

Reforming Discipline in Denver Public Schools: Three-Pronged Approach for Equity & Justice

AASA, the School Superintendents Association, and the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) believe that all schools should be welcoming and productive places for children to learn and for teachers to teach. We believe that exclusionary discipline – suspending or expelling a student from school for a disciplinary reason – should be used sparingly, for short duration and as a last resort. Measures can and should be taken to build positive school climates, respond to special circumstances of students, prevent student misbehavior, and address violations of school rules in a restorative manner.

School and district leaders have shown that positive discipline strategies can be effective in advancing the district's responsibility to keep all people safe, ensure students are learning and treat everyone fairly. The consequences of harsh and punitive discipline policies, including zero tolerance and the overuse of suspension and expulsion, can be devastating in the lives of children, families, and the larger community. AASA and CDF are profiling school districts that have taken the challenge to reform discipline policies and practices. These districts are leading the charge to improve school climate and culture, reduce racial disproportionality in discipline, and improve the odds for children and youth.

GETTING STARTED

*“We began our discipline reform work nearly a decade ago in order to combat our high levels of suspensions and expulsions, which were exacerbating our dropout rate, were highly disproportionate with our students of color, and were not helping build positive school cultures. In the decade since we began our focus on **restorative justice**, we have reduced our out-of-school suspension rates by over 70% and not coincidentally our dropout rate has also gone down by 70%.”*

*~ Superintendent
Tom Boasberg,
Denver Public Schools*

Superintendent Tom Boasberg, J.D., has led Denver Public Schools (DPS) in Colorado since 2009. Under his leadership, DPS has continued to advance its mission of educating children and engaging with families to ensure academic achievement, growth, equity and justice for all. There has been a shift from exclusionary discipline to inclusion and restorative justice (called restorative practices in DPS). Superintendent Boasberg stated: “The ultimate goal is that every one of our students graduates from high school prepared for college and career, and we know how important strong social-emotional supports, including discipline reform, are to our students’ success. One of our top five priorities as a district is a focus on what we call the **‘Whole Child,’** which means working to **ensure our kids feel safe, socially and emotionally intelligent, supported, healthy, challenged and engaged.**”

How has Denver Public Schools approached this work?

Dr. Eldridge Greer, Associate Chief of Student Equity and Opportunity, started at the beginning of the story. Ten years ago DPS, unfortunately, enforced a zero-tolerance policy rooted in school shootings that had occurred in other Colorado school districts. Students were often suspended from school for idiosyncratic reasons and various lengths of time, at times unrelated to the offense. There were not sufficient mechanisms to ensure students were receiving their educational opportunity either post-suspension or post-expulsion in the district. It was an ineffective and damaged system, and community activists in Denver began strongly questioning the process and its inequitable application. There were significant disparities in the rates of suspensions and expulsions for Latino students and African-American students. Once DPS focused on remedying excessive exclusionary discipline and working closely with excellent and driven community stakeholders, significant changes occurred in DPS and outcomes began to improve for students, families, and staff. Dr. Greer noted: “We have a long way to go. So I always preface everything about our discipline work, that we have a long way to go, but I’m extremely proud of how we’ve done the work and the way we’ve done it strategically so that it is more than just change on a spreadsheet.” Indeed, school culture, community engagement, and academic results have improved over time.

STRATEGIES

DPS has employed various macro- and micro-level strategies over the years. At the macro-level, Dr. Greer described their **“discipline reform efforts as a three-legged stool,”** which includes (1) **the school district**, (2) **community partners**, and (3) **university researchers**.

Denver Public Schools (DPS) is the largest school district in Colorado. DPS has over 90,000 students and more than 11,000 teachers and staff in over 200 schools.

Demographics:
 55.5% of DPS students are Hispanic, 23.2% White, 13.4% Black, 3.2% Asian, .6% American Indian, and 4% other.
 67.3 % of DPS students qualified for free or reduced lunch (2016-2017).

Starting in 2007, community activists, such as Padres & Jóvenes Unidos, worked with the school board and the district to create a discipline policy rooted in restorative and therapeutic practices primarily and in administrative referrals secondarily. DPS was one of the first districts in the nation that used a **graduated discipline ladder and matrix** so there was consistency across the board in how interventions could be used. By 2012, when Dr. Greer took over the discipline work, there was recognition that implementation needed to be enhanced even though the improved policies were in place.

DPS then focused on ensuring due process through an equity lens both for suspensions and for expulsions. For example, students expelled for an offense, were enrolled in their next school in DPS within a day of the expulsion hearing. DPS monitored those students closely to ensure daily attendance and followed up if they were not attending school. Dr. Greer explained that it was a “true warm handoff from the expelling school to the school that served the expulsion.” It did not stop there. Once the expulsion period ended, which was calibrated to either a semester or at the end of the school year, a student could choose to return to the school he or she was expelled from or stay at the school that served the student during the expulsion. Students could count on transparency around due process for both the suspension and expulsion process. **Even though the student might have done something harmful to the school culture, disciplinary action was seen as an opportunity to help that student *learn, understand, and repair* what he or she had done and move forward successfully in their academic career.** Dr. Greer described positive results: “Since we’ve done that level of change, less than 3% of our kids end up not remaining in school post the expulsion and the vast majority of our kids, less than 1%, ever come forward for another expulsion. **So our process is really more restorative in nature instead of punitive in nature that pushes kids out.**”

Dr. Greer also explained that DPS had to do a lot of hard work to create positive “**mindset shifts,**” which led to “remarkable changes” for individual students and schools. It was challenging for school staff to follow best practices in real time when student misbehavior occurred. However, through conversations with school staff about establishing a fair process, it became more manageable and effective. Concerns that a zero tolerance policy was needed to preserve safety were dispelled through work with the Department of Safety. Dr. Greer explained: “Our schools overwhelmingly are very safe places, are places of learning that are happening day in and

day out, and the fear back in 2008 and again in 2012 was that ‘you’re going to let kids off the hook with this restorative justice or therapeutic approach, kids are going to start running the school and it’s going to become an unsafe place for our students’ and that did not occur.”

DPS used a lot of data to help school leaders see positive results in student behavior. More specifically, DPS **partnered with local universities** to examine and analyze its school discipline data to inform the reform process. Initially the work focused on lessons from Breaking Schools Rules, the Texas research study, and some of Indiana University Professor Russell Skiba’s work, but later DPS found it helpful to engage local universities that staff felt better knew DPS to assess what drives disparities and inequity. **They examined and analyzed data on offenses and demographics over the years, and the number one driver for a student receiving a classroom removal was the race of the child.** It was not the offense type, not the teacher’s longevity as an educator, not the racial background of the educator, not geographic reasons, and not whether it was a student with a disability. Dr. Greer noted: “Once we were able to share that with our leaders -- ‘our kids are engaging in similar behavior whether they are Latino, Black, or White, but our Black kids are getting suspended at three times the rate. Our White kids are getting suspended at half of their rate for the same types of offense.’ That created space for our educators to be able to lean in differently into our discipline reform effort, to really tackle the equity challenge that we have.” Dr. Greer shared three strategies DPS is using to pursue school discipline reform on the ground:

1. **Restorative Approaches.** DPS provides onsite training and support so teachers and community members can learn how to use and implement restorative approaches across the ECE-12 spectrum.
2. **De-escalation strategies.** DPS recognized from its data that, especially for children of color, suspensions are for defiance or disrespect that get on teachers’ nerves rather than more objective offenses like drug distribution or vandalism. DPS provides formal training for teachers on: “How do you deescalate situations so that you don’t even have to go down the path of thinking about needing a suspension or an expulsion for your kids?”
3. **School culture.** DPS suggests that a restorative school culture is the most important research-based strategy to use that has a social and emotional scope and sequence for the entire year. Teachers must be helped to understand how to teach appropriate emotional expression and emotional regulation for the specific students they are teaching.

DPS has been refining its three-pronged approach (macro- and micro-level strategies) and has continued to see positive results for students and staff overall.

“Seven years ago, we had 185 expulsions; this past year we had only 33, even with a significant growth in our number of enrolled students. Most important, we have helped build stronger school cultures and safer schools with our focus on ensuring that students learn from their mistakes and make whole those whom they have harmed. This year, we took the next step with a new policy that will dramatically curtail out-of-school suspensions and eliminate expulsions for our youngest learners in preschool through grade 3.”

*~ Superintendent
Tom Boasberg,
Denver Public
Schools*

“We know that changing practice in our classrooms begins with a deep understanding about how the change will help our kids, which is why we all do this work. This understanding must be shared by your board of education and district leaders, your educators and school communities, and your students and families. Here were the key factors for us in doing this work, including generating support for our most recent effort on behalf of our youngest learners—

- *Understanding the why: This work is viewed as necessary for academic success. Our kids must be in school if they are to be successful.*
- *Provide time to hear from stakeholders: We announced our desire to move in this direction in a public event with numerous community partners. We also announced a six-month period to gather feedback from all stakeholders and provided numerous ways to weigh in.*
- *Make a sincere effort to address concerns: We listened to the concerns and built in supports, such as increasing resources for educators and providing alternatives to out-of-school suspensions and expulsions.”*

~Superintendent

Tom Boasberg, Denver Public Schools

OUTCOMES

DPS has seen notable outcomes as a result of focusing on reforming school discipline practices and addressing inequities. Changes are occurring at the district-wide policy level too. For example, the DPS Board of Education recently voted unanimously to **eliminate the use of suspension and expulsion for students ages three through nine except for extreme safety**. In the first full year of implementation out-of-school suspensions for ECE-3rd graders dropped over 60%. The process DPS went through to reach that outcome reflected the gains the district had made from its focus on multi-level strategies over the years. Most teachers were saying: “I really want to keep as many of my kids in class and I need more tools to be able to do that – help me with those tools so I don’t have to suspend.” Very few teachers were blaming the students or defending suspensions and expulsions by saying: “This isn’t about equity, it’s about safe classrooms.” The new policy is monumental news for the youngest learners, and it will add to the enhanced school climate.

Staff & Teachers

A number of school staff have engaged in “courageous conversations” confronting racial biases and been trained in restorative practices. In about half of the DPS schools, there are restorative practices trained staff or official coordinators on site

to help with implementation of techniques like mediation circles. According to Dr. Greer, there is a big push for schools to train everyone in their building and have restorative practices shape the school culture.

Students

Students have experienced positive outcomes in recent years as documented in both qualitative and quantitative ways. Dr. Greer shared an anecdote about one of his students who was a “frequent flyer in needing restorative work.” One day he saw that student and another student who she often had problems with “storming down the hallway.” The restorative practices coordinator asked whether they needed to have a mediation with her. The students expressed that they knew what to do and just needed her office as a meeting space to work out their issue. Dr. Greer praised the students and noted: “Two or three years ago, if it were those kids, they probably would have been suspended multiple times. **But we have really been able to teach that these are skills that you can use to repair the relationship without having to escalate the consequence. And that kids are actually able to do it without adult monitoring or support. . . .** So, the times that I’ve been able to see that . . . just tells me that **we are doing the right work at the right time for our kids.**”

Dr. Greer explained that research by the University of Denver found that students who received a restorative practice intervention in the first semester of a given year were 70% less likely to need a subsequent intervention in the spring semester compared to a student having an out-of-school or out-of-class removal for the same offense. The data collected also showed reduced student involvement in school discipline matters: “About seven years ago, when the district had 15,000 less kids, our high was about 185 expulsions. And those kids, really, we lost. They weren’t in school after the expulsion, and they often didn’t come back to school after the expulsion period ended. The past school year, and again, with about 15,000 more kids, we’re at 93,000 students in Denver Public Schools, we expelled 37 students (for a semester or the balance of the school year). So, a really remarkable shift in terms of what we use as the most significant approach in our district. We don’t see disparities especially because the numbers are so low now. We don’t see the depth of racial disparities that you see in suspension anymore either. And 37, you know, people could argue that’s too few for a district as large as ours or just right, but that’s another piece in terms of moving forward, wanting to continue to ensure that when we expel it’s for a very rare reason because we have done all of the good work ahead of time so a kid is actually getting his behavior checked before we would ever actually have to use that severe of a consequence. **We still want to work on making sure that expulsions are only for rare cases and that our kids are able to continue in school and on track.**”

NEXT STEPS

For DPS, one important next step is focusing on further reducing racial disproportionality in out-of-school suspensions and increasing family and community rights. More specifically, Dr. Greer shared: “Our big movement over the next several years continues to be pushing on what we need to do to better support our African-American students. While the numbers of suspensions have gone down dramatically, and have been dramatically reduced for African-Americans, the disproportionate share has been really difficult for us to budge. So even though African-Americans represent about 14% of the district, they have about 30% of our out-of-school suspensions for the overall group. And a lot of our big bet in that area is continuing to work with teachers around the implicit bias in our systems. There is bias that we just inherit as educators that makes it easier to have this group of kids go through more of a punitive route than other groups of kids. And being able to remind teachers and educators of the other resources that are in place like restorative practices is essential. **If you do restorative interventions for this behavior that otherwise would result in exclusionary discipline, you’re not going to see the same kind of behavior moving forward.**”

In talking about Denver Public Schools’ key steps, Superintendent Boasberg shared guidance for leaders looking to lead school discipline reform in their respective districts: “Start with a common goal of what you want to achieve and be very public and open about the values that are at the root of such a common goal. Second, be very open with information— be willing to openly identify and address the disparities facing your district. And, third, ensure that you provide resources, supports and training so your educators can do things differently. **Above all, you must believe that every child can be successful and have optimism that disparities can be overcome.**”

Connect with Superintendent Boasberg, Dr. Greer, and learn more about DPS:

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