

# Discipline Disparities:

A Research-to-Practice Collaborative

## DISCIPLINE DISPARITIES: MYTHS AND FACTS

While the extent of and reasons for disciplinary disparities have been well documented for at least the last 40 years, a number of inaccurate assumptions and myths remain popular but lack research support. This fact sheet describes many of the most common claims about disciplinary disparities, and what research actually says about them.<sup>1</sup>

MYTHS	FACTS <sup>1</sup>
Disparities aren't really due to race, class, or sexual orientation; they are really about the challenges of poverty, inadequate home lives, and violent communities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Poverty does not fully explain racial disparities (<i>New Research Brief</i>, p. 2).</li> <li>School factors are stronger predictors of disparities than individual student factors or the reasons students are suspended for (<i>New Research Brief</i>, p. 3).</li> </ul>
Racial disparities are really due to worse behavior among students of color.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is no evidence that racial disparities in discipline are due to higher rates of misbehavior by Black students (<i>New Research Brief</i>, p. 2).</li> <li>If anything, those students are punished more severely for similar or less serious behaviors than their peers (<i>New Research Brief</i>, p. 2).</li> </ul>
Suspension and expulsion are used infrequently and to prevent or punish series acts of misbehavior.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exclusionary discipline is actually used extensively, especially for Black males: 1/3 to 1/2 of all students will experience at least one suspension or expulsion during their K-12 careers; moreover, nearly 70% of Black males will experience at least one suspension or expulsion while in school (<i>Policy Brief</i>, p. 2).</li> <li>Suspension is used mostly for non-safety threatening incidents (<i>Policy Brief</i>, p. 1).</li> <li>The greatest disproportionality in discipline for Black students is based on subjective and relational-based issues such as "defiance" and "disruptive behavior" (<i>Policy Brief</i>, p. 5).</li> </ul>
Disciplinary disparities are evident only for Black students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disparities have been documented most often for Black students, and are the most extreme for Black males (<i>New Research Brief</i>, p. 2)</li> <li>There is consistent evidence of disparities for students with disabilities, Native American students, and Hispanic/Latino students (at the middle and high school level), and emerging evidence of disparities for LGBT students, girls of color, and English language learners (<i>New Research Brief</i>, p. 2).</li> <li>Most extreme differences are at the intersection of these groups, e.g., Black males with a disability (<i>Policy Brief</i>, pp. 3-4).</li> </ul>

MYTHS	FACTS
While a powerful symbol, there is really no evidence that the “school-to-prison pipeline” actually exists.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The consequences of school exclusion are devastating—lower academic achievement, higher truancy, higher dropout, higher contact with the juvenile justice system, and lower local and state economic growth. Disparities in discipline mean that certain students are more likely to experience these negative outcomes (<i>Policy Brief</i>, pp. 4-5).</li> </ul>
Disparities are solely due to individual teachers and principals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disparities in discipline are systemic and determined by a number of policy and practice factors (<i>Overview Brief</i>, p. 2; <i>Interventions Brief</i>, p. 2).</li> <li>The context of schooling and conditions for learning—including policy decisions at the national, state, and local levels; educator philosophies and practices; and unequal access to quality teaching, a rigorous and meaningful curriculum, and resources—determine disparities and should be prioritized in disparity reduction efforts (<i>Interventions Brief</i>, p. 2).</li> </ul>
There is very little schools can do to eliminate disparities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There are a number of promising strategies schools can and are using for disparity reduction, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offering supportive relationships among and within school staff and students, including repairing relationships caused by misbehavior (<i>Interventions Brief</i>, pp. 3, 8-9),</li> <li>Enhancing academic rigor for all students (<i>Interventions Brief</i>, p. 4),</li> <li>Engaging in culturally relevant and responsive instructions and interactions (<i>Interventions Brief</i>, pp. 4-5),</li> <li>Establishing bias-free classrooms and respectful school environments (<i>Interventions Brief</i>, pp. 5-6),</li> <li>Using teacher professional development systems to focus on improving teacher-student relationships (<i>Interventions Brief</i>, p. 4),</li> <li>Employing structured decision-making processes to student threats of violence (<i>Interventions Brief</i>, p. 7), and</li> <li>Changing disciplinary codes of conduct to be aligned with positive school climates (<i>Policy Brief</i>, p. 7).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
There is really very little community organizations; advocates; and local, state, and federal policymakers can do to reduce disparities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community leaders and policymakers can demand or require annual collection of disaggregated disciplinary data be made publicly available (<i>Policy Brief</i>, p. 8).</li> <li>Policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels can prioritize financial and human capital resources to approaches that reduce disparities (<i>Policy Brief</i>, pp. 8-9).</li> <li>Local community organizations can organize and advocate for policy and practice changes in their communities, similar to those occurring in many states and districts across the country (<i>Overview Brief</i>, pp. 2-3; <i>Policy Brief</i>, pp. 3, 8).</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> Each of the facts is supported by research cited in one of the four Discipline Disparities Collaborative briefing papers, which can be found online at: [rtpcollaborative.indiana.edu](http://rtpcollaborative.indiana.edu). *Overview Brief* refers to *Discipline Disparities Series: Overview* (Carter, Fine, & Russell), *Interventions Brief* refers to *How Educators Can Eradicate Disparities in School Discipline* (Gregory, Bell, & Pollock), *Policy Brief* refers to *Eliminating Excessive and Unfair Exclusionary Discipline in Schools* (Losen, Hewitt, & Toldson), and *New Research Brief* refers to *New and Developing Research on Disparities in Discipline* (Skiba, Arredondo, & Rausch).