

# FOREWORD

**By Amber M. Northern and Michael J. Petrilli**

Last December, a headline in *Chalkbeat* announced the end of a contentious two-year debate among school discipline reformers and other ed-policy aficionados: “It’s official: DeVos has axed Obama discipline guidelines meant to reduce suspensions of students of color.”<sup>1</sup>

The voided guidance, as you probably recall, warned that districts with significant racial disparities in their discipline rates could be subject to a federal review to determine whether they had violated civil rights laws. In rescinding it, Trump administration officials made clear that they would continue to investigate all complaints of discrimination but explained that racial disparities in discipline rates would not in and of themselves be grounds for federal investigation.

Although Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has had some missteps, we believe that she and her team got this one right, in part because of what we’ve been hearing about discipline reform from folks on the ground. To anyone who watched other large-scale reforms play out in the No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top eras (think teacher evaluation), the underlying themes were all too familiar: implementation challenges, mixed signals, and unintended consequences. Federal policymakers issue a new mandate with the goal of improving schools, especially for poor kids and students of color, but by the time it migrates from the capital to the statehouse and from there to local school boards, to central offices, to principals, to other administrators, and (finally) to teachers in an elaborate game of telephone, much has changed—and almost never for the better. It’s the challenge of implementation in a huge, loosely coupled, and mostly fragmented “system” like America’s K–12 education.

We worried that something like this was happening with school discipline. Reformers’ goal was to prod schools toward alternatives to suspensions and expulsions by improving school climate, fostering more engaging teaching, adopting restorative practices, and the like. But we surmised that on the ground (in real schools) teachers would simply be told that students couldn’t be disciplined like they used to be—and that they’d be on their own when it came to dealing with the consequences. Contrary to the assumptions of many reformers, that might be bad for the disruptive students themselves, and it would almost certainly be bad for their well-behaved peers, their teachers, and the larger goal of helping students learn.

As we write in midsummer 2019, it’s abundantly clear that such concerns are not shared by the many presidential candidates battling it out for the Democratic nomination, some of whom insist that the administration’s action on school discipline was an abdication of federal responsibility to uphold students’ civil rights. Bernie Sanders, in his “[Thurgood Marshall Plan](#),” vows to “address disciplinary practices in schools that disproportionately affect Black and Brown children.” Amy Klobuchar gets even more specific, [promising to reinstate](#) the 2014 Obama discipline guidance during her first hundred days. And eight candidates who held Congressional seats at the time [signed a letter](#) appealing to Secretary DeVos not to rescind the guidance, including Sanders and Klobuchar (again), Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, Cory Booker, Kristen Gillibrand, Michael Bennett, and Tim Ryan.

So we know what prominent Democratic politicians think. But what about those closest to the action, the classroom teachers who see the consequences of indiscipline in their classrooms and school corridors and who have the most firsthand experience with the attempted solutions?

This study sought their input. Specifically, it asked a nationally representative sample of over 1,200 white and African American teachers in grade 3–12 classrooms how they see school discipline playing out. To our knowledge, it is the first scientifically rigorous and nationally representative survey on school discipline to be published in at least a decade and a half. It is also the first time that any discipline survey has included a specific focus on the views of African American teachers and teachers in high-poverty schools.

To conduct the study, we joined the survey experts at RAND, who used their [American Teacher Panel](#) to draw the sample and administer the survey. Fordham’s uber-talented senior research and policy associate David Griffith co-developed the survey instrument (with other Fordham staff and the [FDR Group](#)) and served as lead author, with associate director of research Adam Tyner lending expert assistance with data analysis.

The survey (which was fielded in the fall of 2018) asked teachers a wide range of questions about how discipline policy is carried out in their schools; their views on the impact of school suspensions (both in school and out of school); their opinion of newer disciplinary approaches such as positive behavioral interventions and supports and restorative justice; and what they think their schools should be doing differently, if anything, to improve student behavior.

The executive summary provides a fuller treatment of the survey’s findings. But in a nutshell, the authors found the following: Compared to their peers in low-poverty schools, teachers in high-poverty schools report higher rates of disciplinary incidents, such as verbal disrespect and physical fighting. In general, teachers say that disciplinary protocols are inconsistently observed and that the recent decline in suspensions is at least partly explained by higher tolerance for misbehavior or increased underreporting. Although they see value in new approaches to combating student misbehavior, most teachers also say that suspensions are appropriate in some circumstances—and that some chronically disruptive students shouldn’t be in their classrooms at all. Finally, many black teachers say that “exclusionary discipline” should be used more often—despite the likely costs for students who misbehave and their belief that disciplinary consequences are racially biased.

That’s a lot to chew on, and the full study brims with even more details that are worthy of your attention. But for now, allow us to make just three observations:

### ***First, the overwhelming majority of grade 3–12 teachers say that school discipline is broken, especially in high-poverty schools.***

Teachers can find virtue in almost any disciplinary approach, provided it is implemented consistently and fairly. However, in practice, most teachers say that discipline is inconsistent, that they are putting up with more misbehavior than they used to, that administrators underreport serious incidents, and that the majority of students suffer at the hands of “a few persistent troublemakers.”

Almost every discipline problem that low poverty schools deal with is magnified in high-poverty schools. Yet, despite considerable disagreement when it comes to the prevalence of racial bias, black and white teachers in these schools tend to view discipline similarly—and most of them aren’t very happy about what they are seeing.

### ***Second, teachers have strong opinions—which are worth heeding—about how misbehavior should be managed.***

Even a quick glance at the results shows that teachers have fervent views on school discipline. We don’t see many “I don’t know” in their survey responses. Moreover, in addition to answering the multiple-choice questions that comprised the bulk of the survey, roughly 10 percent of respondents also opted to complete a voluntary, open-ended question at the end, wherein they expressed their hopes, frustrations, and convictions relative to managing student behavior.

It's as though they felt they hadn't been heard. So now that they have been, we hope that their sage advice, as synthesized by Griffith and Tyner, will be heeded.

In a nutshell, that means giving them and their principals more discretion when it comes to suspending students, while improving the environments to which disruptive children are removed so the root causes of their misbehavior can be addressed. In practice, that may mean hiring more mental health professionals, social workers, or other qualified adults to fortify such environments, rather than using scarce public resources to train teachers in largely unproven disciplinary "alternatives."

***Finally, our results make plain the dangers of including suspension rates in accountability systems.***

Although the Every Student Succeeds Act requires that states report schools' overall suspension rates on their report cards, it does not further stipulate how those data are used. For example, states are not required to use suspension rates as an indicator of school quality, or to incorporate them into schools' overall grades.

Our findings serve as a stern caution against states using suspension rates to hold schools accountable. So in our view, policymakers should resist the urge to use suspension data to tag schools as troubled, as that incentivizes them to misreport serious incidents and/or issue across-the-board bans or limits on suspensions, all of which will do more harm than good.

Currently, [according to the Learning Policy Institute](#), three states (California, Rhode Island, and West Virginia) use suspension rates to help identify schools that are in need of improvement, and six (Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Kansas, Minnesota, and Washington) use suspensions to help gauge the success of the success of school improvement plans. These states in particular should listen to what the teachers are saying and heed their concerns.

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In the end, it's not just presidential aspirants who need to wise up if they want to align with classroom teachers on this topic. It's also state and local policymakers. Instead of reducing the complexity that is school discipline to a sound bite about "ending the school-to-prison pipeline," how about putting an end to the oversimplification, political correctness, and naivete surrounding this issue? That would be a swell start and one that would do a lot of kids a lot of good.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recent studies suggest that top-down approaches to reducing out-of-school suspension (OSS) can be problematic. Yet when it comes to understanding the costs and/or benefits of suspensions in general, many discipline scholars believe we are at an impasse, and the public debate over discipline policy remains correspondingly polarized and two-dimensional.

To escape from this methodological cul-de-sac, we asked educators what they think about school discipline (something no one had done systematically in nearly fifteen years). Specifically, we surveyed a nationally representative sample of over 1,200 grade 3–12 teachers, in partnership with the RAND Corporation. And because racial and socioeconomic equity is a principal motivation for discipline reform, we oversampled African American teachers and teachers in high-poverty schools to ensure that their views were represented—something not attempted in any prior discipline survey (to our knowledge).

Our research questions were as follows:

1. *To what extent does the recent decline in suspensions reflect “reality,” as opposed to changes in reporting? And insofar as it is real, to what extent does it reflect improved student behavior, as opposed to changes in how educators respond to misbehavior?*
2. *What do teachers think of newer disciplinary approaches, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and restorative justice? And under what circumstances, if any, do they think suspensions, expulsions, and other forms of “exclusionary discipline” are necessary or appropriate?*
3. *What are teachers’ fundamental beliefs about how discipline should be maintained? What do they think we should be doing differently or better? And how do their views differ by teacher race and school poverty level?*

The resulting survey data yielded five key findings:

1. *Teachers in high-poverty schools report higher rates of verbal disrespect, physical fighting, and assault—and most say a disorderly or unsafe environment makes learning difficult.*
2. *Most teachers say discipline is inconsistent or inadequate and that the recent decline in suspensions is at least partly explained by higher tolerance for misbehavior or increased underreporting.*
3. *Although many teachers see value in newer disciplinary approaches—such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and restorative justice—most also say that suspensions can be useful and appropriate in some circumstances.*
4. *Most teachers say the majority of students suffer because of a few chronically disruptive peers—some of whom should not be in a general education setting.*
5. *Despite the likely costs for students who misbehave—and their belief that disciplinary consequences are racially biased—many African American teachers say suspensions, expulsions, and other forms of “exclusionary discipline” should be used more often.*

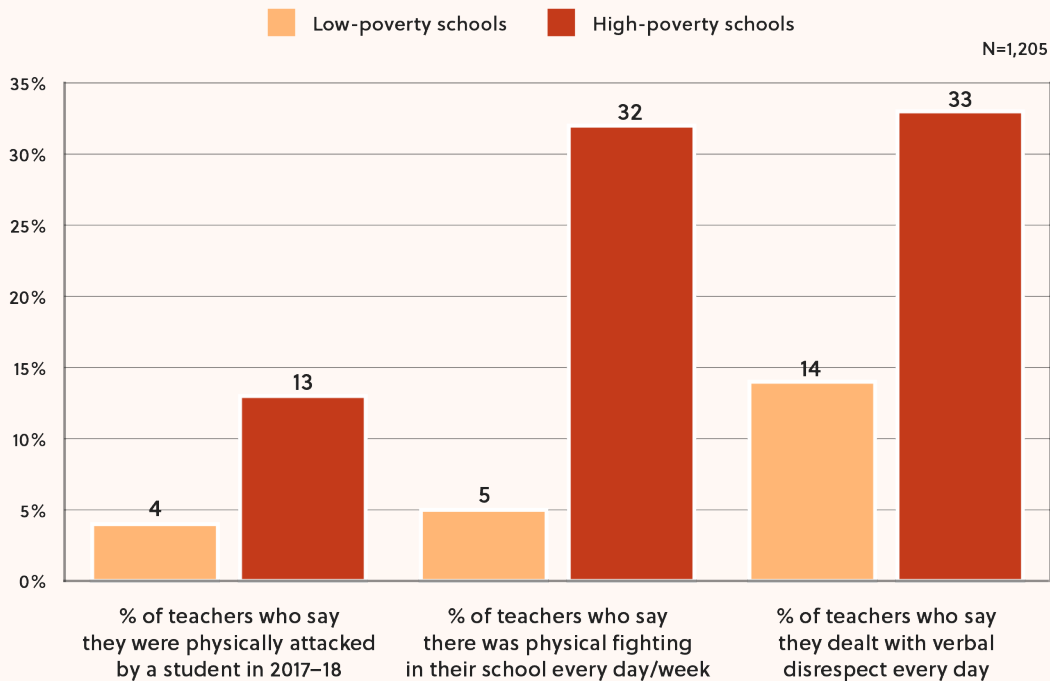
## 1

**Teachers in high-poverty schools report higher rates of verbal disrespect, physical fighting, and assault—and most say a disorderly or unsafe environment makes learning difficult.**

Compared to teachers in low-poverty schools (where fewer than 25 percent of students are eligible for federally subsidized lunches), teachers in high-poverty schools (where that figure is greater than 75 percent) are more than twice as likely to say that verbal disrespect is a daily occurrence in their classrooms. Similarly, they are more than six times as likely to say that physical fighting is a daily or weekly occurrence and more than three times as likely to report being personally assaulted by a student (Figure ES-1).

Tellingly, similar majorities of African American and white teachers in high-poverty schools say that student behavior problems make learning difficult (60 percent and 57 percent, respectively), suggesting that perceptions of school climate are not driven by teacher race (not shown).

**FIGURE ES-1. Teachers in high-poverty schools report higher rates of verbal disrespect, physical fighting, and assault.**



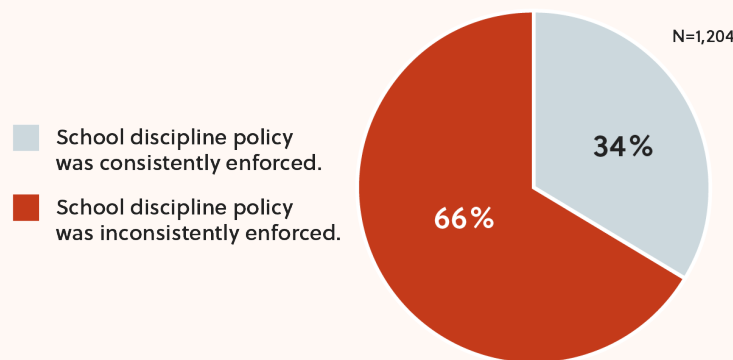
Note: Low-poverty schools are defined as those where less than 25 percent of students are eligible for federally subsidized lunches. High-poverty schools are defined as those where more than 75 percent of students are so eligible.

## 2

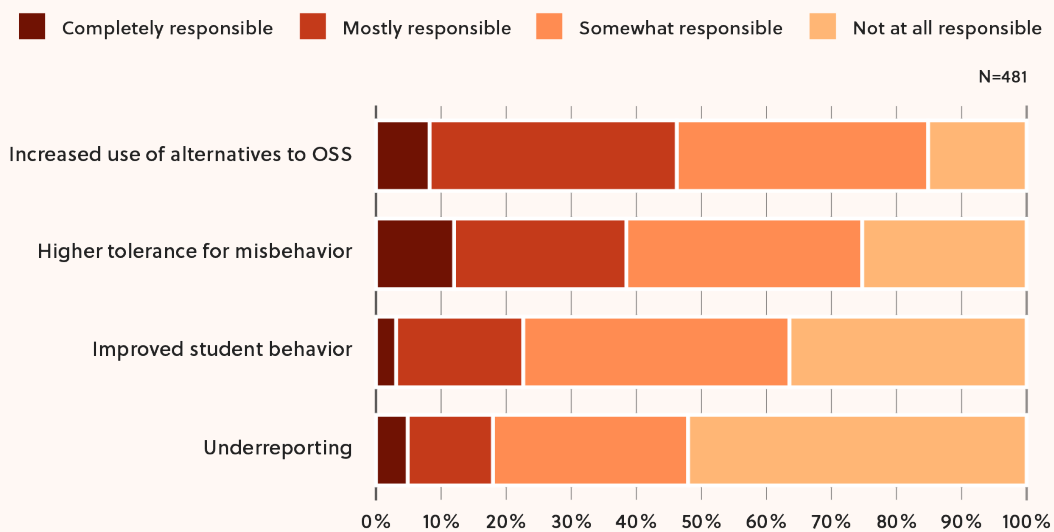
**Most teachers say discipline is inconsistent or inadequate and that the recent decline in suspensions is at least partly explained by higher tolerance for misbehavior or increased underreporting.**

Overall, two-thirds of teachers say discipline policy in their schools is inconsistently enforced (Figure ES-2). Moreover, among those reporting a decline in suspensions, only 23 percent say it is “mostly” or “completely” attributable to “improved student behavior,” compared to 38 percent who associate it with “higher tolerance for misbehavior” (Figure ES-3). (Forty-six percent chose “increased use of alternatives to OSS,” which could be consistent with both improved behavior and higher tolerance for misbehavior.)

**FIGURE ES-2. Which statement comes closer to describing your school last year (2017–18)?**



**FIGURE ES-3. How responsible do you think each of the following is for the decline in out-of-school suspensions at your school?**



Note: The sample for this question includes only those respondents who reported that the number of out-of-school suspensions had decreased at their school in recent years.

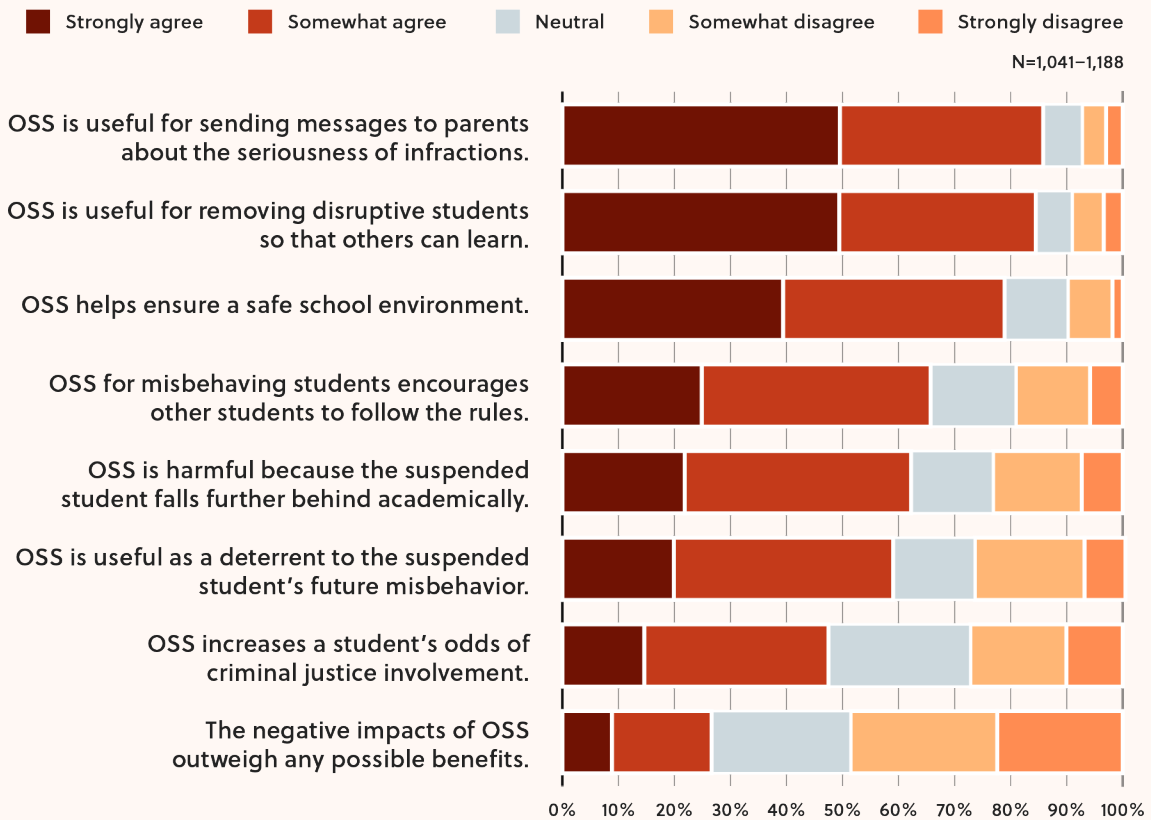
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**Although many teachers see value in newer disciplinary approaches—such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and restorative justice—most also say that suspensions can be useful and appropriate in some circumstances.**

All three of the “alternative” discipline approaches that we asked about—including Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS), restorative justice, and trauma-informed practices—are deemed at least “somewhat” effective by over 80 percent of teachers (not shown). However, 88 percent of teachers also say that “establishing specific consequences for misbehavior” is at least “somewhat” effective.

In a similar vein, although 62 percent of teachers agree that “suspended students fall further behind academically,” overwhelming majorities also say that out-of-school suspensions have their uses, including “sending messages to parents about the seriousness of infractions” and encouraging other students to follow the rules (Figure ES-4).

**FIGURE ES-4. Indicate your agreement with the following statements about the use of out-of-school suspensions (OSS).**



Note: Six of the eight questions (and scale) above were replicated with permission from a survey on school discipline conducted in Philadelphia by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education.<sup>2</sup> By and large, teachers in the Philadelphia survey responded similarly to teachers in our national survey.

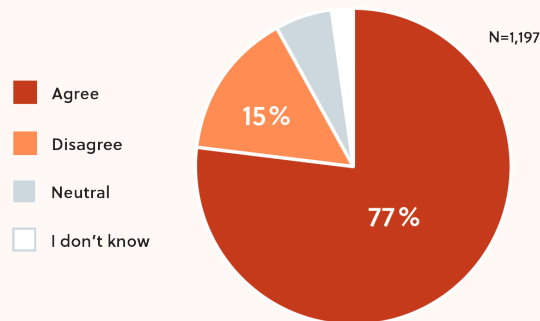
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**Most teachers say the majority of students suffer because of a few chronically disruptive peers—some of whom should not be in a general education setting.**

When asked to reflect on the previous school year, more than three-quarters of teachers (77 percent) agreed that “most students suffered because of a few persistent troublemakers” (Figure ES-5), and almost two-thirds of those in high-poverty schools (64 percent) said they had some “chronically disruptive” students who “should not have been in their classroom” (Figure ES-6). On a potentially related note, many teachers also noted that disciplining students with Individualized Education Plans presented additional challenges, with more than two-thirds agreeing that these students were treated too leniently, “even when their behavior had nothing to do with their disability” (not shown).

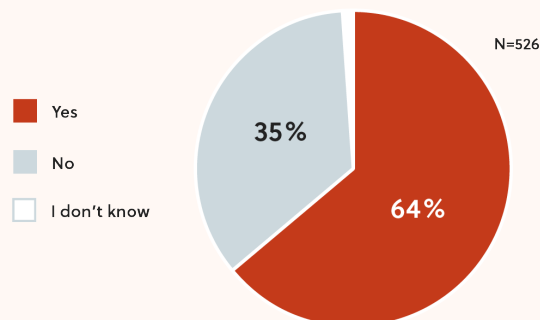
**FIGURE ES-5. Based on your experiences at your school last year (2017–18), indicate your agreement with the following statement:**

*Most students suffered because of a few persistent troublemakers.*



Note: “Agree” includes both strongly and somewhat agree responses. This survey question was replicated with permission from a national survey of middle and high school teachers conducted by Public Agenda in 2004.<sup>3</sup> In that survey, 85 percent of teachers agreed with this statement.

**FIGURE ES-6. Did you have any students with chronic discipline problems who you felt should not have been in your [high-poverty] classroom last year (2017–18)?**



Note: Sample includes only respondents teaching in schools where more than 75 percent of students were eligible for federally-subsidized lunches.

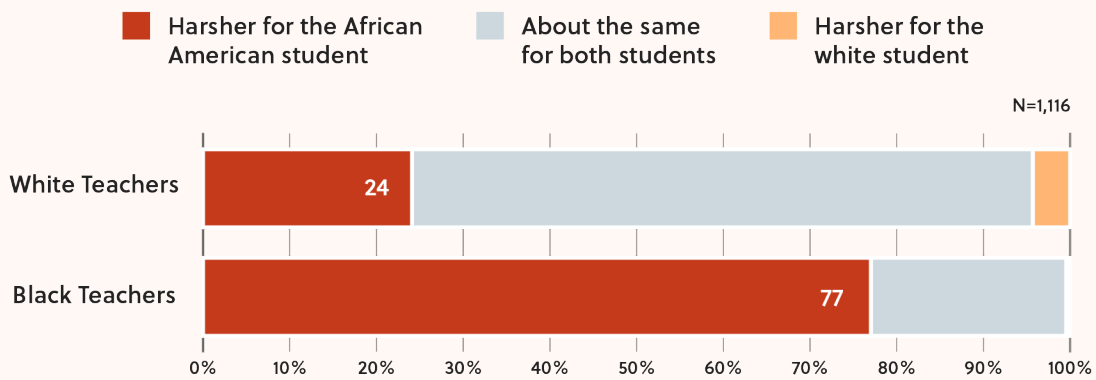


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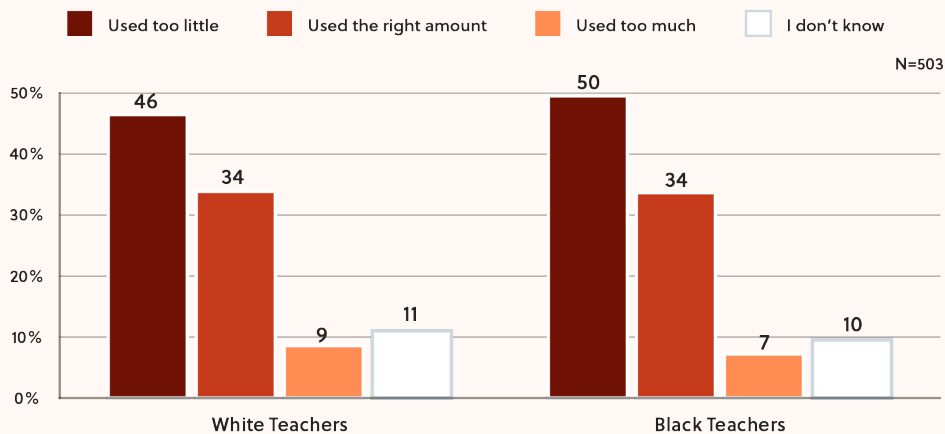
**Despite the likely costs for students who misbehave—and their belief that disciplinary consequences are racially biased—many African American teachers say suspensions, expulsions, and other forms of “exclusionary discipline” should be used more often.**

Compared to their white peers, African American teachers are somewhat more likely to worry that suspensions increase students’ odds of criminal justice involvement, and they are far more likely to believe there is racial bias in how school discipline policy is carried out (Figure ES-7). Yet, despite these concerns, many African American teachers (including half of those in high-poverty schools) say that out-of-school suspensions, as well as longer-term options such as expulsions and Alternative Learning Centers (ALCs), should be used more often (Figure ES-8).

**FIGURE ES-7. All else equal, if an African-American student and a white student commit the same infraction (e.g., verbally disrespecting a teacher), is the consequence likely to be:**



**FIGURE ES-8. In general, do you think your [high-poverty] school used out-of-school suspensions too much or too little?**



Note: Sample includes only respondents teaching in schools where more than 75 percent of students were eligible for federally-subsidized lunches.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### ***1. When it comes to school discipline, federal and state policymakers should respect the principle of non-maleficence: First, do no harm.***

Because sensibly balancing the interests of a minority of students against those of the majority is impossible from hundreds or thousands of miles away, federal and state policymakers should think twice before wading into the moral bracken of school discipline. Obviously, the federal Office for Civil Rights has a duty to intervene in cases where students believe they have been subject to discrimination, and these results in no way negate that vital function. But they do underscore the importance of making teachers and principals—not distant bureaucrats—the default arbiters of school discipline.

### ***2. Districts should revise their codes of conduct to give teachers and principals greater discretion when it comes to suspensions.***

Establishing and maintaining basic order so students can learn is an interpersonal challenge that doesn't lend itself to technocratic solutions. Consequently, when it comes to school discipline, it makes more sense to rely on teachers' and administrators' professional judgment than to second-guess or micromanage them. Trying to devise universal rules that are appropriate to every situation can do serious damage insofar as it undermines teachers' and principals' authority, forces them to make fundamentally unreasonable trade-offs, and increases the incentive to engage in underreporting.

### ***3. Instead of fixating on the rate at which disruptive students are removed from schools and classrooms, advocates for these students should focus on improving the environments to which they are likely to be removed.***

In general, districts and schools should be focused on connecting disruptive students with the services they need, rather than the rates at which they are suspended or expelled. For example, teachers' comments suggest ample room for improvement when it comes to "in-school suspension." Similarly, there is a strong case for referring those receiving lengthier suspensions (or outright expulsions) to a district-run alternative learning center that is appropriately staffed with social workers and mental health professionals, in addition to trained educators.

### ***4. Additional resources should be put toward hiring more teaching assistants and mental health professionals in high-poverty schools, rather than training teachers in largely unproven alternatives that may do more harm than good.***

Although the appeal of newer disciplinary approaches is understandable, their track record is decidedly spotty, in part because what appears to work in one place often fails to deliver the hoped-for benefits when tried somewhere else—with different students, different staff, different leadership, and different resources and constraints. Accordingly, when and where additional resources are available or existing resources can be redirected, the priority should be ensuring that high-poverty schools and the associated alternative settings are well staffed with individuals who have the requisite skills, knowledge, and passion for helping troubled and at-risk youth succeed— not on unproven "alternatives to suspension" that may do more harm than good.