

Case Study:

Investing in Positive Discipline Alternatives A Report from the School Discipline Reform Portfolio of The Atlantic Philanthropies

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INTRODUCTION

School discipline practices in the United States are changing rapidly. These changes are widespread and reflect the efforts of educators, policy makers, grassroots groups of students and parents, the juvenile justice system, lawmakers, philanthropies and advocacy groups. One of the major contributors to these changes is the School Discipline Reform Portfolio launched by The Atlantic Philanthropies in 2010. Atlantic joined other funders interested in creating national change in school discipline practices, including the Open Society Foundations, the California Endowment, the Edward W. Hazen Foundation and the Schott Foundation for Public Education.

Atlantic grantees have not only raised awareness of the negative consequences of harsh and discriminatory discipline practices in our nation's schools, but also have developed new disciplinary strategies, tested these strategies with high quality research, and built awareness of positive practices that work. This paper reviews the work of those Atlantic grantees that have been particularly focused on finding, testing, and advocating for positive disciplinary practices that keep young people in school.

BACKGROUND

In the last quarter of the 20th Century, questions began to be raised about whether school discipline policies were fair and appropriate.¹ Despite alarming increases in rates of suspensions, expulsions and arrests in school, little action was taken on the issue at that time. By the close of the first decade of the 21st Century, however, it had become painfully clear that many schools in the United States were often using disciplinary methods that were inordinately harsh responses to adolescent behavior and that directly undermined their core mission—to educate all of the youth in the country.

More disturbing still was the finding shown with new data by advocates attempting to change these policies, that these disciplinary measures were much more likely to be applied to students of color, students with disabilities, and male students. These disparities were shown to be nearly ubiquitous and dramatic. For example, data from the Office of Civil Rights showed that 3.45 million students were suspended from school in 2011-12. The rates for out-of-school suspension in that year were 6 percent for white males but 20 percent for black males. Even in preschool, black children were disproportionately represented among suspended children, since they represented 18 percent of preschool enrollment but 48 percent of preschool suspensions. Suspension rates are lower for females than for males in every racial category, but black girls are suspended at higher rates than

¹ Children's Defense Fund, 1974. *School Suspensions: Are They Helping Children?* Cambridge, MA: Washington Research Project.

girls of any other ethnicity and more than most males. While 13 percent of students with disabilities are suspended, only 6 percent of their non-disabled peers receive these punishments.²

Data on first-year teachers and teaching careers provide consistent evidence that the challenge of classroom management is a primary reason for teachers leaving the profession. Still, most schools of education offer only scant training in classroom management or in how to develop effective and supportive relationships with diverse students. It is perhaps only logical that school staff moved students out of the classroom and out of the school when they were perceived to be discipline problems, often without awareness of how racial and other biases might be affecting their perceptions. The rationale for this exclusion was often that then other students could learn.

In addition, the use of police to maintain order and safety in schools expanded to such an extent that ticketing or arresting students for minor infractions had become commonplace. Atlantic grantees argued that treating behaviors such as truancy as minor criminal acts (known technically as “Class C misdemeanors”) resulted in overcrowding in courts and unnecessary detention of young people, but did not increase a sense of safety in schools.³ Moreover, the use of enhanced school security measures such as contraband searches, metal detectors, and armed police in the school were found to be positively associated with suspension rates and positively related to increased racial disparities in the use of suspensions.⁴

Thus, the confluence of local school policies, state policies insisting on zero tolerance for some behaviors, the widespread involvement of the police in school discipline, and the lack of training for teachers in how to handle disruptive students, escalated the use of punitive discipline policies and disproportionately excluded some students from school.

“Zero tolerance school discipline has become a trap door into the juvenile justice system for too many children.”

Mediratta, 2014⁵

The educational community had already learned that poor attendance was a strong predictor of failure to graduate from high school. But these new and more detailed data from Atlantic grantees showed that ironically, the school itself was unwittingly contributing to school dropout. The Dignity in Schools Campaign, an Atlantic grantee, began calling these tactics “pushout” strategies. Students were not voluntarily dropping out of school; they were being actively pushed out by school policy

² U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights. 2014. *Civil Rights Data Collection, 2011-12*.

³ Carter, P., Fine, M., and Russell, S. 2014. *Discipline Disparities Series: Overview*. Bloomington, IN: The Equity Project at Indiana University.

⁴ Finn, J.D., and Servoss, T.J. “Security Measures and Discipline in American High Schools.” in Losen, D. (ed.), *Closing the School Discipline Gap: Equitable Remedies for Excessive Exclusion*. New York: Teachers College Press.

⁵ Mediratta, K., Remarks at AFT Educator’s Summit on School Discipline, March 21-22, Washington, DC.

and practice. Failure to graduate from high school is, in turn, predictive of poor economic and job prospects and thus a predictor of crime. And the sanctions being used in schools were directly exposing young people to the justice system, thus heightening the likelihood of future involvement. Tickets for truancy during a suspension could lead to arrest warrants when students could not pay these tickets. This sequence of events led young people, civil rights advocates, and others to coin the term: “school to prison pipeline.”

From the outset of this initiative, Atlantic and its partners knew that documenting these issues and educating others about them would not be enough. A key part of achieving success would be finding or creating more positive alternatives to these harmful disciplinary practices. An early document outlining Atlantic’s funding strategy for the portfolio stressed three essential actions that local school districts would need to undertake in order to produce discipline reform in individual schools:

- (1) Reforming the district’s disciplinary code and/or the memorandum of understanding with school police in order to narrow the number and type of infractions subject to suspension, expulsion or arrest; and*
- (2) Implementing positive, evidence-based alternative models of discipline; and***
- (3) Continuously monitoring the data with respect to referrals to the principal’s office, suspensions and racial disparity and making any necessary adjustments to school practice.*

TEC Consultina, Inc., 2010, emphasis added⁶

In response to the data on the escalating use of harsh disciplinary policies, the disparities in their use, and the negative consequences of these practices, The Atlantic Philanthropies used three primary strategies to promote the use of alternative disciplinary policies and practices in schools: 1) the creation of materials and resources to promote alternatives; 2) research to establish more effective policies and practices; and 3) increasing awareness of effective alternatives. This paper outlines the activities and outcomes of Atlantic grantees in pursuing these strategies.

⁶ TEC Consulting Inc. 2010. Ending Zero Tolerance Discipline in U.S. Public Schools: A Proposed Grantmaking Strategy for the Atlantic Philanthropies. Montclair, N.J.: Author.

STRATEGY 1: MATERIALS AND RESOURCES TO PROMOTE ALTERNATIVES

Atlantic and their funding partners have supported several efforts to produce materials that will be useful to educators and others in learning about alternatives to punitive discipline practices. These materials include websites, videos, new curricula, and training materials. Some of these efforts are outlined here:

American Institutes for Research—AIR has created the National Clearinghouse on Supportive School Discipline, a website that facilitates access to research, advocacy material and tools to help schools examine and improve their school discipline policies and practices. Still in the building stage, AIR also intends for the site to provide state and national data on discipline policies and disparities, information on how schools can use data to drive their work, and a tool to audit whether schools are meeting vital conditions for learning. **Contact: David Osher, dosher@air.org.**

Oakland Unified School District—Over the past several years, OUSD has experienced notable declines in their rates of out-of-school suspension. Suspension rates for all students have dropped from 9 percent to 6 percent between 2010 and 2013 and among African American male students, from 22 percent to 15 percent. OUSD accomplished this by transforming its schools into full service community schools and making specific efforts to reduce its disproportionate use of harsh discipline practices and improve academic and other supports for African American youth. The District created an Office of African American Male Achievement (AAMA) to support schools to set specific goals and outcomes for this population at their sites. In addition to supporting the AAMA, school discipline and community schools initiatives, Atlantic funding also is helping OUSD to educate policymakers and practitioners on how to better support achievement and reduce school exclusion for children of color from high poverty communities. OUSD is producing educational materials such as a school transformation handbook, a binder of best practices, videos, and web based tools that will be available to other districts seeking to implement similar strategies. **Contact: Curtiss Sarikey, curtiss.sarikey@ousd.k12.ca.us.**

University of Virginia, Curry School of Education—The Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) at UVA developed My Teaching Partner (MTP), a professional development strategy to help teachers improve interactions with students through structured reflection (including video-taped classroom instruction) and coaching. The program has an accompanying Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) that assists administrators and coaches to provide feedback to teachers on 10 dimensions, including their provision of emotional and instructional support for students and their classroom organization.

Atlantic funds are helping CASTL to expand MTP with a sequence of online materials to strengthen the capacity of teachers to engage diverse learners. The materials focus on helping teachers to become aware of their own beliefs and the beliefs of others, assess their interactions with students, and interact more effectively with students. Because these materials are free and on-line, CASTL

hopes they will be adopted by a large percentage of the nation’s teacher preparation programs. **Contact: Robert Pianta, rcp4p@virginia.edu.**

W. Haywood Burns Institute—Through its Discipline Disproportionality Project, this Atlantic grantee is building educators’ understanding of the collateral consequences of suspensions, expulsions, arrests and ticketing on children’s long-term wellbeing, and how trauma and stress can affect student actions. The Burns Institute has a long history of work to reduce racial disproportionality in juvenile justice settings and drawing on this work, has developed a training curriculum customized for educators. The training emphasizes empathy with students and supports teachers to identify alternative strategies for managing behavior that lessen conflict in the classroom and reduce punitive sanctions. The Institute is also developing an objective decision-making tool to guide administrators in tracking the use of suspensions and intervening with classroom teachers when patterns of disproportionality are evident. **Contact: James Bell, jbelle@burnsinstitute.org.**

STRATEGY 2: RESEARCH TO ESTABLISH MORE EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVES

When Atlantic began this initiative, some alternatives to suspensions, expulsions, and other exclusionary disciplinary measures had been developed, but additional research was needed to find which alternative practices were truly effective. Two such efforts are discussed below:

Johns Hopkins University, Center for Social Organizations of Schools—This grantee is conducting a randomized control trial to test the impacts of restorative justice and how best to support its implementation in schools. Three concepts are central to the restorative justice approach. In the context of conflict or student misbehavior, the focus is on 1) repairing harm, 2) involving stakeholders, and 3) restoring relationships. Again relationships within a school community are emphasized, as noted above in practices preparing teachers to form positive relationships with students. But restorative justice also changes the lens through which conflict and behavior problems are viewed. Rather than a crime and punishment mentality that seeks to exclude the offender from a community, restorative justice asks those who do harm to take responsibility for their actions and make amends to those harmed. It is designed to not only create justice but to restore equilibrium and a sense of safety to a school and involves the school community rather than only an assistant principal in charge of discipline.

⁷ Gonzalez, T. 2015. “Socializing Schools: Addressing Racial Disparities in Discipline Through Restorative Justice, in Losen, D., op.cit., 2015.

“The underlying assumption of restorative justice is that students who commit delinquent or offensive acts are breaching the social contract between them and the school community. That social contract cannot be restored if the...school’s first and most frequent response is to ban the offender from the community.”

Gonzalez, 2015⁷

Before Atlantic made its investment in testing this model, restorative justice had shown promise. For example, a detailed case study of the experience of Denver Public Schools with restorative practices found fewer suspensions and in turn, gains in academic achievement.⁸ Importantly, findings from that research suggested that community building techniques—rather than exclusionary punishment—did not pose a risk to academic effectiveness, as some had feared.

Other research on restorative approaches to school discipline, both in the US and in other countries, also offered evidence of its promise in reducing suspensions, fighting, use of detention, police tickets, and other indicators of behavioral disruption⁹. Yet without formal randomized control trial evidence, school districts faced hurdles—both politically and practically—in using federal and state funding for this approach.

In 2014, Atlantic provided a \$1 million grant to the International Institute for Restorative Practices in partnership with the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University for a three-year randomized field trial of the SaferSanerSchools Whole-School Change Program. This program is testing restorative practices using 15 program and 16 control schools. The desired outcomes are reducing disparities in discipline and reducing overall rates of suspension, arrest, and expulsions.

The study also is collecting data from administrators, teachers and students on implementation practices and challenges. Among the teachers, surveys will measure perceptions of the school environment, support of discipline reform efforts, teachers’ participation in professional learning groups, and their perceptions of student behavior. Students will also be surveyed on such topics as school climate, behavioral issues in the school, and the degree to which teachers show respect and caring for students. The results of this study will provide important quantitative data on the impacts of restorative practices. **Contact: Robert Balfanz, rbalfanz@jhu.org.**

⁸ Gonzalez, op. cit., 2015

⁹ Schiff, M. 2013. “Dignity, disparity and desistance: Effective restorative justice strategies to plug the ‘school to prison pipeline’.” Paper presented at the Closing School Discipline Gap Conference. Available at <http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu>

The Discipline Disparities Research-to-Practice (RtP) Collaborative—The RtP Collaborative, launched with Atlantic funding, included researchers, advocates, policy analysts and educators and was anchored by a partnership between the Equity Project at Indiana University and the Center for Civil Rights Remedies at UCLA’s Civil Rights Project. Their task was to assess the state of knowledge on causes and effects of discipline disparities and to develop research and practical interventions to reduce disparities in discipline and the pushout of students from school.

The Collaborative’s work resulted in a major conference, two congressional briefings on new research findings, the publication of two books, and a series of briefing papers, in addition to eleven funded studies of emerging interventions to reduce disparities. The briefing papers and books—*Closing the School Discipline Gap: Equitable Remedies for Excessive Exclusion*¹⁰ and *Inequality in School Discipline: Research and Practice to Reduce Disparities*¹¹—are designed to inform policymakers and practitioners of the factors contributing to excessive discipline and resulting disparities, and to share guidance on specific remedies, including restorative justice, teacher training, and tiered intervention strategies such as the "threat assessment protocol". In addition, these materials expand knowledge about the impact of punitive discipline, exploring disparities for students on the basis of sexual orientation, gender expression and identity. Together the Collaborative’s work presents clear evidence of an urgent problem for which there are some broad and specific solutions which policymakers and practitioners can pursue. **Contact: Russ Skiba, skiba@indiana.edu; Daniel Losen, losendan@gmail.com.**

STRATEGY 3: INCREASING AWARENESS OF POSITIVE ALTERNATIVES

Virtually all of those funded as part of Atlantic’s School Discipline Reform Portfolio engaged in activities to enhance the public’s awareness of the disparities in school discipline and the harmful effects of suspensions, expulsions, arrests, and zero tolerance policies. Funding also was provided to help the US Department of Education make available systematic national data on school discipline and its disproportionate application to students of color, those with disabilities, and males. The American Federation of Teachers held their first ever “Educator’s Summit on School Discipline” in March, 2014, to talk about current discipline practices and their alternatives. The Discipline Disparities Research-to-Practice Collaborative produced a series of materials on these topics, and many more of the 50 grantees that were part of the Portfolio wrote about and talked about these dire findings with their constituencies.

¹⁰ New York: Teachers College Press.

¹¹ Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, in press.

Atlantic funded a series of projects focused on building awareness of the problem and alternatives, and creating opportunities to make sense of the implications for policy and practice. Examples of such projects include:

The Southern Education Foundation (SEF)—In a multi-year project, SEF framed out-of-school suspensions as a challenge for educational achievement, rather than the result of behavioral problems. Working in the South to network policy and advocacy communities, they completed a regional scan of state codes, litigation and policy trends on discipline policy and practice, as well as a scan of teacher certification laws, regulations and curricula. These data were used to define research needs and to create state profiles, maps and data tools to help organizations push for positive change. They helped develop two cross-sector coalitions, one in Georgia now known as the Georgia Education Climate Coalition, and one in North Carolina, providing key research, asset and need mapping that were used to identify areas of need.

Through a re-grant to the Columbia School of Journalism, SEF held a seminar for journalists on the topic of school exclusion and encouraged them to raise public awareness through writing articles on the subject. They convened leaders of national education associations such as the Council of Great City Schools to encourage their involvement in advancing school discipline reform and improving teacher preparation in classroom management. They advocated for and educated others about how an improved overall school climate can decrease the need for discipline. Their work in the South was particularly relevant since six of the ten states with the highest suspension rates in the nation are in that region. **Contact: Kent McGuire, kMcGuire@southerneducation.org.**

The American Federation of Teachers Educational Foundation—Atlantic’s support to the AFT enabled it to develop reform projects in partnership with local affiliates to demonstrate actions that school-level practitioners could take to promote positive discipline and disparity reduction. Two schools in Peoria, IL, for example, developed a broad coalition with members of the school community to examine student discipline practices and introduce options, including training in positive youth development and cultural and implicit bias, enhancing student engagement, and using data to inform these options.

In addition, the AFT also supported the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) to create a Positive Learning Collaborative that, to date, has trained more than 1,000 staff members in Therapeutic Crisis Intervention for Schools in partnership with Cornell University and the New York City Department of Education. Funding from Atlantic has enabled an expansion to support more than 15 schools including District 75 and 79 schools.

But the most sweeping accomplishment of the AFT was the “seismic shift” in its own views of school discipline. A longtime champion of zero tolerance policies, the organization began to elevate the discussion of disparities in discipline in its member convenings and publications. It also passed a resolution promoting the adoption of restorative justice in schools that receive public funds. This new document advocates as follows:

- “RESOLVED, that the American Federation of Teachers will advocate that every school that receives public funds adopt the restorative justice philosophy and restorative justice practices and support systems, including but not limited to counseling, intervention, peace circles, peer juries, peer mediation, conflict resolution, restitution and community service; and
- RESOLVED, that the AFT will advocate that all school administration, staff, and security personnel be trained in the basic philosophy and critical practices of restorative justice; and
- RESOLVED, that the AFT will advocate that the students, parents, community members, legislators, and public be educated about the basic philosophy and critical practices of restorative justice; and
- RESOLVED, that the AFT will advocate for funds to place restorative justice coordinators/trainers and support staff in every school with the goal of promoting positive learning environments that foster meaningful student relationships to develop self-worth, cultivate emotional well-being, culturally relevant and culturally responsive curriculum, and help produce responsible citizens.”¹²

Contact: [Lisa Thomas, lthomas@aft.org](mailto:liathomas@aft.org).

American Association of School Administrators—Atlantic provided funds to support a partnership of AASA and the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) to conduct a national survey of superintendents on their knowledge of school discipline, develop a learning community for district leaders to study the issue, and provide intensive support to a small number of districts that committed to reviewing data and assessing their policy and practices. The survey of some 500 school superintendents revealed that half of them believed that reducing out of school suspensions and expulsions was very important. However, 85 percent of these superintendents believed there were positive consequences to such suspensions and expulsions, including an improved school climate since troublesome children are removed from the school. Over 90 percent recognized negative consequences as well, including loss of class time, increased disengagement, absenteeism, truancy and dropout.

To enhance knowledge about current discipline practices in schools and their alternatives, AASA has also prepared several pieces on these topics and made them available to their membership through their website (AASA.org). AASA and CDF have also selected ten school districts in nine states to explore effective discipline alternatives to suspension and expulsion. The districts are either reforming their existing discipline codes or expanding the reforms they have already launched. **Contact:** [Sharon Adams Taylor, sadams@aasa.org](mailto:sadams@aasa.org) or [Bryan Joffe, bjoffe@aasa.org](mailto:bjoffe@aasa.org).

National Association of State Boards of Education—The funding provided to this group was used to produce policy briefs and webinars to inform state board members of the harms of

¹² American Federation of Teachers. 2014. School Discipline: Reclaiming the Promise: A New Path Forward on School Discipline Practices. Resolution passed by the AFT Executive Committee.

exclusionary discipline, and to assist a cohort of six states to evaluate their policies. Grant funds also were provided to school boards in Oregon, Virginia, Georgia, Michigan and West Virginia to create a task force to improve school discipline data collection and reporting, decrease out of school suspensions, expulsions and law enforcement referrals, and eliminate disparities in the use of disciplinary strategies. Each task force was to be led by at least one member of the state board of education. This project is an example of Atlantic's efforts to cultivate and engage state-level leaders in examining discipline practices as part of the foundation's overall funding strategy. **Contact:** [Kimberly Charis, kcharis@nasbe.org](mailto:kcharis@nasbe.org).

Editorial Projects in Education—This project was designed to build educators' awareness by expanding coverage of school discipline for education audiences through a "conditions for learning" beat in the national newsmagazine, *Education Week*, and to conduct readership polls tracking trends in attitudes towards school climate and discipline. During the first two years of the project, they published some 50 articles on school discipline issues in *Education Week* and on edweek.org, including 17 that were page one stories. There were more than 240,000 page views of this material during the years they were first posted.

This project also conducted three surveys of teachers and school administrators between 2012 and 2015. All of the surveys used samples of registered users of edweek.org to measure their attitudes toward school climate, discipline and safety issues. In the earliest survey, administrators were generally more positive about the climate of their schools than were teachers. Most of those surveyed said their schools used a variety of approaches to improve student behavior, including school-wide behavioral management programs, social and emotional learning, restorative practices, and school security practices.

By 2015, these educators were considerably more likely to report that social and emotional learning was very important to student achievement (67 percent in 2015 versus 54 percent in 2014) and more reported using schoowide behavioral management programs to improve students behavior (59 percent in 2015 versus 53 percent in 2012). Use of restorative practices had also increased from 21 percent in 2012 to 33 percent in 2015.¹³

Contact: [Virginia Edwards, GinEd@epe.org](mailto:GinEd@epe.org).

¹³ Editorial Projects in Education 2015. *Social and Emotional Learning: Perspectives from America's Schools*. Bethesda MD: Education Week Research Center.

CONCLUSION

Through its School Discipline Reform Portfolio, The Atlantic Philanthropies invested in making clear the negative consequences of zero tolerance discipline policies for America's students. In collaboration with other funders, they brought to light the disproportionate use of these "pushout" policies with students of color, males, and students with disabilities. To lessen these disparities, Atlantic made a substantial investment in an integrated and deliberate portfolio to find, test, and disseminate positive alternatives to these disciplinary practices. They did this through a specific funding strategy including high performing grantees and partnerships with local school leaders.

To provide the nation's educators with other remedies for misbehavior, Atlantic funded the creation of new materials and resources that would support educators in the use of professional development strategies, coaching, and other activities designed to reinforce more positive approaches to discipline. Grantees educated teachers, school staff, and journalists on what other tactics schools could use to build positive climates that would prevent extensive disciplinary problems and heal conflict when it occurred. Grantees also carried out high quality research to test emerging techniques like restorative practices and created a new collection of this research, offering multiple positive disciplinary alternatives.

As the nation begins to abandon or at least lessen the use of disciplinary solutions that push young people out of school, into the streets, and eventually into the justice system, these alternatives should see increased use. Equally important, the large and harmful disparities in the use of pushout policies should gradually disappear in favor of improved school climates, fewer school days missed by the nation's young people, and higher rates of school completion.