

## Reducing Disproportionality in Disciplinary Action: A Summary of Research

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The following summary pertains to research findings on correlates of disproportionality in terms of ethnicity, race, or gender in disciplinary actions. Research reported on interventions is also summarized. Several studies cited also touch on disproportionality in special education, but that is not the focus of this summary. Note that this is not an exhaustive review of literature; rather, research was selected based on relevance, publication date, and rigor.

### Rates and Correlates

*Disciplinary referral rates.* Black students are more likely to receive office disciplinary referrals (ODR) than white students and are more likely to be referred for less severe and more subjective disciplinary actions (e.g, making threats) than other students (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, & Tobin, 2011; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). However, the research is not in consensus on the existence of disproportionality in some specific categories of behavioral referrals, such as defiance.

*Suspension and expulsion rates.* Male African American and Latino students are more likely to be suspended or expelled following a disciplinary referral than their peers (Hinojosa, 2008; Skiba et al., 2011; Vincent, Sprague, & Tobin, 2012). These students are also more likely to be placed in alternative education programs (Booker & Mitchell, 2011).

*Correlates of overrepresentation in disciplinary practices.* The literature points to negative school culture, such as that characterized by hopelessness and blaming of families for behavioral problems, as contributing to disproportionality (Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges, & Jennings, 2010). Most notably, multiple studies have identified different responses to similar behaviors, originating in the classroom but continuing through to the administrative level, as a major factor in overrepresentation of minority males in exclusionary practices (Skiba et al., 2002, 2011; Townsend, 2000). In the review of the literature and their own findings, Bradshaw and colleagues (2010) found evidence that disciplinary referrals were influenced by teacher and school expectations as well as teacher efficacy. Further, cultural disparity between students and teachers/school culture may contribute to misconduct in that students may feel disrespected, unsupported, singled out, and may not feel as if they are wanted or valued in the educational setting. Literature in disproportionality in special education placement echo these concerns, as teacher resources and behavior management style, school culture, differences in student engagement and classroom behavior related to cultural background all contribute to placement (Raines et al., in press).

### Interventions

No recent well-controlled research was identified that systematically investigated the effects of any large-scale interventions designed to reduce disproportionality in disciplinary practices. The

most frequently mentioned type of intervention was Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Supports (SWPBS).

*Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Supports.* Tobin (2011) noted that the key elements of SWPBS include: (a) proactive teaching of schoolwide behavioral expectations; (b) consistent reinforcement of expected behaviors; (c) consistent consequences for inappropriate behavior; (d) monitoring of student behavior in all school settings; (e) use of data for decision-making regarding students' support needs. Tobin (2011) used large scale correlational data of 46 schools to conclude that consistent use of positive recognition in the classroom (promote trusting teacher relationships) is the SWBPS most related to reduction of exclusion; in looking at 8 schools with strong reduction, regular use of data to monitor problem behaviors, regular training of personnel, and use of FBA for individual student planning (10 hours/week) were reported as making most difference. Other research argues that better training in SWPBS may lead to a reduction of fear of losing control in the classroom and accordant exclusion (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Further, positive teacher-student relationships characterized by increased expectation are associated with a reduction in out-of-school suspension (Hinjosa, 2008).

*Basic skills training.* One study used an intensive after school approach to improve basic reading and math skills in a small, high risk sample of students and found that improving basic skills reduced suspensions (Martin, Martin, & Wilkins, 2007).

*School culture change.* Two studies used an approach based on counseling models to advocate for a change in school culture led by teams of school personnel and students that stimulates and promotes personal accountability, leadership, resiliency, self-management, and social competence in students as opposed to merely reducing student deficits. Further, this approach emphasizes development of culturally congruent interventions to reduce behavior problems (Day-vines & Day-Hairston, 2005; Day-Vines & Terriquez, 2008)

*Intervening to prevent or diminish problem behavior.* Functional behavioral assessments (FBA) may be useful for diminishing externalizing behaviors. Universal screening for behavioral and emotional risk throughout education, but notably in elementary school, may help identify areas for intervention and promote professional development (Raines et al., in press).

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