

Case Study:

Pressure in Numbers

**Using Data to Make the Case for School
Discipline Reform**

**A Report from the School Discipline Reform
Portfolio of The Atlantic Philanthropies**

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The logo for Philliber Research & Evaluation features the word "Philliber" in a large, blue, serif font. A red arc curves over the top of the letters "i", "l", and "l". Below "Philliber" is the text "RESEARCH & EVALUATION" in a smaller, blue, sans-serif font.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2010, school discipline reform was a relatively unknown issue for many working in education leadership, although the momentum was growing due to the work of several key advocacy groups. The Children’s Defense Fund had been advocating for school discipline reform since 1975 when *School Suspensions: Are They Helping Children* was first published. The Advancement Project had been organizing local community-based organizations since 2001 to advocate for reform. The Open Society Foundations was funding school discipline reform efforts in Maryland and a study of the magnitude and impact of school discipline in Texas. And in 2007, the Dignity in Schools Campaign was formed as a platform for grassroots groups and advocates working around the country to talk with each other.

Throughout its life, The Atlantic Philanthropies have been dedicated to creating opportunities and lasting changes for people who are unfairly disadvantaged or vulnerable to life’s circumstances. School discipline had become ineffective, unjust, and unequally applied to people of color and vulnerable populations—and the moment was right for a bold strategic investment over a relatively short period of time. Atlantic decided to take on the issue of reforming of school discipline policies and practices nationally and in local communities across the country.

As one federal official interviewed for this piece observed, The Atlantic Philanthropies’ approach to their school discipline portfolio was unusual because they set out from the beginning to fund *categories of work*, rather than particular organizations or geographic areas, operating from a larger strategic framework of catalyzing a movement. Grantmaking focused on categories of work associated with:

- mobilizing advocates;
- strengthening federal mandates for reform;
- building influential champions; and
- enhancing knowledge and capacity to reduce exclusionary discipline and racial disparities.

This study focuses one highly influential aspect of this last category of work: the gathering, interpretation, and dissemination of data on school discipline practices. Gathering compelling data on school discipline reform has provided valuable assistance to advocates who are working to make the case for change, chart the progress of the movement as it unfolds, and demonstrate the success of alternatives to past practices.

At the onset of its work, Atlantic set a long-term nationwide goal of reducing school suspensions by one half and reducing discipline disparities by one quarter. The Atlantic Philanthropies’ principal strategy for this portfolio of grants have been to fund a diverse array of organizations to foster pressure from the top down, in the case of federal guidance, and pressure from the bottom up, as can be seen in key reforms in school districts and states. Although the grantmaking can be associated with specific categories of work, the major advances in school discipline reform have been as a result of strategic and extensive layering and interweaving of these efforts. A major

portion of the portfolio has prioritized the support of grassroots organizations to mobilize advocates by supporting these groups with legal, research, communication, and funding resources.

This report focuses on key examples of how Atlantic funding for, and assistance with, using data contributed to the overall school discipline reform effort. Many of these examples overlap in time, and in many cases efforts are still ongoing. Drawing on a review of internal documents, grantee reports, media coverage, and interviews with Atlantic staff, grantees, and additional stakeholders, we describe the many different ways in which data have sustained this national reform effort. The interplay between data, individual student stories, and issue framing has opened a policy window for unprecedented progress in school discipline reform.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS TO DATE

The main premise of Atlantic’s school discipline campaign was that zero-tolerance policies in schools did not work to make schools safer, and that they disproportionately punished students of color. As the portfolio developed, there was an increasing emphasis on positive alternatives to school discipline and linking school discipline policies to academic achievement. Atlantic funded efforts to make these arguments in several ways, including the rapid development of an enhanced collection of basic research. In the first four years of the portfolio, Atlantic sponsored and facilitated research and analyses that demonstrated the following²:

- Zero tolerance policies were geographically widespread and frequently included punishment for actions well beyond the scope of initial policies.
- The application of school discipline policies around suspension and expulsion were disproportionately and more harshly applied to males, African Americans, and students in special education.
- Students who have disabilities, are Hispanic/Latino, Native American, and LGBT were also punished more harshly than peers not in these groups.
- Arguments that disciplinary disparities were due to the behavioral effects of poverty or that students of color are more likely than other peers to engage in disruptive behavior were not supported by the data.

Additional research that links discipline data to other indicators, such as school attendance, academic performance, and delinquency, provided evidence of a “school to prison pipeline” in which:

² Summarized from the research brief *New and Developing Research on Disparities in Discipline* (2014), by Research to Practice Collaborative members Russell J. Skiba, Mariella I. Arredondo, and M. Karega Rausch. http://www.indiana.edu/~atlantic/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Disparity_NewResearch_010915.pdf

- The application of harsh discipline policies can vary enormously at the school level, with some extreme schools driving the statistics for the whole district.
- Suspension was linked with academic disengagement, academic failure, and dropout.
- Alternative school placements for purposes of discipline can exacerbate these academic problems.
- Affected students were also more likely than peers to have contact with the juvenile justice system.
- This pattern of systemic failure had negative fiscal consequences for schools and communities.

BACKGROUND

In 2000, many schools and districts across the country had zero-tolerance policies. These were often adopted as an expansion of zero-tolerance drug and weapon policies implemented in the 1980s and early 1990s, and further expanded in response to school shootings in the late 1990s. School safety was cited as the primary motivation for strong and strict policies, which typically were not based on any research or statistical arguments. Gradually, the zero tolerance approach expanded to less serious disciplinary infractions and held stronger and stronger punishments. School police forces were put in place and expanded. In addition to suspension and expulsion, students in many districts could be charged with a variety of crimes and referred to the juvenile justice system.

Many parents, students, and grassroots advocates had long-standing concerns about these policies. Initially, criticism of zero-tolerance and other draconian school discipline policies came from high school students, as well as the legal and juvenile justice advocates in large urban districts, such as Los Angeles, where the consequences were painfully felt. In some areas, the courts were flooded with students who had received tickets or arrests for extremely minor violations, as in Dallas, Texas. Parents sought legal remedies to allow their children to return to schools. People in these communities could clearly see that children of color—especially African American males—were being disproportionately targeted and affected by harsh school discipline policies.

Despite these concerns, the extent of the problem was difficult to gauge without uniform data with which to compare schools and districts. On the federal level, the Gun-Free Schools Act required reporting of expulsions for weapons, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) required reporting disciplinary actions against special education and disabled students. Federal school discipline data were available from the US Department Office of Civil Rights, but they represented a sample of only about 50 to 60 percent of districts, lagged by two years, and were notoriously difficult to access.

Nonetheless, the number of advocates and grassroots organizations actively addressing the issue continued to grow. A handful of states and districts required reporting, some academics, including Russell Skiba and Pedro Noguera, were following the issue, and national groups, such as the

Children’s Defense Fund, Advancement Project and the Center for Civil Rights Remedies at UCLA’s Civil Rights Project, were conducting research and advocacy work in the area.³ However, with the exception of the Open Society Foundations, there were relatively few funders supporting the research.

In 2009, as Atlantic embarked on its final five years of grantmaking in the US, its leaders were searching for a well-defined, actionable issue to challenge racial disparities and where they could facilitate a large amount of change in a small amount of time. Donna Lawrence, Director of Atlantic’s Children and Youth Programme, had previously led the Children’s Defense Fund New York office and had a long history of work promoting children’s wellbeing. She was instrumental in selecting the issue and developing the staff team to lead the work. As Atlantic prepared to invest, staff turned to the array of grassroots groups, academics, and civil rights advocates already in place to create a foundation for the movement they hoped to propel.

CREATING PRESSURE FOR CHANGE

The theory of change undergirding Atlantic’s school discipline reform portfolio emphasized: (1) widespread pressure from advocacy groups; (2) developing capacity for reform; and (3) the ability to respond to opportunities with a well-coordinated network of people and resources. Program officers, in consultation with many experts in the field, drew on social movement theory and social science concepts of “policy windows” advanced by John Kingdon⁴ and the “tipping point” popularized by Malcolm Gladwell⁵, to formulate a strategy. Combined, these theories and concepts emphasize how social change occurs as a result of an alignment of resources, networks of people, influential champions, a palatable alternative, and a favorable social context. These elements are mutually reinforcing and combine to increase pressure for change as well as new capacity within systems to undertake reform. The strategic use of data is but one factor among many. In the remainder of this study, we will demonstrate how the acquisition, reporting, and use of data are a part of a larger algorithm of forces leading to social change.

According to an early internal Atlantic memo, the aims of the portfolio’s pressure strategy were to “(a) build demand and pressure for local and state reform from parent, youth, and other community advocates in a strategic tier of jurisdictions around the country; and (b) strengthen federal pressure on, and incentives for, states and local school districts to relinquish reliance on suspension,

³ For a more thorough history of this time, see “Grassroots organizing and the school-to-prison pipeline,” by K. Mediratta, in *Disrupting the School to Prison Pipeline*, published by Harvard Educational Review, 2012.

⁴ See *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies (2nd ed.)*, by J. Kingdon, published by Addison, Wesley, Longman, 1995.

⁵ See *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, by M. Gladwell, published by Little, Brown and Company, 2000.

expulsion and arrest, in favor of positive discipline approaches that keep children in school and learning.”

Program staff started by looking at grassroots groups and making grants to support organizations that would mobilize and amplify grassroots voices to best affect change. This included helping grassroots advocates form strategic partnerships and providing them with policy information, research and analysis, and training in using data to inform campaign work. Accordingly, Atlantic’s initial funding in 2010 supported three grantees whose work provided the cornerstone of the pressure strategy. These groups included: (1) Public Interest Projects to launch the “Just and Fair Schools Fund” to re-grant money to local grassroots organizations in school districts and states across the country (the project later shifted to the New Venture Fund under a new name, Communities for Just Schools Fund); (2) Advancement Project to provide policy research and communications support to grassroots organizations; and (3) the Dignity in Schools Campaign at the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative (NESRI) to assist local groups in taking coordinated actions nationally and engaging in federal advocacy. (Atlantic later funded a cohort of legal groups via the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, as described on page 8.)

A strategy of building pressure from the bottom up was shaped by the local and decentralized nature of school discipline policy. Individual school districts have traditionally had considerable autonomy to design and adopt their own policies, with varying degrees of oversight from state and federal government. Program staff chose not to focus on specific districts because of the unstable and unpredictable nature of education reform at the local level. Instead, Atlantic focused on building sufficient density among advocates by providing resources to clusters of organizations working together in districts and states, and helping advocates develop a common language and metric for the measurement of progress.

The top-down component of the pressure strategy included advocacy to build awareness and support for reform in Congress, the White House, and federal agencies. Federal action was important to convince school districts of the need to examine disciplinary practices and to hold school districts accountable through a process that included mandatory data collection and subsequent legal action if disparities were present. From this perspective President Obama, Attorney General Eric Holder, and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, as well as key Congressional leaders, had enormous influence. To percolate this issue up to them, however, required getting the attention of their staffers through strategic use of data in combination with poignant and timely first-person accounts delivered by constituents to congressional members, federal officials, and their staff members.

Social and political contexts have shifted in important ways since 2010. In the original round of Atlantic funding, national efforts focused on the impending passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). However, the mid-term elections and ensuing political climate stifled that bill. Instead, with a gridlocked Congress, the Obama administration looked inward to see how they could affect change through the regulatory actions of federal agencies and White House-based initiatives. When this happened, Atlantic had a strong network of federal advocates equipped with the right data already in place.

DEVELOPING A STRATEGY FOR INCORPORATING LOCAL DATA IN ADVOCACY EFFORTS

There are several hurdles to the use of local data by grassroots organizations within school districts. First, the right data must be collected in the first place, which may require changes to state or district policies and regulations. Second, gaining access to data is not always easy: there may be technical or legal issues requiring specialized expertise. Third, the data required to show the relationship between school discipline policies and juvenile justice involvement may be housed in very different agencies and require extensive agreements to facilitate sharing. Fourth, the data must be understood within context, which requires meaningful interaction with education administrators, parents, students, and teachers. And fifth, the data need to be reported accurately and in a media-savvy fashion to have any impact.

A key component of Atlantic's initial grant to the Advancement Project was to analyze trends in media coverage of school discipline issues up to that point and help develop messages that could be used by the entire advocacy community. This work included focus groups and polling to determine if campaign messages were having an effect, and holding national media trainings to equip advocates to use new message frames effectively. The Advancement Project convened "ActionCamps" (later called "Bootcamps") around the country in partnership with several other national and local organizations, including the Denver-based *Padres y Jovenes Unidos*. These events brought together parents, students, and advocates. One of six possible tracks was gathering, analyzing, and using school discipline and arrest data. However, importantly, this training was given alongside other crucial skills, such as understanding media bias, understanding the legislative process, law enforcement policy analysis, and movement building.

Both the challenge and the power of providing data driven arguments has been demonstrated in several key victories around the country. Rather than focus on one geographic area, Atlantic looked to provide funding in places that already had established networks of advocates who had made some initial progress on the issue.

In New York City, Atlantic funded the convening of a School-Justice Partnership Task Force, led by prominent former State Chief Judge Judith Kaye and the New York State Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children that she chairs. The Task Force included judges, attorneys, staff from the New York City Department of Education and other city agencies, education groups, the United Federation of Teachers, and several advocacy groups. Many Atlantic grantees participated, including the Dignity in Schools Campaign and the legal support group Advocates for Children of New York. Members brought broad expertise and "a commitment to using data to diagnose problems and highlight good practice."⁶

⁶ From *Keeping Kids in School and Out of Court: Report and Recommendations*, by the New York City School-Justice Partnership Task Force. May 2013. <https://www.nycourts.gov/ip/justiceforchildren/PDF/NYC-School-JusticeTaskForceReportAndRecommendations.pdf>

The Task Force’s deliberations drew on group expertise, literature reviews, site visits and interviews, and data released as a result of the Student Safety Act of 2011, which mandated the reporting of all suspension, summons, and arrest data. In New York City, the school police force is a division of the New York Police Department, and is comprised of over 5,000 school safety agents and 200 armed officers.⁷ Students can be arrested and charged for a wide variety of offenses. The Task Force had to grapple with how to include court data, link summons and arrest data to school data (including suspensions), and examine data that is designed to be analyzed annually in a longitudinal fashion. Task Force members were able to draw on their professional networks to obtain additional assistance from the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office and city Family Court judges to analyze a sample of cases more thoroughly.

Substantial analysis had preceded the creation of the Task Force (for example, advocates including the New York Civil Liberties Union, Dignity In Schools Campaign-New York and Urban Youth Collaborative had led the campaign producing the Student Safety Act). Judge Kaye’s efforts brought the cachet and legitimacy of a widely respected leader to bear on the issue and assembled a more diverse set of stakeholders and experts than had previously engaged in problem-solving. Their collective efforts revealed that, counter to city-wide patterns in the reduction of violence, schools had accelerated the use of suspension and referral to the court system. These actions were more likely to be linked to minor misbehavior and were disproportionately employed by a small number of struggling schools. Additionally, students of color and/or with disabilities were grossly over-represented in the school discipline data. These findings were enormously helpful in bolstering the Task Force’s subsequent recommendations, detailed in the 75-page report, *Keeping Kids in School and Out of Court*.

Another example of the culmination of years of effort can be seen in Denver, Colorado, where the group Padres y Jovenes Unidos (Padres Unidos) has worked with the Advancement Project since 2003. In 2005, discipline data from Denver Public Schools (as well as several other districts around the country) were revealed in the Advancement Project’s report *Education on Lockdown: the Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track*. Subsequently, Padres Unidos built political and public support to implement restorative justice programs in six Denver public schools (to date, 17 schools have implemented restorative justice programs) and helped the district rewrite its school discipline policy into one of the most progressive in the country. Atlantic resources helped the organization take its campaign to the state level.⁸ In 2012, Colorado passed the Smart School Discipline Law, the first comprehensive bill to reform school discipline in the country, including by improving data collection on school-based arrests, tickets, and court referrals. In 2014, Padres Unidos released the first “Colorado School Discipline Report Card” based on the 2012-2013 state-wide data collection mandated by the new Smart School Discipline Law. The report card highlights positive

⁷ Retrieved from the NYPD School Safety Division Website. October 2015.

http://www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/html/school_safety/school_safety_overview.shtml

⁸ Funding was initially provided via the Just and Fair Schools Fund at Public Interest Projects, and later through the Communities for Just Schools Fund at New Venture Fund.

developments, tracks progress to be made, and facilitates comparisons among all 179 Colorado school districts.⁹

DEVELOPING AN INTEGRATED RESEARCH COMMUNITY

Early in the portfolio, there were calls from many quarters—especially from participants in the Advancement Project Action Camps—to bring researchers together with grassroots organizations. It was clear that to counter pushback arguments most effectively, grassroots organizations would need to have more research in hand. Although these groups, in some cases, requested and analyzed their own data, they often needed the help and/or credibility of research experts and they wanted more information about alternatives to suspensions, expulsions, arrest and ticketing that schools could use to better address student needs and reduce discipline disparities. Additionally, in order to best advise the federal government on school discipline policy, it was advantageous to have a set of researchers on call who were familiar with the universe of data that were and were not available. In turn, for researchers, it was crucial to have an ongoing dialogue with practitioners who could provide a meaningful context for the interpretation of data.

This need for expert assistance as well as for more information on remedies set the table for the Discipline Disparities Research to Practice (RtP) Collaborative. As Atlantic consultant Tanya Coke describes it, “And so from that first year we decided that we would do a research and practitioner collaborative project and bring the best minds over several fields together to really try to come up with some strategies and to do some research on disparity reduction.”

The RtP Collaborative, funded in 2011, was housed at Indiana University’s Equity Project and organized by academic Dr. Russell Skiba. The approximately 25 members come from top universities, leading civil rights and education organizations, school districts, and foundations. The group has served many functions to support other grantees and advance the field. They have hosted meetings, sponsored original research, and provided key experts to grassroots groups, the media, and federal agencies. The RtP Collaborative, along with other grantees, has fostered key research on discipline disparities, implicit bias, charter school discipline policies, and alternative school discipline policies.

The RtP Collaborative serves as the research interface to many other areas of the school discipline portfolio, including a cohort of legal advocates participating in the Legal Strategies Collaborative facilitated by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund.¹⁰ This second major initiative was

⁹ Summarized from The Colorado School Discipline Report Card: The State of 170 Districts, by Padres y Jovenes Unidos. March, 2014. http://padresunidos.org/sites/www.padresunidos.org/files/media-root/CO_SCHOOL_DISCIPLINE_REPORT_CARD_FINAL_SPREADS.pdf

¹⁰ NAACP LDF Legal Strategies Collaborative members include: Advocates for Children of New York City; Advocates for Children’s Services of Legal Aid of North Carolina; ACLU Racial Justice Project; ACLU of

also launched in 2011, and brought together leading public interest law firms across the country that had a longstanding involvement in the issue. The group has served as a key resource for legal advocates working to promote school discipline reform, and as a “brain trust” of legal theory and litigation strategy for grassroots and other advocates in the field.

An important complementary grant was also made to UCLA’s Civil Rights Project to analyze state and federal data and provide jurisdiction-specific research. It is a major player in the RtP Collaborative, provides extensive consultation on federal initiatives and other efforts, and is a frequently tapped media contact when new data sets are released.

Many grantees and stakeholders interviewed for this study remarked that one of the most helpful outcomes of the portfolio was the facilitation of bringing people together to learn from one another and talk about issues. As one federal official said, “Instead of setting 20 different meetings with 20 different organizations, I could go to one and get a lot out of it.” For those who work for smaller organizations with limited budgets, the travel funds to attend these meetings were crucial.

SUPPORT FOR FEDERAL DATA REPORTING

School discipline data have been gathered as a part of the mandatory Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) since 1964 as a part of the Civil Rights Act and several subsequent pieces of legislation. It is collected by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) within the Department of Education. The CRDC covers public schools and school districts, including juvenile justice facilities, charter schools, alternative schools, and schools serving students with disabilities. Most data are disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, disability, and limited English proficiency (LEP) status.

Until 2010, CRDC data were not easily accessible because the project, in general, was relatively under-resourced. Data collection from the entire universe of schools and school districts had not been conducted since 2000, with the CRDC relying on samples every two years in the interim. Under the leadership of then-Assistant Secretary Russlynn Ali, OCR began taking steps to expand its data collection, increasing both the number of indicators collected (including school discipline) and the frequency and reach of its data collection efforts. This focus continued under her successor, Catherine Lhamon, who had previously led school discipline reform efforts while on staff at Public Counsel in Los Angeles, another Atlantic grantee.

Northern California; Civil Rights Project of UCLA; Charles Hamilton Houston Institute of Harvard University; Educational Law Centre of Pennsylvania (in partnership with the Juvenile Law Centre); Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana; Kentucky Youth Advocates (in partnership with the Children’s Law Centre of KY); Legal Aid Justice Centre of Virginia; National Center for Youth Law; New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU); New York State Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children; Public Counsel of Los Angeles; and Texas Appleseed.

In a move that was unusual for Atlantic, given how extensively it was investing in putting advocacy pressure on government, Atlantic provided a small grant directly to support OCR's efforts to upgrade its staffing, data cleaning processes, and website, in order to facilitate the release of its expanded data collection. Equally important, Atlantic staff and key members of the RtP Collaborative consulted extensively with OCR to provide them with the research needed to justify universal data collection and specific indicators to add to the survey instrument, especially on students with disabilities, in-school suspensions, or one/multiple suspensions. One federal official noted that the support from Atlantic grantees and the sophisticated media coverage facilitated by the portfolio funding greatly reduced the amount of backlash to federal school discipline reform efforts.

One of the key advancements in the area of school discipline reform has been the improved breadth and depth of school discipline data that school districts must now provide to the Office of Civil Rights. Advocates working with the OCR have emphasized that the CRDC provides a crucial resource to allow the public to hold the government more accountable for progress in school discipline reform. Mandatory universal data collection and reporting greatly facilitates comparisons across regions, and could also be used as a way to provide data for research on new policies and interventions to improve practice. Additionally, advocates have encouraged the Department of Education to use data from the CRDC to examine racial disproportionality in school discipline in districts and states when awarding federal funds for education-related initiatives.

USING DATA TO REFRAME SCHOOL DISCIPLINE ISSUES IN THE MEDIA

Media coverage of school discipline issues has gradually shifted frames and dramatically increased in volume in the past two decades. Following the prominent school shootings in the 1990s, the term "zero tolerance" in school discipline was often discussed as something necessary to protect children from violent youth criminals. As public favor began to turn against zero tolerance policies in the 2000s, media stories that covered school discipline issues increasingly focused on "one student" stories that did not provide context for how harsh discipline policies affected school climate, racial disparities, or their long-term effects on students. Numerous stories highlighted young children suspended or expelled for making gun-shaped objects out of their food or bringing pocket knives to school in their backpacks. One example was the New York Times' front-page article from October 12, 2009: "It's a Fork, It's a Spoon, It's a...Weapon? School Suspends Boy, 6," which told the story of a young white boy, Zachary Christie, who took a camping utensil to school and was punished with 45 days in the district's reform school.

The Advancement Project produced an early media scan that found that awareness of the need for school discipline reform was slowly making its way into mainstream news media. Overall, by 2011, as compared with previous years, many more articles were critical of harsh school discipline. Increasingly, the term "school to prison pipeline" was employed as a way of framing the problem as systemic and often racially biased.

Atlantic funded several projects to focus strategic messaging, assist grantees with reviewing and improving their media coverage, track media coverage nationally and in some local areas, and place editorials from influential champions in high profile newspapers. It commissioned the media firm, The Hatcher Group, to provide intensive media relations support to grassroots and legal advocates and national grantees conducting research and data analyses. The portfolio also supported two training institutes for education reporters on this issue, and funded a beat at Education Week, the largest educator-oriented periodical. In general, these efforts were aimed at encouraging the integration of data with compelling personal stories and the creation of “echo chambers” to amplify the key messages of the movement.

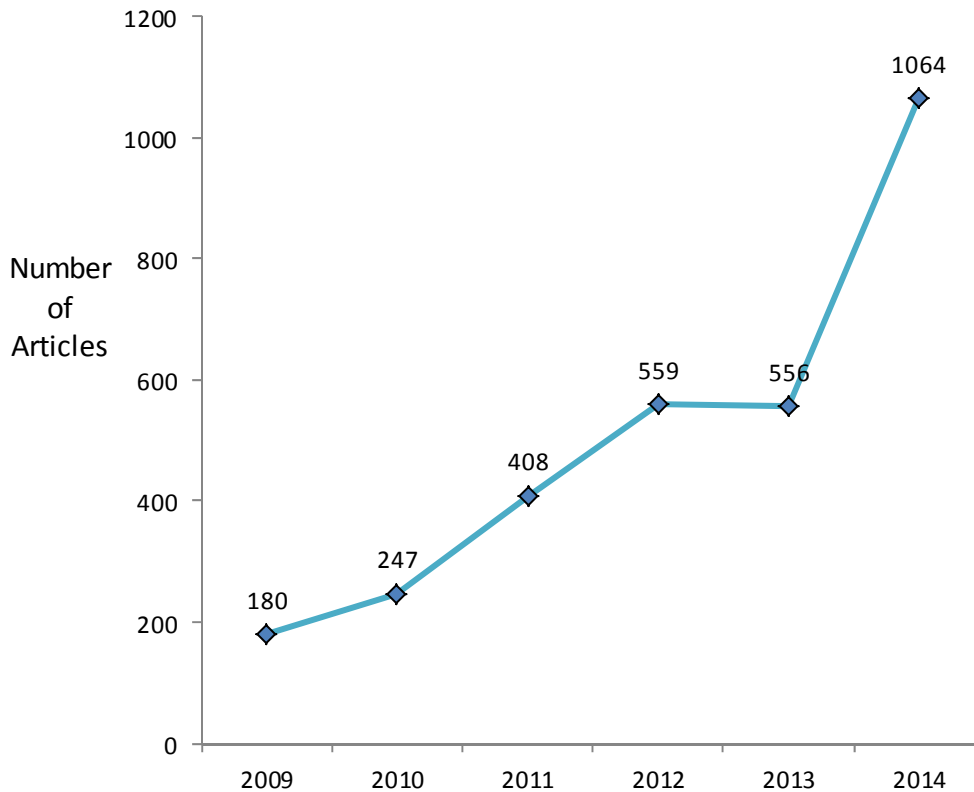
Media analyses by The Hatcher Group in October 2014 found an explosion of media coverage—in 2011 the report had found coverage of school discipline issues in 490 stories. From February 2013 to August 2014, there were 3,010 stories that appeared in newspaper, blogs, television, and radio. Additionally, some of the most high profile news events of the year drew on data and reporting about school suspensions and racial disparities. This included coverage of the riots in Ferguson, Missouri, and the launch of the White House My Brother’s Keeper Initiative. Importantly, data were fully integrated into the media coverage, alongside with first-person accounts of the negative impacts of suspensions and arrests in schools.

Further, a separate search of Google News for the top headlines for school discipline reform shows that stories were increasingly associated with key research findings on discipline disparities and policy victories associated with grantee activity at the district, state, and federal level. Internet news coverage was mostly one-article-per-event in 2009 and 2010. However, in 2011, multiple outlets covered the “Texas Study” produced by the Justice Center of the Council of State Governments and the Public Policy Research Institute. In 2012, coverage was dominated by the discipline disparities highlighted in the release of the findings from the 2009-2010 Office of Civil Rights (OCR) data collection and frequently included grantee voices. In 2013, several actions at the local level received coverage from national outlets, especially the revision of school discipline codes in Broward County, Florida and Los Angeles, California, which were solidly rooted in research findings. In 2014, the news coverage was extensive on the release of federal guidance for school discipline reform, as well as the disparities highlighted in the OCR’s release of the findings from the 2011-2012 data collection, and again grantee voices often were included.

An examination of representative print and online coverage from newspapers, wires, and television shows a steady rise in coverage of school discipline between 2009 and 2012, followed by an explosion of stories in 2014 on the federal school discipline guidance, CRDC, and the White House My Brother’s Keeper initiative.¹¹

¹¹ We searched the online database NewsLibrary and supplemented with additional coverage found in Lexis-Nexis Academic for stories related to school discipline that included the terms suspensions, expulsions, zero tolerance, school to prison pipeline, or intervention. Note that we did not include internet-only forms of media like blogs, as the Hatcher study does, so these numbers are slightly smaller than the Hatcher report numbers.

News Coverage of School Discipline Issues, 2009 - 2014



AN EXAMPLE OF DATA REPORTING, MEDIA COVERAGE, AND GRANTEE COLLABORATION

One of the most striking features of the accomplishments made by Atlantic’s school discipline grantees is the extent to which grantees support each other. A key early example of this was the release of “the Texas Study” in 2011. The Texas Study, “Breaking Schools’ Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Students’ Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement,” by the Justice Center of the Council of State Governments and the Public Policy Research Institute (PPRI), was the first statewide study that quantified what happened to youth in the system over a 6 to 8-year period. It followed over a million students. According to many Atlantic grantees, the study was sophisticated and current, drawing from multiple sources. One grantee noted: “It dwarfed any other study like it.” The study was influential in part because Texas is the second largest state in the country: it is so big and diverse it can be seen as nationally representative.

Original funding for the study came from the Open Society Foundations. In 2010, Atlantic funded the reporting of the study, and it was released in 2011. Atlantic money provided funds for expert

writing, editing and layout, and consultation with national experts from the nascent RtP Collaborative. The funding also included working with key interest groups and stakeholders, including those within Atlantic's network of grantee organizations. It allowed CSG to hire The Hatcher Group, and to place editorials praising the study from a Democratic senator and Republican representative. Atlantic helped CSG with media consultations to release the report to the media, and also strongly encouraged the inclusion of students and parents at public events.

Atlantic also funded a set of events that laid the groundwork for the report, demonstrating that groups wanted this information. Atlantic pulled together grassroots groups and legal advocates to brief them several weeks before the report was released, creating additional buzz and equipping them to do media outreach to amplify the report's findings. As one interviewee remarked, this report was definitely "not just dropped into an ice-cold environment."

Six months earlier, in February 2011, the Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ) had sent a group of young people to Washington to attend a summit organized on college attainment, with funding from Atlantic. AEJ youth participated in a session on school climate with staff from the DOE and DOJ. According to staff members, this was a pivotal moment in developing the staff commitment to change and the networks to foster collaboration.

Prior to releasing its report, CSG briefed federal officials. The data on suspensions and racial disparities were so alarming that, as then program officer Kavitha Mediratta recounts, "the Attorney General was moved to call Arne Duncan and the two of them form a partnership to address the problem. That was a significant moment, but what tilled the soil for their 'receptivity' was the personal interest and commitment of staff in the agencies. That combination of leadership awareness and staff commitment was what gave rise to the Supportive School Discipline Initiative, a truly unique collaboration between the two agencies, the Department of Education and the Department of Justice."

For CSG, including youth and advocate voices was a new strategy, one that was unfamiliar but extremely beneficial. When they rolled out the report to the Texas Supreme Court, there was a parent sitting at the head of the table. From CSG's perspective, these first person accounts have been very effective and more compelling than the data itself. The Texas Study provided the impetus for the passage of legislation in several states. In addition to its influence in state and federal government, this report provided a model of cross-sector collaboration for data analysis and reporting that was extremely useful to other grantees.

POLICY AND LEGISLATION FOR DATA COLLECTION AT THE STATE LEVEL

The above-mentioned Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) is a mandatory data collection that primarily draws on school district data collected from local education agencies (LEAs).¹² The data collection has most commonly consisted of a sample of about 6,000 to 7,000 local education agencies, but the collection was “universal” (meaning all LEAs were required to participate) in 2011-2012 and 2013-14, and it is anticipated to be universal again in 2015-2016.¹³

However, there are no uniform data collection and reporting requirements at the state level. As of 2014, at least 18 states required school discipline data collection, review, or reporting through a state statute or regulation.¹⁴ Some states go well beyond the federal CRDC measures, while others do very little. The strategy for change at the state level can take many different forms, depending on the structure of education administration in the state, the politics of the state, and the momentum produced by grassroots advocates. In almost all of these efforts, Atlantic grantees worked in coalitions with other advocates, as well as state and local agencies.

The nature of state level statutes varies enormously, and usually the requirement for data collection and reporting is a part of a larger bill that instructs school districts to establish some kind of new policy or program regarding school discipline. The general themes regarding data collection are:

- Mandating local reporting by school districts or local education boards to state departments of education or similar offices (AL, CO, DE, FL, GA, KY, LA, NJ, OH, RI, UT, WA), and/or mandating state departments of education to report to the state board of education or general assembly (AL, AR, CO, GA, KY, NJ, RI). In New York State, district superintendents are authorized to require schools to report on school discipline. In North Carolina, superintendents submit their data to a state-wide longitudinal data collection that can be used by multiple state agencies. In Washington State data are submitted to a state-level K-12 data governance group.
- Increasing the grain of local reporting to include certain types of offenses (CO, OR, FL, KY, MI, NJ, OR, PA, RI) or certain types of disciplinary actions (AR, GA, IL, KY, NC, PA, RI, WA)

¹² In two cases this information is provided by the state education agencies. The Office of Civil Rights' explanation of this process is described in an administrative document located at http://www.reginfo.gov/public/do/PRAViewDocument?ref_nbr=201403-1870-001

¹³ See the CRDC web page <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/data.html?src=rt/> and their supporting document available for download on that page: *2013-14 and 2015-16 CRDC Questions and Answers*.

¹⁴ Summarized from *School Discipline Data: A Snapshot of Legislative Action*, by the Council of State Governments Justice Center. March 2014. <http://csgjusticecenter.org/youth/publications/school-discipline-data-a-snapshot-of-legislative-action/>

- Disaggregating reports by demographic subgroup (CO, GA, KY, NC, OH, PA, RI, and WA) and/or assessing disparate impact by demographic subgroup (AR, MD)
- Requiring or authorizing the review of school discipline and other related data, such as academic achievement, attendance data, or teacher-student ratio at the local level, often in conjunction with appointed agencies (AR, CO, KY, LA, WA). In California, an independent evaluation that includes school discipline data is mandated only when schools fail to meet accountability targets and are required to undergo educational restructuring.
- Increasing public access to data via the state’s website (WA).

The Council of State Governments’ Justice Center and the Center for Civil Rights Remedies at the UCLA Civil Rights Project conducted a 50-state survey of SEA websites to assess the availability of state level data to the public. These surveys, which took place from August 2012 to May 2013, found that ten states still did not report any school discipline data on their SEA website; less than half of the states reported how many students were suspended annually; and only one out of three states disaggregated disciplinary data by race. This project has resulted in an online spreadsheet that pulls all of the information together in one place.¹⁵

The 2014 School Discipline Consensus Report, a set of policy statements from the bi-partisan Council of State Governments Justice Center created with support from Atlantic, The California Endowment, The NoVo Foundation, The Open Society Foundations, and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention from the US Department of Justice, made a series of detailed recommendations to the field regarding data collection and reporting. These include avoiding inconsistencies in reporting by adopting definitions consistent with the Office of Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) definitions; expanding and improving statewide longitudinal systems for disciplinary data collection and reporting; and collecting, analyzing, and reporting data in a way that is meaningful, flexible, and accessible to a wide array of audiences.

SUMMARY

A key facet of Atlantic’s overall strategy for the school discipline reform portfolio was to create pressure for reform. The strategy was designed to be inherently flexible and was able to adapt to several unforeseen events, such as political changes associated with the congressional gridlock and media coverage of tragic shootings that highlighted racial disparities across all areas of public life. It also enabled advocates to capitalize on events to lift the profile of school discipline, such as its inclusion within high-profile federal initiatives such as My Brother’s Keeper. As the explosion of news media coverage suggests, there is a growing societal awareness of the importance of school

¹⁵ See <http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/resources/projects/center-for-civil-rights-remedies/school-to-prison-folder/online-data-resources/nation-wide-survey-of-state-education-agencies2019-online-school-disciplinary-data>

discipline reform and how it relates to other discussions about education, race, punishment, opportunity, and the need for systemic change.

Pressure is a cumulative force that comes about as a result of many factors, and to isolate one category of work—such as the strategic use of data—is inherently limiting. On the other hand, it serves as a useful example for describing the complexity of the tightly interlocked elements of the grantees’ relationships and tasks. Supporting the development of a research base is an important aspect of many advocacy campaigns. Data, when gathered and interpreted properly, are a powerful tool for addressing common biases and misperceptions.

To that end, we have highlighted the following general strategies employed in this work:

- Improve the infrastructure for data collection.
- Bring together people who know how to access, analyze, and interpret data on a regular basis. Be sure to include people with first-hand experience of the problem.
- Provide advocates with tools and support to share data meaningfully for maximum impact.
- Provide reporters and other public influencers with tools and support to share data meaningfully for maximum impact.
- Facilitate the sharing of data among groups in different geographical areas, sectors of employment, and levels of government.

Atlantic has worked as both a funder and a partner to many organizations. Just as it is difficult to isolate the effect of one “category of work” within the portfolio, it is also difficult to catalog Atlantic’s contribution to progress within the field. However, everyone we interviewed agrees that the progress has been swift, the opportunities have been invaluable, and the financial support for the issue unparalleled.

Atlantic’s internal benchmarks for the school discipline portfolio describe short, medium, and long term outcomes for advocacy efforts, while acknowledging that the long term outcomes will occur as a result of momentum that carries far beyond their last funding cycle. In this category there are just two benchmarks: a 50 percent reduction in school suspensions and a 25 percent reduction in discipline disparities. Although these numbers are meant to be somewhat aspirational, they represent a strong impact. Because of the efforts aimed at increasing the ability to gather, interpret, and share these data, whatever the numbers turn out to be, they will have lasting meaning for the field.