

SYSTEMIC CHANGE FOR EFFECTIVE DISCIPLINE REFORM

by

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Systemic Change for Effective Discipline Reform

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Abstract

This capstone examines school disciplinary actions, the harms of punitive discipline, alternative approaches to disciplinary practices, and how to create meaningful and equitable reform. The alternative approaches explored are Restorative Practices, School-Wide Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports, and trauma-informed practices. Many studies have found that traditional disciplinary methods are disproportionately applied to marginalized groups, ineffective at improving academic outcomes, and unsuccessful at supporting meaningful behavioural change. This capstone addresses the following question: If punitive discipline is harmful, disproportionately applied, and ineffective in producing meaningful behavioural change, what alternative approaches can schools adopt, and what conditions are necessary to ensure that these approaches are implemented equitably? This capstone recommends three levels of change (system, school, and classroom) to facilitate equitable practices in schools.

Keywords: Punitive and Exclusionary Discipline, Restorative Practices (RPs), Schoolwide Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS/PBIS), Trauma-Informed Approaches, Zero Tolerance, School-to-Prison Pipeline, School Culture

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Systemic Change for Effective Discipline Reform

Chapter 1: Discipline Reform

Introduction

There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children. There is no duty more important than ensuring that their rights are respected, that their welfare is protected, that their lives are free from fear and want, and that they grow up in peace.

(Annan, 2000, as cited in Morrison, 2007, p. 1)

Punitive and exclusionary discipline have been widely used to decrease disruptive behaviour and to support learning. Discipline via referrals to the office, in-school and out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions are common consequences for behaviours deemed inappropriate for school environments. However, substantial research indicates that exclusionary discipline is ineffective as a means of changing behaviour or improving academic success. In reality, exclusionary practices have been associated with detrimental impacts on individual students, school culture and the broader school community. Policies that center punitive practices in schools have been linked to criminalization of students, poor health outcomes, lower academic achievement, toxic school culture and disproportionate effect on Black, Indigenous, People of colour (BIPOC), 2SLGBTQIA+ students, students with mental health illnesses and students with disabilities. In response to these concerns, schools have begun to consider alternative practices.

There are alternatives to exclusionary discipline that have been implemented in schools to reduce these harms. Restorative Practices (RPs) focus on repairing harm and restoring relationships through dialogue. School-Wide Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS/PBIS) emphasizes teaching positive behaviours and recognizing students for appropriate actions. Trauma-Informed Programming prioritizes understanding and

addressing the effects of trauma on students' behaviour and learning. However, many studies have shown that these alternatives do not adequately stop disproportionality. To address the disproportionate impacts of discipline, there have been successes when schools implement an alternative disciplinary program alongside equitable policies and data collection, provide mental health support, use culturally responsive teaching, train educators in empathy and equity, and support students' self-esteem and identity affirmation.

Background Information

Many students came to mind as I studied the impacts of punitive discipline. Students who are bright, funny, and full of potential, but who struggle to meet behavioural expectations in traditional classrooms. I think of students who have difficulty sitting still, regulating their emotions, or responding appropriately in moments of frustration. This may sound like you or someone you know. Rather than receiving support that helped them remain connected to learning, they were often removed from class, sent to the office, suspended, and, in some cases, eventually pushed out of school. I have watched this happen repeatedly, and it raises important questions about how schools respond to student behaviour.

Schools serve diverse learners with different strengths, needs, identities, and life experiences. While some students thrive in traditional school environments, others may struggle because of disability, mental health concerns, trauma, stress, unmet needs, or a lack of belonging at school. Behaviour is often shaped by more than simple rule-breaking, yet school discipline systems have historically relied on punishment and exclusion as common responses to student misconduct.

Punitive and exclusionary discipline refers to responses that remove students from their classrooms or schools, including suspensions, expulsions, and school-based police referrals or arrests (Duarte et al., 2023). These approaches became especially common through policies such as the United States' Zero Tolerance movement and Canada's Safe

Schools Act, which promoted predetermined consequences for certain behaviours regardless of context (Salole & Abdulle, 2015). Although these policies were introduced in the name of school safety, research has shown that these forms of discipline often worsens student behaviour, lowers academic achievement, and contributes to harm beyond the school setting (Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Stinchcomb et al., 2006).

Traditional disciplinary approaches also do not affect all students equally. Research has shown that Black, Indigenous, and racialized students, 2SLGBTQIA+ students, and students with disabilities or mental health needs are more likely to experience suspensions, expulsions, and other exclusionary responses (Mallett, 2017). This is significant because these students are not inherently more likely to misbehave; rather, they are often more likely to be targeted by inequitable disciplinary practices (Mallett, 2017). As a result, punitive discipline can damage students' sense of belonging, weaken relationships between students and schools, and contribute to harmful long-term outcomes.

Because of these concerns, many schools have begun exploring more supportive alternatives to exclusionary discipline. These alternatives rely on more flexible, preventive, and relational ways of responding to student behaviour (Skiba, 2008). This capstone focuses on three such approaches: restorative practices, school-wide positive behavioural interventions and supports (SWPBIS/PBIS), and trauma-informed approaches. Restorative practices focus on repairing harm and strengthening relationships. SWPBIS/PBIS emphasizes teaching and supporting positive behaviour across the school community. Trauma-informed approaches help educators recognize how trauma may affect student behaviour and learning and encourage responses that reduce re-traumatization (Harlacher & Rodriguez, 2017; SAMHSA, 2014).

These programs are designed to foster accountability in students through less exclusionary methods. They proactively teach students essential skills for repairing harm,

building relationships, and behavioural and self-regulation, as well as responding to trauma in more supportive ways (Avery et al., 2021; Gregory et al., 2021; Riley et al., 2025). Backed by evidence, these practices have been shown to reduce the necessity for disciplinary actions, shifting the focus from reactive exclusion to proactive skill-building (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Gregory et al., 2021; Welsch, 2023).

However, research suggests that reform alone is insufficient to eliminate persistent disciplinary disparities affecting marginalized students (Gregory et al., 2021; Welsch, 2023; Huguley et al., 2022). Despite discipline reforms like RPs and SWPBIS reducing overall disciplinary actions, studies show significant, persistent disparities in the use of exclusionary discipline. Gregory et al. (2021) and Welsch (2023) both note that Black students remain disproportionately disciplined compared to White students. Furthermore, 2SLGBTQIA+ youth and students with mental illness or disabilities are also more likely to face punitive practices (Duarte et al., 2023). The vital question is whether proposed alternative frameworks genuinely lead to significant change or merely reinforce current inequalities.

Statement of the Problem

This capstone examines both the harms of punitive discipline and the possibilities and limitations of alternative approaches, while arguing that meaningful discipline reform must address the broader systemic conditions that shape how discipline is understood and applied to students (Bradshaw et al., 2018; Welsch, 2023).

Purpose of the Paper

This capstone explores evidence-based programs for change at systemic, school, and classroom levels. The focus is on the need for reform in disciplinary practices. The discussion starts with the effects of punitive and exclusionary discipline on individuals, school culture, and the school community. Next, it shares three alternative programs: Restorative Practices (RPs), School-Wide Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS/PBIS), and

Trauma-Informed Approaches. It then explains their positive outcomes and limitations. The paper closes by highlighting aspects of these approaches that support equity and breaks them down into system, school, and classroom strategies that can help transform educational practices.

Research Question or Thesis Statement

If punitive discipline is harmful, disproportionately applied, and ineffective in producing meaningful behavioural change, what alternative approaches can schools adopt, and what conditions are necessary to ensure that these approaches are implemented equitably?

Positionality Statement

Standing in the halls of an elementary school for years, I've noticed the kindergarten student skipping to music class, happily on their way to learn to sing a new song. Then, I see the grade 6 student walking quietly down the same hall, head down, looking at their feet.

Depending on the student, the teacher, the mood of the day, the kindergarten student might have been reprimanded, high-fived, the grade 6 student may have been checked in on, or ignored, and the student might have been stopped and questioned about their whereabouts. This makes me wonder what students endure in schools: what is encouraged and corrected, and how schools shape a student's sense of self, belonging, and behaviour.

Over time, I have become increasingly aware of how educators' responses to student behaviour are influenced by adult expectations, institutional structures, and broader societal norms. These dynamics can inadvertently extinguish the light within children, leading them to feel inadequate, unwelcome, or disconnected. Many classroom teachers lack the time and resources necessary to support students through these challenges, and I have often felt ill-equipped to help students in need. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the return to in-person learning in 2021–22, I observed a marked shift in student

behaviour, resilience, and their ability to meet expectations. Mental health needs became increasingly prevalent, while opportunities for meaningful support remained limited.

As an English teacher, I knew I could teach students to read, but I questioned whether I could also help them develop self-worth and understand that they matter. This task proved challenging, particularly as families faced new and complex needs—such as food insecurity and trauma resulting from the pandemic. Pursuing further education became my solution, as I sought the skills needed to provide meaningful support. Now, as an emerging school counsellor, I have gained valuable insights into strategies that educators, school leaders, and staff can employ to support students. Most importantly, I have been afforded the time to sit with students, listen to their concerns, and understand their experiences.

I do not approach this capstone from a neutral position. My perspective is shaped by my work in schools, studies in counselling, and commitment to more equitable and compassionate responses to student behaviour. At the same time, I acknowledge that I work within a system that can both support and harm students, and that my bias has been shaped by those systems. This capstone is therefore informed by both professional experience and critical self-reflection, as I consider how discipline practices affect students and what more just alternatives might look like.

Significance of the Study

This capstone provides recommendations for strategic shifts at three distinct levels, each of which plays a significant role in promoting student well-being within schools.

At the system level, the study highlights the importance of broad, sustainable change undertaken by a wide range of stakeholders. While this work often involves leaders such as principals, assistant principals, superintendents, and school board members, it also welcomes educators, staff, community members and students who are committed to systemic improvement. Stakeholders at this level are encouraged to collect and analyze data, advocate

for policy change, and secure necessary resources. These system-level changes have a lasting effect, as policies and resources remain in place even as new staff and leaders join the school community.

The school-level shifts outlined in this capstone are relevant to everyone directly connected to a school building, including leaders, teachers, families, staff, and community partners. Efforts at this level focus on using data to inform policy modifications, implementing schoolwide collaborative behaviour programs, and forming targeted support teams to address students' academic, mental health, and behavioural needs.

At the classroom level, the focus shifts primarily to educators, while emphasizing the importance of collaboration among all classroom stakeholders, including teachers, staff, families, community members, and students. Classroom initiatives prioritize relational work, foster best practices such as reflection and collaboration, and adhere to teaching standards. Additionally, classroom-based approaches are intended to be both restorative and culturally responsive.

Importantly, these three levels are interconnected. Effective, meaningful change requires ongoing collaboration and support among stakeholders at the system, school, and classroom levels. By working together, these groups can create improvements that are relevant, sustainable, and reflective of each school community's unique culture and needs.

Outline of the Remainder of the Paper

Efforts to move away from purely punitive disciplinary practices in educational settings are showing considerable promise for fostering better outcomes for students. However, successful implementation requires significant, systemic changes across the entire program structure. In this capstone, the first section of Chapter Two illustrates the harmful effects of punitive discipline, followed by the second section, which explores three alternative approaches: Restorative Practices, Schoolwide Positive Behavioural Interventions and

Supports (SWPBIS), and Trauma-Informed Programs. Next, the key strategies embedded within these programs that support systemic change are discussed. Finally, in Chapter 3, this paper shares recommendations for three levels of shifts (system, school, and classroom) across all programs to ensure effectiveness and support for all students.

Chapter 2: Punitive Discipline and the Alternatives

Introduction

Schools have imposed a variety of programs to keep students safe. Mandated punitive programs began in the 80s through policies such as the United States' Zero Tolerance Policy and Canada's Safe Schools Act. Subsequently, researchers found that punitive and exclusionary practices could exacerbate behaviours, lower academic outcomes, and displace problem behaviours into the community (Stinchcomb et al., 2006). In fact, Skiba and Peterson (1999) reported that Zero Tolerance had not been proven effective in reducing violence and often led to negative long-term consequences, such as increases in exclusionary discipline and student alienation. As a result of this research, many schools adopted alternative programs to punitive-focused discipline.

The research used in this paper primarily focuses on North America, with some references to Australia, Norway, the United Kingdom, Japan, Brazil, Indonesia, and Chile. In the first section, the harmful effects of punitive practices are explored, and in the second, three alternative approaches are examined: Restorative Practices, Schoolwide Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS), and Trauma-Informed Programs. There is promise in reforming punitive practices and adopting alternatives; however, the research in this paper demonstrates the need for systemic changes across all programs to ensure effectiveness and support for all students.

Definition of Terms

The following section provides clear, concise definitions of key terms used throughout this capstone project. These definitions establish a shared understanding of important concepts and frameworks referenced in the study.

Punitive and Exclusionary Discipline: Retributive mechanisms that remove students from their classrooms or schools, including suspensions, expulsions, and school-based law enforcement referrals/arrests, with the purpose of deterring perceived misbehaviour (Duarte et al., 2023, p. 2).

Restorative Practices (RPs): Approaches that support victims, offenders, and the community by repairing harm, holding offenders accountable, and preventing future harm through reparation, healing, and reintegration. Practices similar to restorative justice have origins in Indigenous groups in North America, the Maori of New Zealand, and communities in Japan and Africa (Cormier, 2002, as cited in Rideout et al., 2010, p. 35).

Schoolwide Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS/PBIS): PBIS is an evidence-based framework designed to support students' behavioural, academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs (Harlacher & Rodriguez, 2017). Schoolwide PBIS uses a three-tiered model: Tier 1 involves teaching behavioural expectations to all students, while Tiers 2 and 3 provide increasingly individualized supports for those requiring additional intervention.

Trauma-Informed Approaches: Approaches that recognize and respond to the lasting adverse effects of trauma by creating safe, supportive environments that reduce re-traumatization and promote healing, regulation, and student wellbeing (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014).

Zero Tolerance: A disciplinary policy in the United States of America that subjects certain behaviours (such as school disruption or possession of drugs or weapons) to mandated

punitive consequences, regardless of context. In Canada, the Safe Schools Act gave school boards authority to suspend or expel students and involve police in disciplinary measures (Salole & Abdulle, 2015).

School-to-Prison Pipeline: The social phenomenon where students become formally involved with the criminal justice system as a result of school policies that use law enforcement, rather than discipline, to address behavioural problems (Owens, 2017, p. 11).

School Culture: The personality, norms, values, patterns of behaviour, and expectations of stakeholders in a school (Inez et al., 2023).

Review of Research Literature

School Safety Through Punitive Discipline

Since the late 1980s, governments across North America have implemented policies to enhance school safety. As described by Monahan et al. (2014), in the United States, schools introduced policies such as the Zero Tolerance Policy of 1989, implemented in response to drug use, violence, and gang activity on school grounds. Skiba and Knesting (2001, as cited in Monahan et al., 2014) note that administrators were required to expel students for specific behaviours, including drug possession and violence. In 1990, the Gun Free School Zone Act aimed to make the presence of weapons within 1000 feet of a school a federal felony (Stinchcomb et al., 2006). It was struck down but opened the door for the Gun Free Schools Act of 1995, which mandated one-year expulsions and referral to the criminal justice authorities for the possession of a weapon (Stinchcomb et al., 2006). It sounds rational; however, schools were required to comply without context or consideration of the student's circumstances, and the definition of the offence expanded over time to include behaviours that were “more personally troublesome than physically threatening” (Stinchcomb et al., 2006).

Similarly, in Canada, initiatives emerged with comparable intentions of making schools safe places through Ontario's Safe Schools Act of the 2000s. An act that expanded a school's authority to suspend and expel students and to involve the police in disciplinary matters, signalling a shift toward more exclusionary safety approaches (Salole & Abdulle, 2015, p. 131). Mosher (2008), as cited in Salole and Abdulle (2015), explained that this created a culture of exclusion, resulting in a 34% increase in student suspensions and a 1700% increase in expulsions. Provincially, expulsions increased from 1,909 to 152,626 after the introduction of the Act (p. 132). Eventually, the policy was amended in 2008 to mitigate the zero-tolerance approach, resulting in lower suspensions and expulsions by 2010. However, the installation of more security cameras and increased police presence in schools contributed to continued disproportionate discipline of marginalized youth. These heightened security measures contributed to increased surveillance, suspension, and expulsion of Black students, thereby reinforcing the school-to-prison pipeline (Salole & Abdulle, 2015).

Zero Tolerance Policies in the United States and the Safe Schools Act in Canada aimed to mandate policies to create safe school environments for students. Numerous studies have look at the effectiveness and the results of these policies. Although they were well-intentioned, these policies had unexpected and detrimental effects on schools and communities. In 2008, the American Psychological Association (APA) commissioned a task force to study 20 years of Zero-Tolerance Policies in the United States to determine whether zero tolerance was effective in keeping schools safer (Skiba, 2008, p. 835) and many more studies found that these government-driven reforms have detrimental effects on students individually, negatively affect the school community, and can be isolating for families. The next three sections of this paper will examine research on the specific effects of punitive disciplinary practices on individuals, school culture, and the community.

The Effects of Punitive Discipline on Individuals

In this first subsection, this paper will provide information about how individual students are affected by punitive discipline. It has been found that the most marginalized students in society end up being the most affected by policies that rely on punishment-driven systems. Rather than being distributed equally among all students, punitive consequences are unjust and discriminatory. In a systematic review, Duarte et al. (2023) studied literature on the effects of punitive discipline on student health outcomes and the disproportionate targeting of marginalized students:

Notably, a substantial body of literature finds that students who are structurally marginalized—specifically, Black, Latinx, Native/Indigenous, disabled young people, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) individuals—are at increased risk of exposure to punitive discipline and school-based policing, beginning as early as preschool and persisting across grades and school settings, indicating this is a pathway through which discrimination operates in young people's lives... While these data highlight the expansive reach and stark inequities in the deployment of punitive discipline, they likely underestimate its actual scale, given that many forms of punitive school discipline are not systematically documented (e.g., restraints and “soft expulsion”). (p. 2)

Many other studies have reached similar conclusions. For example, Skiba et al. (2001) found that when using punitive practices in elementary schools, Students of Colour were more likely to be suspended for any offence, major or minor, than their White peers. Black students were four times more likely than White students to receive suspension or expulsion for minor infractions, and Latinx students were suspended at twice the rate of White students. Similarly, in the 2013–14 school year, Darling-Hammond (2023) reported that Black female students received suspension at five times the rate of White females and that “every subpopulation, in every context, and at every grade level, Black students are far more likely

than their White peers to receive out-of-school suspensions” (p. 3). This research illustrates how inequitable, exclusionary practices compound harm and amplify existing marginalization, especially for students of colour.

Not only are punitive measures disproportionately affecting Black and Brown students, but other marginalized students are targeted unfairly as well. Snapp et al. (2015), in a study titled *Messy, Butch, and Queer: LGBTQ Youth and the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, found that exclusionary punishment was disproportionately applied to students in same-sex relationships for public displays of affection compared to straight peers for the same behaviours. They also found that youth with gender-nonconforming style, for example, girls who “dress like boys”, were viewed as troublemakers and boys with hair extensions were threatened with punishments (p. 67).

Research indicates that students with invisible disabilities, such as ADHD, face significantly higher rates of exclusionary discipline. A large study by Lopez et al. (2024) involving 450,000 Chilean students across various school levels found that students with invisible disabilities were 30% to 150% more likely to receive exclusionary measures, with the severity depending on the student's school level and socioeconomic status. Key risk factors identified include being male, older than peers, showing apathy toward school, or having special education needs.

This pattern of exclusion is also evident in students with emotional disturbances. Wagner et al. (2005) similarly reported that these students experience the highest dropout rates and are suspended or expelled at four times the rate of peers in other disability categories. Essentially, students requiring the most support are being marginalized and excluded due to mental health needs that are outside of their control.

Moreover, in addition to unequal distribution of punishments to marginalized groups, it is essential to note that receiving punitive discipline is also associated with adverse health effects in individuals, following students into adulthood. The significance of these findings lies in Duarte et al.'s (2023) assertion that receiving exclusionary discipline in early life elevates risk for substance abuse, self-harm, depression, mental health disorders, suicide, and adolescent pregnancy. The greater exposure to punishment among Black, Brown, and Indigenous students means they are more likely to suffer these consequences. Duarte et al. (2023) further find that these health outcomes often persist into adulthood, influencing lifelong well-being. They conclude that “punitive school discipline is largely a health-harming exposure, with implications for racial health inequity” (p. 16). These outcomes suggest that not only are marginalized students more likely to be targeted by punitive measures, but the effects of those measures function as social determinants of health, deepening the inequity for vulnerable youths, especially youth of colour, across their life span.

In summary, government-backed traditional discipline strategies—intended to promote safety—disproportionately harm vulnerable student populations. These policies, such as Zero Tolerance and the Safe Schools Act, are introduced to prevent violence and improve safety; however, based on available evidence, these goals are not met for all students. When exclusionary discipline is used, it targets the most vulnerable within the student population, with extensive harm placed on marginalized groups such as racialized students, 2SLGBTQIA youth, students with disabilities, and students with mental health needs, which indicates a core contradiction in the pursuit of school safety. Furthermore, studies find that students who are punished punitively are likely to experience adverse health effects into adulthood. When school safety is the goal but the result is increased

discrimination and detrimental health outcomes for individuals, it signals a need for approaches rooted in support, restoration, and inclusion rather than removal.

The following subsections explain how punitive discipline shapes school culture and broader community systems.

The Effects of Punitive Discipline on School Culture

As defined by Inez et al. (2023), “school culture is the personality of a school, or the underlying norms and values that shape attitudes, patterns of behaviour, and expectations of stakeholders in the school” and because school culture “permeates every aspect of school life” (p. 5), schools must invest in practices that promote positive school culture. When zero tolerance was introduced, it was found to undermine school culture through punishments that were widely adopted regardless of student context or the severity of behaviour (Skiba, 2008). This approach led to unforeseen consequences, such as a young child in St. Petersburg, Florida, being expelled for having a small knife in her lunchbox to cut an apple, and an adolescent being expelled for answering a cellphone call from his mother, who had been deployed overseas. These two examples illustrate the disconnect between punishment and safety and the importance of context. A child wanting to cut an apple or answer a mother’s phone call is hardly a cause for concern.

As Monahan et al. (2014) found, after zero-tolerance policies were implemented, what began as a response to serious concerns quickly expanded to include minor behaviours, and, over time, it was applied not only to major offences but also to low-level disruptions. Suspensions, one of the most widely used disciplinary responses, were increasingly used for infractions as minor as general classroom misbehaviour (Dupper & Bosch, 1996; Skiba & Knesting, 2001, as cited in Monahan et al., 2014). Students have found severe punishments for minor infractions to be unfair, thereby eroding trust in teachers and school institutions (Wang et al., 2023). Researchers have found that:

Simply stated, if students do not feel like they belong in the classroom and are being unfairly excluded for minor disruptions, they may become less engaged in learning over time. These attitudes and beliefs then become part of the classroom's ecology, shared among students through interpersonal exchanges and behavioural observations. (Rudasill et al., 2018, as cited in Wang et al., 2023, p. 22)

Academically, disciplinary systems have had some major effects. As Huguley et al. (2022) note, schools often impose consequences with the hope of deterring offenders and improving academic performance; however, their findings show that suspension correlates with lower academic performance due to decreased perceptions of fairness, reduced teacher trust, and diminished engagement—ultimately achieving the opposite of the intended goals. Wang et al. (2023) also find that students who receive suspensions are more likely to achieve lower grades in mathematics and science. Interestingly, the same study finds that suspensions for minor infractions are “largely ineffective at curtailing negative behaviour” (p. 21), indicating that exclusionary practices fail as both deterrents and safety strategies. These findings reveal that, ironically, the very mechanism intended to create safety and enhance learning appears to undermine academic achievements.

Lastly, punitive discipline was found to strain relationships with families, further negatively impacting school culture. Quin and Hemphill (2014) reported that students saw suspensions as messages that they were unwelcome and not expected to succeed. Wang et al. (2023) similarly found that students who witnessed peers being suspended for minor infractions began to question their sense of belonging and trust in school authorities. Furthermore, Wahman et al. (2022) found that families with children who were suspended or expelled felt unfairly treated and began to perceive schools as obstacles to their children's success. Not only do these dynamics undermine safety, but they also erode relationships among students, families, and school staff.

Taken together, the evidence demonstrates that punishment-based approaches do not merely affect individual students—they reshape school culture in ways that erode learning, trust, and connection. Across multiple studies, punitive systems have been found to harm students, relationships with staff, and family trust, thereby weakening the school culture necessary for academic success. When a policy consistently produces lower achievement, mistrust, and fractured relationships, it calls into question its effectiveness as a strategy for safety or learning.

The Effects of Punitive Discipline on the Outside Community

As mentioned above, the consequences of punitive policies can be severe, including adverse health outcomes that persist into adulthood. Similar studies have found that school punishment practices extend beyond classrooms to broader community systems, such as the criminal justice system. Duarte et al. (2023) explain that these policies rely on punitive measures, such as surveillance, restriction, and exclusionary practices, under the guise of promoting school safety. The authors continue by arguing these strategies often do not deter misconduct; instead, they increase harm in schools by criminalizing student behaviour, perpetuating inequities and reinforcing pathways into the legal system. Terenzi and Foster, 2017 (as cited in Trenton and Marsh, 2018) explain this as the school-to-prison pipeline, “ a pattern of harsh punitive and often exclusionary disciplinary policies executed by school personnel and in-school police that leads to high rates of permanent dropout for students, as well as involvement in the criminal legal system” (p. 131). Mallett (2017) explains that marginalized youth exposed to punitive discipline are at heightened risk for lifelong consequences:

The children and adolescents who are involved in the broad school discipline protocols and the smaller number subsequently caught within the school-to-prison pipeline share commonalities and experiences that place them at

higher risk for these outcomes. These school discipline risks are also factors for adolescents' involvement with the juvenile courts (p. 565).

When schools enacted Zero Tolerance policies in the U.S. and the Safe Schools Act in Canada, Salole and Abdulle (2015) found increases in police presence, surveillance, and exclusionary discipline. These conditions contributed to students leaving school early to face a greater risk of homelessness, unemployment, health problems, sexually transmitted infections, unplanned pregnancy, and substance abuse—resulting in long-term burdens on healthcare systems (Cassidy & Jackson, 2005). Huguley et al. (2022) further caution that higher suspension rates correlate with economic losses, including reduced tax revenue and increased social costs.

Overall, these results suggest that exclusionary policies have consequences beyond the school building, spilling into communities through additional resource and economic strain, eventually affecting the community as a whole.

Punitive Discipline: Benefits

There is a large body of evidence showing the negative effects of disciplinary systems on many outcomes for students, especially for marginalized groups, however, there have been questions raised about the precise cause of the disproportionality. Two studies brought up interesting arguments. First, Morris and Perry (2016) found that teacher relationships are important to student success; as a result, when discipline is perceived as unfair, relationships suffer and, in turn, student outcomes suffer. However, it is unclear whether a student's perception of discipline as fair and valid affects academic success. This study raises an important question about punitive discipline: Are negative student outcomes driven by exclusionary practices or by perceptions of fairness in the application of disciplinary measures?

The second study came from Skiba's 2008 study into the harmful effects of zero tolerance; however, they recognized that, in some serious cases, expulsions and removals were necessary, but only for the most egregious offences, such as weapons or drugs. Showing that, sometimes, exclusion is necessary for safety.

Both of these studies acknowledge the importance of physical school safety and its perception. When serious safety concerns arise, school authorities may step in to exclude a student to ensure students' safety. If the action is deemed fair and acceptable by all students, punitive practices might be more acceptable. However, this is not the case, as the burden of discipline often falls on the most marginalized, and maintaining equity when employing exclusionary measures has proven difficult.

Punitive Discipline: Limitations

Despite substantial evidence linking punitive practices to negative outcomes for individuals, schools, and the broader community, research remains limited, offering opportunities for further study. For example, in their 2023 study, Duarte et al. suggested that further research on how discipline affects different age groups is warranted. Their study revealed that students who were suspended in junior high may be at greater risk of adverse health outcomes than those suspended in high school. For example, if a student began using tobacco during middle or junior high school and was suspended, they were twice as likely to smoke in adulthood compared to those who were affected by suspension in high school. The authors suggest early adolescence as a critical stage for shaping behavioural habits and attitudes toward substance use, revealing the need to examine how age might interact with exclusionary practices.

Morris and Perry (2016) found that the relationships between student discipline, behaviour, and academic outcomes were complex, and they cautioned that it is difficult to isolate punitive practices as the sole mitigating factor. They suggested that the loss of

learning from missed class time is the primary factor in the reduction in academic success after suspension, rather than disciplinary action alone. Pointing out the need for more investigation into the specific causes of lower academic achievement.

Both of these indicate the need for a better understanding of how consequences affect students. Is it the consequence, the perception, or the age group that determines the impact of punitive discipline?

To conclude, when a student breaks a rule, causes harm, or violates conduct expectations, schools often resort to removal-based disciplinary systems intended to deter misbehaviour. Skiba (2008) concluded that zero-tolerance policies have not been proven to improve student behaviour or safety. In fact, despite decades of implementation, traditional discipline approaches have failed to achieve intended outcomes, and changes are needed. Skiba (2008) believes that validated, research-informed approaches “hold a great deal more promise than zero tolerance for reaching our shared goals of safe schools and productive learning environments” (p. 860). This is significant because it suggests that schools can avoid these impacts by exploring alternatives to zero tolerance, punishments, and exclusionary consequences for student behaviour.

The following section explores alternatives to punitive and exclusionary approaches currently practiced in schools.

Promising Programs That Reduce Punitive Discipline

Schools are introducing a variety of effective, alternative safety programs aimed at child development, learning, and growth. Skiba (2008) highlights the need for a more “flexible and commonsense” approach to school safety and notes that there are “practices that have been validated in over 10 years of violence prevention research” (p. 860), making the case that a more holistic approach is needed in schools to ensure safety and support for all students. Furthermore, as Duarte et al. (2023) explain, the adverse health effects of punitive and

exclusionary practices signal the need for schools to adopt more health-conscious models that prioritize safety, well-being, and community (p. 2). Although many alternative programs are available, this capstone will focus on three research-based alternatives to discipline-based programs: restorative practices grounded in Indigenous knowledges; positive behavioural interventions and supports informed by mental health research; and trauma-informed schooling rooted in healing frameworks.

Restorative Practices: Core Philosophy and Goals (Sub-heading 1)

To understand the components and benefits of the first program, Restorative Practices (RP), it is essential to acknowledge their origin and significance in Indigenous communities.

Baskin (2002) explains:

To begin, I would like to give you a bit of a history and perspective on what restorative justice means to Aboriginal people in Canada. We have always had government and justice within our culture. The emphasis traditionally has been on the family and community. This is reflective of an important Aboriginal value which stresses the *interconnectedness of all life* and upon which the foundation of society is based. Our current position stresses that all interventions with Aboriginal peoples be holistic in nature, that they be culture-based and community controlled. Basically, in Canada this is what self-government means to First Nations peoples (p. 133).

Across diverse educational settings, there is increasing acknowledgment of the harms caused by colonization and a corresponding shift toward reconciliation-focused practices. Many schools in Canada and internationally are implementing approaches to foster Indigenous ways of being and knowing (Pelland, 2024). One approach increasingly adopted in schools is Restorative Practices. According to Marsh (2017), schools in Australia began adopting RPs in the 1990s. Unlike punitive discipline, which separates and excludes, RPs bring community members, victims, and those who cause harm together to discuss impacts in

a safe space, deepening relationships rather than isolating and furthering harm (p. 4). This shift illustrates a movement away from behavioural control of individuals toward a comprehensive, community-driven approach to safety.

The literature does not offer a single agreed-upon definition of restorative practices; instead, scholars describe them through varying definitions and disciplinary lenses. Darling-Hammond (2023) shares that restorative programming can vary widely in scope; however, at their core, restorative approaches focus on reducing harm, resolving conflict, promoting relationships, supporting inclusion, and avoiding exclusion (p. 9). Another definition from Morrison and Vaandering (2012) describes RPs as a pedagogical shift that *nurtures relational school culture through shared values and community processes*. The underlying theme in the literature is *relationality*. Vaandering (2014) argues that what distinguishes restorative practices from other school safety initiatives is their relational foundation, the belief that humans are inherently connected and that repairing relationships, rather than enforcing punishment, is central to school culture.

Collectively, these definitions suggest that RP is not merely a disciplinary tool but a reorientation of school culture. It means reshaping how schools organize and hold students accountable. Unlike punitive practices, which negatively affect school culture due to their uneven delivery through RPs, there is a push for belonging and safety for all students as a proactive rather than a reactive solution. Being proactive in schools can reduce the need for reactive disciplinary procedures and, when necessary, use other forms of correction to address behaviour and hold students accountable. Stinchcomb et al. (2006) explain:

Moreover, restorative justice is ultimately concerned with changing the behavior and conditions that caused it, incorporating consideration of both the circumstances of individual cases and a multiplicity of response options that focus on the spirit and intent, rather than the letter, of the law. (p. 125)

By reducing the need for reactive responses, Braithwaite's 2002 framework, as cited in Morrison & Vaandering (2012), explains that RP integrates values and processes into school culture. RP is underpinned by boundary-setting values (e.g., accountability, respectful listening, and respect for human rights), goal-oriented values (e.g., dignity, compassion, peace, and community repair), and emergent values that develop through the restorative process, such as remorse, an apology, forgiveness, and mercy. Community processes described by Hopkins (2011), Morrison (2007), and Vaandering (2009) are grounded in these values and include practices such as restorative circles, victim–offender mediation, and peacemaking circles. These categorized values show that RP is intended to cultivate moral development and empathy in schools, not simply to manage behaviour (although it does that too). When school culture is impacted this way, positive relationships and empathy are cultivated, creating systemic changes that support all students rather than disproportionately punishing a few.

Some processes within RP are enacted through various forms of talking and teaching circles, used in different ways. Some are shaped by the values identified by Morrison and Vaandering (2012), such as boundary-setting, goal-setting, and relationally reparative values. By using circles, teachers proactively build community, develop emotional literacy, and cultivate students' understanding of themselves and others. Instead of naming classroom rules, teachers use talking circles to collaboratively discuss and support the school and classroom rules. Gregory et al. (2016) found that teachers use circles proactively to set expectations, establish rules, and outline consequences for misconduct (as cited in Costello et al., 2010). For example, this type of circle sets boundaries for behaviour by reinforcing norms of listening, respect, and responsibility. This proactive use positions RP as a preventative framework rather than a reactive intervention.

A second way circles are used in schools involves responding to harm rather than resorting to more exclusionary practices. RP addresses conflict by bringing stakeholders together to discuss impacts and repair relationships (Darling-Hammond, 2023). Marsh (2017) explains that, unlike punitive discipline, which uses exclusion as a form of safety, RP employs restorative circles to create an inclusive space in which parties can discuss what repair might entail. In their study, Morrison and Vaandering (2012) found that restorative circles are collaborative processes that can involve multiple people directly or indirectly connected to the harm, allowing participants to identify needs and obligations (p. 142). According to Vaandering (2014), many schools implementing RP begin “as a response to specific, harmful student behaviour and attempt to grow into an approach that engages all students in an environment that encourages respectful, caring interaction” (p. 66). A more collaborative approach reflects an implementation trajectory in which RP moves from being seen as a behaviour intervention to being understood as a schoolwide cultural framework.

Lastly, there is literature that suggests circles may also be used for peacemaking (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012) or as re-entry supports following harm, to ensure that students returning to a community receive the relational support necessary to avoid repeating past behaviours (Darling-Hammond, 2023). Stern (2016) and Gonzalez (2012) suggest that circles used in this capacity guide conversation toward supporting the wrongdoer’s reintegration into school, especially when those in conflict will continue to interact (as cited in Marsh, 2017). Students are in a unique position because, in most cases, they see their classes and classmates regularly. Returning to the school community through these restorative practices shows that RP seeks not only to resolve incidents but also to sustain belonging and relational growth over time.

These three uses of circles foster a shift in school management toward a more equitable, inclusive and collaborative approach. They instill values of Indigenous Ways into schools through connectedness and peace.

Restorative Practices: Evidence of Positive Outcomes

When schools implement restorative practices with consistency, teachers are committed to the work and receive support; as a result, RPs can be transformative. One student emphasized this nature of restorative practices:

Restorative practices saved my life. It's a lifestyle, not a practice or a program....

Once you start doing it, you will start having restorative conversations and learn to be a good listener. And you make really lasting relationships because [restorative practices] teach you not to be afraid of opening up to people (as cited in Darling-Hammond, 2023).

Stichcomb et al. (2006) found significant reductions in in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and office behaviour referrals after implementing RPs schoolwide in three Minnesota Schools. Gregory et al. (2016) reported similar results from a 3-year RP program in high schools: violent acts decreased by 52%, suspensions decreased by 50%, and disrespect/classroom interruption decreased by 70% after 1 year of implementation. The statistics are significant and serve as a motivator for schools to adopt alternative disciplinary methods that support students rather than exclude them.

Restorative Practices: Limitations and Barriers

Implementing restorative practices (RPs) in schools can be difficult and time-consuming. Schools have established systems that are difficult to change, and, as Marsh (2017) states, “moving to an RP approach is a long-term, incremental reform; schools must adopt a long-term plan and commitment” (p. 5). Comprehensive training and ongoing support are essential for sustained change. Teachers require administrative backing and continued

assistance to maintain accurate implementation; without such support, implementation falters (Stinchcomb et al., 2006). Furthermore, Marsh (2017) identified staff turnover, lack of ongoing support, and insufficient supplemental training as barriers to maintaining restorative initiatives. Therefore, when support and training are inadequate, school climate is affected, and efforts to improve student achievement may suffer (Huguley et al., 2022). These findings suggest that restorative practices require sustained structural commitment rather than short-term adoption.

Beyond logistical and training challenges, restorative practices often clash with existing school systems that reinforce hierarchical power structures, including institutional bureaucracies, social norms, and zero-tolerance policies (Stinchcomb et al., 2006; Vaandering, 2014). Morrison and Vaandering (2012) found that some educators struggle to integrate RPs within established disciplinary frameworks, particularly when implementation requires relinquishing old forms of authority. Harber and Sakade (2009, as cited in Vaandering, 2014) further argue that, while schools may promote empowerment and critical thinking, control, obedience, and social reproduction remain embedded in institutional practices, making meaningful transformation difficult. These findings suggest that restorative practices introduced into systems that are organized around compliance and control may be constrained by the very structures they seek to reform.

The implications of these structural constraints are particularly evident in research examining racial discipline disparities. Huguley et al. (2022) found that restorative practices alone did not eliminate racial disparities in disciplinary outcomes. Although schools employ fewer punitive practices because of RPs, equity outcomes are limited when staff do not intentionally incorporate racial justice-oriented components. Furthermore, Darling-Hammond (2023) observed that White educators are more likely to use restorative practices with White students and less likely to “leverage restorative practices when interacting with Black

students” (p. 17). These findings indicate that without explicit attention to racial justice and critical reflection on educator beliefs shaped within hierarchical systems, restorative practices risk reproducing existing inequities rather than disrupting them.

In summary, some of the first schools to implement RP were in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, Japan, Brazil, Indonesia, and the United States (Stinchcomb et al., 2006). Research demonstrates benefits that indicate RP’s potential to transform student relationships, school climate, and community well-being when implemented with commitment and dedication. However, restorative justice cannot transform schools unless educators critically investigate and challenge the underlying power structures embedded in traditional schooling systems; otherwise, RPs risk becoming just another inequitable behavioural management tool.

Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports: Core Philosophy and Goals

Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Schoolwide PBIS (SWPBIS) have been adopted in schools in the US, Canada, Norway, and Australia. These programs benefit schools by providing systems of support that help students proactively reduce problem behaviours. This resulted in a decrease in exclusionary discipline practices and an improvement in overall climate (Bradshaw et al., 2010). The Schoolwide PBIS (SWPBIS), a three-tiered program, aims to enhance the school environment and student outcomes—both academic and social-emotional—across the school (Sailor et al., 2009, as cited in Harlacher & Rodriguez, 2017). SWPBIS has been introduced in approximately 9,000 schools by the U.S. Department of Education (Bradshaw et al., 2010).

SWPBIS reaches students through three support tiers: training staff, launching schoolwide initiatives, and delivering targeted support to staff and students when needed. Tier 1 includes universal practices taught to staff, students, and families. This changes school systems and procedures and is meant to affect the behaviours of about 80–90% of students

(Muscott et al., 2008). Tier 1 also involves teaching 3–5 common expectations, setting up a schoolwide reward program for good behaviour, and tracking referrals and disciplinary actions (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Harlacher & Rodriguez, 2017). Tier 2 targets smaller groups or at-risk students not affected by Tier 1 procedures. Tier 3 delivers intensive, personalized support when needed (Muscott, 2008; Cho, 2021). These three tiers are key to SWPBIS and require time to apply well. Implementing Tier 1 can take up to a year; reaching Tier 3 may take up to 3 years (Harlacher & Rodriguez, 2017).

SWPBIS is a comprehensive, multi-tiered program that benefits schools by lowering office referrals, reducing suspensions, and providing more instructional time because less time is spent on managing behaviours. To achieve effectiveness, SWPBIS relies on accuracy, consistency, and ongoing education, as emphasized by Bradshaw et al. (2010). When implemented with fidelity, Muscott et al. (2008) found that SWPBIS leads to measurable academic gains, especially in math, and positive changes in behaviour. These findings underscore the need for proper training for school staff to realize these benefits.

Consequently, several studies have analyzed the effectiveness of SWPBIS training programs.

Muscott et al. (2008) examined New Hampshire's implementation of SWPBIS. To ensure proper application, they used a five-stage program that emphasized the need for substantial support and learning. Key steps included building awareness among leaders and staff, forming a Universal Leadership Team, and ensuring ongoing training. Commitment from administration and faculty, and the intensity of training, drove positive results. This research stresses the importance of whole-school buy-in for alternatives to traditional discipline.

Smolkowski et al. (2016) found similar outcomes while adopting SWPBIS with the Safe & Civil Schools (SCS) Foundations model. Discipline systems, staff attitudes, and student behaviours improved. Unlike New Hampshire's approach, SCS training relied

primarily on peer-to-peer teaching among teachers. Leadership teams received formal SWPBIS instruction and led all-staff implementation with data-driven tools, manuals, and multi-year support (p. 340). The two-year training and ongoing coaching enabled consistent and successful execution of SWPBIS (p. 256).

This body of research underscores the importance of leadership development, staff training, and sustained implementation for the successful and meaningful application of SWPBIS and PBIS. Both Muscott et al. (2008) and Smolkowski et al. (2016) emphasize the importance of comprehensive adoption and sustained training to maintain consistency in SWPBIS implementation. In the context of disciplinary program reform, these findings illustrate that meaningful change requires system-wide commitment. In both studies, successful implementation was supported by district-level backing, extensive and structured professional development, strong administrative leadership, trained school-based teams responsible for accountability, and, critically, sustained time for integration. Notably, measurable reductions in disciplinary outcomes did not occur immediately; instead, improvements emerged over multiple years of consistent implementation and capacity building. If schools are genuinely dedicated to discipline reform, the literature emphasizes the necessity of consistency through proper training. Without these supports, meaningful changes are difficult.

Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports: Evidence of Positive Outcomes

According to Muscott et al. (2008), when a SWPBIS program is established through a systems-change process—such as New Hampshire’s five-stage program—and with organized support, it can yield positive behavioural and academic outcomes. For example, a group of 26 schools with high commitment and high fidelity found that when they sustained the program for two years, there was a significant decrease in behaviour-related suspensions and office referrals, as well as a recovery of class time lost to disruptive behaviour and gains in math

achievement. These promising results indicate the importance of whole-school buy-in for positive outcomes, as well as the five-stage comprehensive training program and staff coaching.

Similarly, Smolkowski et al. (2016) found that when staff consistently implement SCS Foundations over two years, schools benefit from improved discipline, safer environments, more positive staff views of student behaviour, and significant reductions in suspensions, bullying, absenteeism, and chronic tardiness. These benefits reflect how sustained PBIS implementation can improve both school culture and student outcomes.

Finally, studies have evaluated PBIS's effectiveness in narrowing racial disparities in discipline. In their 2021 study, McIntosh et al. found that schoolwide, office discipline referrals dropped by about half, and that the reduction eliminated disparities for 86 students. Though these preliminary results require replication, they are significant. The authors observed that in these schools, where discipline practices were more equitable, participants were *already committed to addressing disciplinary disparities and implicit bias*. These findings are promising for schools striving to become more equitable and safer for all students. When staff prioritize necessary, equitable work, change is achievable.

Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports: Limitations and Barriers

Research shows that successful PBIS culture change requires strong commitment. Muscott (2008) recommended that districts and schools align their philosophy and involve families, stakeholders, district staff, school staff, and students. Staff may need time to adjust to collaborative decision-making and discussing school culture issues.

Additionally, there is a need for larger-sample studies in PBIS schools, as many use additional programming to support the individual needs of their demographic, such as bullying or drug prevention, which can alter the effectiveness of PBIS (Bradshaw et al., 2010). Another example of this was in schools where equity education was included in staff

training; the commitment to reducing disproportionate disciplinary actions may have provided staff with a framework for understanding the challenges of discussing inequitable practices. School staff and society at large have often avoided discussions of racism and discrimination. However, when equity was embedded in PBIS interventions, educators found the work acceptable and meaningful (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2014, as cited in McIntosh et al., 2021). Further research is encouraged to determine how supplemental programs might affect the success of PBIS.

These limitations highlight the importance of staff buy-in, sustained training, contextual sensitivity, and systemic commitment when implementing PBIS.

Trauma-Informed Programs: Core Philosophy and Goals

Trauma exerts profound effects on both physical health and brain development, primarily due to the persistent influence of chronic stress on the immune system (Avery et al., 2021). The repercussions of trauma encompass severe mental health conditions, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), in addition to deficits in cognitive functioning, including difficulties with attention, memory retention, and the ability to interact positively (Avery et al., 2021). Stevens (2012, as cited in Perry & Daniels, 2016) reported that 13 out of 30 students had been affected by three or more traumatic events. Furthermore, Stoltenburg et al. (2024) observed that trauma disproportionately impacted Black and Latino students and was associated with an increased likelihood of punitive discipline, absenteeism, and diminished academic success across the entire student population.

Given the widespread and well-documented impact of trauma on student development, schools increasingly explore trauma-informed programming as an alternative approach to promoting student safety and support (Maynard et al., 2019). Trauma-informed approaches in schools aim to minimize the harmful effects of trauma and support student healing and development by integrating supportive policies, procedures, and practices across

entire school systems to foster safe and nurturing learning environments (Bateman et al., 2013, as cited in Avery et al., 2021).

A variety of frameworks and models have been developed to guide trauma-informed practice in schools, including Trauma-Informed Programs and Practices (TIPPS), Multitiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Social Emotional Learning (SEL), and the Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS) model (Watson et al., 2024; Avery et al., 2021). These approaches are generally considered trauma-informed by mental health practitioners; however, there remains a lack of consensus regarding a unified definition of trauma-informed programming within educational contexts (Watson et al., 2024; Avery et al., 2021).

To establish a consistent conceptual foundation, many researchers and organizations rely on shared guiding principles when defining trauma-informed practice. Research examining trauma-informed programming in schools remains limited; however, many studies that exist today find similar criteria through various mental health organizations. Maynard et al. (2019) find that many studies rely on established definitions from the SAMHSA and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) when conceptualizing trauma-informed approaches. SAMHSA describes trauma-informed care using the “four Rs,” which emphasize that organizations must realize the widespread impact of trauma, identify (recognize) signs and symptoms of trauma in individuals connected to the system, integrate trauma knowledge into policies and practices (respond), and actively work to prevent (resist) re-traumatization (SAMHSA, 2014, as cited in Avery et al., 2021).

Understanding how the four Rs function in educational settings provides insight into implementing trauma-informed practices in schools. Each of the 4Rs of trauma-informed practice guides how schools can respond to and support students dealing with trauma. Understanding the components of the program individually helps clarify how trauma-

informed programs can be implemented in educational settings. The first two components—realizing that trauma exists within the school setting and recognizing the way trauma might be expressed—are vital first steps to trauma programs as they promote the second and third components—supportive responses and decreasing the acts of re-traumatization (Riley et al., 2025; Avery et al., 2021).

In addition to understanding trauma, research consistently highlights staff training as a major factor in the successful implementation of trauma-informed programming. As documented in research on RPs and PBIS/SWPBIS, staff training is essential to the outcomes of holistic programs. Trauma-informed is much the same. In fact, “professional development was reported in all studies as a change catalyst, central to becoming trauma-informed and improving motivation to adapt practices” (Avery et al., 2021, p. 392). Avery et al. (2021) add that when school staff receive appropriate training and motivation, they are more likely to approach student behaviour differently, resulting in reduced use of punitive measures that further traumatize students. One study completed by McIntyre et al. (2019) finds that teacher buy-in is an important factor in determining whether trauma-informed practice will be adopted. The authors explain that “knowledge of trauma-informed approaches to the school’s mission statement, leadership expectations, or their job description...may strengthen the relationship between knowledge and acceptability” (p.96).

Another study completed by Riley et al. (2025) finds that after training, teachers can recognize apparent signs of trauma, such as yelling and running, but need more awareness of less apparent signs, such as withdrawal from others and intrusive thoughts. Educators can be unaware of implicit bias and risk re-traumatizing students through punitive discipline because “often, behaviors that appear as student defiance, lack of motivation, or poor self-regulation may be manifestations of trauma” (Herrenkohl et al., 2019, as cited in Riley et al., 2025, p.6). These authors (2025) found a variety of training in schools, such as information sessions on

recognizing trauma, and teachers made changes in their classrooms, such as selecting a diverse collection of books from many cultures; however, no comprehensive support plans were put in place (Riley et al., 2025). These findings indicate the need for appropriate training when implementing trauma-informed programs in schools. It may be difficult to respond to less recognizable trauma indicators, resulting in a lack of support and further traumatization.

Beyond staff preparation, trauma-informed frameworks also emphasize structural and classroom-based strategies to support students by responding to trauma. To facilitate appropriate support and response to students who have experienced trauma, Riley et al. (2025) recommended the TIPPS (Trauma-Informed Programs and Practices) framework, which suggests schoolwide approaches to responding to trauma, such as building community, developing lessons to teach resiliency, and focusing on positive relationships. For example, schools build community by hosting a talent show, conducting interest inventories, and engaging students in collective decision-making. This framework encourages classroom teachers to schedule class meetings and support resiliency by teaching breathing techniques and coping mechanisms (p. 7). Regarding retraumatization, they emphasized the importance of identifying implicit biases and deficit thinking, as well as reducing punitive disciplinary practices—all of which are risk factors for retraumatizing students. Reducing re-traumatization also involves intentionally planning policies to reduce exclusionary practices and promote restorative practices such as repairing harm and relationships (p. 7). SAMHSA (2014, as cited in Avery et al., 2021) notes that many individuals who have experienced trauma feel voiceless and vulnerable, and consulting with students can help rebuild agency while offering educators meaningful insight into student experiences. These findings highlight the importance of taking concrete actions to support students who have experienced trauma through individual strategies, as well as culture and community shifts.

Trauma-Informed: Evidence of Positive Outcomes

Research consistently demonstrates that teacher knowledge and professional learning are important to the successful implementation of trauma-informed networks in schools. Many studies find that after training, teachers are more aware of the signs of trauma, and their understanding of trauma increases. For example, Dorado et al. (2016) find that knowledge related to trauma and its impact on children improves by 57%, while understanding of how to support students affected by trauma increases by 61%. Knowledge of trauma-sensitive strategies shows the greatest growth at 68%. Furthermore, awareness of burnout and vicarious trauma rises by 65%, and the implementation of trauma-sensitive practices increases by 49%. Similarly, another study finds that staff “are able to reframe challenging student behaviours and thereby decrease their own potential reactive responses and the possibility of punitive practices, which in turn may have avoided further escalations of the students” (Avery et al., 2021, p. 392). Both studies show that when teachers receive targeted training, they not only increase their knowledge but also shift their thinking and responsiveness to student behaviour. This shift supports a more preventive, relationship-based school culture and reduces punitive discipline, thereby improving students' well-being and engagement.

In addition to improving teachers' knowledge and practice, research demonstrates positive effects on student engagement, emotion regulation, and academic participation. When teachers and staff develop trauma-informed knowledge and practice, student engagement and academic outcomes improve. For example, Dorado et al. 2016 studied HEARTS therapy, an integrated therapeutic approach involving students, families, and teachers, and found statistically significant results. They (2016) found that in five schools in San Francisco, school professionals reported that students' ability to learn increases by 28%, time on task in the classroom increases by 27%, time spent in the classroom increases by

36%, and school attendance increases by 34%. Students demonstrate better coping and emotion regulation strategies, fewer intrusive and dissociative thoughts, and improved ability to maintain relationships. Perry and Daniels's 2016 study in New Haven, Connecticut, reveals similar findings: 95% of students report a better understanding of how to relax, 92% report a better understanding of how to trust others, and 91% report a better understanding of how to worry less. Studies like these convey the positive impact trauma-informed teachings have on students' abilities to cope with trauma, achieve academic success and overall well-being through trusting and meaningful relationships.

Trauma-informed practices may extend beyond individual student outcomes and contribute to stronger school-community relationships, especially when community members and families are included in the programming. For example, in Perry and Daniels's 2016 study in New Haven, they reported that communication between families and the school improved through the trauma-informed approach implemented at the pilot school. There were 19 families identified for targeted support, and not only did communication between the families and school improve, but these families also opened up and facilitated support to other community members as well:

These families began reaching out to others who they believed to be under significant stress in an effort to minimize any anxiety or fear associated with signing up for such a service. This natural creation of community is at the heart of trauma-informed transformation, as it goes directly against the isolative, silent culture that can be created when communities are impacted by adversities (p. 184).

Due to these benefits, the researchers suggested stretching out resources to family members in the second year to support more parents and guardians who may have their own experiences of trauma (Perry & Daniels, 2016). Although few studies report effects on the community, it can be inferred that when student outcomes improve, families and the

community benefit as well.

These findings highlight promising outcomes, although more information is needed. The following section explores the limitations and challenges associated with implementing trauma-informed practices in school settings.

Trauma-Informed: Limitations and Barriers

Since schools began adopting mental health approaches, the promise of reduced punitive practices is evident; however, data on the approach's effectiveness are difficult to obtain, and schools lack the resources to implement programs in a congruent manner.

For example, Watson et al. (2024) state, “the limitation of all research of trauma-informed schools currently is the lack of formal measurements, conceptual designations, or a process to identify schools that are trauma informed” (p.15). Although Avery et al. (2021) reported positive findings in their data analysis, they acknowledged that the information and data are widely discussed and implemented. However, the others believe that high-quality studies are still needed to prove effectiveness (Maynard et al., 2019). In Canada, Jacobson (2021) recognized the value of trauma-informed work and its potential to create more welcoming spaces, but she too found that in-depth data was missing. Additionally, Perry and Daniels (2016) found that they were unable to monitor or adequately measure changes in teachers' classroom use of trauma-informed practices. They recommended establishing a more consistent monitoring method.

A final limitation found in the studies of trauma-informed schools was the lack of availability of resources and time (Perry & Daniels, 2016). For example, Riley et al. (2025) found that their school cohorts who could recognize trauma were unaware of smaller indicators of trauma (such as unfavourable behaviours), and school professionals wanted more resources, training, and time to implement interventions and resist retraumatization. The authors (2025) acknowledge:

In order to successfully implement schoolwide, trauma-informed practices, it is crucial to garner time and support from school professionals across various levels of the school system who are, oftentimes, spread too thin by managing their typical educational duties (p. 7).

Furthermore, Duarte et al. (2023) recognize the lack of mental health supports in schools in their study, which found that 10 million students attend U.S. public schools, all of which have a police officer, but none have a social worker, counsellor, psychologist, or nurse.

Responding to trauma becomes difficult without proper avenues of support. Future research needs to address the potential of trauma-informed programs that receive full support, commitment, and planning, as well as ongoing empirical evaluation.

Benefits and limitations aside, the promise of trauma-informed education reform and others like it lies in the potential for more equitable and inclusive learning environments, particularly for students who are marginalized and disproportionately affected by punitive and exclusionary practices. By moving focus from simply punishing behaviour to understanding underlying causes, often rooted in trauma, schools can support students without the use of exclusion, reduce the discipline gap and create supportive academic and emotional environments.

Considerations for Discipline Reform: Implementing Meaningful Changes

Many schools are changing their disciplinary practices after learning that punitive measures such as suspensions, expulsions, and office referrals deny students educational opportunities and worsen social, economic, and health disparities and outcomes (Gonzales et al., 2019). Several studies mentioned had district-wide investment in initiatives with full training, funding, and support. There is a lot of hope in creating meaningful change in schools through disciplinary program reform. However, genuine support for students requires that school reform be structural, intentional, and sustained.

In their review of current discipline reform programs such as RPs and SWPBIS, Gregory et al. (2021) found studies indicating a comprehensive reduction in disciplinary actions overall. However, "disparities in student receipt of exclusionary discipline remain significant" (p. 207). In a systematic review of studies, Welsch (2023) also found that reformed disciplinary programs reduced overall use of exclusionary practices. However, "the disproportionate use of exclusionary discipline on Black students compared to their White counterparts remains a lingering challenge" (p.9). Additionally, marginalized groups—LGBTQ youth, students with mental health needs and disabilities—continue to be more likely targets of punitive practices (Duarte et al., 2023). This raises a critical question: if alternative frameworks do not dismantle problems attributed to punitive discipline, can they create meaningful change, or do they merely perpetuate existing inequities in a modified form?

The answer is, both. In the research, scholars have found that educators, policymakers, psychologists, and counsellors are committed to creating meaningful change and, through that commitment, have developed strategies that work to reduce disparities in discipline for marginalized groups. Research suggests that school safety programs become more equitable and less harmful when schools incorporate policies that reduce exclusion through policy and data collection, implement discipline program reforms with accuracy, include mental health support, center inclusive practices, and provide ongoing training and coaching for teachers and staff (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Bradshaw et al., 2018; Welsch, 2023).

An essential shift in schools is policy change, along with data collection on the changes made. Policies enforced by schools that continue to hold up systems of oppression need to change; however, the data show that they do not always work to lower disparities in discipline. For example, McCluskey et al. (2011), as cited in Morrison and Vaandering (2021), found that when schools implemented RPs, some educators were reluctant to give up

punishment and exclusion as a recourse for behaviour incidents, as they are symbols of power and strength. This indicates the need for firm policies that prevent educators from reverting to old structures deeply embedded in punitive norms that often persist within reform efforts. Welsh's 2023 study found that many states across the US are reforming their discipline policies to reduce exclusionary practices. For example, in one study (2023), they found that schools banned suspension for attendance issues, which lowered overall out-of-school suspensions as well as reduced the disparity gap for Black and Latinx students compared to their white peers. However, in another study (2023), they found that when policies prohibited suspensions for code-of-conduct issues or behavioural infractions, racial disparities persisted. These findings indicate the need for policy reform because they are impactful; however, without data collection, it would be unclear whether the changes were equitable. Making it very important to both reform policies and collect disaggregated data on race and ethnicity (p. 4).

Further, schools with counsellors and mental health programs were found to lower disparities for Black students, and while more research is needed, there is promise for supporting LGBT students as well. Welsh (2023) found that when discipline reform programs were used in tandem with school mental health frameworks, office referrals and out-of-school suspensions decreased for Black students. In other words, implementing alternative safety programs is important for reducing punitive practices; however, to reduce discipline disparities, schools need more support. Additionally, in their study of supportive strategies versus punitive practices for LGBT Youth of Colour, Snapp et al. (2023) argue that when schools employ school counsellors, these professionals can intervene to provide support before disciplinary actions are taken. They propose working with students and teachers to support struggling students as a preventive measure rather than resorting to punishment (p. 10). These two studies indicate the need for support before punishment. Instead of dealing

with problem behaviours when they arise, mental health interventions can reduce the need for discipline and address disproportionate discipline. Even within schools that have integrated mental health support, Duarte et al. (2023) found that “White children are more likely to have a medicalization frame deployed to respond to perceived misbehaviour in schools, Black children are more likely to have a criminalization frame deployed” (p. 147). A finding that highlights the importance of inclusive approaches to support.

Additionally, the success of alternative safety programs depends on implementation fidelity. Programs like restorative practices (RPs), Schoolwide Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS/PBIS), and trauma-informed frameworks require consistent, proper application (Elrod et al., 2022; Gage et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2018, as cited in Welsh, 2023). Supporting this, Welsh (2023) reported that when these frameworks incorporate culturally responsive practices, studies consistently find reductions in discipline disparities. For instance, restorative practices not only reduce punitive discipline but also highlight the importance of student voice in talking circles. This reduces discipline disparities (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2014; Evans & Vaandering, 2016, as cited in Gregory et al., 2021). This finding underscores that providing students with a supportive space to be heard is a powerful and inclusive aspect of the restorative process. Gregory et al. (2021) explain:

A mechanism for doing so (creating institutionalized change) is raising students' and staff's critical consciousness about how inequality is reproduced in communities. For example, Knight and Wadhwa (2014) describe how they empower students as change makers through discussions about racism, oppression, and the school-to-prison pipeline during the RP circle process. (p. 211)

Additionally, there is evidence that, when using Positive Behavioural Programs and Supports (PBIS), engaging in culturally responsive PBIS (CR-PBIS) can reduce the discipline gap (Levenson et al., 2019, as cited in Gregory et al., 2021). CR-PBIS intentionally integrates

students' backgrounds and historical contexts into the curriculum, lessons, and school culture (Rose et al., 2020, as cited in Gregory et al., 2021). Better-Bubon et al. (2016) share the positive outcomes of CR-PBIS:

The few studies on culturally responsive PBIS programs show potential benefits.

Greflund et al. (2014) found no disproportionality for Aboriginal students in a diverse K–8 sample from British Columbia. This was due in part to incorporating Aboriginal values, language, and voice in PBIS implementation (McIntosh, Moniz, Craft, Golby, & Steinwand-Deschambeault, 2014). Eber, Upreti, and Rose (2010) reported positive outcomes for ethnic minority youth in several Illinois schools through difficult conversations, building student-staff relationships, and integrating data-based decision-making into school discipline. (p. 266)

When students are supported in understanding themselves, and when safety programs center their cultural identities, schools move past surface-level reform. These actions create systemic change. Increased mutual understanding among teachers, staff, and students leads to more equitable practices, stronger relationships, and a more inclusive school climate.

Lastly, teacher training and coaching in empathy and equity have been closely studied and proven to minimize racial disparities in schools for students and teachers. In their 2026 study, Welsh analyzed a training and coaching program called My Teacher Partner (MTP), which taught teachers emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional skills (Gregory et al., 2016). Teachers recorded their lessons and received feedback from coaches to develop action plans for improvement (Gregory et al., 2016, p. 177). MTP was found to dissolve the racial discipline gap for Black students and students from other ethnic groups (p. 172). This result shows the power and impact of teacher coaching. Welsh (2023) also emphasized the importance of individual coaching, noting that professional development is a key means of reducing the discipline gap. However, emerging evidence suggests that

professional development may be ineffective without individual coaching (p. 9). It is not enough to be a more inclusive educator; teachers need hands-on, practical applications in their classrooms.

Bradshaw et al. (2018) found similar results in their study of a coaching program, Double Check Coaching, when taught through SWPBIS, achieved a 24% reduction in office discipline referrals. This program is intended to “increase staff cultural responsiveness and classroom management skills and, ultimately, reduce disproportionality in teachers’ use of exclusionary discipline” (p. 119) as well as improve student outcomes and academics. This is done through an extra (double) check to ensure cultural factors are systemically considered when addressing academic and behavioural challenges. For example, in a Maryland study (2018) of 12 elementary and middle schools, public schools implemented Double Check CARES, which integrates interventions with Tier 1 of SWPBIS (behaviour is taught to all students, schoolwide). Through CARES, teachers participate in five 60-minute sessions on connecting to the curriculum, authentic relationships, reflective thinking, effective communication, and sensitivity to students’ cultures. It was found that teachers who received Double Check coaching received more proactive behaviour supports, and their students demonstrated greater cooperation and fewer disruptive behaviours.

Building on these findings, Okonofua and Darling-Hammond (2020) found that integrating three key components: getting a student's perspective, believing students' behaviour can improve, and believing teacher-student relationships can improve, resulted in reduced racial disparities in teachers' discipline decisions. This training reduced the negative labelling and stereotyping of Black students, therefore, serving “as an effective way to mitigate societal disparities” (p. 4).

Connected to these findings, Borman et al. (2022) found that a social-psychological program aimed at student affirmations lowered the racial gap in suspensions between white

and Black students by 67%. Through the program, students were asked to participate in writing activities that opposed racial stereotypes and encouraged them to write positively about themselves. The authors (2022) explained that the writing aimed to highlight positive aspects of the student's identity, such as being a good brother or sister, having a sense of humour, and qualities they liked about themselves (p. 289). They found that, particularly for Black students, this lowered the amount of office referrals and suspensions.

Considering this research collectively, it is widely acknowledged that reformed disciplinary practices—such as RPs, SWPBIS, and trauma-informed programs—reduce the overall need for disciplinary actions. However, the reform in itself is not enough to impact disparities in discipline. To achieve a more equitable program, research indicates that, in addition to program reform, schools need to integrate interventions such as equitable mental health support, inclusive practices (e.g., cultural responsiveness), empathy and equity teacher training and coaching, and student self-esteem building. By combining these interventions, schools achieve lower discipline disparities and fewer disciplinary actions overall. A concrete example of how this may work in an educational setting was shown by Debnam et al. (2014) and Hurd et al. (2015), as cited in Bradshaw et al. (2018), who found that:

Examples include visible images reflecting cultural values and the selection of learning activities that reflect and acknowledge students' backgrounds, cultural norms, families, and communities. Authentic relationships between educators and students are characterized by tangible evidence of warmth, caring, and trust. There is a focus in this professional development on strategies for optimizing the teachers' enthusiasm, caring, and willingness to help students meet academic and behavioral challenges, as well as ways to learn more deeply about their students. Positive relationships between students and teachers help students adjust to the pressures of the

classroom, promote social competence, and are associated with fewer behavior problems (p. 121)

Summary

In summary, implementing meaningful changes in schools through disciplinary program reform requires significant transformation. Schools are nuanced, and no program is a one-size-fits-all. To be successful and equitable, each discipline reform program must adapt to the community it serves and its staff. Research consistently demonstrates that the use of exclusionary practices inadvertently creates barriers and educational inequity by systematically denying students instructional time and worsening social, economic and health outcomes (Gonzales et al., 2019). There is a powerful and promising movement toward equitable changes through program reform. However, simply replacing punitive practices with another program is not enough, as there is a risk of continued discipline disparities if frameworks are not intentional and require clear goals, data-driven strategies, and targeted staff coaching. This change takes time, continuous investment in removing disparities, ongoing evaluation, and resisting the temptation to revert to old, more authoritative habits. Furthermore, educators need funding and district support to implement programs with integrity. True reform goes beyond simply adopting a new program; it requires a systemic shift toward culturally responsive schools that are empathetic, inclusive and restorative.

Chapter 3: Meaningful Discipline Reform

Summary

Punitive discipline harms students individually through re-traumatization, disproportionality, and poor health outcomes into adulthood. Additionally, exclusionary punishments harm school culture by decreasing perceptions of fairness, reducing teacher trust, and diminishing engagement. Furthermore, school culture is negatively impacted by exclusion, as students feel they are not welcome and do not belong. Lastly, because traditional discipline approaches lowers health outcomes and creates a school-to-prison pipeline, communities suffer as there is a higher strain on resources, which causes economic strain. There are countless studies that demonstrate these harms.

As a result of this extensive research, many districts have adopted alternative disciplinary programs. Educational reforms work to create meaningful change in disciplinary practices through alternative frameworks. Three examples of these frameworks include a focus on restoration through Restorative Practices (RPs), rooted in Indigenous Knowledge; Positive Behaviour Programs (PBIS), which focus on clear expectations and support; and, finally, Trauma-Informed Programming, which puts mental health first. Overall, when implemented consistently and with staff commitment, they were successful in reducing disciplinary actions for the school population.

Nevertheless, while benefits were seen schoolwide, the disproportionate rates of discipline remained largely unchanged. Schools, policymakers, counsellors, and psychologists studied these results and identified interventions to make meaningful, equitable changes in discipline. It was found that reforms could not be applied in isolation. Focus should be on a combined, structured approach that includes mental health support, an inclusive and culturally responsible curriculum, empathy and equity coaching, and self-esteem-building for students. Adding these interventions, school communities begin to

cultivate trust, empathy, and mutual accountability, and reform efforts move beyond policy compliance toward meaningful and equitable change.

Implications

Two questions were posed during this research. The first explores whether negative student outcomes are primarily caused by exclusionary disciplinary practices or by students' perceptions of fairness in their administration. Exclusionary discipline appears in many studies to be unfair, as it disproportionately affects marginalized groups. Yet, after these systems were reformed, disparities persisted. Overall, the use of exclusionary discipline decreased, but not for marginalized groups. This leads to the second question: If alternative frameworks do not solve the problems caused by exclusionary discipline, do they create meaningful change, or do they merely perpetuate existing inequities in new forms? This is an important question. Studies from Arum (2003) and Kupchik and Ellis (2008), as cited in Morris and Perry (2016), explain: “even when strict, if students perceive discipline as fair, this may foster a positive relationship with school and result in higher achievement” (p. 83). Findings show that these questions are closely linked to equitable practices in schools. They raise a critical issue: how do we create school systems that are fair, support academic success, and promote positive health outcomes? The research highlights several recurring themes for creating change and addressing the discipline gap.

First, discipline reforms must be systemic if schools want real change. Collecting disaggregated data is important. Schools need to monitor disparities and revise discipline policies that reduce fairness. Leadership teams need training and aligned discipline policies for meaningful reform. For example, a harmful discipline policy—found in some schools—is the suspension of students for truancy or absenteeism, which increases the time they miss school. When schools encourage attendance and do not punish absences, the loss of school time is reduced, and when students miss less school, they have higher academic outcomes. A

logical modification schools could employ. Identifying and changing discipline policies that create disparities or cause harm is a powerful way to create systemic change in schools.

In addition to policy reforms, a teacher's beliefs, relationships, and perceptions of their students can influence disciplinary decisions and reinforce negative practices. Practices that are unfair or deemed unfair by students can negatively affect relationships and reduce trust among students, their families, and teachers. For example, teachers are more likely to enforce a criminalization framework for Black children and a medicalization framework for White students. The disparities exist. When schools recognize and accept what the research shows, they can begin to grow. Research shows that coaching, empathy training, and MTP can transform inequitable practices and change systems. When teachers are trained to listen to their students, believe in their students' capacity, and strengthen student-teacher relationships, disciplinary disparities are reduced. When teachers show warmth, empathy, and genuine interest in their students, it heightens equitable practices.

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize the role of students, families, and those who promote belonging in addressing discipline inequities. When schools are culturally responsive, use an inclusive curriculum, and talking circles, students and families feel heard. Studies show this reduces overall discipline and interrupts patterns of disproportionate discipline. Researchers suggest that students who feel they belong and have a voice are less likely to face punitive discipline. Approaches centred on student identity, cultural responsiveness, and collaboration build trust and reduce disparities.

Finally, providing mental health support is a vital component of school discipline reform. These supports lessen reliance on exclusion and address disparities by focusing on the underlying causes of behaviour. Trauma-informed frameworks warn against re-traumatization, which may harm student health. When school staff recognize signs of trauma, they respond proactively. This reduces office referrals and suspensions. Providing mental

health supports addresses root causes and shrinks the discipline gap. When schools provide access to counselling, trauma-informed care, and interventions, educators can better meet student needs and promote well-being.

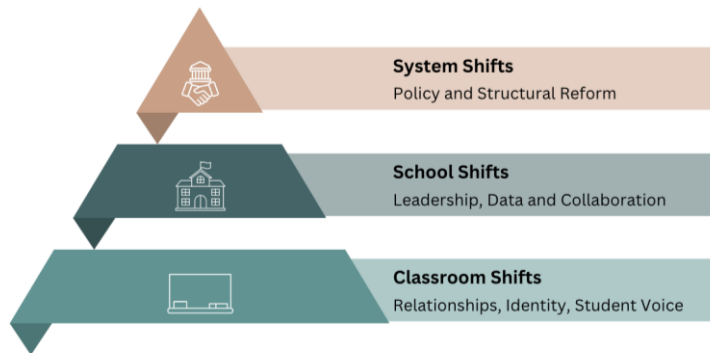
If schools and educators can uphold these interventions while reforming disciplinary practices, real change emerges for all students. Exclusionary discipline is reduced, therefore promoting academic achievement and student well-being.

Recommendations

Districts and schools may, unfortunately, lack the resources, time, or funding to implement interventions and alternative discipline programs. Furthermore, achieving meaningful changes in discipline may seem challenging in the current educational climate, especially given time constraints, competing responsibilities, and the systemic pressures educators face. However, change is essential and remains achievable. As professionals in education, we possess the requisite expertise and motivation to support students. In many ways, teachers already have the professional framework for accomplishing systemic change. Instead of the overwhelming thought of a full district reform, which would be fantastic if your district had the resources, the following recommendations outline practical steps at the system, school, and classroom levels. See APPENDIX E (Building Community: Everyone Belongs Slide Show).

Figure 1

Framework for Discipline Reform: Multi-Level Change



Note. Reforming disciplinary practices requires a shift on 3 levels: System, School and Classroom. Adapted from a Canva template (Canva, n.d.).

System Level Shifts:

System-level shifts involve structural changes. These involve advocates interested in making systemic shifts to change policy, school culture, and the broader picture of school building. Teachers, administrators, staff, counsellors, parents, families and even students can get involved in this work. Changes at this level affect many subjects and can be powerful, making a big impact. The following are recommendations for system-level shifts:

- 1. Collect and review data on discipline disparities to identify patterns:**

Analyze the results collaboratively and set specific goals for improvement.

- 2. Identify resource needs:**

Contact parent councils, explore grants, connect with school boards, and engage community agencies to secure necessary support.

- 3. Request designated time for professional learning and collaboration:**

Propose adjusting schedules or holding weekly meetings to support this.

- 4. Write to government officials to advocate for change, or motivate colleagues with an interest in taking this step.**

Support those who engage through encouragement.

School Level Shifts:

Shifts at the school level are collaborative and reflective, and they have a significant impact on the school day. The school community and external support are necessary when resources and funding are difficult to access. Depending on the school, there are creative ways to engage in schoolwide change, such as video meetings with counsellors or leveraging parent volunteers with expertise. When school staff, teachers, and leaders are on the same page with expectations, policies, and goals, this work is streamlined, and the effort has a clear path. The following are recommendations for school-level shifts:

- 1. Create schoolwide expectations:**

Create schoolwide expectations that are clear and manageable for students, staff, and families. Expectations, rewards, and consequences should be communicated consistently to promote fairness and understanding. Schools should also include student and family voices when developing or revising these expectations so that policies reflect the needs and values of the school community.

- 2. Review discipline policies and data:**

Push for equitable discipline policy by reviewing school discipline data and collaborating with administrators and staff to identify patterns and areas for improvement. Schools can use this information to guide policy and practice changes.

- 3. Support collaborative teacher-led teams:**

The literature often highlights formal leadership teams implementing schoolwide initiatives; however, studies also emphasize the importance of schools responding to the needs they see in their own community. In many schools, teams emerge organically when teachers and staff collaborate to support student needs. Depending on your school context and staff interest/expertise, you may see:

- a) Academic support teams focus on building academic support, such as reading interventions, math interventions, and additional support for students with disabilities.
- b) Mental health and well-being teams help facilitate connections to school-based or community health supports and promote initiatives that support students' well-being and belonging.
- c) Behavioural or restorative teams work with students who may be at risk of disciplinary consequences and provide support.

Classroom Level Shifts:

Researchers have identified shifts at the classroom and teacher levels as significantly reducing the use of punitive discipline and improving student outcomes. Research examining trauma-informed and PBIS frameworks indicates that when teachers respond to behaviour through relationship building, trust, and empathy, the use of punitive disciplinary practices decreases and student outcomes improve (Avery et al., 2021; Riley et al., 2025; McIntosh et al., 2021). Such practices are already widely implemented by educators. Cultivating relationships, trust, and empathy within the classroom aligns with established pedagogical principles and is recognized as essential to effective teaching. The following are recommendations for classroom-level shifts:

1. **Continue or reconnect to best teaching practices:**

Review teaching standards in your district or school. Become re-acquainted with the expectations of the profession. Reflection and collaboration are cornerstones of the teaching practice. Sometimes, time constraints and additional responsibilities prevent teachers from meeting these vital standards.

2. **Relationships with students and families:**

Developing relationships with students has been proven through research to improve school engagement and academic achievement. Simple actions such as greeting students, checking in regularly, and demonstrating genuine interest in students' lives can strengthen trust and reduce behavioural challenges. See APPENDIX A (Student Interest Inventory) and APPENDIX B (2x10 Conversations).

3. Cultural responsiveness and identity affirmations:

Promote a sense of belonging through culturally responsive practices and identity affirmations. For example, recognize students' strengths and contributions and ensure students see themselves reflected in classroom materials and curriculum. See APPENDIX C and APPENDIX D (Cultural Responsive Lesson Planning and Culturally Responsive Lesson Reflection).

4. Restorative conversations:

When harm or conflict arises, respond to behaviour with support first rather than punishment. Listen to a student's point of view. Consider whether the reaction stems from unmet needs, stress, or trauma rather than from intentional defiance. Responding with supportive strategies is a trauma-informed approach that equips students with coping and behaviour skills that support well-being and positive futures. They also strengthen trust and reduce behavioural challenges.

If schools and educators can uphold these interventions while reforming disciplinary practices, real change emerges for all students. Exclusionary discipline is reduced, therefore promoting academic achievement and student well-being. By embracing a combined approach focused on equity, empathy, and systemic reform, we can create school communities where every student feels a sense of belonging, achieves their potential, and steps onto a path toward a bright future. The power to transform education lies in our hands; let us commit to cultivating trust, fairness, and mutual accountability for the success of every

child.

Conclusions

Making equitable changes at a system, school, or classroom level can start with big or small initiatives. It might be a "hello" at the classroom door, a holiday recognition, a check-in, an empathetic conversation, a reflection, an apology, or a policy change. Most important is the motivation for equitable classrooms. The harmful impacts of punitive discipline continue each day without action. When we work together, this work becomes possible. When schools commit to equity, empathy, and systemic reform, we can create school communities of belonging, academic success, and bright futures. Transforming educational settings needs to start somewhere. Even with current challenges, let us at least commit to cultivating trust, fairness, and mutual accountability for every child's success.

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Appendix A



Student
INTEREST
INVENTORY

PERSONAL info

NAME: GRADE: PRONOUNS:	NAME: GRADE: PRONOUNS:
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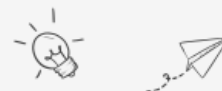
<p style="text-align: center;">MY favourite THINGS:</p> MUSIC ARTIST: MUSIC GENRE: LOCATION: FOOD: DRINK: COLOUR: MOVIE: TV SHOW: EVENT:	<p style="text-align: center;">Hobbies & INTERESTS:</p> SPORTS, CLUBS OR OTHER ORGANISATIONS I'M INVOLVED IN: HOBBIES, INTERESTS OR ACTIVITIES I ENJOY OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL:
---	---

Academic INTERESTS:

FAVOURITE SUBJECT: LEAST FAVOURITE SUBJECT: DREAM CAREER: IN THIS SUBJECT, I FEEL CONFIDENT WITH: IN THIS SUBJECT, I STRUGGLE WITH:

Note. Adapted from a Canva template (Canva, n.d.).

LEARNING STYLES



FILL OUT THE LEARNING STYLES INVENTORY AND TOTAL YOUR COMPLETED RESPONSES HERE.

CIRCLE THE SELECTION WITH THE HIGHEST SCORE.

VISUAL:

AUDITORY:

KINESTHETIC:

1. WHEN LEARNING, I LEARN BEST BY:

- (V) WATCHING SOMEONE SHOW ME HOW
- (A) HEARING SOMEONE TELL ME HOW
- (K) TRYING TO DO IT MYSELF

2. WHEN I READ, I OFTEN FIND THAT I:

- (V) VISUALIZE WHAT I AM READING IN MY MIND
- (A) READ OUT LOUD OR HEAR THE WORDS INSIDE MY HEAD
- (K) FIDGET AND TRY TO "FEEL" THE CONTENT

3. WHEN ASKED TO GIVE DIRECTIONS, I:

- (V) SEE THE ACTUAL PLACES IN MY MIND AS I SAY THEM OR PREFER TO DRAW THEM
- (A) HAVE NO DIFFICULTY IN GIVING THEM VERBALLY
- (K) HAVE TO POINT OR MOVE AS I GIVE THEM

4. IF I AM UNSURE HOW TO SPELL A WORD, I:

- (V) WRITE IT IN ORDER TO DETERMINE IF IT LOOKS RIGHT
- (A) SPELL IT OUT LOUD IN ORDER TO DETERMINE IF IT SOUNDS RIGHT
- (K) WRITE IT IN ORDER TO DETERMINE IF IT FEELS RIGHT

5. WHEN I WRITE, I:

- (V) AM CONCERNED HOW NEAT AND WELL SPACED MY LETTERS AND WORDS APPEAR
- (A) OFTEN SAY THE LETTERS AND WORDS TO MYSELF
- (K) PUSH HARD ON MY PEN OR PENCIL AND CAN FEEL THE FLOW OF THE WORDS OR LETTERS AS I FORM THEM

6. IF I HAD TO REMEMBER A LIST OF ITEMS, I WOULD REMEMBER IT BEST IF I:

- (V) WROTE THEM DOWN
- (A) SAID THEM OVER AND OVER TO MYSELF
- (K) MOVED AROUND AND USED MY FINGERS TO NAME EACH ITEM

7. I PREFER TEACHERS WHO:

- (V) USE THE BOARD OR SCREEN
- (A) TALK WITH A LOT OF EXPRESSION
- (K) USE HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES

8. WHEN TRYING TO CONCENTRATE, I HAVE A DIFFICULT TIME WHEN:

- (V) THERE IS CLUTTER/MOVEMENT IN THE ROOM
- (A) THERE IS A LOT OF NOISE IN THE ROOM
- (K) I HAVE TO SIT STILL FOR ANY LENGTH OF TIME

9. WHEN SOLVING A PROBLEM, I:

- (V) WRITE OR DRAW DIAGRAMS TO SEE IT.
- (A) TALK MYSELF THROUGH IT.
- (K) USE MY ENTIRE BODY OR MOVE OBJECTS TO HELP ME THINK.

10. WHEN GIVEN WRITTEN INSTRUCTIONS ON HOW TO BUILD SOMETHING, I:

- (V) READ THEM SILENTLY AND TRY TO VISUALIZE HOW THE PARTS WILL FIT TOGETHER.
- (A) READ THEM OUT LOUD AND TALK TO MYSELF AS I PUT THE PARTS TOGETHER
- (K) TRY TO PUT THE PARTS TOGETHER FIRST AND READ LATER.

11. TO KEEP OCCUPIED WHILE WAITING, I:

- (V) LOOK AROUND, STARE, OR READ..
- (A) TALK OR LISTEN TO OTHERS.
- (K) WALK AROUND, MANIPULATE THINGS WITH MY HANDS, OR MOVE/SHAKE MY FEET AS I SIT.

12. IF I HAD TO VERBALLY DESCRIBE SOMETHING TO ANOTHER PERSON, I WOULD:

- (V) BE BRIEF BECAUSE I DO NOT LIKE TO TALK AT LENGTH
- (A) GO INTO GREAT DETAIL BECAUSE I LIKE TO TALK
- (K) GESTURE AND MOVE AROUND WHILE TALKING

13. IF SOMEONE WERE VERBALLY DESCRIBING SOMETHING TO ME, I WOULD:

- (V) TRY TO VISUALIZE WHAT WAS BEING SAID
- (A) ENJOY LISTENING BUT WANT TO INTERRUPT AND TALK MYSELF
- (K) BECOME BORED IF THE DESCRIPTION GETS TOO LONG AND DETAILED

14. WHEN TRYING TO RECALL NAMES, I REMEMBER:

- (V) FACES BUT FORGET NAMES
- (A) NAMES, BUT FORGET FACES
- (K) THE SITUATION I MET THE PERSON OTHER THAN THE PERSON'S NAME OR FACE

"ADAPTED FROM AND EXPANDED UPON READINGFITZ (N.D.)."

Note. Adapted from "Middle School Interest Inventory," by ReadingFitz (n.d.), Teachers Pay Teachers.

LEARNING *style*

HOW DO YOU LEARN BEST?
(e.g. visual, auditory, kinesthetic)

WHAT CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES DO YOU ENJOY?
(e.g. individual work, group work, class discussions, reading, hands-on activities)

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT COLLABORATIVE OR GROUP LEARNING ACTIVITIES?

HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU WITH USING TECHNOLOGY FO LEARNING?
Do you prefer digital or physical textbooks and resources?

HOW DO YOU STAY ORGANISED?
(e.g. Planners, digital tools, to-do lists)

WHAT STUDY TECHNIQUES HAVE YOU FOUND MOST EFFECTIVE FOR YOU?
(e.g. mnemonic devices, flashcards, mind maps, group study, timed practice)

Classroom SUPPORT:

HOW DO YOU PREFER TO COMMUNICATE WITH TEACHERS?
(e.g. in-person during class, in-person outside class, email, messaging)

WHAT CHALLENGES DO YOU FACE WHEN STUDYING OR COMPLETING CLASS
WORK OR ASSIGNMENTS?

HOW CAN TEACHERS BEST SUPPORT YOU IN YOUR STUDIES?

ANYTHING ELSE YOU'D LIKE ME TO KNOW?

Note. Adapted from a Canva template (Canva, n.d.).

Appendix B



2X10 (TWO BY TEN) Strategy I

Two by Ten is a strategy for building authentic relationships and assessing student needs. Applied strategically, the teacher formally, though subtly, meets with the student and “conducts” a two-minute personal conversation about anything the student is interested in on a daily basis for 10 consecutive days. The teacher listens to the student and later may make note of information that will help reach the learner.

IMPLEMENTATION

1. Choose students to target for this approach. Any student can be chosen, but students who are not responding to instruction, not engaging in learning, struggling academically and are having behavior difficulties are often selected.
2. Create a simple note-taking tool to record when the behavior occurs and a few notes about the conversation.
3. Meet with the student for 2 minutes. Begin with a conversation starter and then LISTEN to the student responses.
4. Extend responses by restating what the student said, or comment about what the student said showing interest, not judgment.
5. Make note of the conversation identifying significant information to guide the next meeting.

EXAMPLE

Date	Conversation Topics	Reflection

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- The focus is to build a relationship with the student.
- Focus on the student's interests.
- Avoid emotionally charged topics.
- Maintain a positive and supportive approach when interacting with the student.
- Listen, listen, listen!
- Watch for signs of discomfort.
- Use information from Student Interest Surveys to generate conversation starters.
- Use observation and “I noticed that...” statements to generate responses.

1

Note. Source: Stetson & Associates, Inc. (2016.)

Appendix C

Culturally Responsive Lesson Planning Template

Lesson Information

Subject	Grade Level
Topic	Time Allotment
Date	Date

Curricular Outcomes

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

-
-
-
-

Culturally Responsive Elements	Selection
Connect to students' prior knowledge or lived experience	•
Use culturally relevant texts or examples	•
Encourage dialogue and multiple perspectives	•
Include community or identity connections	•
Allow student voice or choice	•

Questions for Connection	Selection
Whose perspective is present?	•
Whose perspective is missing?	•

How might this topic connect to students' lived experiences? •

How can students contribute their own perspectives or knowledge? •

Materials and Resources

- File (Worksheets/Handouts)
- File (Presentation Slides)
- Textbook/Reading:
- Technology/Equipment:
- Other:

Differentiation and Modifications

For Students Needing Support

-
-

For Advanced Students

-
-

Introduction (5-10 minutes)

Goal: Capture student attention and activate prior knowledge.

Time	Activity	Notes/Instructions
	Introduction/Hook	
	Pre-assessment/Review	

Explore/Explain (_____ mins)

Goal: Introduce new content and facilitate deeper understanding.

Time	Activity	Notes/Instructions
	Direct Instruction/Lecture	
	Guided Practice/Activity	

Time	Activity	Notes/Instructions
------	----------	--------------------

Independent Work/Experimentation

Closure and Evaluation (5-10 minutes)

Goal: Assess student mastery of objectives.

Time	Activity	Notes/Instructions
------	----------	--------------------

Assessment Type
(e.g., Exit Ticket, Quiz)

Wrap-up/Summary

Feedback

Homework/Follow-up

-
-

Reflection:

What is one thing I learned about my students from this lesson?

Student Experience

- Did students see aspects of their identity, culture, language, or experiences reflected in the lesson?
- Which students appeared engaged/disconnected? Why? What might help?

Perspectives and Representation

- How could additional voices or experiences be incorporated next time?

Appendix D

Culturally Responsive Lesson Reflection

After teaching a lesson, take a few minutes to reflect on how it supported student learning and culturally responsive practice.

What is one thing I learned about my students from this lesson?

Student Experience

- Did students see aspects of their identity, culture, language, or experiences reflected in the lesson?
- Which students appeared engaged/disconnected? Why? What might help?

Perspectives and Representation

- How could additional voices or experiences be incorporated next time?

Classroom Relationships

- Did the lesson create opportunities for student voice, collaboration, or discussion?
- Did students learn something about each other's perspectives or backgrounds?
- Did this lesson help strengthen relationships in the classroom?

Instruction and Learning

- What parts of the lesson were:
 - Most effective for student understanding? Confusing or less effective?
- What changes could improve the lesson for future classes?

Next Steps for Culturally Responsive Practice

- What is one small adjustment that could make this lesson more inclusive or relevant next time?
 - Community voice, cultural perspective, or real-world connection?

Collaboration and Professional Learning

- Could this lesson benefit from:
 - Collaboration with another teacher or department?
 - Community members, Elders, families, or cultural organizations?
 - Additional resources or texts (more culturally diverse viewpoints)?

Appendix E

Building Community: Everyone Belongs

[APPENDIX E - Building Community: Everyone Belongs \(with notes\)](#)



Before you start:

Before starting this presentation, adjust the chart paper questions to fit your context. Maybe you want to ask different questions:
Eg. Instead of “what do we already do,” maybe you ask “what are some ideas?”



Building Community: Everyone Belongs



Rethinking Discipline Through Belonging and Relationships



Reflect on your day:

Take this moment, **5 mins** at the start of this session to reflect on your school day. If you didn't teach today, reflect on yesterday or the day before. Maybe there is a pattern emerging that you would like to write about.

Guiding questions: Answer some, all, up to you!

1. What interaction or student moment is sticking with you today?
2. Is there a nudging issue you would like to address?
3. How might you address these sticky, nudging interactions tomorrow?
4. What went well? Why did it go well?



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01

The Elephant

Schools are not equitable.

02

Why Care?

It might feel like one more thing...

03

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Changes to fight for.

04

School Level

Changes to collaborate on.

05

Classroom Level

Changes you can make.

06

Conclusions

Finally.



Disclaimer: This Is Not About Blame

Most educators entered this profession to help students succeed.

However:

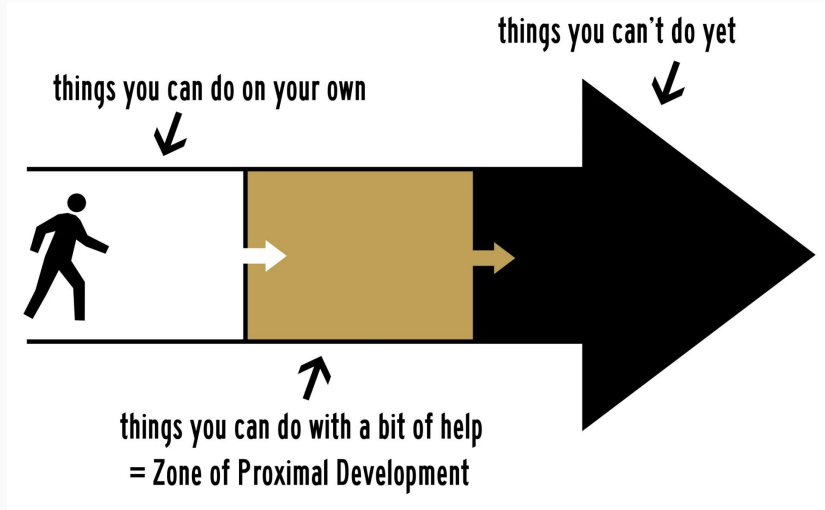
- Schools operate inside systems and policies we did not create.
- Discipline practices developed over decades.
- Research helps us understand unintended outcomes.

Today's goal is not to assign blame.

It is to ask: How can we build schools where every student feels they belong?



Zone of Proximal Development: AKA The Frustration Zone



We sometimes assume student understanding, which can make it hard for students to grasp concepts or feel comfortable asking questions.

Please write down any questions you have and submit them at the end of the session.

Vygotsky (1978) as cited in McLeod (2024)



The Elephant: Punitive Discipline

Disproportionately affects:

- racialized students
- 2SLGBTQIA youth
- students with disabilities
- students with mental health needs

Is linked to:

- depression
- self-harm
- substance abuse
- suicide
- adolescent pregnancy

Causes:

- reduced trust in teachers
- decreased student engagement
- lower perceptions of fairness in schools

Associated with:

- lower academic achievement
- lower grades in subjects like math and science
- reduced engagement in school

Research sources:

Avery et al., 2021; Bradshaw et al., 2010; Duarte et al., 2023; McIntosh et al., 2021; Morris & Perry, 2016; Muscott et al., 2008; Skiba, 2008.



Accountability and Boundaries:

Accountability and boundaries, are important. This doesn't mean, don't refer students to the office, suspend or expel. Those actions might be necessary in given circumstances.

- Zero Tolerance (U.S.)
- Safer Schools (Ontario)

The Safer Schools Act expanded the use of suspensions, expulsions, and police involvement in schools. Although intended to improve safety, research shows these policies contributed to increased exclusionary discipline, disproportionate punishment of marginalized students, and a **culture of surveillance rather than support.**



What are the alternatives?

Restorative Practices (RPs)

Focus on repairing harm and restoring relationships rather than punishing behaviour.

(Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2023)

Positive Behaviour Programs and Supports (PBIS)

A school-wide framework that teaches and reinforces positive behaviour expectations.

(Bradshaw et al., 2010; Muscott et al., 2008)

Trauma-Informed Frameworks

Recognizes that trauma affects behaviour, learning, and emotional regulation.

(Avery et al., 2021; Dorado et al., 2016)



However, research shows reform alone does not eliminate discipline disparities.

¹⁰ (Gregory et al., 2021; Welsch, 2023; Duarte et al., 2023)



“There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children. There is no duty more important than ensuring that their rights are respected, that their welfare is protected, that their lives are free from fear and want, and that they grow up in peace.”

— Kofi Annan



Leadership Matters

Research consistently shows discipline reform is most effective when schools have:

- Leadership commitment to equitable discipline practices
- Time for collaboration and professional learning
- Data review of discipline patterns
- Access to mental health and counselling supports
- Coaching and training for teachers

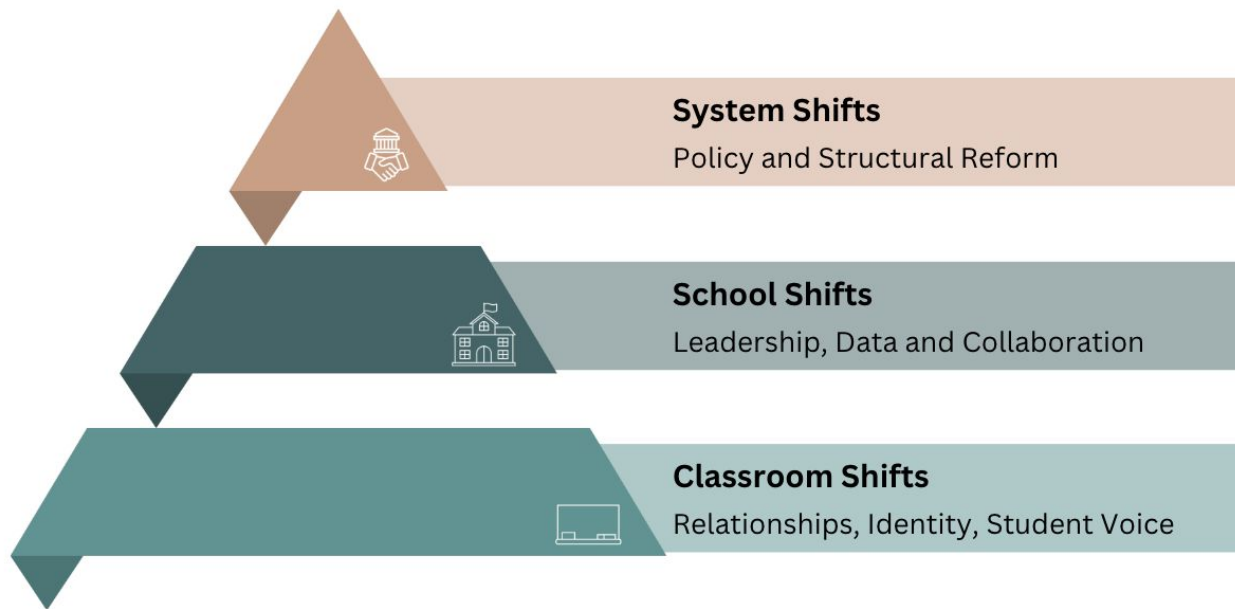
When these supports are present, schools see:

- Fewer suspensions
- Improved school climate
- Higher academic engagement

(Bradshaw et al., 2010; Muscott et al., 2008; McIntosh et al., 2021)



Framework for Discipline Reform: Multi-Level Change





Why This Matters for Teachers...

Punitive discipline affects:

- Instructional time
- Teacher-student relationships
- School climate
- Student engagement

When students feel they belong, behaviour improves.

Research shows they:

- Attend school more regularly
- Have higher academic achievement
- Exhibit fewer behavioural challenges
- Report greater well-being



01 ✨ Systems Level ✨



You know who you are!



System Changers: Disruptors

- **Collect and review discipline disparity data** to identify patterns; collaboratively analyze results and set improvement goals.
- **Identify resource needs:** Contact parent councils, explore grants, connect with school boards, and engage community agencies for support.
- **Request designated time** for professional learning and collaboration (e.g., schedule adjustments or weekly meetings).
- Advocate for change by **writing to government officials**; support and encourage colleagues who take this step.



02 ✨ School Level ✨

Collaboration is KEY!



School LEADERS! Where are you?!

Create school-wide expectations: Establish clear, manageable expectations for students, staff, and families, consistently communicating rewards and consequences for fairness. Include student and family input when developing or revising policies to reflect community needs and values.

Review discipline policies and data: Promote equitable discipline by reviewing data and collaborating with staff and administrators to identify patterns and areas for improvement, guiding policy changes. See Appendix A for examples.

Continued on the next slide.



School LEADERS! Where are you?!

Support collaborative teacher-led teams: While formal leadership teams implement initiatives, schools must also address local needs. Teacher teams often emerge organically to support students. Teams may focus on:

- **Academic support:** Interventions for reading, math, and support for students with disabilities.
- **Mental health and well-being:** Connecting students with health supports and promoting well-being initiatives.
- **Behavioural or restorative:** Supporting students at risk of disciplinary action.



03 ✨ Classroom Level ✨

Steps to take tomorrow!



Great Teaching: You KNOW This!

Continue or reconnect to best teaching practices: Review your school or district's teaching standards to reaffirm professional expectations. Reflection and collaboration are key, though time often limits meeting these vital standards.

Relationships with students and families: Research shows that developing student relationships improves engagement and academic achievement. Simple acts like greeting students, regular check-ins, and showing genuine interest build trust and reduce behavioural issues.

- [See Student Interest Inventory](#)
- [2x10 Conversations](#)



Great Teaching: You KNOW This!

Cultural responsiveness and identity affirmations: Promote belonging through culturally responsive practices and identity affirmations. This includes recognizing student strengths and ensuring students see themselves in classroom materials and curriculum.

- [See Culturally Responsive Lesson Planning](#)
- [Culturally Responsive Lesson Reflection](#)

Restorative conversations: When conflicts arise, respond to behaviour with support over punishment. Listen to the student's perspective. Consider if the reaction stems from unmet needs, stress, or trauma, not defiance. Supportive, trauma-informed strategies build coping skills, support well-being, and strengthen trust while reducing behavioural challenges.



Reflect:

Go back to your reflection: What different approaches or time-tested methods will you implement to support your students (or a specific student)?

Consider the following in your practice:

- How do you respond to student behaviour?
- Are students given an opportunity to share their perspective?
- Are consequences focused on relationships or exclusion?
- Do students feel a sense of belonging?



Questions:



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