowing the racial discipline gap for Black non-Hispanic and Hispanic students.[50] Test scores steadily improved during implementation.[50]	Can help reduce negative risk taking and emotional distress.[65] School discipline policies grounded in core principles of SEL have been shown to shift race and gender disparities.[59]

Conclusion

Until recently, the school discipline reform movement has primarily been led by education, disability, and civil rights advocates working alongside parents, students, school officials and teachers, and other community members. Application of the design principles to RJP and SEL demonstrate not only their complementary nature as alternatives to ESD practices but also their promising health benefits. Public health practitioners and advocates have a vested interest in advancing school policies like RJP and SEL that, beginning at the preschool level, support healthy development at a critical stage, equip children with the skills to mitigate the effects of ACEs and toxic stress, and position them to reach their full potential. A change in course from a punitive to a healing approach to school discipline—one that ensures that schools are places where all students have the opportunity to heal, learn, and thrive—will require a concerted effort, commitment of resources, and patience. Courageous pioneers over the last 25 years have created and refined these health-promoting approaches. To amplify their impact and to improve the odds for children who face heightened risk for health inequities, the public health sector must commit its resources to supporting a health justice framework that integrates ACEs, trauma, discipline policies, and supportive interventions.
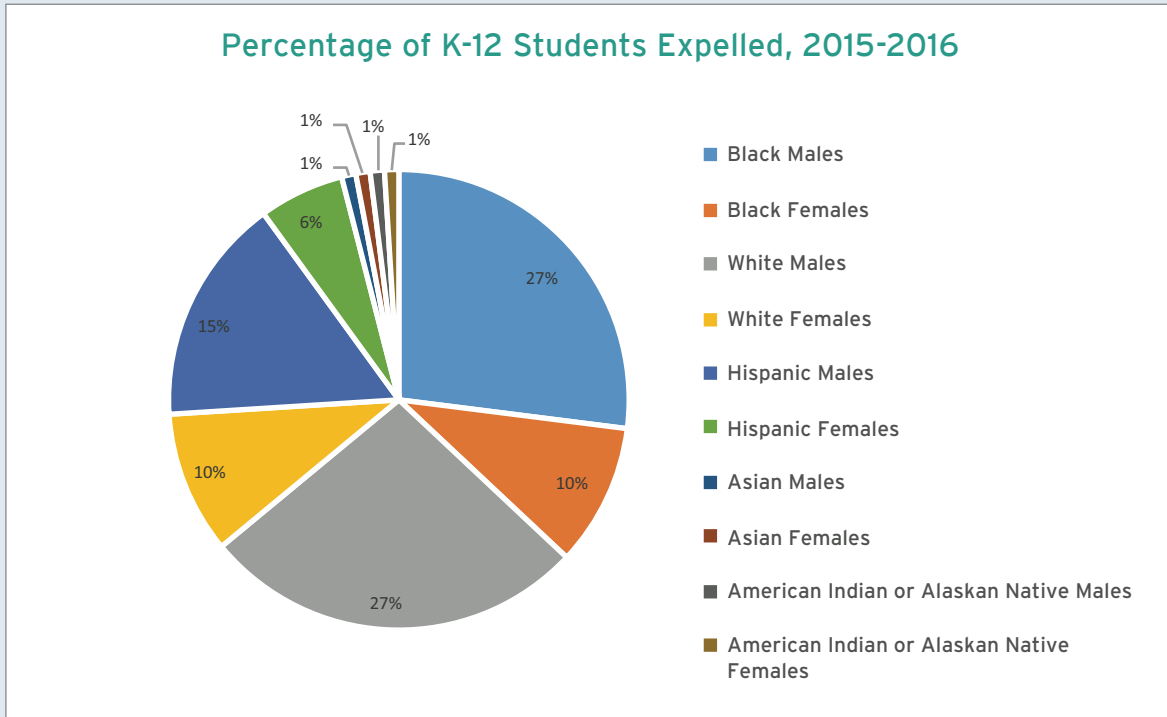
APPENDIX A: Disparities in ESD Practices at the K-12 Level

(By Race and Sex, School Year 2015-2016)

Percentage of Enrolled K-12 Students, 2015-2016

Legend:
- Black Males
- Black Females
- White Males
- White Females
- Hispanic Males
- Hispanic Females
- Asian Males
- Asian Females
- American Indian or Alaskan Native Males
- American Indian or Alaskan Native Females

Data labels: 2%, 1%, 1%, 8%, 8%, 3%, 13%, 25%, 13%, 24%

Percentage of K-12 Students Receiving 1 or More Out-of-School Suspensions, 2015-2016

Legend:
- Black Males
- Black Females
- White Males
- White Females
- Hispanic Males
- Hispanic Females
- Asian Males
- Asian Females
- American Indian or Alaskan Native Males
- American Indian or Alaskan Native Females

Data labels: 0%, 1%, 1%, 1%, 1%, 6%, 15%, 8%, 24%, 14%, 25%

Percentage of K-12 Students Expelled, 2015-2016

Legend	
■	Black Males
■	Black Females
■	White Males
■	White Females
■	Hispanic Males
■	Hispanic Females
■	Asian Males
■	Asian Females
■	American Indian or Alaskan Native Males
■	American Indian or Alaskan Native Females

Pie chart values: 27%, 10%, 27%, 10%, 15%, 6%, 1%, 1%, 1%, 1%

Source: U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. 2015-2016 Civil Rights Data Collection: School Climate and Safety. 2018. *www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/school-climate-and-safety.pdf*.

APPENDIX B: Resources

School-to-Prison Pipeline

The American Bar Association Joint Task Force on Reversing the School-to-Prison Pipeline
Preliminary Report (February 2016). This report provides an overview of the school-to-prison pipeline problem, explores its causes, and examines the consequences for youth.

Equal Justice Society
Breaking the Chains: The School-to-Prison Pipeline, Implicit Bias, and Racial Trauma (September 2016). This policy report examines the path of the school-to-prison pipeline, discusses contributing factors, and proposes several recommendations to help teachers, administrators, and policymakers address disproportionate discipline and reduce the effects of implicit bias in school settings.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Center for Youth Wellness
An Unhealthy Dose of Stress: The Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences and Toxic Stress on Childhood Health and Development (June 2013). This paper introduces readers to the concepts of ACEs and toxic stress, describes the impacts of toxic stress on the developing brain, and provides recommendations to promote the health and well-being of children.

Child Trends
The Prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences, Nationally, by State, and by Race or Ethnicity (February 2018). This brief describes the prevalence of 1 or more ACEs among children, using data from the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health, and provides a summary of the research on the effects of ACEs.

Restorative Justice Practices

Advancement Project, American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association, and the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign
Restorative Practices: Fostering Healthy Relationships and Promising Positive Discipline in Schools (March 2014). This toolkit provides strategies to build healthy relationships between students and adults in educational settings.

Thalia González, scholar
Restorative Justice from the Margins to the Center: The Emergence of a New Norm in School Discipline (January 2017). This article provides an integrated understanding of the evolution of school-based restorative justice in the United States by exploring a range of examples from various sites.

Social and Emotional Learning

The Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, & Academic Development
The Evidence Base for How We Learn: Supporting Students' Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (September 2017). This brief describes why it is essential to address social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of learning and how schools can integrate their development into their daily work.

Edna Bennet Pierce Prevention Research Center, Pennsylvania State University
School Climate and Social and Emotional Learning: The Integration of Two Approaches (January 2018). This brief describes research on how positive school climate supports social and emotional learning, and how social and emotional learning contributes to improved school climate in elementary and secondary schools.

Social and Emotional Learning and Restorative Justice Practices

Edna Bennet Pierce Prevention Research Center, Pennsylvania State University
Applying an Equity Lens to Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (June 2018). This brief identifies a series of barriers that contribute to inequitable access to a high-quality SEL education, then presents promising initiatives for applying an equity lens to SEL programming, including restorative justice practices in school discipline.

Design Principles

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University
Science to Policy and Practice: 3 Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families (October 2017). This report draws on recent advances in the science of brain development to identify a set of design principles that can be used by practitioners and policymakers in different sectors, including education, to improve outcomes for children and families.

ESSA

The Education Trust
The Every Student Succeeds Act: What's in It? What Does It Mean for Equity? (January 2016). This resource provides an overview of ESSA and describes its various levers that can be used by advocates to push for education equity.

Learning Policy Institute
Making ESSA's Equity Promise Real: State Strategies to Close the Opportunity Gap (September 2018). This report describes which states have used their ESSA plans to focus on measuring and advancing, among other goals, reducing the rates of student suspension and building a positive school climate.

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    1. Lived with a parent or guardian who became divorced or separated
    2. Lived with a parent or guardian who died
    3. Lived with a parent or guardian who served time in jail or prison
    4. Lived with anyone who was mentally ill or suicidal, or severely depressed for more than a couple of weeks
    5. Lived with anyone who had a problem with alcohol or drugs
    6. Witnessed a parent, guardian, or other adult in the household behaving violently toward another (e.g., slapping, hitting, kicking, punching, or beating each other up)
    7. Been the victim of violence or witnessed any violence in his or her neighborhood
    8. Experienced economic hardship "somewhat often" or "very often" (i.e., the family found it hard to cover costs of food and housing)

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