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# Discipline Reform Through the Eyes of Teachers

*By David Griffith and Adam Tyner*



Foreword & Executive Summary by  
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# FOREWORD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

\*\*\*\*\*

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

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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

Our research questions were as follows:

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

The resulting survey data yielded five key findings:

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

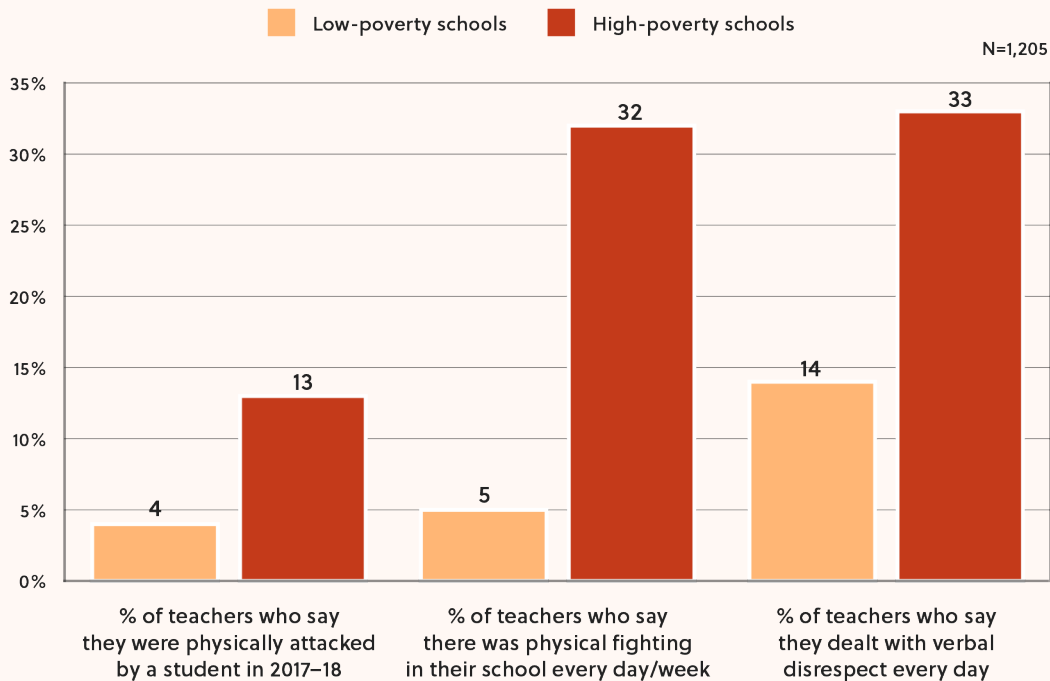
1

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

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

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

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



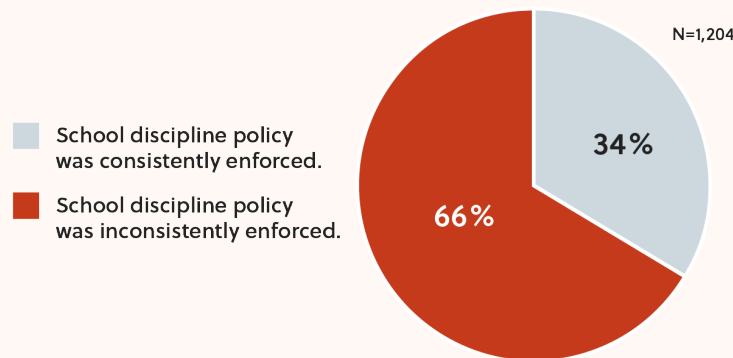
Note: Low-poverty schools are defined as those where less than 25 percent of students are eligible for federally subsidized lunches. High-poverty schools are defined as those where more than 75 percent of students are so eligible.

## 2

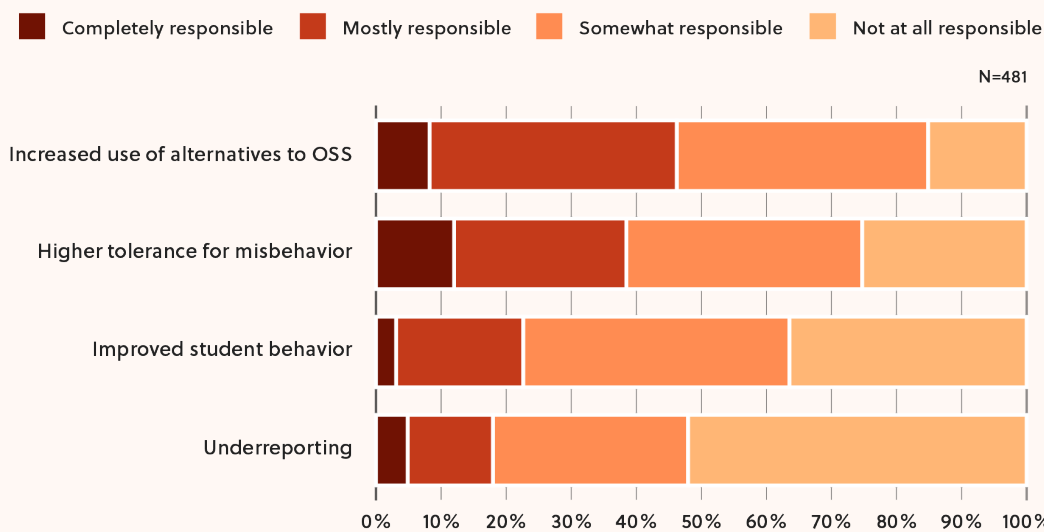
***Most teachers say discipline is inconsistent or inadequate and that the recent decline in suspensions is at least partly explained by higher tolerance for misbehavior or increased underreporting.***

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

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



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



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

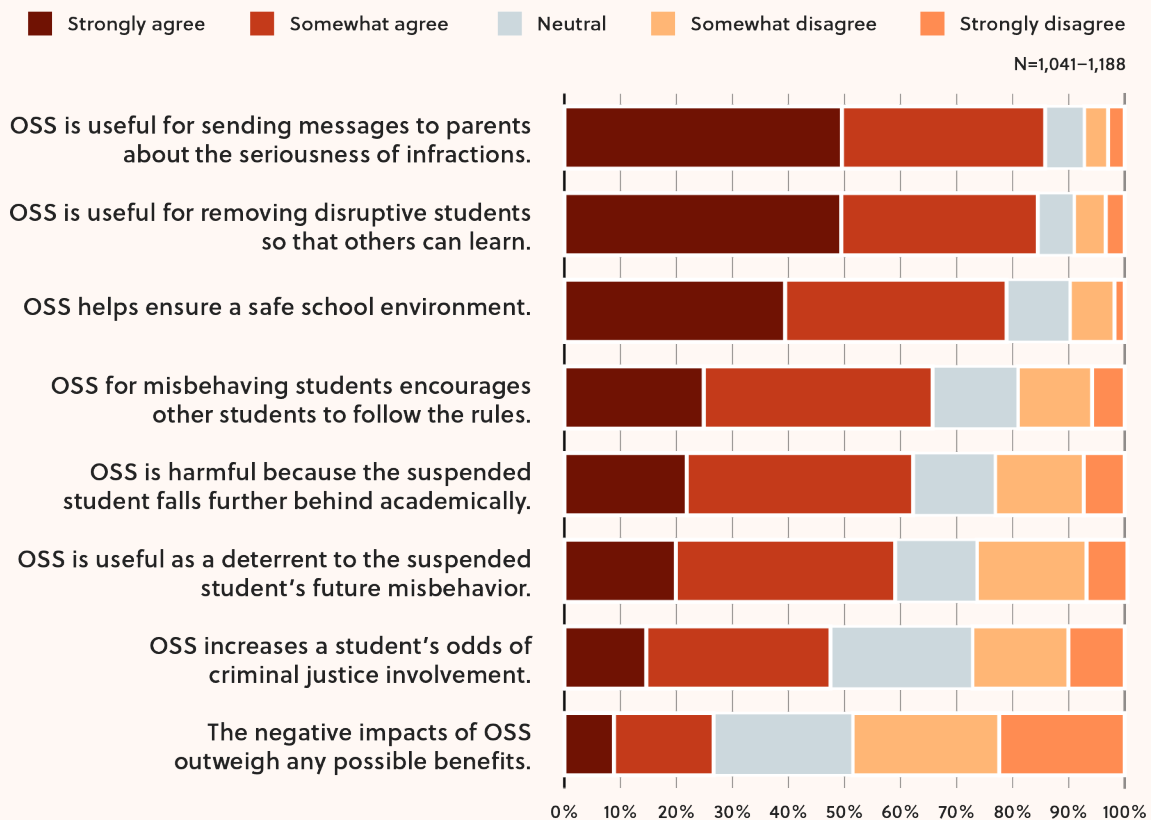
## 3

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

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

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

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



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

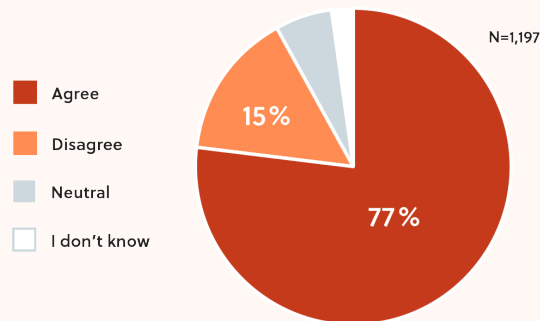
## 4

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

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

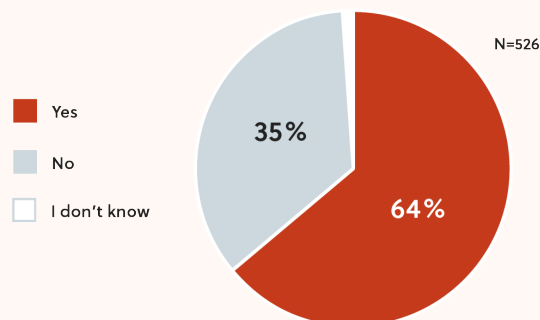
**FIGURE ES-5. Based on your experiences at your school last year (2017–18), indicate your agreement with the following statement:**

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



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

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



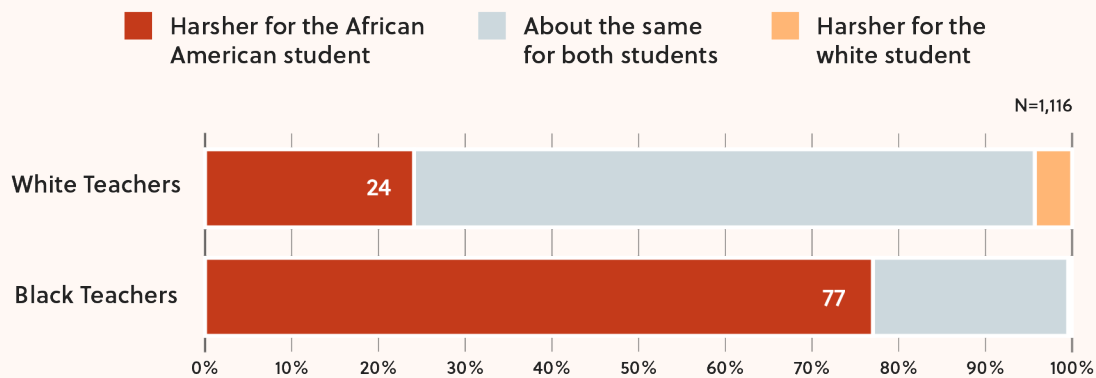
Note: Sample includes only respondents teaching in schools where more than 75 percent of students were eligible for federally-subsidized lunches.

## 5

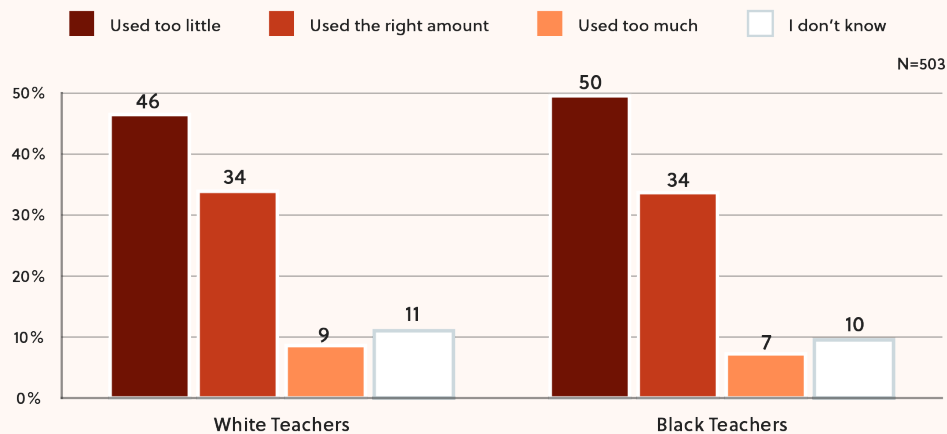
***Despite the likely costs for students who misbehave—and their belief that disciplinary consequences are racially biased—many African American teachers say suspensions, expulsions, and other forms of “exclusionary discipline” should be used more often.***

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

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



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



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

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# INTRODUCTION

The public debate over discipline policy remains depressingly polarized and simplistic. Advocates of reform argue that suspensions and other forms of exclusionary discipline are associated with negative outcomes, including higher rates of criminal justice involvement—and that they are implemented unfairly. In contrast, skeptics argue that we must consider the interests of all students, not just those who misbehave, that schools depend on suspensions and the like to maintain order, and that the proposed alternatives are unproven and unrealistic.

Because school discipline is so difficult to study, most of the research associated with the topic cannot be considered causal. Consequently, both advocates and critics of reform have often resorted to impassioned rhetoric. What they haven't done often enough since the discipline debate began is solicit input from the individuals with the most firsthand experience with discipline problems and the proposed solutions—namely, our teachers.

Accordingly, this study asks a nationally representative sample of African American and white teachers in grade 3–12 classrooms what they think about school discipline. To our knowledge, it is the first scientifically rigorous and nationally representative survey on school discipline to be published in at least a decade and a half.<sup>4</sup> It is also the first time that any discipline survey has included a specific focus on the views of black or African American teachers and teachers in high-poverty schools.

Our research questions are as follows:

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

By shedding new light on what is happening at the ground level, including how those charged with implementation view recent shifts in discipline policy and what discipline reform means to *them*, we hope to jump-start a more informed and honest conversation that takes greater heed of the realities of the classroom and the need for truly bottom-up solutions.

## BACKGROUND

Like the issue itself, the research on school discipline is complex. For example, numerous studies have linked suspensions to lower grades, test scores, and graduation rates, as well as higher rates of criminal justice involvement for the children who are punished.<sup>5</sup> Yet the more rigorous the study design, the smaller the costs of suspension seem to be.<sup>6</sup> And research has also demonstrated that disruptive students have a negative effect on school climate and the academic progress of their peers, suggesting there are implicit trade-offs associated with their presence or absence.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, research on the effectiveness of the various alternatives to suspension is mostly disappointing.<sup>8</sup> For example, a rigorous evaluation of restorative justice in Pittsburgh middle schools found negative effects for African American students,<sup>9</sup> and studies of discipline reform efforts in NYC and Philadelphia suggest that top-down efforts to limit suspensions can negatively impact school climate and non-offending students.<sup>10</sup> However, several large-scale experimental studies have found that Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) can have a positive effect on school climate—at least, at the elementary level.<sup>11</sup>

In the absence of convincingly causal estimates of the impacts of suspensions or alternatives to suspension, surveys of teachers and administrators are a potentially valuable source of information. And in recent years, bits and pieces of the discipline debate have surfaced in various surveys. For example, the 2015 and 2016 *Education Next* surveys found that most teachers were opposed to a policy that prevented African American and Hispanic students from being suspended or expelled at higher rates than other students.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, a 2013 *Education Week* survey found that 46 percent of teachers viewed OSS as effective (though it didn't define "effective").<sup>13</sup> Finally, local surveys that were wholly or partially devoted to school discipline have been conducted in several districts where reforms have been attempted. In general, the results of these surveys have been troubling, suggesting that discipline reform has been challenging for those charged with its implementation.<sup>14</sup>

Collectively, these studies give us some sense of what teachers are thinking when it comes to school discipline and discipline reform. Yet despite the heated debates over discipline policy, the last nationally representative teacher survey to focus exclusively on school discipline was a 2004 study by Public Agenda.<sup>15</sup> And despite the fact that racial and socioeconomic equity is a principal motivation for discipline reform, no discipline survey (to our knowledge) has specifically focused on the views of African American teachers or teachers in high-poverty schools.

## METHODS

The survey on which the present study is based was developed in Summer 2019 by Fordham Institute research staff, with assistance from the FDR Group, a survey research public opinion firm located in NYC. However, a handful of the survey items are adapted (directly or indirectly) from other discipline surveys, as noted in the relevant figures. To pilot the survey's content and wording, the FDR Group convened two focus groups of teachers in Washington, D.C., and NYC in Spring 2018.

The survey sample comprises a nationally representative group of white and African American teachers in the United States who teach grades 3–12. The sample is stratified based on the percentage of students who are eligible for a free or reduced-priced lunch (FRL) per the National Center for Education Statistics' categorization and by grade band (3–5, 6–8, and 9–12). Analysts at RAND selected a sample of 2,077 teachers, which resulted in 1,208 completed surveys for a response rate of 55 percent. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the sample by strata. (See *Appendix A* for more on survey design, sample distribution, and weighting.)

The complex design of some of our survey questions muddies discussions of statistical significance. But roughly speaking, our 95 percent confidence intervals are plus or minus 5 percentage points for the full sample, plus or minus 6 percentage points for the school-poverty or racial subsamples (e.g., “black teachers” or “high-poverty schools”), and plus or minus 7 percentage points for the larger school-poverty-by-race subsamples (e.g., “black teachers in high-poverty schools”). In general, we highlight differences between groups that meet those thresholds.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to answering multiple-choice questions, survey respondents were given an opportunity to share their thoughts on school discipline via an open-ended question at the end of the survey. It read, “Anything else you’d like to tell us about your experiences with or views on school discipline? (Optional).” To our surprise, we received over one hundred substantive replies to this voluntary question, many of them insightful and passionate. Because of the volume and intensity of these responses, we have included most of them in the report verbatim. (The complete list is included in *Appendix B*.)

**Table 1. Number of Survey Respondents by Strata**

School Composition	White Teachers	Black Teachers	Missing/ Other Race	Total
>75% FRL	287	205	37	529
50–75% FRL	178	126	24	328
25–50% FRL	122	60	15	197
<25% FRL	98	24	5	127
Missing FRL	19	7	1	27
<b>Total</b>	<b>704</b>	<b>422</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>1,208</b>

# FINDINGS

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

“

*Either we want higher test scores or we want lower suspensions rates, but we can't have both.*

”

# FINDING 1

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

Regardless of race, teachers in high-poverty schools report higher rates of verbal disrespect and physical fighting than teachers in low-poverty schools, and they are more than three times as likely to say they have been “physically attacked” by a student. Unsurprisingly, these behaviors make it difficult for teachers to do their jobs, and more than half of teachers in high-poverty schools say student behavior problems are contributing to “a disorderly or unsafe environment that makes it difficult for many students to learn.”

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*“Classroom discipline was a major challenge for me last school year. I felt that I did not have a voice to address my concerns. I also felt that appropriate action to maintain overall discipline was sorely lacking. I did not feel supported. A student threatened to KILL me. NOTHING was done. The matter was NEVER addressed. I was concerned about some of the students in the room as well as myself. I was made to feel that I was the problem.”*

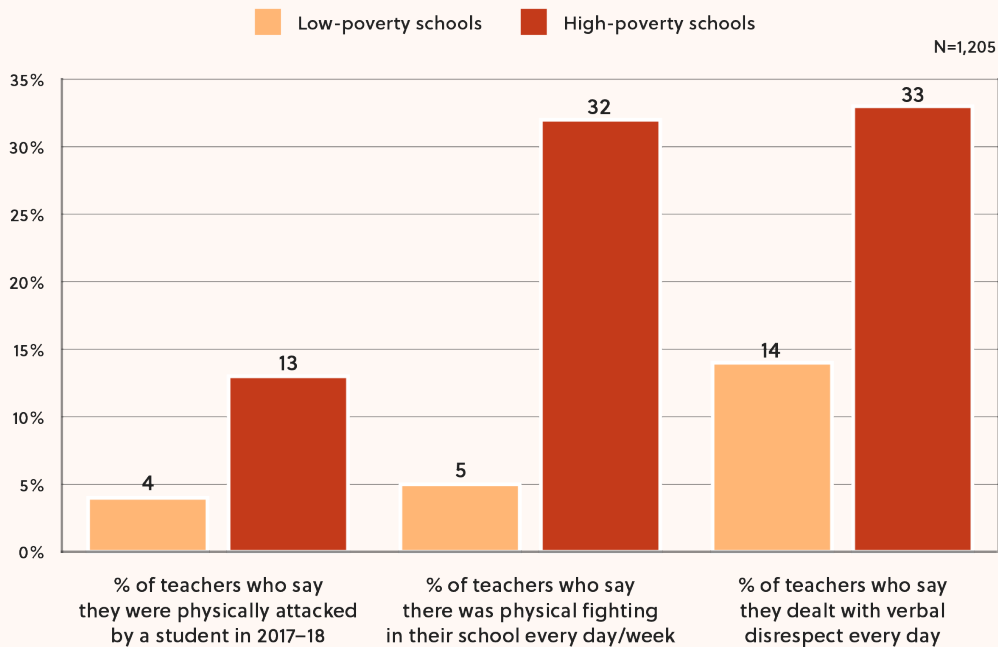
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## 1A

## Teachers in high-poverty schools report higher rates of verbal disrespect, physical fighting, and assault.

Compared to their counterparts in low-poverty schools (where less than 25 percent of students are eligible for federally-subsidized lunches), teachers in high-poverty schools (where more than 75 percent of students are eligible) report significantly higher rates of most student behavior problems. For example, they are more than twice as likely to say that “verbal disrespect” is a daily occurrence in their classrooms (33 percent) as teachers in low-poverty schools (14 percent). They are also more than six times as likely to say that “physical fighting” is a daily or weekly occurrence in their school (32 versus 5 percent). Finally, 13 percent of teachers in high-poverty schools report being “physically attacked” by a student during the 2017–18 school year—more than three times the percentage in low-poverty schools (Figure 1).

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



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

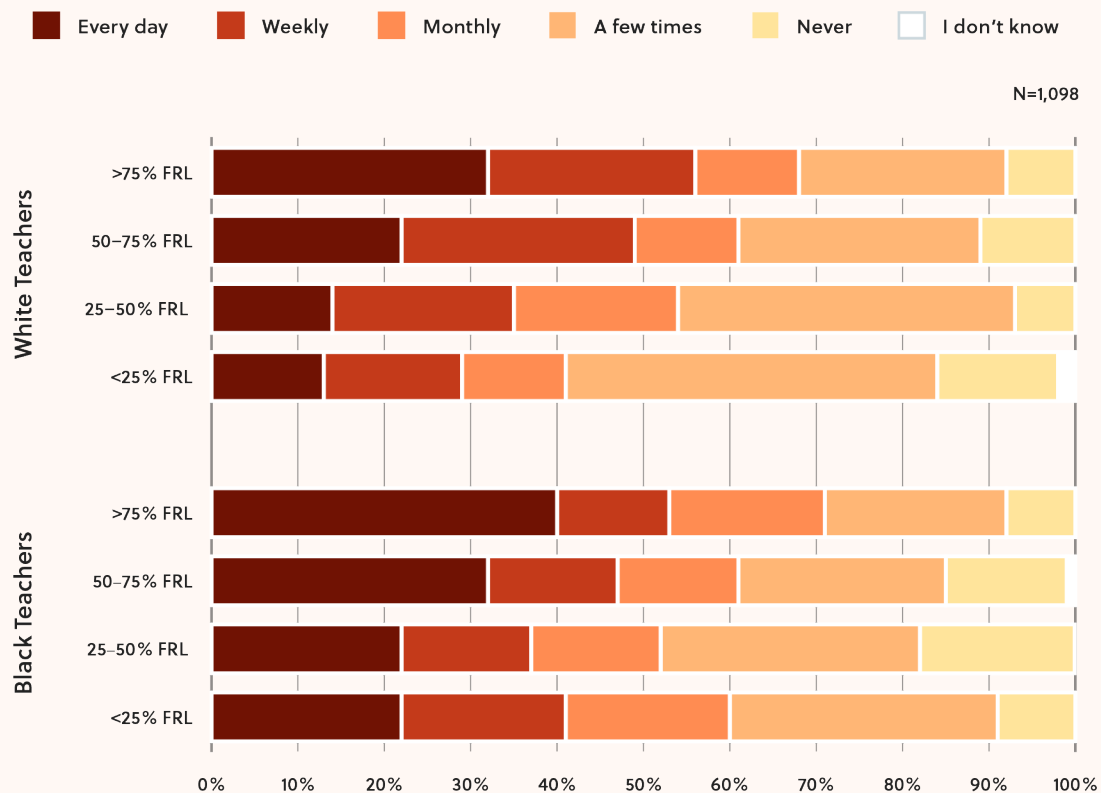
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*"I work with at-risk youth and spend countless hours working to help them become better people. Hours and hours go into 'motivating the unmotivated child.' If push came to shove, my school district would back the parent and student over myself. This year I have documented every situation to protect myself. It is not teaching. It is monitoring behaviors. I really can't blame the kids because no one cares about them until they get to me. Their home lives are awful and dysfunctional. They have never been told no."*

”

Notably, these differences are not driven by teacher race (Figures 2–4). For example, roughly similar percentages of African American and white teachers in high-poverty schools (>75 percent FRL) say they deal with verbal disrespect “every day” (40 versus 32 percent) and that physical fighting is a weekly or daily occurrence (33 versus 29 percent). Finally, African American and white teachers in high-poverty schools report similar annual rates of assault (15 versus 12 percent), suggesting that a teacher’s exposure to physical violence is primarily a function of his or her work environment.

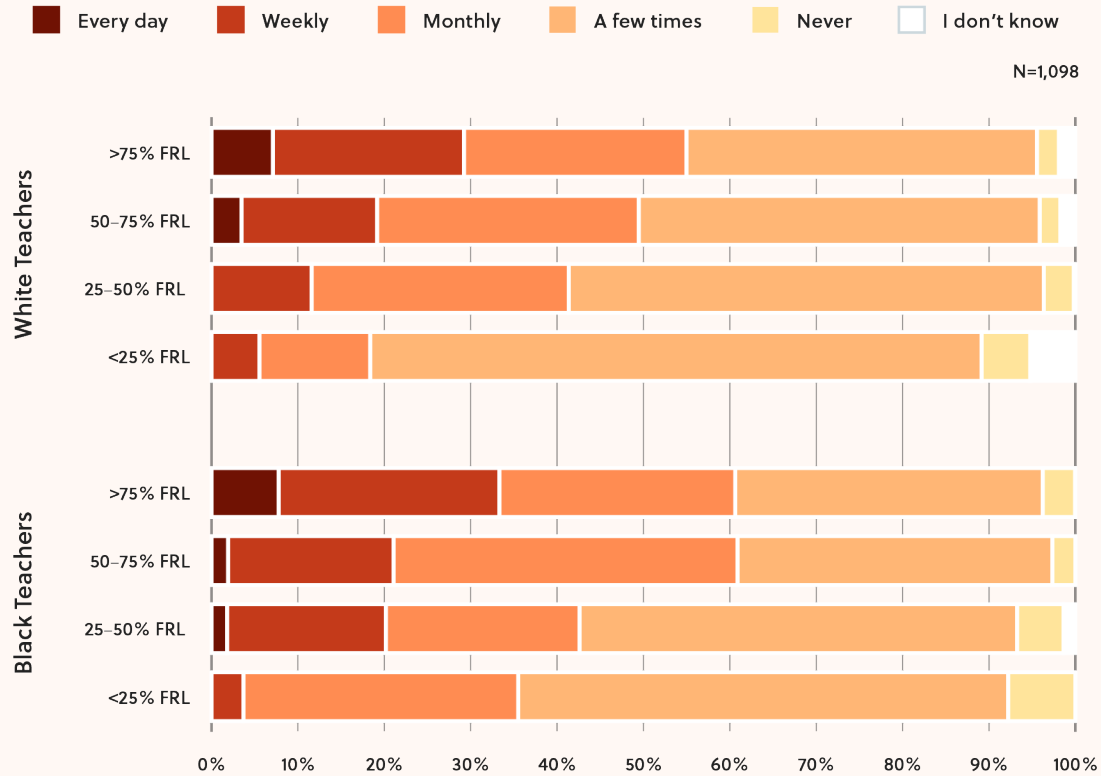
**FIGURE 2. How often would you say you dealt with verbal disrespect in your classroom last school year (2017–18)?**



*“Over the course of my career, disrespect for adults on campus has grown. Is it societal? That is a huge factor. When the profession is disrespected as a whole, it's only logical that children are learning that it's alright to treat teachers as society does.”*

*“The students were awful to me. I would cry in my car some days.”*

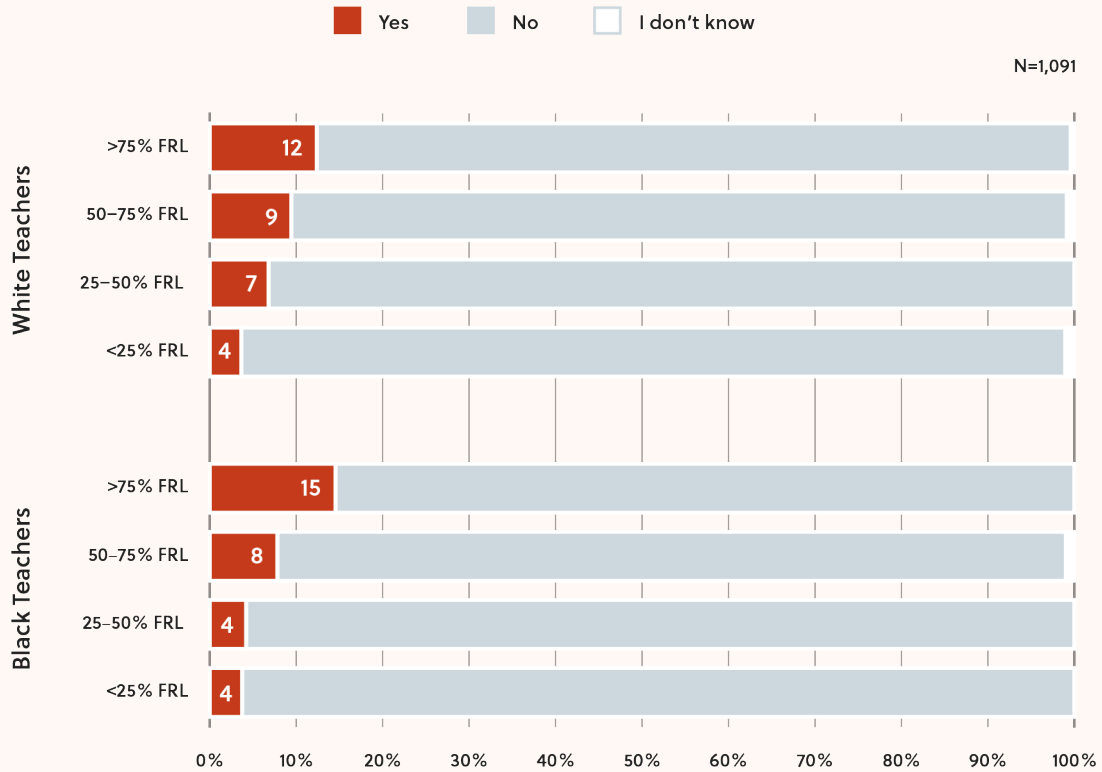
**FIGURE 3. How often would you say physical fighting happened at your school last year (2017–18)?**



*"I retired because I couldn't take the stress. I could handle my classroom, but the school environment was horrible. Sometimes, I was breaking up three fights a day, every day of the week. Admin. kept changing the rules and not telling the teachers. And they did not enforce the rules we had."*

*"Unruly students are the only factor that makes me feel like leaving the profession."*

**FIGURE 4. Were you physically attacked by a student last school year (2017–18)?**



*“I wish the administrators would have teachers’ backs. I was physically assaulted by a student, and all the admins did was pull him out of my class for three days. He is still in my class.”*

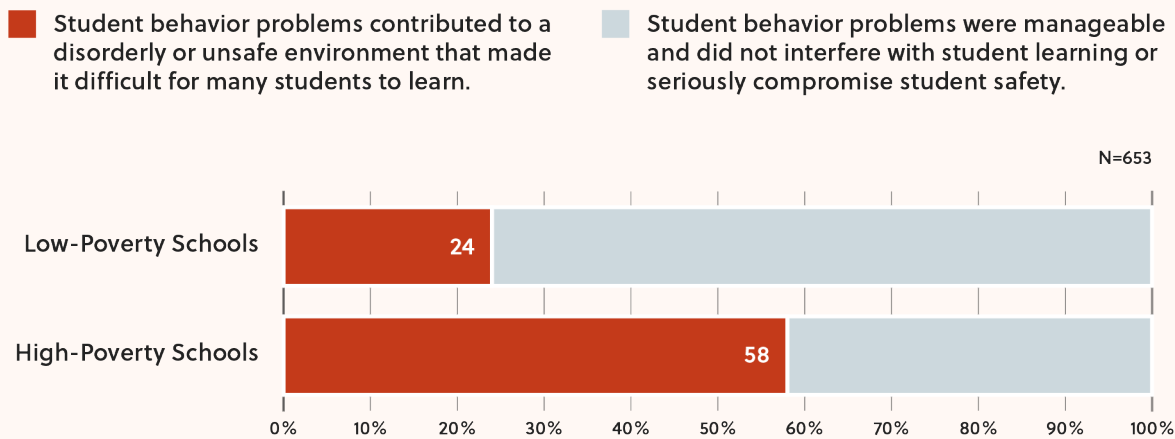
*“One of my goals for last year was not to get hurt.”*

## 1B

## Over half of teachers in high-poverty schools say student behavior problems “contributed to a disorderly or unsafe environment that made it difficult for many students to learn.”

Unsurprisingly, given the higher rates of verbal disrespect and physical violence they report, many teachers in high-poverty schools say problems with student behavior make it difficult for them to do their jobs properly. For example, when asked to characterize their experiences during the 2017–18 school year, 58 percent of teachers in high-poverty schools agreed that student behavior problems “contributed to a disorderly or unsafe environment that made it difficult for many students to learn,” while 42 percent described these problems as “manageable.” In contrast, only 24 percent of teachers in low-poverty schools say their school environment makes learning difficult (Figure 5).

**FIGURE 5. Which statement comes closer to describing your school last year (2017–18)?**



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

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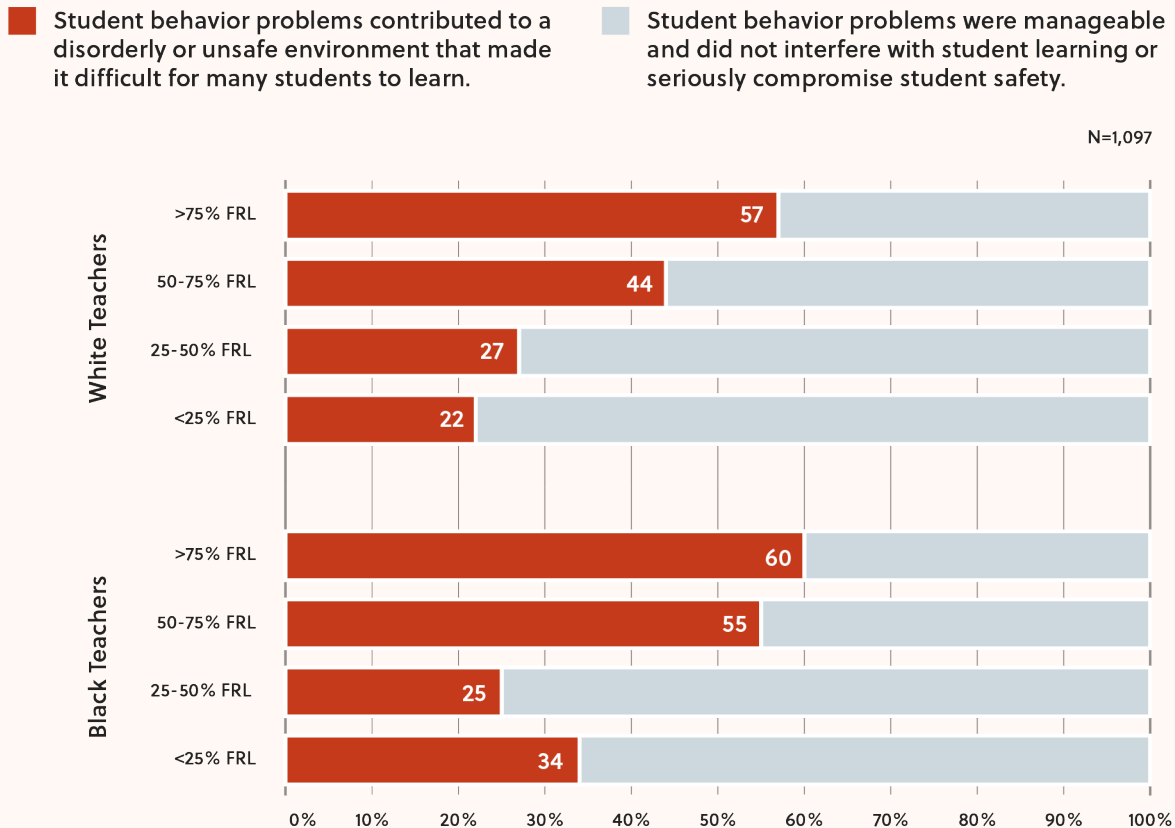
*“Students are not held accountable for their actions anymore. We make excuses for everything. They need structure and to understand what is expected of them. When people do not follow through, they get away with whatever they want.”*

*“Admin does not want to give consequences for behavior. They understand that students do not have great home lives. However, this sends the message that you can act however you want with no consequences . . . I don’t think it’s necessary to punish students and make them feel disconnected from school and give up on an academic life. But something needs to be done instead of nothing.”*

”

Notably, similar percentages of African American and white teachers in high-poverty schools (>75 percent FRL) say that student behavior problems make learning difficult (60 versus 57 percent), suggesting that perceptions of school climate are not primarily driven by teacher race (Figure 6).

**FIGURE 6. Which statement comes closer to describing your school last year (2017–18)?**



*“When you have students with behavioral problems in your classroom, it is nearly impossible to teach. You begin to despise your job and want out. If the administration does not back you up 100%, you can chalk up the year as a wash.”*

*“Discipline has gone downhill. With the new laws, more students are staying in class and then disrupting the learning environment. Consequences are not handed out quickly enough, and students refuse to serve after-school detentions. They are not held accountable any more. The lack of control/discipline in the schools has had me thinking about other career choices. I signed up to be a teacher, not to constantly manage behavior and deal with such disrespectful young people.”*

## FINDING 2

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

In addition to uninvolved parents and troubled communities, many teachers blame student behavior problems on “administrators who enforce school discipline policy inconsistently,” and almost half say they find themselves putting up with misbehavior in the classroom due to “a lack of administrative support.” Of the teachers who say suspensions have declined at their school, more than three quarters say higher tolerance for misbehavior or underreporting is at least partly responsible for this decline; teachers in high-poverty schools are particularly likely to say that suspensions are underreported. Finally, underreporting of “serious disciplinary incidents” is even more widespread than underreporting of suspensions, with only one-quarter of teachers saying administrators always report such incidents.

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*“During the 2017–18 school year . . . I saw a complete disregard for the safety of both students and teachers in favor of underreporting significant disciplinary actions. This was done to prevent the reports within the system, which can reflect negatively on a school’s rating and grade. It led to an increase in behavioral issues because the students understood that there would be no consequences for their actions. The classrooms were often disrupted by this behavior, and many students would communicate their safety concerns, but to no avail.”*

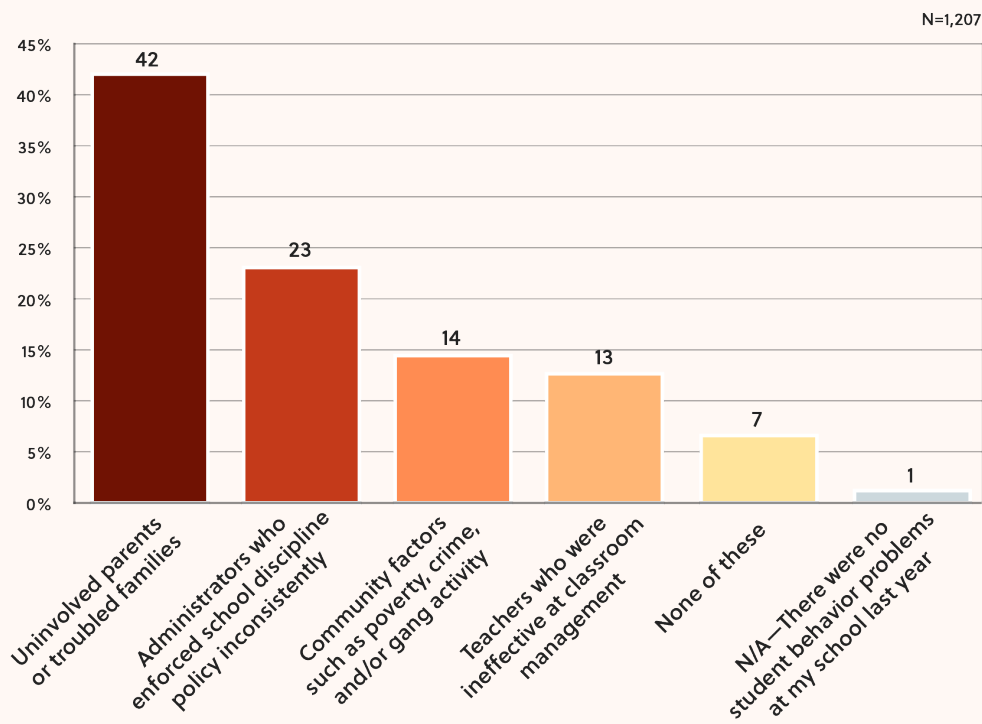
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## 2A

**Two-thirds of teachers say discipline policy is inconsistently enforced, and almost half say they put up with offending behavior in the classroom due to a lack of administrative support.**

Unsurprisingly, when asked to identify the factor most responsible for student behavior problems at their school, a plurality of teachers (42 percent) chose “uninvolved parents or troubled families.” However, a significant minority (23 percent) chose “administrators who enforced school discipline policy inconsistently.” In contrast, only 14 percent of teachers chose “community factors such as poverty, crime, and/or gang activity,” and only 13 percent blamed “teachers who were ineffective at classroom management” (Figure 7).<sup>17</sup>

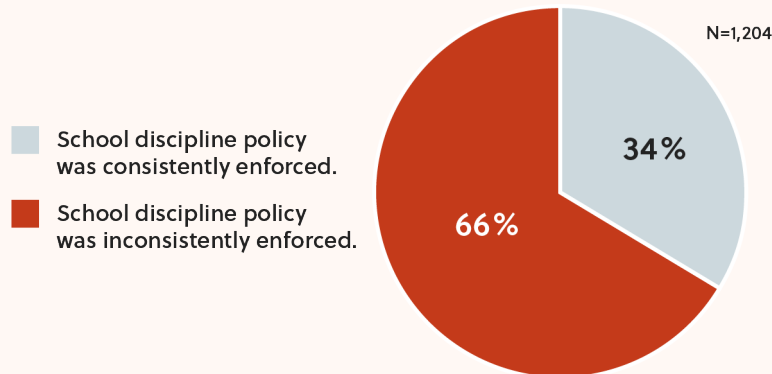
**FIGURE 7. Which of the following do you think was most responsible for the student behavior problems at your school last year (2017–18)?**



*“The lack of support by administration is causing teachers to leave the classroom. Inconsistent discipline is causing students to have no respect for administrators, so if you have trouble managing your classroom you literally have no support. Administration refuses to help teachers with poor classroom management. Students feel like they run the school, and honestly they do at my school . . . Teachers need support! We are exhausted!”*

Inconsistent discipline, inadequate supports, and a general lack of accountability are all major themes of teachers' open-ended responses. Overall, roughly two-thirds of teachers (66 percent) say discipline policy is inconsistently enforced at their school (Figure 8), and almost half (48 percent) say they put up with offending behavior in the classroom due to "a lack of administrative support" (Figure 9).

**FIGURE 8. Which statement comes closer to describing your school last year (2017–18)?**



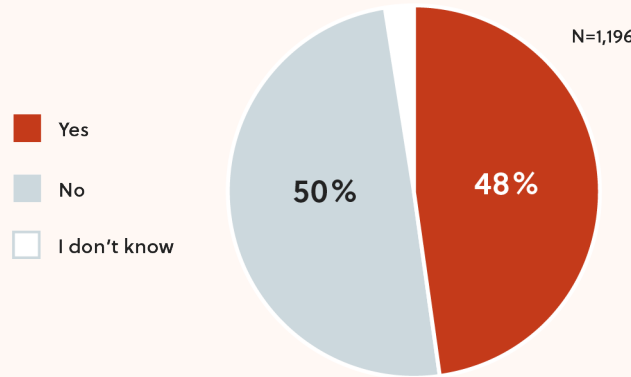
*"The inconsistency is one of the biggest issues, followed by administration's lack of follow-up . . . Teachers are often handling issues in their classroom that should have been escalated to administration because administration will often do nothing other than have a quick conversation with the student, no matter the severity of the infraction."*

*"Part of the problem is that discipline is not enforced equally by administrators, but another part of the problem is that it is inconsistent among teachers and other staff members, as well. Even when policies are clearly stated, there are enough teachers who do not follow them that the students don't think they have to be followed in any class."*

*"Administrators in our district have far too many responsibilities and an enormous number of students to address. However, our admin does not specifically address the rules at the beginning of each year with the student population, and they do not follow through with the rules they do set."*

*"Administration needs to be more consistent and hold students and parents more accountable!"*

**FIGURE 9. Did you find yourself putting up with offending behavior in the classroom due to a lack of administrative support?**



*"The administrators do not have the teachers' backs when a student is violent or disruptive, possibly because their own supervisors don't have theirs."*

*"At my school, the teacher is always wrong, and administrators tend to take the part of the student. They only intervene in student-to-student confrontations. Teachers are not allowed to say anything, but students can be verbally abusive."*

*"There was a point in time when I stopped writing referrals. For several years I did not write a single referral, as I felt nothing was done when I did. There were no consequences for students. They were simply talked to, if that, and let off the hook. I did not feel supported or backed by my administration. I was told to stay in my lane and that administration had the right to bend rules and enforce however they saw fit."*

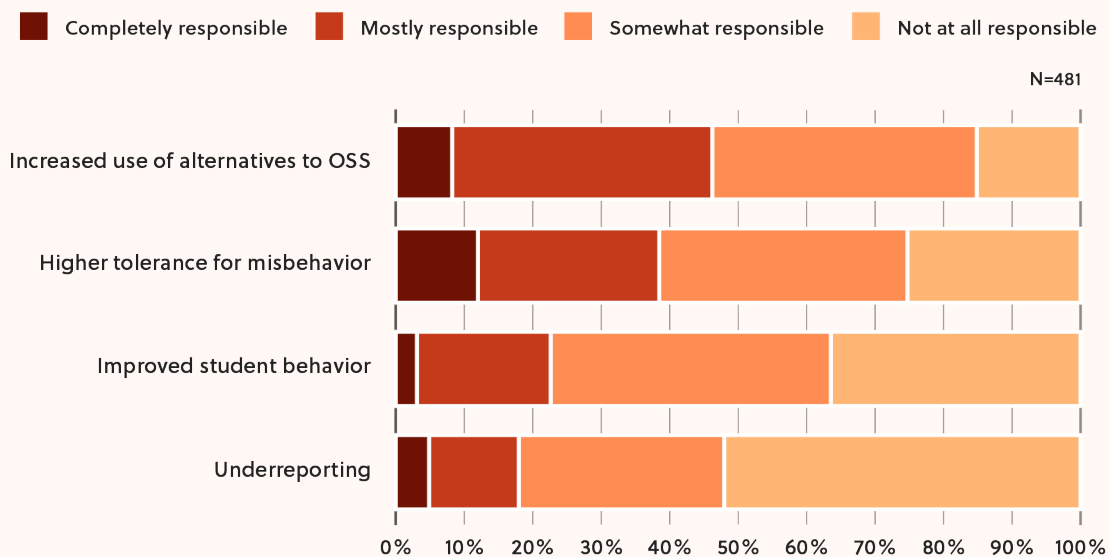
## 2B

## Underreporting of “serious incidents” is rampant, and most teachers say underreporting and/or higher tolerance for misbehavior are at least partly responsible for the recent decline in suspensions.

Consistent with the national decline in officially reported suspensions, 41 percent of teachers in our sample say suspensions at their school have declined in recent years, versus just 14 percent who say they have increased (not shown). However, of those reporting a decline, only 23 percent say it is “completely” or “mostly” attributable to “improved student behavior,” compared to 38 percent who attribute it to higher tolerance for misbehavior (Figure 10). (Forty-six percent of teachers chose “increased use of alternatives to OSS,” which could be consistent with both improved behavior and higher tolerance for misbehavior.)

In addition to these factors, nearly one in five teachers (18 percent) say underreporting by administrators is “completely” or “mostly” responsible for the decline in suspensions at their schools, and almost half (48 percent) say it is at least “somewhat” responsible (see *Discipline Reform in New York City* for more on underreporting, page 32).

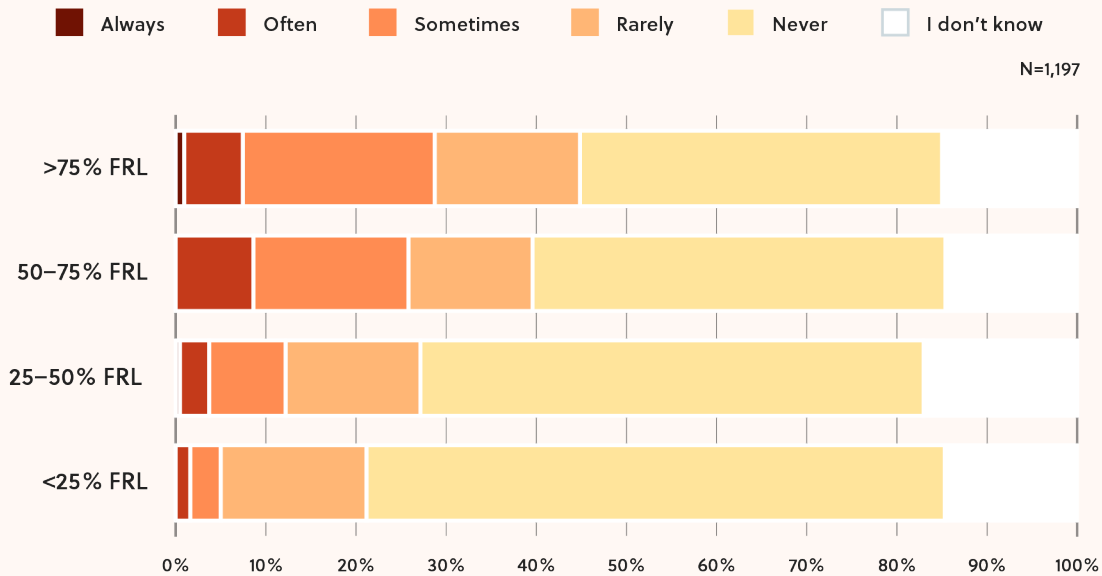
**FIGURE 10. How responsible do you think each of the following is for the decline in out-of-school suspensions at your school?**



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

Teachers in high-poverty schools (>75 percent FRL) are also six times more likely to say administrators at least "sometimes" fail to report suspensions (29 percent) than teachers in low-poverty schools (5 percent), suggesting that some of the official decline in suspensions is an illusion in the former (Figure 11).

**FIGURE 11. Based on your experiences as a teacher, how often would you say that administrators tell students to stay home from school without officially recording it as a suspension?**



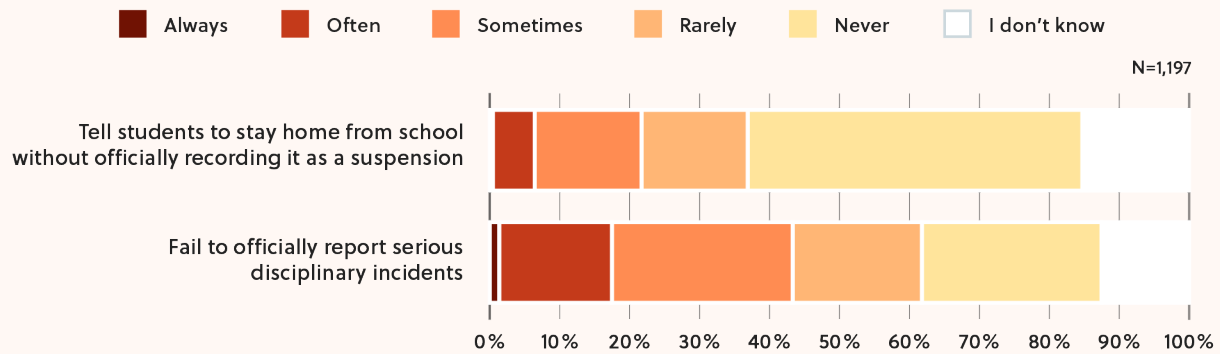
*"There are very few consequences for student misbehavior . . . Students have learned this and know they can get away with anything."*

*"We follow a city-wide discipline code that does not allow for out-of-school suspension except in extreme cases. This policy is not helpful at all and forces schools to keep discipline problems in the classroom. The policy is more harmful to good students that want to learn and are unable to . . . It is discouraging for good students."*

*"I believe that the number of discipline cases is underreported because of coding. At my school, any time we write up a student, we are advised to select the teacher referral code. Administration later goes in and updates it based on their punishment. Sometimes a student was written up by several teachers, but it was counted as one disciplinary action on the administration side."*

Finally, teachers' responses suggest that the distinction between underreporting suspensions and underreporting serious behaviors is important. For example, 22 percent of teachers say administrators at least "sometimes" send students home "without officially recording it as a suspension," versus 43 percent who respond similarly for failing to report "serious disciplinary incidents" (Figure 12).

**FIGURE 12. Based on your accumulated experiences, how often do you think administrators do each of the following?**



*"Underreporting for OSS or serious offenses is common. Administrators don't want their schools highlighted by the county."*

*"More often than not, administrators sweep incidents under the rug and don't report them. The more they report, the worse it makes the school look. I have had teachers attacked severely, but little was done . . ."*

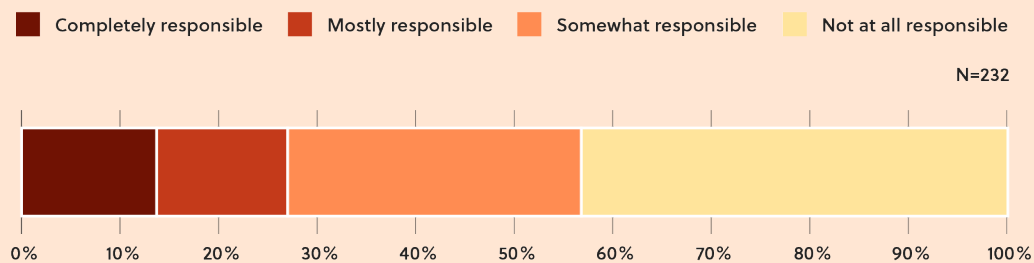
*"The underreporting that our admin does is RIDICULOUS. But they're doing it that way so we look better to the district, so they look better to the county, so they look better on the state results. It's shameful."*

## Discipline Reform in New York City

No district in the country has pursued discipline reform more aggressively than New York City Public Schools. For example, it has essentially banned out-of-school suspensions without approval from the central office under the de Blasio administration.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the views of NYC teachers are of particular interest nationally.

In general, our results suggest that the views of teachers in the Big Apple are similar to those of teachers in other districts—with a few exceptions (Figure 13). Most notably, teachers in NYC are particularly likely to say that increased underreporting is responsible for the decline in suspensions, with more than one-quarter (27 percent) saying it is “completely” or “mostly” responsible (versus 18 percent of all U.S. teachers) and more than half (57 percent) saying it is at least “somewhat” responsible (versus 48 percent of U.S. teachers).

**FIGURE 13. How responsible do you think increased underreporting is for the decline in suspensions at your school?**



Note: Sample includes only educators who teach in New York City.

*“My biggest takeaway from working for New York City is that they don't deal with discipline, which is one of the main reasons why the numbers are so bad for schools. Students quickly realize there are no consequences for negative behavior. If a teacher tries to be too strict, they are quickly identified as having ‘management issues.’ As a result, teachers end up dealing with lots of behaviors that would never be acceptable in any other social situation.”*

## FINDING 3

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

Although many teachers see value in newer disciplinary approaches, most also say that out-of-school suspensions and in-school suspensions can be useful for sending messages to parents, ensuring a safe school environment, removing disruptive students from the classroom, and deterring future misbehavior. Furthermore, teachers' responses suggest that OSS and ISS have slightly different uses, making the question of when and how ISS can effectively replace OSS a complex one. In general, teachers say that OSS should be reserved for serious offenses, while ISS should be used for minor offenses. But the context in which the offense occurs is important, and many teachers who are reluctant to use OSS in general say it can be appropriate when other measures have failed.

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*"PBIS (or something similar) works for some students. Negative consequences work for some students. NOTHING works for all students. A variety of disciplinary systems must be in place, but schools jump on the bandwagon of one and try to make each student fit the model. Experienced and successful teachers (and parents) know that what works for one may not work for another. All students need consistency."*

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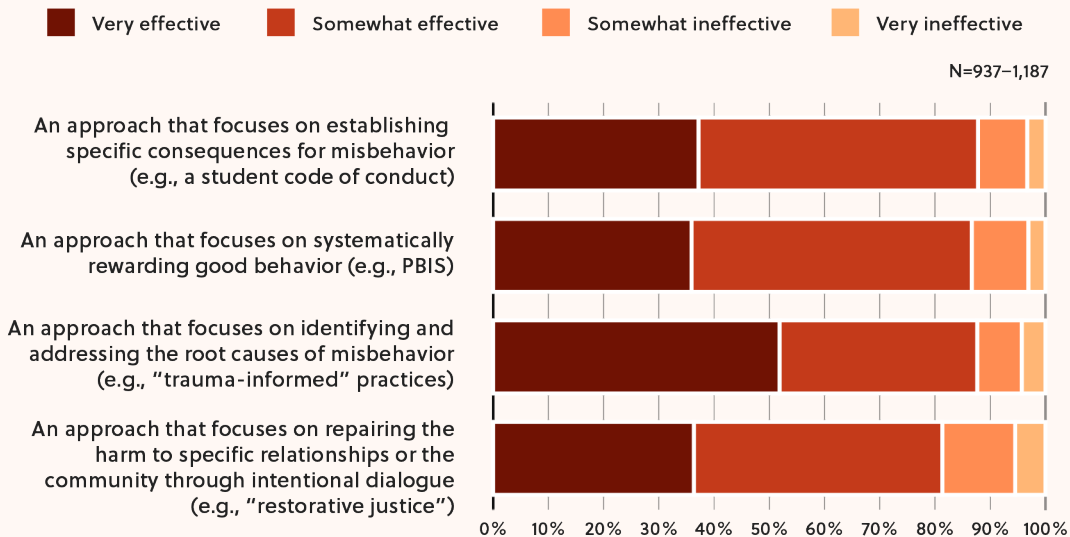
# 3A

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

It's clear from teachers' responses that many see value in newer approaches to school discipline. For example, 81 percent of teachers say "restorative justice" is at least "somewhat" effective. Similarly, overwhelming majorities say approaches such as PBIS (87 percent) and "trauma-informed" practices (88 percent) are at least "somewhat" effective. However, 88 percent of teachers also say a traditional disciplinary approach that focuses on "establishing specific consequences for misbehavior" is at least somewhat effective (Figure 14).

In other words, most teachers seem to value both newer approaches to discipline and the more traditional methods they aim to replace—an impression that is reinforced by teachers' responses to our open-ended survey question, many of which note the importance of taking an "all-of-the-above" approach (see *What do teachers think of newer disciplinary approaches?*).

**FIGURE 14. In your opinion, how effective is each of the following approaches to school discipline?**



## What do teachers think of newer disciplinary approaches?

### Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

*"We just implemented a schoolwide PBIS plan, and so far the discipline has been far more successful than previous years."*

*"My school uses PBIS, which is helpful. But sometimes, we get away from holding kids accountable for their misbehavior."*

*"We need to use a mixed-methods approach. PBIS and other 'huggy' programs are great for some kids and can really benefit them. Unfortunately, there is confusion about when to use what program, and it leads to a lot of ambiguity regarding whether or not a consequence will be implemented."*

*"PBIS (or something similar) works for some students. Negative consequences work for some students. NOTHING works for all students. A variety of disciplinary systems must be in place, but schools jump on the bandwagon of one and try to make each student fit the model. Experienced and successful teachers (and parents) know that what works for one may not work for another. All students need consistency."*

### Restorative Justice

*"I am firmly in favor of trauma-informed practices and restorative justice. The main cause of many discipline issues in schools is the lack of reflection of staff on how they are creating the issues they struggle with, and a change of staff attitude and tone does tremendous things for the productivity of a classroom."*

*"I am an advocate for the use of restorative practices, restitution, and prevention techniques. I oppose suspensions and believe that no student should be "thrown away." These are children, and they need our support, not a punishment. OSS and expulsion limits my students' access to food (as we provide breakfast and lunch at no cost to our students). A suspension isn't just exclusion from school. It may be an exclusion from food."*

*"Restorative justice has led to a huge decrease of suspensions. I fully understand the arguments for this approach. However, I strongly feel that this approach is failing students, particularly students of color, because it is reinforcing the idea that there are little or no consequences for negative behavior. Things do not work like this in the real world, outside of school. So it is better to teach students that there are real consequences for misbehavior at a young age, rather than have them learn that the hard way with the criminal justice system."*

*"Our school has focused on restorative justice and student conferences instead of any real consequences, and the students see that as getting away with bad behavior, so they continue."*

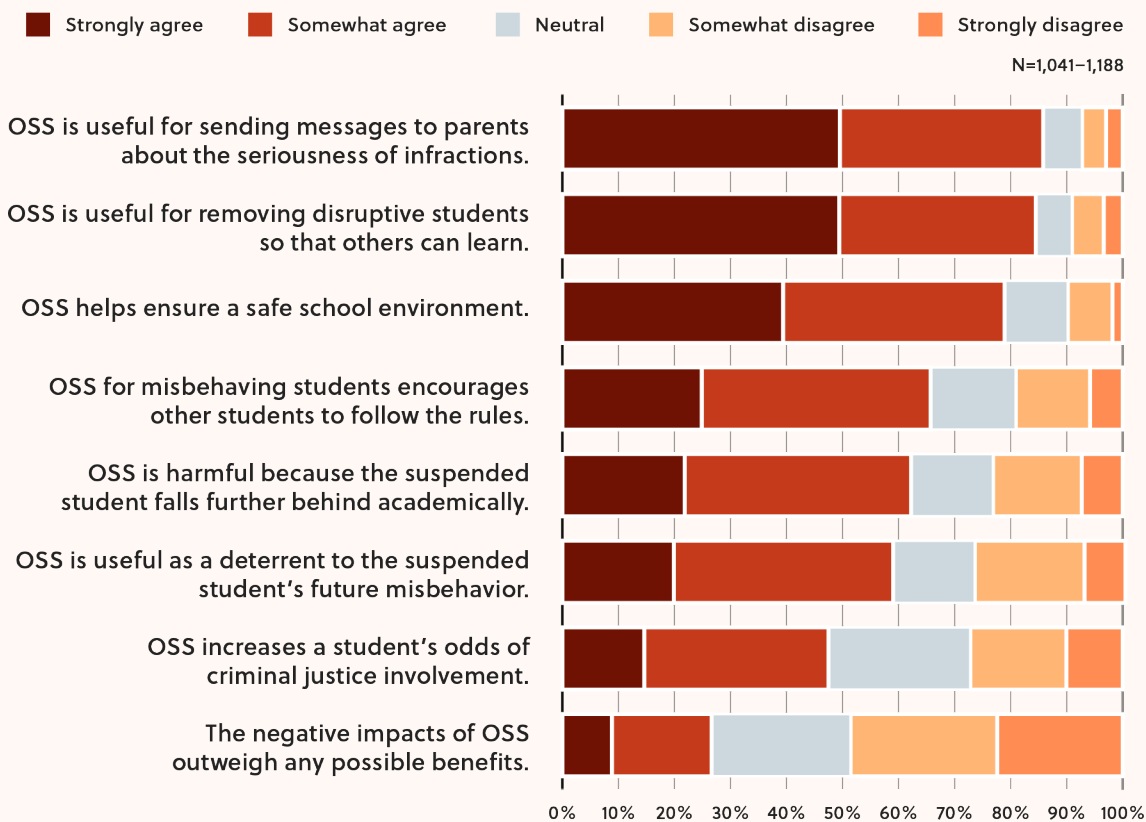
*"The restorative justice program is a farce and should be discontinued until a thorough study of its effectiveness can be completed. It has done more to demoralize teachers than any other program."*

In general, teachers' responses suggest they are aware of the costs that may be associated with out-of-school suspensions. For example, 62 percent of teachers say OSS is harmful because "the suspended student falls further behind academically," and 48 percent say it increases students' odds of criminal justice involvement (Figure 15).

Yet, despite these concerns, overwhelming majorities of teachers say suspensions have their uses. For example, 86 percent agree that OSS is "useful for sending messages to parents about the seriousness of infractions." Similarly, 84 percent of teachers agree that OSS is "useful for removing disruptive students so that others can learn," and 79 percent agree that it "helps ensure a safe school environment." Finally, 66 percent of teachers agree that OSS "encourages other students to follow the rules," and 59 percent say it is useful for "detering the suspended student's future misbehavior" (though a sizable minority disagrees with that last statement).

Consistent with the overall thrust of those results, only 27 percent of teachers agree that the "negative impacts of OSS outweigh any possible benefits," suggesting that efforts to reduce OSS are likely to encounter resistance if they go too far (see *When is ISS an effective replacement for OSS?*).

**FIGURE 15. Indicate your agreement with the following statements about the use of out-of-school suspensions (OSS).**



Note: Six of the eight questions (and scale) above were replicated with permission from a survey on school discipline conducted in Philadelphia by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education.<sup>19</sup> By and large, teachers in the Philadelphia survey responded similarly to teachers in our national survey.

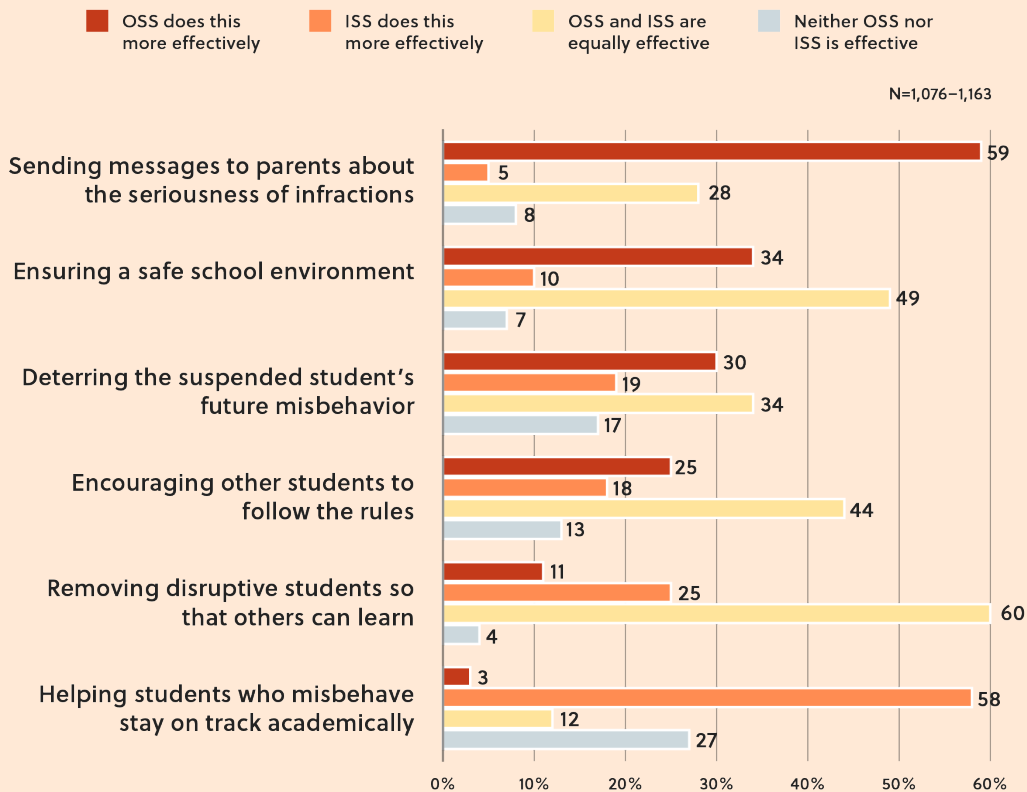
## When is ISS an effective replacement for OSS?

Although many discipline reformers assume that in-school suspensions can replace out-of-school suspensions, teachers' responses suggest that each serves distinct—though clearly overlapping—purposes (Figure 16). For example, three-fifths of teachers (59 percent) say OSS is more effective when it comes to “sending messages to parents about the seriousness of infractions” (versus 5 percent who say ISS is more effective). Similarly, one-third say OSS is more effective when it comes to “ensuring a safe school environment” (versus 10 percent who say ISS is more effective).

In contrast, 58 percent of teachers prefer ISS when it comes to “helping students who misbehave stay on track academically.” And in some cases, pluralities say OSS and ISS are equally effective. For example, 60 percent of teachers say they are equally effective at “removing disruptive students from the classroom,” while 44 percent say they are equally effective at “encouraging other students to follow the rules.”

Overall, these results suggest that OSS and ISS can be equally effective in achieving some purposes, but not others. And many teachers seem to value both types of suspensions, rather than one over the other. Accordingly, schools seeking to replace OSS with ISS should be sure to consult with their teaching staff before moving forward.

**FIGURE 16. Which do you think accomplishes each of the following more effectively, ISS or OSS?**



## When is ISS an effective replacement for OSS? (cont'd)

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*"I feel suspension is just a punishment. It does nothing to deal with the causes of behavior. I don't feel it deters the suspended student or other students from engaging in future misbehaviors."*

*"Suspensions are generally not helpful to the student that is suspended, but they help maintain order in the school or classroom."*

*"The effectiveness of ISS and OSS depends on the student and his/her family. For well-disciplined students with strong family support, being given ISS or OSS is enough to curtail any future discipline problems."*

*"ISS is such a joke at my school that many students purposely do things to be sent to ISS just to get out of regular class for a few days. I believe ISS could be a deterrent for minor behavior problems if students didn't feel so comfortable."*

*"Our entire approach is ineffective. Students feel that ISS and OSS are both 'holidays' from class. Therefore, neither helps to deter future inappropriate behaviors."*

*"My school added in-class suspension, which is a joke. They sit in the back with an hourly clipboard to check off if they are doing work silently. It sets kids up to fail and puts more work on teachers."*

*"I think lunchtime detention without electronics is MUCH more effective than any in- or out-of-school suspension. Students lose socialization time AND phone time. Both are HIGHLY coveted by teenagers."*

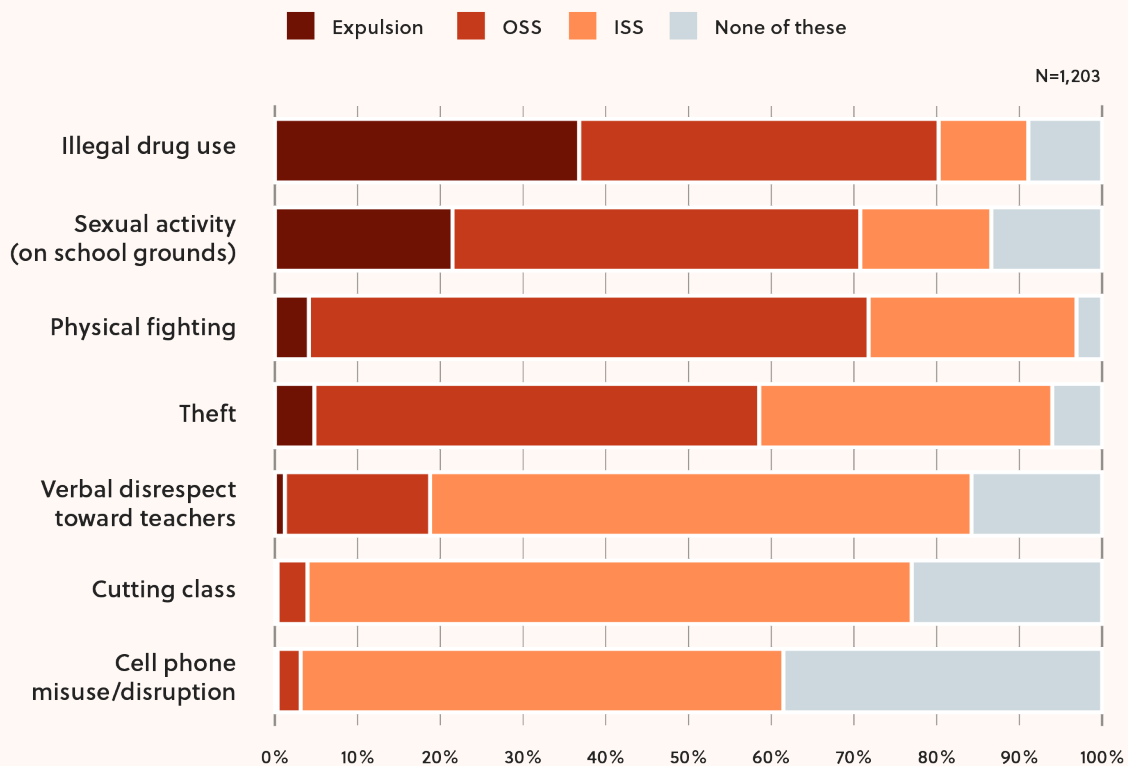
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## 3B

**In general, teachers say out-of-school suspensions should be reserved for serious offenses, but the context in which the offense occurs is important.**

Most teachers are reluctant to expel students, although significant minorities support expulsion for illegal drug use (37 percent) and sexual activity on school grounds (22 percent). Accordingly, most teachers say OSS is the appropriate consequence for more serious offenses such as physical fighting and theft, while ISS is appropriate for minor offenses such as verbal disrespect and misusing a cellphone (Figure 17).

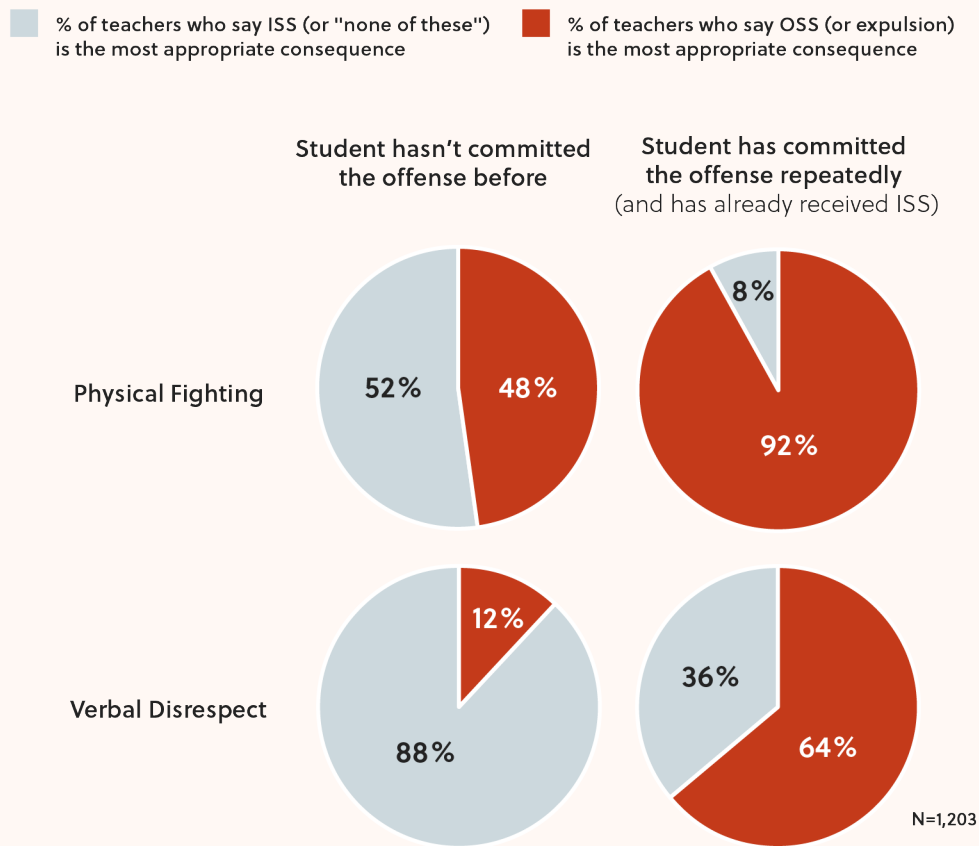
**FIGURE 17. Assuming there are no extenuating circumstances, which do you think is the most appropriate consequence for the following infractions?**



*"Consequences for bad behavior should fit the behavior and be beneficial for the school. All too often, a student who gets in trouble for disrespecting a teacher is put in ISS or OSS, where they get a mini vacation. Then they return to class without an apology or resolution with the teacher. Then it is on the teacher to make sure the suspended student is caught up academically. Suspension alone just doesn't carry weight with some students and parents."*

Yet the context in which the offense occurs is key. For example, only 12 percent of teachers say out-of-school suspension is an appropriate consequence the first time a student shows “verbal disrespect.” Yet almost two-thirds (64 percent) say OSS is appropriate if a student has been repeatedly disrespectful (and ISS has already been tried). Similarly, only 48 percent of teachers say OSS is the right response for “physical fighting” if a student hasn’t gotten in a fight before. However, that figure increases to 92 percent for students who have repeatedly been involved in fights (Figure 18).

**FIGURE 18. Although they are reluctant to use out-of-school suspension for first-time offenses, many teachers believe it can be appropriate when other measures have failed.**



“

*“I believe in positive reinforcement for all students. However, when behavior is outrageous, I believe there should be consequences.”*

*“I believe some infractions deserve severe consequences, and I believe repeated infractions deserve progressively harsher consequences. Having staff to provide counseling, parent interaction, and alternative disciplinary and remediation requires money. But no one wants to hear the simple answer: train people better, pay people better, create workdays that don’t absolutely wear people down.”*

”

## FINDING 4

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

More than three-quarters of teachers say the majority of students suffer because of “a few persistent troublemakers.” And nearly two-thirds say they have students with chronic discipline problems who “should not be in their classroom.”

On a related note, many teachers say disciplining students with Individualized Education Plans presents special challenges, with two-thirds—including a majority of special-education teachers—saying such students are treated too leniently “even when their behavior has nothing to do with their disability.”

“

*“Last year, my site was held hostage by a small number of students with chronic behavior issues. Many measures were taken to stem the tide, but when you have inconsistent consequences (or no consequences) for the students, parents who blame instead of taking responsibility, and a top-down message that suspensions must be brought down, it makes for a challenging situation.”*

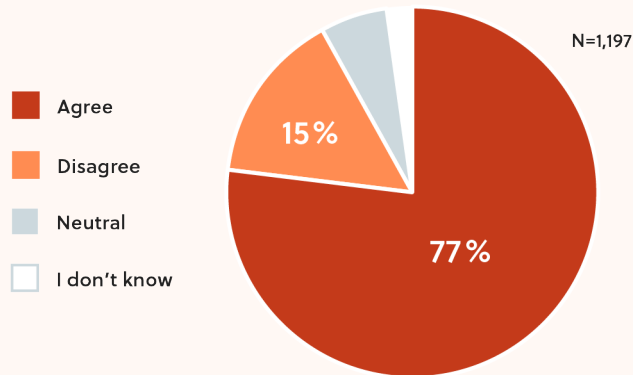
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## 4A

### Most teachers say the majority of students suffer because of a few chronically disruptive peers—some of whom “should not be in their classroom.”

When asked to reflect on the previous school year, more than three-quarters of teachers (77 percent) agreed that “most students suffered because of a few persistent troublemakers” (Figure 19), and almost two-thirds of those in high-poverty schools (64 percent) said they had “chronically disruptive” students who they felt “should not have been in their classroom” (Figure 20).

**FIGURE 19. Based on your experiences at your school last year (2017–18), indicate your agreement with the following statement:**  
*Most students suffered because of a few persistent troublemakers.*

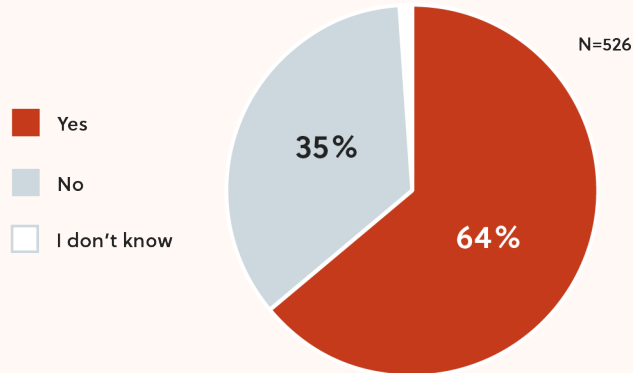


Note: “Agree” includes both strongly and somewhat agree responses. This survey question was replicated with permission from a national survey of middle and high school teachers conducted by Public Agenda in 2004.<sup>20</sup> In that survey, 85 percent of teachers agreed with this statement.

“The majority of students are in school to learn. However, the repeat offenders make the learning environment consistently disruptive and undermine the teacher’s ability to teach and the students’ ability to learn. It is depressing to say the least. For everyone. Including the repeat offenders. It is so very sad. Going to school makes me sad.”

“I’m shocked we don’t have parents of the GOOD kids banging on our school doors demanding to know why THEIR students’ education is suffering because OTHER kids are allowed to continue being little a-holes. And they KNOW they are behaving that way; it’s not all trauma related. Some of them genuinely enjoy testing us adults, and they KNOW there’s a trend to reduce suspensions.”

**FIGURE 20. Did you have any students with chronic discipline problems who you felt should not have been in your [high-poverty] classroom last year (2017–18)?**



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

*"If multiple teachers are struggling with the same student disrupting class, that student shouldn't be in a general ed classroom. I don't think people realize how hard teachers work and how much we put up with. If a student is consistently disrupting the entire class, administration needs to take them out of the class for more than one or two days. We can't do our job correctly if a student can't meet the expectations of the school."*

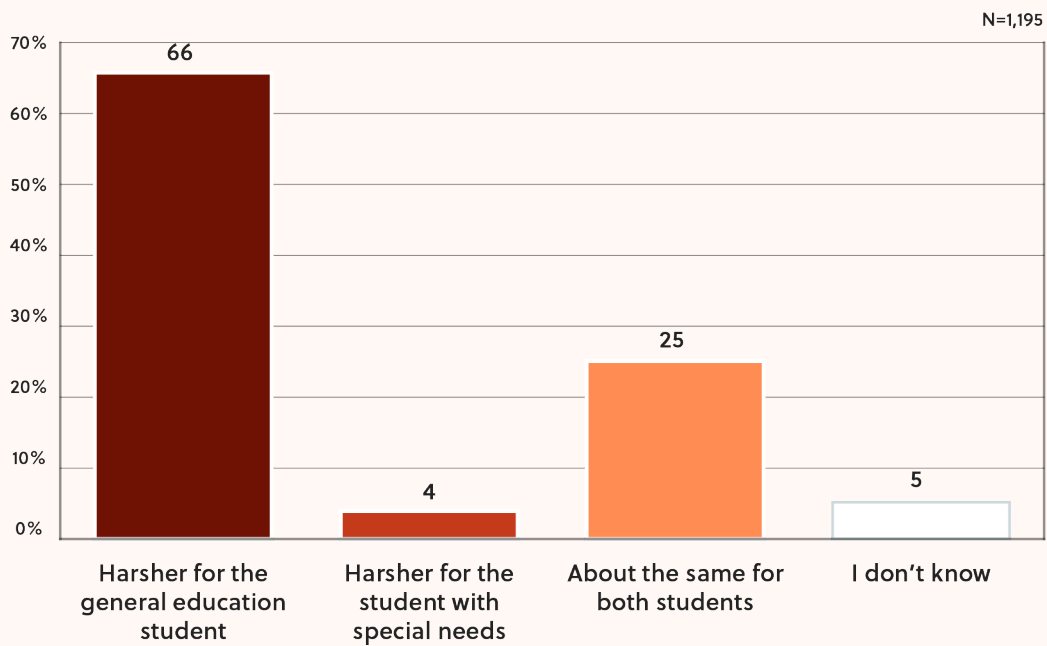
*"When we lost our Behavior Enhancement class, that forced most of the very challenging students back into a general ed class. That is a huge problem—a lack of specially trained teachers to work with those students who struggle emotionally."*

## 4B

## Most teachers say students with Individualized Education Programs are treated too leniently, “even when their misbehavior has nothing to do with the disability.”

Although it’s a sensitive subject, teachers’ responses suggest that the uncomfortable overlap between school discipline and special education deserves more attention—and, perhaps, a more honest discussion. To be clear, many students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are not disruptive, and there are plenty of disruptive students without IEPs. But according to teachers, the overlap between these groups is problematic.<sup>21</sup> For example, roughly two-thirds of teachers say general education students receive harsher consequences than students with IEPs for similar offenses—which could be because the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) stipulates that students with disabilities can’t be suspended or expelled for behavior that is *caused* by their disability (Figure 21).

**FIGURE 21. All else equal, if a student with special needs and a general education student commit the same infraction, is the consequence likely to be:**



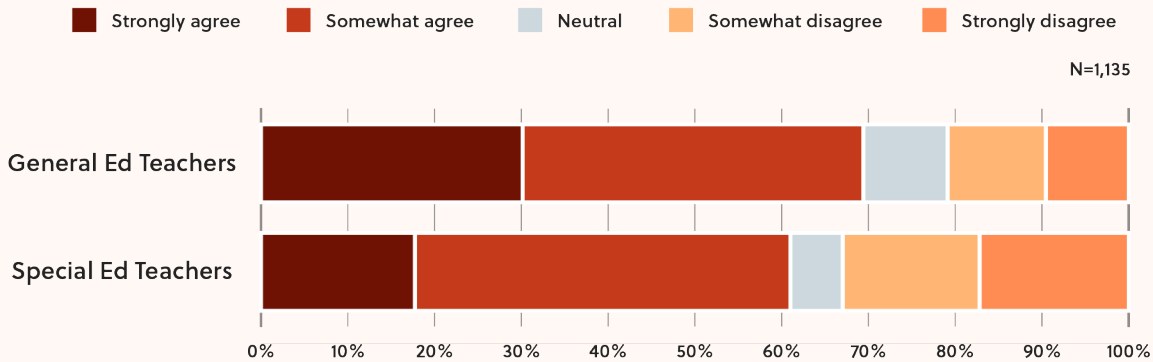
*“By creating and following ridiculous behavior plans for individual students, we are allowing them to think that the world revolves around them. It’s a prison pipeline.”*

Perhaps more surprisingly, however, 69 percent of teachers—including 61 percent of special-education teachers—say students with IEPs are treated too leniently, “even when their behavior has nothing to do with the disability” (Figure 22).<sup>22</sup> And many of teachers’ open-ended responses note the challenges associated with disciplining and/or “mainstreaming” these students.

Obviously, these results identify a complex problem, rather than a workable solution. Still, the overarching conclusion is unavoidable and deserves to be stated explicitly: Between the push to reduce suspensions and expulsions, the push to mainstream potentially disruptive students with IEPs, and the push to close long-standing racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps, teachers and principals in high-poverty schools have been tasked with a mission that is increasingly improbable—if not downright impossible.

**FIGURE 22. To what extent do you agree with the following statement:**

*Students with IEPs were treated too leniently, even when their behavior had nothing to do with their disability.*



Note: This survey question was replicated with permission from a national survey of middle and high school teachers conducted by Public Agenda in 2004.<sup>23</sup> In that survey, teachers’ responses were as follows: 40 percent strongly agreed, 37 percent somewhat agreed, 11 percent somewhat disagreed, 8 percent strongly disagreed, and 4 percent weren’t sure.

“

*“Special education students get away with murder . . . Special education behavior is far and away the largest driver of problems in the general education classroom. Mainstreaming has been a miserable experience.”*

*“Overall, as a special-education teacher, I DON’T agree that some students should be in the regular education classroom, because their behavior completely disrupts the learning environment for others. It’s doing them a disservice to not be receiving more help, and it’s a disservice to other students and teachers that have to put up with it on a regular basis without being properly trained in dealing with behaviors. I am specifically talking about students who are ‘emotionally disturbed.’”*

*“I was in a classroom with several students on IEPs and on specific medications for behavior issues, as well as bipolar disorder and violent tendencies. If these students were on their medications, the day went very smoothly. However, more often than not, they would miss a dose of medicine or intentionally not take it, and the entire day would be a battle to keep control and teach as effectively as possible. I think in these situations, it is unfair to ask the teacher if we have tried “this strategy” or “that strategy” prior to having administration interfere. I know administrators are only following the protocol put forth to them, but there are times when students need to be removed immediately...”*

”

## FINDING 5

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

On average, African American teachers are somewhat more likely to worry that suspensions increase students’ odds of criminal justice involvement, and they are far more likely to believe there is racial bias in how school discipline is carried out. Yet despite the likely costs for students who misbehave—and their belief that disciplinary consequences are racially biased—many African American teachers (including half of those in high-poverty schools) say out-of-school suspensions should be used more often. Similarly, many African American teachers say long-term options such as expulsions and Alternative Learning Centers (ALCs) should be used more often.

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*“Neither positive nor negative consequences are the singular answer. The answer lies in consistent expectations and consistent follow-through when rules are not followed.”*

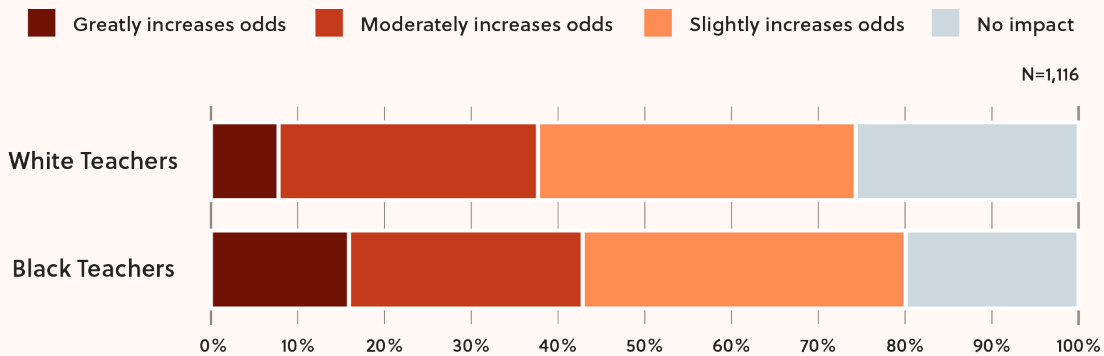
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## 5A

**African American teachers are more likely to believe that suspensions increase students' odds of criminal justice involvement—and far more likely to believe that disciplinary consequences are racially biased.**

When it comes to the impact of suspensions on students' odds of criminal justice involvement, African American and white teachers have broadly similar views. For example, 74 percent of white teachers and 80 percent of African American teachers say getting suspended at least "slightly increases" students' odds of involvement—though about twice as many African American teachers (16 percent) as white teachers (8 percent) say suspensions "greatly increase" those odds (Figure 23).

**FIGURE 23. What impact (if any) do you think getting suspended has on a student's odds of criminal justice involvement?**



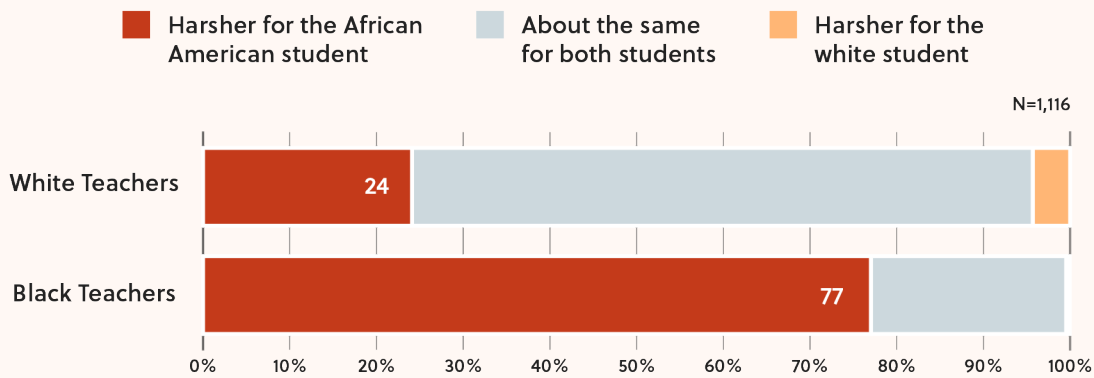
*"OSS does NOT cause criminal activity. Criminals are often given OSS, but that does not cause the criminal action."*

*"I wish there was an effective way to redirect students who have learned how to fail and have been told over and over again that school is not for them."*

*"Students who can't read and don't perform at grade level are more prone to misbehavior. If students experience success, they are less likely to get into trouble. School is the issue. Discipline is a symptom."*

In contrast, the gap between African American teachers' and white teachers' views on the prevalence of racial bias in school discipline is striking—and far larger than the racial gap that we observed for any other question (Figure 24). Overall, approximately three-quarters of African American teachers say African American students are punished more harshly than white students, while nearly as many white teachers say that African American and white students receive similar consequences. Obviously, resolving this disagreement is beyond the scope of our survey (see *Are white teachers more likely to suspend students of color?*).

**FIGURE 24. All else equal, if an African-American student and a white student commit the same infraction (e.g., verbally disrespecting a teacher), is the consequence likely to be:**



“

*“African American boys are punished to the extreme in comparison to other demographics. Everybody knows this is a true statement, but NO ONE does anything about it.”*

*“I am frustrated with the biased/unbiased issue . . . I truly feel we discipline fairly and equally across the spectrum of students on my campus. And as a teacher, I feel like it has been put to us that we are the problem because we are racist when that could not be farther from the truth . . . It is counterproductive and puts all teachers off.”*

*“If a student whose parent is an active and vocal member of the PTA has a child who misbehaves, that child is less likely to receive a punishment commensurate with the crime. If a child who misbehaves has a parent that is not active or visible, sometimes those punishments exceed the weight of the crime.”*

*“There has been little consistency in discipline in any of the schools that I have taught in. It is not always racial, gender, or special-ed designation that led to the bias. Often it was just that an administrator liked the student or liked the parents or was afraid of the parents.”*

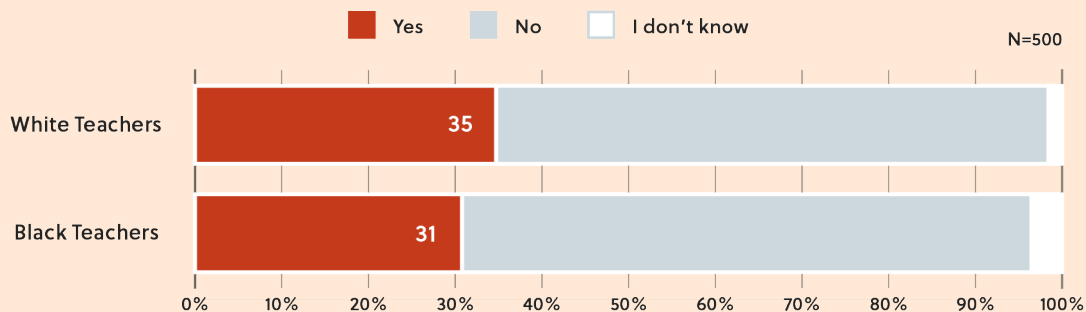
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## Are white teachers more likely to suspend students of color?

At least one study has found that white teachers are somewhat more likely to suspend African American students than their African American colleagues (controlling for poverty and other student and teacher characteristics).<sup>24</sup> For what it's worth, 35 percent of white teachers in high-poverty schools say they recommended or personally suspended a student in the 2017-18 school year; that figure was 31 percent for similarly situated African American teachers. However, this difference is not statistically significant, and the survey didn't ask teachers about the race of the suspended student (Figure 25).

Although discussions of racial disproportionality often focus on implicit bias and a perceived lack of cultural competence, it's important to recognize that other factors may be as or more important. For example, studies show that white teachers in high-poverty schools have higher turnover than African American teachers.<sup>25</sup> So as a group, they may be less experienced, and their classroom management skills, as well as their relationships with students and parents, may be weaker. In other words, although it's certainly possible that white teachers are (on average) more biased, it's also possible that other factors make misbehavior more likely in white teachers' classrooms (or make suspension a more likely outcome when it occurs).

**FIGURE 25. Did you recommend that a student be suspended or personally suspend a student last school year (2017–18)?**



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

“

*“Minority (black) students are always accused and receive harsher punishments much more often than their white peers. Working in a predominantly white school, I see that other minority students are never accused or punished in the way black students are.”*

*“I feel that these issues are systemic. They are tied to racial and ethnic tensions that date back decades. I also feel that lack of connection to the community and students' families exacerbates the issues.”*

*“I, personally, understand the difference between bias and reality. Our administration really took a back seat and turned it around on us . . . 'What have you done to cause the student to act like this?'”*

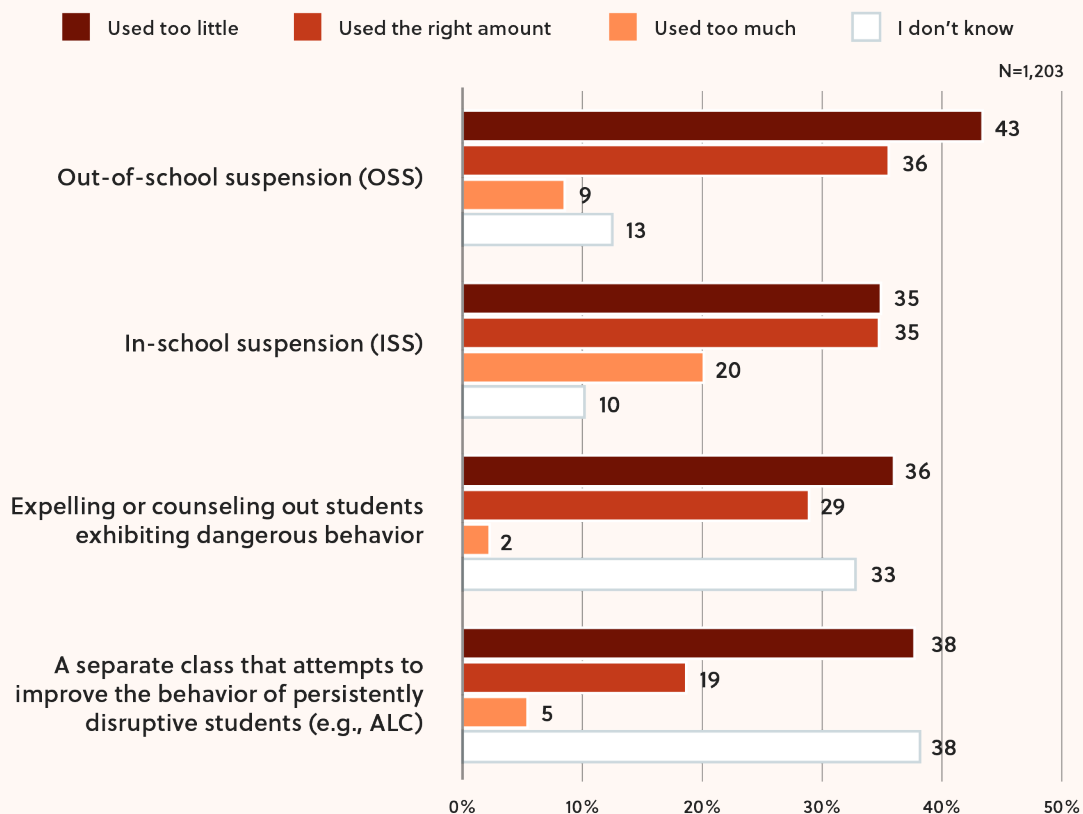
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## 5B

**Regardless of race, many teachers say suspensions, as well as long-term options such as Alternative Learning Centers and expulsions, should be used more often.**

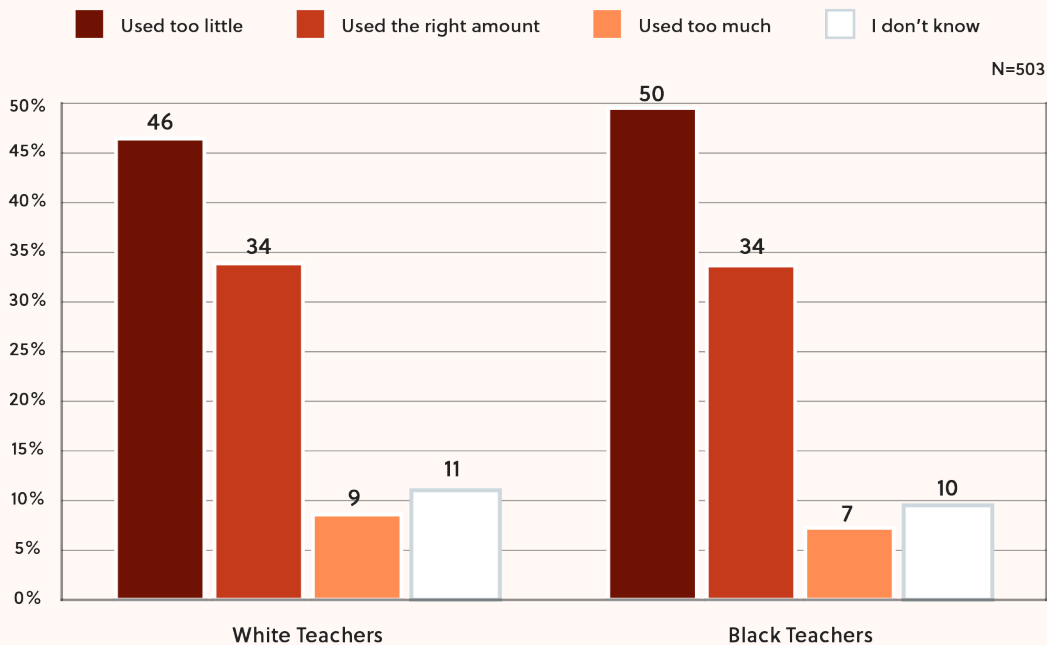
Despite the likely costs associated with suspensions, many teachers say OSS, as well as other disciplinary tools that remove disruptive students from the classroom, should be used more often. For example, 43 percent of teachers say OSS is used “too little,” while just 9 percent say it is used “too much.” Similarly, more than one-third of teachers say expulsions (36 percent) and alternative classroom settings (38 percent) aren’t used enough, while almost none say they are used too much—though significant percentages of teachers selected “I don’t know” for these questions, perhaps reflecting a sense of conflict or internal discord when it comes to the necessity or effectiveness of these measures (Figure 26).

**FIGURE 26. In general, do you think your school used the following responses to student behavior problems too much, too little, or about the right amount?**



Notably, pro-suspension sentiment is particularly strong among African American teachers—despite their belief that disciplinary consequences are racially biased—and teachers in high-poverty schools. For example, 50 percent of African American teachers and 46 percent of white teachers in high-poverty schools say OSS should be used more often, versus 7 percent and 9 percent who say it is used too much (Figure 27). Similarly, 44 percent of African American teachers and 41 percent of white teachers in high-poverty schools say Alternative Learning Centers should be used more often, versus 7 and 6 percent, respectively, who say they are used “too much” (Figure 28). And similar percentages say that more students should be expelled or counseled out (Figure 29).

**FIGURE 27. In general, do you think your [high-poverty] school used out-of-school suspensions too much, too little, or about the right amount?**



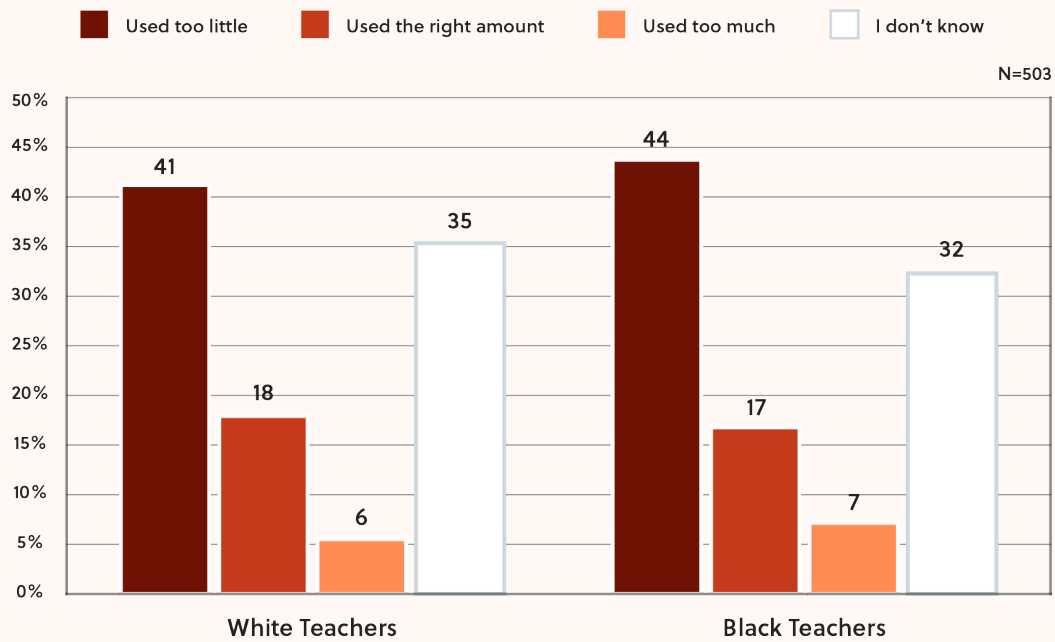
Note: Sample includes only respondents teaching in schools where more than 75 percent of students were eligible for federally-subsidized lunches.

*“OSS is completely ineffective. I have had students purposely act out to try to get suspended so they can avoid school. It is far better to get counselors and parents involved to help the child see the need to be in school.”*

*“I answered ‘I don’t know’ for a lot of questions because I think the issue is quite complex. My gut says that we should be addressing underlying issues rather than telling a child not to come to school for a week.”*

*“Either we want higher test scores or we want lower suspension rates, but we can’t have both.”*

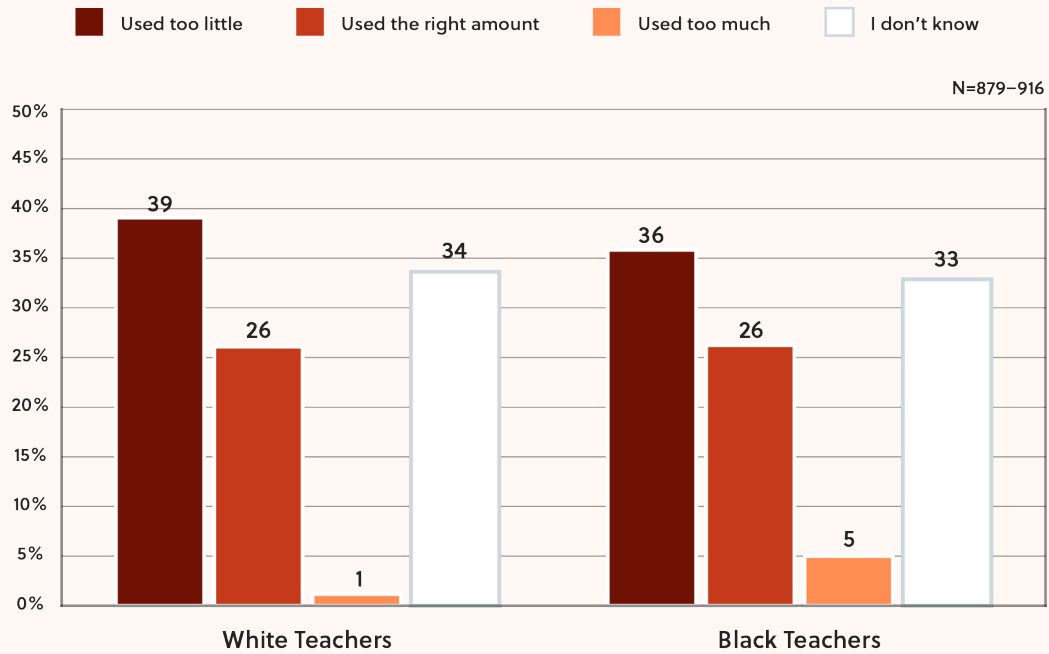
**FIGURE 28. In general, do you think your [high-poverty] school used alternative learning centers ("ALC") too much, too little, or the right amount?**



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

*"It is almost impossible to deal effectively with the diverse needs of 34 students, especially with students who have behavioral issues and need additional discipline and attention. Either the better-behaved students get less attention because the students with behavioral issues take up more time and focus, or the students with behavioral issues get less attention."*

**FIGURE 29. In general, do you think your [high-poverty] school used expulsions too much, too little, or the right amount?**



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

*"I appreciate the intellectual arguments on both sides of this conversation: I understand that students may have past trauma to explain their behavior and that we should try and address the root causes, and I also understand that one student's misbehavior shouldn't disrupt the learning of others. But I don't have enough patience for consistent misbehavior, and I have yet to see anyone propose a solution that is practical and works. And by practical, I mean . . . I'm a teacher. I know and love my content, and I want to focus my energy on helping students learn. I am NOT a psychologist or a police officer. I cannot be expected to police or counsel these extremely troubled and defiant children."*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

1. When it comes to school discipline, federal and state policymakers should respect the principle of non-maleficence: First, do no harm.
2. Districts should revise their codes of conduct to give teachers and principals greater discretion with regard to suspensions.
3. Instead of fixating on the rate at which disruptive students are removed from schools and classrooms, advocates for these students should focus on improving the environments to which they are likely to be removed.
4. Additional resources should be put toward hiring more teaching assistants and mental health professionals in high-poverty schools, rather than training teachers in largely unproven alternatives that may do more harm than good.

“

*“In-house and out-of-school suspension are effective deterrents for 90 percent of students, but the other 10 percent need additional support and just cycle between severe consequences. For these students, we need more mental health services and counseling.”*

”

## 1

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

Because sensibly balancing the interests of a minority of students against those of the majority is impossible from hundreds or thousands of miles away, federal and state policymakers should think twice before wading into the moral bracken of school discipline.

Although we don't doubt the good intentions of discipline advocates, the fact that three-quarters of teachers say greater tolerance for misbehavior is at least partly responsible for the official decline in suspensions at their school provides little assurance that newer approaches are working as intended. And the widespread underreporting that many teachers say they observe is yet another reminder of the dangers associated with arbitrary quotas and largely unfunded mandates.

Obviously, the federal Office for Civil Rights has a duty to intervene in cases where students believe they have been subject to discrimination, and these results in no way negate that vital function. But they do underscore the importance of making teachers and principals—not distant bureaucrats—the default arbiters of school discipline.

Although the Obama Administration's controversial discipline guidance was officially rescinded last year, nine states are still using suspension and/or expulsion rates in their school accountability or improvement systems (Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Kansas, Minnesota, Rhode Island, Washington, and West Virginia), and another twenty (plus the District of Columbia) are using them to inform continuous improvement efforts across all schools.<sup>26</sup> As a result, it's likely that the problems associated with top-down discipline "reform" are still with us in many places—and will remain so until policymakers find a better approach.

“

*"Having taught for many years at different schools with different grade levels and demographics, it's hard to come up with one truth about discipline. I think each school and community is unique."*

*"It appears that schools are less likely to suspend students for behaviors that would have warranted such a consequence in years past. In my opinion, this is primarily due to . . . wanting to keep kids in school, so as not to have to admit there is a problem we either need help with or can't handle and so as not to inconvenience the parents or the voters."*

”

## 2

***Districts should revise their codes of conduct to give teachers and principals greater discretion with regard to suspensions.***

As anyone who has actually worked in a classroom understands, context is everything. For example, there is a huge difference between an impromptu scuffle and a premeditated assault. And of course, there are as many types of “verbal disrespect” as there are high school students.

Consequently, it is almost impossible to devise a universal standard that is appropriate for every situation, and trying to impose one may do serious damage insofar as it undermines teachers’ and principals’ authority, forces them to make fundamentally unreasonable trade-offs, and increases the incentive to engage in underreporting.

Ultimately, establishing and maintaining basic order so that students can learn—not to mention a positive and inviting classroom culture—is an interpersonal challenge that does not lend itself to technocratic solutions. Thus, when it comes to school discipline, it makes more sense to rely on teachers’ and administrators’ professional judgment than to second-guess or micromanage them. After all, they are the responsible point of contact between school and student. Their desire to help students is the reason they took the job.

“

*“The school system’s discipline policies don’t support the classroom teacher. I have observed students with chronic behavior problems repeat poor behaviors with little consequence. It seems at times that administration’s hands are tied . . . The principals are evaluated on the number of suspensions they have a year. To avoid negative evaluations, many principals will not suspend a student, even if the infraction warrants suspension.”*

*“OSS has been used less because of the extensive paperwork required by administrators. It is just easier to do an ISS, even if it warranted more.”*

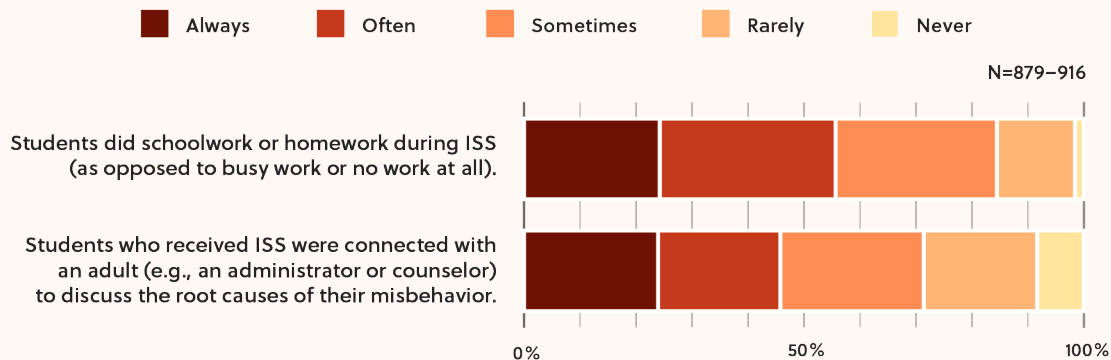
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## 3

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

With rare exceptions, advocates of discipline reform have fixated on the rates at which disruptive students are removed from school and class, with little consideration for the consequences of such fixation. For example, the decline in OSS has often led to an increase in ISS. Yet teachers' responses suggest that the quality of most students' ISS experience is poor, with roughly half saying that students "always" or "often" do schoolwork or homework in ISS and less than half saying they are "always" or "often" connected with an adult to discuss their misbehavior (Figure 30).

**FIGURE 30. Based on how your school implemented in-school suspension last year (2017–18), how often do you think each of the following happened?**



Note: Sample includes only those teachers who indicated that their school used some form of ISS.

*“Even if an ISS is issued, there’s no one watching or holding the student accountable for working on school-related work, staying off their phone and games, etc.”*

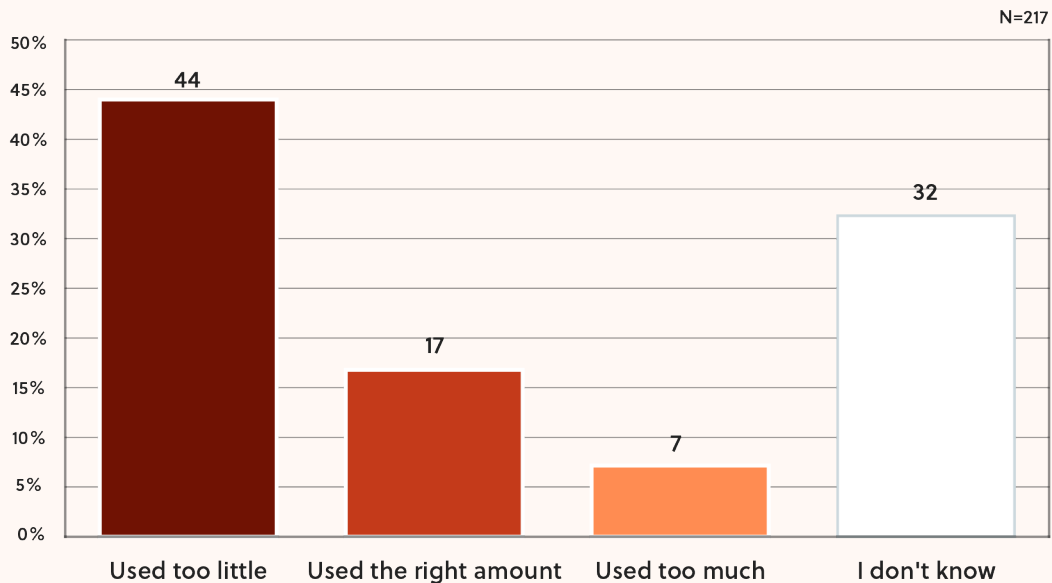
*“The effectiveness of ISS is COMPLETELY dependent on how it is run. An effective ISS needs components that include listening to the offender, counseling, NO FUN, and classroom work.”*

*“Discipline is not consistent at all. Teachers fail to document discipline or call parents to address behavior problems. Most incidents are left unaddressed and simply ignored. Many of the teachers in this school will send a student to ISS (there’s no protocol) without parent or admin contact. I’ve talked to students that have been sent to ISS for putting their head down on their desk.”*

Although replacing OSS with ISS may look better on paper, it’s not clear that it’s preferable in practice (especially when the potential costs for other students are taken into account). And if we actually want to connect the most chronically disruptive students with adults who can help them, there may be economies of scale associated with sending them to a well-staffed Alternative Learning Center—which would likely resonate with the 44 percent of African American teachers in high-poverty schools who think ALC isn’t used enough (Figure 31).

Depending on the district and the situation, the ideal ALC might be structured in any number of ways. But the principle is clear: Rather than bouncing back and forth between a regular classroom and an ill-functioning ISS (or the street), students with chronic behavior problems should be connected with the services they need in whatever setting is best suited to the task. For example, those receiving lengthier suspensions (or outright expulsions) might be automatically referred to a district-run ALC that is physically separated from the school of origin and appropriately staffed with social workers, mental health professionals, and appropriately trained educators—along the lines of what New York City has long offered (or at the very least, districts could provide this as an option for students that teachers and administrators believe would most benefit from that setting).<sup>27</sup>

**FIGURE 31. Most African American teachers in high-poverty schools say Alternative Learning Centers should be used more often.**



Note: Sample includes only African American teachers working in schools where more than 75 percent of students are eligible for federal lunch subsidies.

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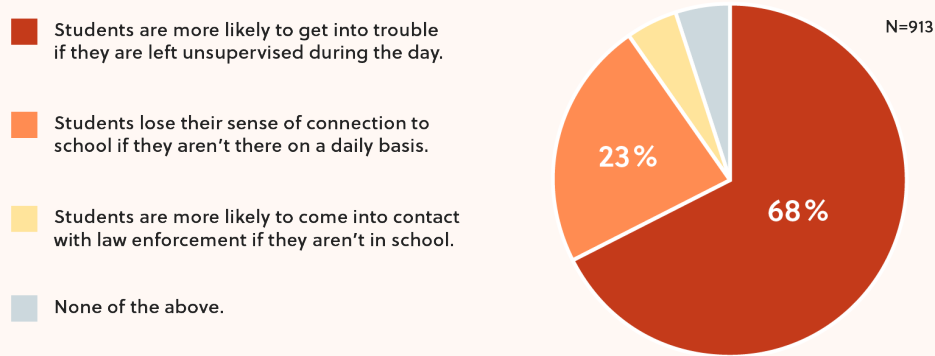
*“The chronically disruptive students should go to an alternate school or center so that students that want an education can receive the best education possible.”*

*“It would be incredibly helpful to have more alternative settings for students who struggle emotionally.”*

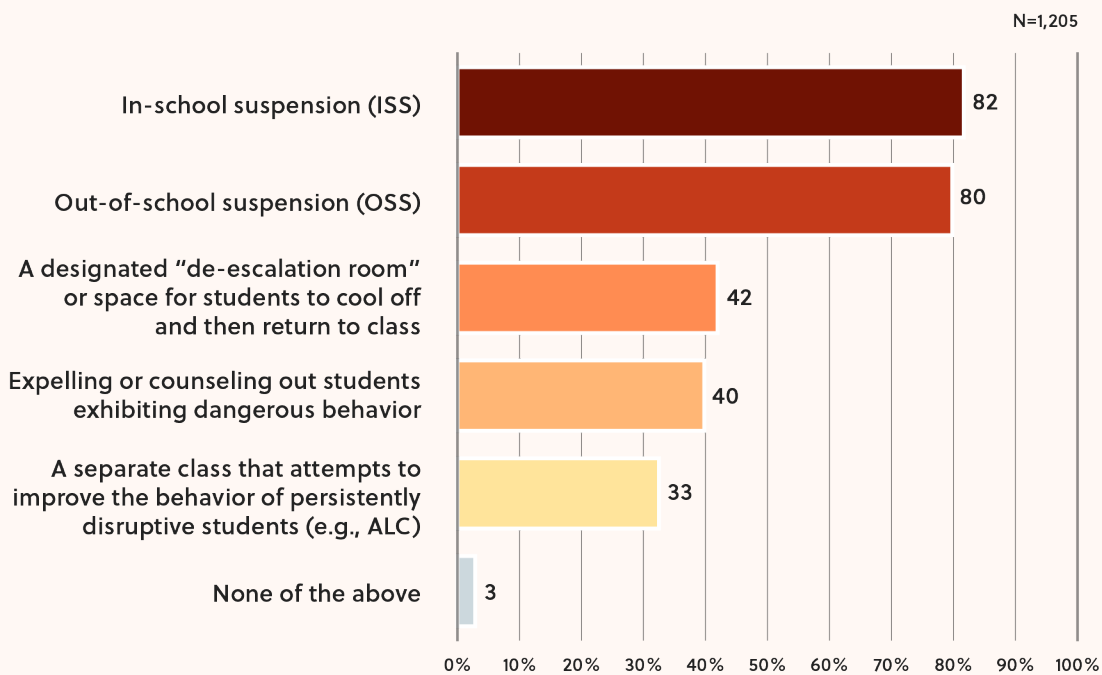
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Though not without its own complications (or cheap), such an approach strikes us as a reasonable compromise between the obvious need to protect the learning environment in general education settings and the understandable desire to make sure students aren't left unsupervised during the day—an outcome teachers overwhelmingly agree is less than ideal (Figure 32). To be clear, this is only one of many possible approaches. And realistically, ALCs probably can't replace OSS or ISS completely. But if we're trying to craft a more sustainable set of solutions to the discipline problem, we need a more realistic and appropriately funded set of alternatives. As it stands, teachers are far more likely to say their schools use OSS and ISS than other forms of "exclusionary discipline" that might be preferable in some cases (Figure 33).

**FIGURE 32. What is the most important reason that OSS increases students' odds of criminal justice involvement?**



**FIGURE 33. Which of the following did your school use as a response to student behavior problems last year (2017–18)?**



## 4

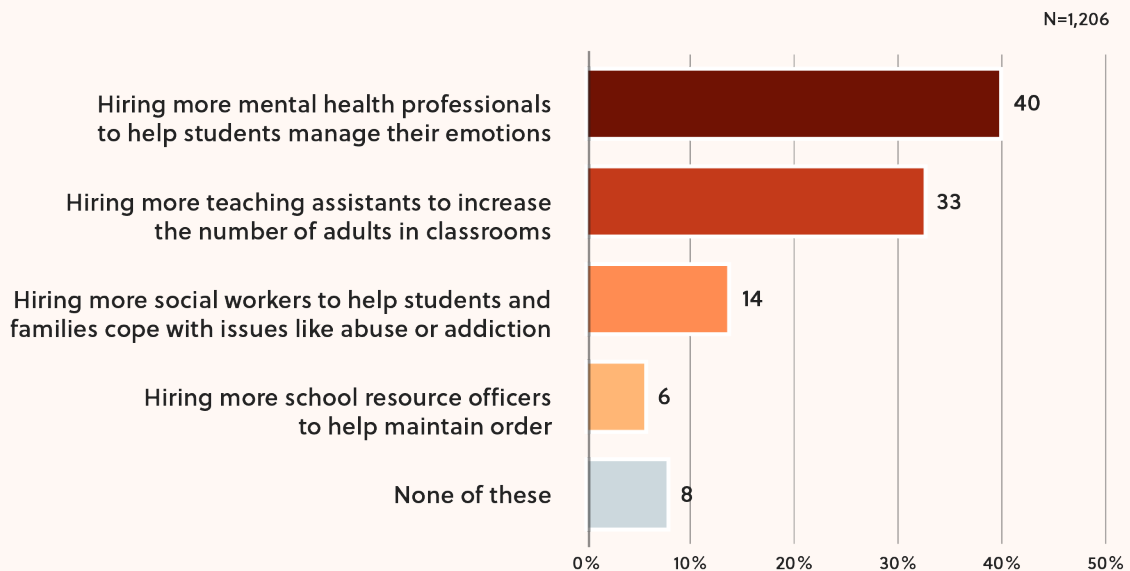
***Additional resources should be put toward hiring more teaching assistants and mental health professionals in high-poverty schools, rather than training teachers in largely unproven alternatives that may do more harm than good.***

Although the appeal of newer disciplinary approaches such as restorative justice is understandable, their track record in the education sector is decidedly spotty, in part because what appears to work in one place often fails to deliver the hoped-for benefits when tried somewhere else—with different students, different staff, different leadership, and different resources and constraints.

Similarly, the track record of district-run professional development is abysmal when it comes to discipline (or virtually any other topic), in part because it is offered at the district level rather than the school or classroom level. (Imagine, for a moment, that you are a veteran teacher in your district’s “toughest” high school. How would you feel about attending a district-wide training in restorative justice?)

Precisely what dollar amount constitutes an “adequate” investment in the education and care of students with behavioral challenges is a question no survey can answer. However, when and where additional resources are available or existing resources can be redirected, the priority should be ensuring that high-poverty schools and associated alternative settings are well staffed with individuals who have the requisite skills, knowledge, and passion for helping troubled and at-risk youth succeed. And yes, we need more of those individuals—and according to teachers, more mental health professionals and teaching assistants in particular (Figure 34).

**FIGURE 34. Suppose that your school had additional funds to put toward addressing student behavior. Which of the following do you think would be the best use of those funds?**



Ultimately, every dollar spent on a “promising” new approach is a dollar that could have been used to hire more mental health professionals, social workers, or teaching assistants in high-poverty classrooms. For example, recent reporting suggests that the District of Columbia is planning to spend at least \$1 million on restorative justice trainings and technical assistance.<sup>28</sup> But for that same amount, it could hire thirty more teaching assistants for the coming school year—that’s one for every middle school and high school in the District, including the charters—or, alternatively, another mental health professional and social worker for each of the district’s twelve alternative and/or citywide high schools.

No, that wouldn’t be “enough.” But that’s no excuse for wasting precious resources that could be put to better use. Arguably, the clearest lesson from teachers’ responses is that school discipline is too complex to be solved with any single approach. So perhaps we should stop trying. After all, most teachers have years of firsthand experience with the complexities of school discipline.

What makes us think we shouldn’t listen to them?

“

*“Educators are frequently asked to be social workers and counselors.”*

*“I have 29 students and NO other adults in my class all day. Another adult presence would be amazing!”*

*“There was a question that asked: What can a school do to improve discipline? I answered hiring more social workers. If hiring a Dean to enforce discipline was an answer choice, I would have put that first.”*

*“In-house and out-of-school suspension are effective deterrents for 90 percent of students, but the other 10 percent need additional support and just cycle between severe consequences. For these students, we need more mental health services and counseling.”*

*“My school works hard to consistently address behavior concerns. Even with the support of administration, I feel that we are understaffed in addressing behavioral issues, which sometimes results in chronic behavior issues remaining in the classroom.”*

*“Some students were homeless and had little support from parents. Some parents need parenting classes. Often these kids have had problems due to their life situation that they didn’t ask for. We are limited in what we can do for them. Honestly, schools need more funding for social workers on campus, even in elementary school.”*

*“A couple of high schools I taught at were in desperate need of full-time mental health professionals to support students whose parents couldn’t afford it or didn’t know how to find the appropriate resources and help. For these students, there is no amount of ISS or OSS that would have helped. They just needed one-on-one professional help. Suspensions may have helped students who had one infraction, but the schools that I worked in did not have a long-term solution or next step (at least from my perspective) for students who repeatedly committed the same offense.”*

*“I am fortunate to work in a school where parents, students, teachers, and staff work collaboratively and respectfully to help each child succeed. I am able to request support from the social workers present in our building when I see destructive patterns of behavior. We do not use suspensions (ISS or OSS) as a consistent consequence. Rather, we try to establish a secure and positive relationship between home and school. Our students are not perfect, but there is an underlying trust. Often, within our population, we find that behavior problems are linked to learning disabilities or a lack of structure at home. We try to problem solve rather than punish.”*

”

# APPENDIX A

## Technical Appendix

This appendix provides a description of the sample design, the distribution of the sampling frame, and the estimation of the weights to produce a sample representative of the population of interest.

### Sample Design

This survey was drawn from the RAND American Teacher Panel (ATP). The ATP is a representative sample of K–12 public school teachers in the U.S., produced using probability-based recruitment methods. More information about the panel is available at <https://www.rand.org/education/projects/aep.html>.

The sample was designed to select a nationally representative group of white and African American teachers in U.S. grade 3–12 classrooms, along with an oversample of teachers in NYC. Because the research team had a particular interest in teachers in NYC, the sample was stratified to obtain responses from as many white and African American teachers in NYC as possible; hence, all eligible white and African American teachers from the sampling frame were contacted to participate in the survey. For other states, samples of white and African American teachers were selected.<sup>29</sup>

The research team was further interested in stratifying the sample by schools by percent FRL per the National Center for Education Statistics' categorization and by grade bands 3–5, 6–8, and 9–12. Anticipating at least a 55 percent response rate, RAND selected a sample of 2,077 teachers to produce 1,219 completed surveys. Table A-1 shows the breakdown of the sample by strata.

**Table A-1. Sampling and Respondents by Strata**

Race of Teacher / School Composition	Grade Band	Sampled		Responded	
		NYC	Other	NYC	Other
White / >75% FRL	Grades 3–5	46	142	24	85
	Grades 6–8	43	142	26	81
	Grades 9–12	61	141	42	88
White / <75% FRL	Grades 3–5	78	142	45	88
	Grades 6–8	55	142	28	94
	Grades 9–12	43	142	24	89
Black / >75% FRL	Grades 3–5	15	142	9	66
	Grades 6–8	18	166	14	97
	Grades 9–12	18	92	10	48
Black / <75% FRL	Grades 3–5	4	142	3	82
	Grades 6–8	8	142	4	76
	Grades 9–12	11	142	14	82
Total		400	1,677	243	976

As of 2017, the ATP provides state-level estimates in twenty-five states. Table A-2 shows the number of teachers in the sampling frame, the active teachers participating in surveys, and the teachers who were eligible to participate in this survey (i.e., active teachers who reported teaching grades 3–12 and being either white or African American). “Active” teachers are those who previously participated in an ATP survey. Only active teachers were eligible for this report, as the race/ethnicity of other teachers (who joined the panel but did not participate in a previous survey) was not known. These counts reflect teacher information collected for the sampling frame and from surveys administered with the ATP.<sup>30</sup>

**Table A-2. Number of Teachers in the ATP by State**

State	Panel Total	Active Teachers	Eligible Teachers
Alabama	3,108	871	463
Arizona	3,102	999	605
California	3,758	731	347
Colorado	3,089	903	546
Delaware	3,009	623	352
Florida	2,948	866	454
Georgia	2,760	795	484
Illinois	2,932	984	616
Kentucky	3,100	905	553
Louisiana	3,792	680	394
Massachusetts	3,052	754	466
Maryland	3,120	924	509
Missouri	3,144	910	543
North Carolina	2,817	1,165	648
New Mexico	3,975	742	336
New York State	4,873	871	436
New York City	3,528	760	402
Oklahoma	3,048	1,059	546
South Carolina	3,121	1,027	589
Tennessee	2,996	1,046	618
Texas	2,601	670	331
Virginia	2,976	919	598
West Virginia	3,151	1,021	663
All Other States	10,682	4,031	3,037
Total	84,682	24,256	14,536

Because teachers in the sampling frame were selected using probability samples, and to avoid extreme design effects in the analytic sample, the sample of 2,077 teachers was also selected using probability sampling. In this way, the final probabilities of selection were similar across participants, producing a sample that closely resembled a random sample design.

While probability sampling was conducted for most sampling cells, census sampling (take all) was conducted in cells with limited sample (such as African American teachers in NYC) in order to maximize the yield. With a particular participant  $i$  having a probability  $p_{fi}$  of being in the sampling frame (a known probability from the ATP), outside of the strata where all observations in the sampling frame are included (e.g., African American teachers in NYC), we selected the probability  $p_{si}$  of sampling from the frame so that

$$p_{si} / p_{fi} \approx \text{constant} \quad (1)$$

where the constant is the same across all participants. Even though the strictly equal equation has a unique solution, for some participants—especially within small strata—the solution can lead to a probability greater than 1; as such, adjustments were made for all the selection probabilities to be reasonable.

## Weights

To provide a weighted sample similar to the population of white and African American teachers in grade 3–12 classrooms in the United States, we created weights as the product of the following: the weight of selection into the ATP sampling frame, the weight of selection into the TBFI sample, and the survey response weight. To assure representativeness, the panel weights were first calibrated to match known national-level totals for specific characteristics based on the National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data and Schools and Staffing Survey reports.

These included both school-level (e.g., school size, level, urbanicity, sociodemographics) and individual-level (e.g., gender, education, experience) characteristics. The inverse of the selection probability  $p_{si}$  was used as the sample selection weight. The response weights were estimated by modeling the likelihood  $p_{ri}$  of a selected participant responding to the survey, conditional on the school- and individual-level characteristics of teachers. For parsimony, a variable selection method was used to choose the model that best fit the data. To reduce potentially extreme weight values that could have a larger-than-desired influence on estimates produced with these data, the weights were trimmed at the 95th percentile. In total, about 60 of 1,208 weights were trimmed, and all of those cases were outside of NYC.

The final weight was estimated as

$$\text{Weight} = \text{Calibrated} (1 / p_{fi}) \times 1 / p_{si} \times 1 / p_{ri} \quad (2)$$

In Table A-3, we present the distribution of the weights for the overall data, as well as the three subgroups (grade bands). In Table A-4, we show how applying these weights leads to a more nationally representative sample of teachers.

**Table A-3. Distribution of the Sample Weights**

Overall				
State		NYC	Other	Total
Size		243	976	1,219
Design Effects	No Trim	1.388	1.099	1.393
	Trim 95%	1.316	1.045	1.369
Weight Distribution	Mean	5.8	48.2	36.8
	Min	0.4	22.6	0.1
	Q1	3.4	40.3	8.7
	Median	5.0	41.9	42.8
	Q3	7.5	55.6	47.8
	90th percentile	9.7	63.7	65.7
	95th percentile	13.0	67.7	72.7
	99th percentile	18.7	124.7	86.2
	Max	20.1	137.5	137.5

Grades 3–5				
State		NYC	Other	Total
Size		81	321	402
Design Effects	No Trim	1.298	1.047	1.239
	Trim 95%	1.203	1.036	1.231
Weight Distribution	Mean	6.3	45.3	40.3
	Min	0.4	37.9	0.4
	Q1	4.0	39.6	38.9
	Median	6.2	41.0	44.2
	Q3	8.1	45.0	46.8
	90th percentile	9.3	60.0	64.8
	95th percentile	10.8	67.0	73.3
	99th percentile	17.1	78.5	82.2
	Max	20.1	79.4	86.7

**Table A-3. Distribution of the Sample Weights (cont'd)**

Grades 6–8				
State		NYC	Other	Total
Size		72	348	420
Design Effects	No Trim	1.539	1.18	1.559
	Trim 95%	1.374	1.055	1.501
Weight Distribution	Mean	5.0	49.2	32.7
	Min	0.4	22.6	0.4
	Q1	2.4	40.0	6.2
	Median	4.1	41.0	40.6
	Q3	6.4	54.7	46.3
	90th percentile	8.4	63.6	61.3
	95th percentile	11.8	69.8	70.8
	99th percentile	19.4	135.8	85.8
	Max	19.4	137.5	137.5
Grades 9–12				
State		NYC	Other	Total
Size		90	307	397
Design Effects	No Trim	1.362	1.052	1.409
	Trim 95%	1.331	1.037	1.391
Weight Distribution	Mean	6.0	50.9	37.6
	Min	0.5	37.9	0.1
	Q1	3.6	41.2	8.7
	Median	4.9	49.3	42.9
	Q3	7.8	58.7	53.9
	90th percentile	11.0	64.3	66.9
	95th percentile	13.4	66.4	72.5
	99th percentile	16.1	85.8	89.2
	Max	17.1	95.4	114.3

**Table A-4. Representativeness of the Sample by Teacher Characteristic**

Variable	Characteristic	Estimate for Grade 3–12 Black and White Teacher Population	Weighted Sample	Unweighted Sample
Grade Level*	Grades 3–5	41.0%	38.3%	32.8%
	Grades 6–8	35.3%	27.0%	35.6%
	Grades 9–12	36.6%	34.8%	36.3%
Gender	Female	36.7%	29.2%	77.2%
	Male	63.3%	70.8%	22.8%
School Poverty	<25% FRL	21.5%	12.3%	10.8%
	26–50% FRL	29.6%	19.6%	16.7%
	50–75% FRL	27.2%	29.2%	27.8%
	>76% FRL	21.7%	38.8%	44.8%
Urbanicity	City	26.8%	36.0%	47.0%
	Rural	22.2%	17.4%	16.5%
	Suburban	39.9%	37.2%	28.7%
	Town	11.1%	9.4%	7.9%
*Grade levels are not mutually exclusive as some teachers teach multiple grades and some of these teachers are therefore assigned to multiple categories.				

## APPENDIX B

## Optional Survey Question Responses

Listed below are the complete set of responses from teachers who chose to complete the last, open-ended question on the survey. It read, "Anything else you'd like to tell us about your experiences with or views on school discipline? (Optional)." To aid in interpretation, we organized the responses by "theme."

### ***Verbal Disrespect***

- "Over the course of my career, disrespect for adults on campus has grown. Is it societal? That is a huge factor. When the profession is disrespected as a whole, it's only logical that children are learning that it's alright to treat teachers as society does."
- "Over the last 23 years of teaching, the disrespect that students show has become more prevalent. There have always been students who would show disrespect, but now more of them will, and many parents are supportive of this behavior by their child."
- "Not last school year but the previous year I had such a terrible year with misbehaving students that I did consider leaving my profession. It was my first year teaching XX graders, we had a transition with a new Associate Principal coming on then shortly after our Principal had to take a hiatus, so it was a time of turmoil in leadership. The students were awful to me. I would cry in my car some days."

### ***Physical Fighting***

- "Unruly students are the only factor that makes me feel like leaving the profession."
- "Not only did I consider quitting teaching after XX years of teaching, I did quit. The stress level is incredible . . . I am now in the private sector. I don't make as much money, but I was working for peanuts anyway."
- "I retired because I couldn't take the stress. I could handle my classroom, but the school environment was horrible. Sometimes, I was breaking up three fights a day, every day of the week. Admin. kept changing the rules and not telling the teachers. And they did not enforce the rules we had."

### ***Assault***

- "One of my goals for last year was not to get hurt."
- "I wish the Administrators would have teachers' backs. I was physically assaulted by a student, and all the Admins did was pull him out of my class for three days. He is still in my class."

## Disorderly or Unsafe Environment

- “The school system's discipline policies don't support the classroom teacher. I have observed students with chronic behavior problems repeat poor behaviors with little consequence. It seems at times that administration's hands are tied . . . The principals are evaluated on the number of suspensions they have a year. To avoid negative evaluations many principals will not suspend a student even if the infraction warrants suspension.”
- “Classroom discipline was a major challenge for me last school year. I felt that I did not have a voice to address my concerns. I also felt that appropriate action to maintain overall discipline was sorely lacking. I did not feel supported. A student threatened to KILL me. NOTHING was done. The matter was NEVER addressed. I was concerned about some of the students in the room as well as myself. I was made to feel that I was the problem.”
- “The lack of support by administration is causing teachers to leave the classroom. Inconsistent discipline is causing students to have no respect for administrators, so if you have trouble managing your classroom you literally have no support. Administration refuses to help teachers with poor classroom management. Students feel like they run the school, and honestly they do at my school . . . Teachers need support! We are exhausted!”
- “Discipline has gone downhill. With the new laws, more students are staying in class and then disrupting the learning environment. Consequences are not handed out quickly enough, and students refuse to serve after-school detentions. They are not held accountable any more. The lack of control/discipline in the schools has had me thinking about other career choices. I signed up to be a teacher, not to constantly manage behavior and deal with such disrespectful young people...”

## Inconsistency

- “In order to have effective classroom discipline one must be fair, firm, and consistent.”
- “Administrators and teachers need to be on the same page when it comes to discipline.”
- “School discipline works best when everyone knows what consequences there are and the same infraction gets the same consequence every time.”
- “Administrators in our district have far too many responsibilities and an enormous number of students to address. However, our admin does not specifically address the rules at the beginning of each year with the student population, and they do not follow through with the rules they do set.”
- “Part of the problem is that discipline is not enforced equally by administrators, but another part of the problem is that it is inconsistent among teachers and other staff members as well. Even when policies are clearly stated, there are enough teachers who do not follow them that the students don't think they have to be followed in any class.”
- “The inconsistency is one of the biggest issues, followed by administration's lack of follow-up . . . teachers are often handling issues in their classroom that should have been escalated to administration because administration will often do nothing other than have a quick conversation with the student, no matter the severity of the infraction.”
- “Discipline is not consistent at all. Teachers fail to document discipline or call parents to address behavior problems. Most incidents are left unaddressed and simply ignored. Many of the teachers in this school will send a student to ISS (there's no protocol) without parent or admin contact. I've talked to students that have been sent to ISS for putting their head down on their desk.”

## Lack of Accountability

- “Administration needs to be more consistent and hold students and parents more accountable!”
- “There are very little consequences for student misbehavior . . . Students have learned this and know they can get away with anything.”
- “At times I feel students are not held accountable for their actions, and that is teaching them nothing about serving after graduation in the job world.”
- “I believe in positive reinforcement for all students. However, when behavior is outrageous, I believe there should be consequences. It disturbs me when a child with behavior problems is rewarded.”
- “At my school, the teacher is always wrong, and administrators tend to take the part of the student. They only intervene in student-to-student confrontations. Teachers are not allowed to say anything, but students can be verbally abusive.”
- “Students are not held accountable for their actions anymore. We make excuses for everything. They need structure and to understand what is expected of them. When people do not follow through, they get away with whatever they want.”
- “There was a point in time when I had stopped writing referrals. For several years I did not write a single referral, as I felt nothing was done when I did. There were no consequences for students. They were simply talked to, if that, and let off the hook. I did not feel supported or backed by my administration. I was told to stay in my lane and that administration had the right to bend rules and enforce however they saw fit.”
- “Admin does not want to give consequences for behavior. They understand that students do not have great home lives. However, this sends the message that you can act however you want with no consequences. I once overheard a student saying, “Just tell the dean X, then you won’t get in trouble.” Students know they can do whatever and there is nothing to be done. Then, the behavior continues. I don’t think it’s necessary to punish students and make them feel disconnected from school and give up on an academic life. But something needs to be done instead of nothing.”

## Underreporting

- “Underreporting for OSS or serious offences is common. Administrators don’t want their schools highlighted by the county.”
- “The reason suspensions dropped across our very large school district is that the district-level administration refused to let principals suspend students out of school. It had nothing to do with changes in student behavior or ineffective teachers. It had everything to do with them wanting to make the numbers look good on paper.”
- “I believe that the number of discipline cases is underreported because of coding. At my school, anytime we write up a student, we are advised to select the teacher referral code. Administration later goes in and updates it based on their punishment. Sometimes a student was written up by several teachers, but it was counted as one disciplinary action on the administration side.”
- “During the 2017-2018 school year . . . I saw a complete disregard for the safety of both students and teachers in favor of under-reporting significant disciplinary actions. This was done to prevent the reports within the system, which can reflect negatively on a school’s rating and grade. It led to an increase in behavioral issues because the students understood that there would be no consequences for their actions. The classrooms were often disrupted by this behavior, and many students would communicate their safety concerns, but to no avail.”

- “The underreporting that our admin does is RIDICULOUS. But they're doing it that way so we “look” better to the district, so they “look” better to the County, so they “look” better on the State results. It's shameful. I'm shocked we don't have parents of the GOOD kids banging on our school doors demanding to know why THEIR students' education is suffering because OTHER kids are allowed to continue being little a--holes. And they KNOW they are behaving that way; it's not all trauma-related. Some of them genuinely enjoy testing us adults and they KNOW there's a trend to reduce suspensions.”
- “More often than not, administrators sweep incidents under the rug and don't report them. The more they report, the worse it makes the school look. I have had teachers attacked severely, but little was done . . . Since my first day as a teacher, my biggest takeaway from working for New York City is that they don't deal with discipline, which is one of the main reasons why the numbers are so bad for schools. Students quickly realize there are no consequences for negative behavior. If a teacher tries to be too strict, they are quickly identified as having “management issues.” As a result, teachers end up dealing with lots of behaviors that would never be acceptable in any other social situation.”

## ***Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)***

- “We just implemented a school wide PBIS plan, and so far the discipline has been far more successful than previous years.”
- “My school uses PBIS which is helpful. But sometimes, we get away from holding kids accountable for their misbehavior.”
- “We need to use a mixed methods approach. PBIS and other “huggy” programs are great for some kids and can really benefit them. Unfortunately, there is confusion about when to use what program, and it leads to a lot of ambiguity regarding whether or not a consequence will be implemented.”
- “I personally believe students should have consequences for bad behavior . . . Our district does not have this belief. We are a PBIS district . . . I don't see how we are preparing students for the real world if they don't have consequences for bad behavior, regardless of their family situation or background.”
- “PBIS can be a good thing to recognize students that don't always get acknowledged for doing the right thing. However, students need clear boundaries and consequences for misconduct. My school uses only PBIS. There are no clear boundaries or consequences for misconduct. My school district does not allow OSS.”
- “PBIS (or something similar) works for some students. Negative consequences work for some students. NOTHING works for all students. A variety of disciplinary systems must be in place, but schools jump on the bandwagon of one and try to make each student fit the model. Experienced and successful teachers (and parents) know that what works for one may not work for another. All students need consistency. Neither positive nor negative consequences are the singular answer. The answer lies in consistent expectations, and consistent follow-thru when rules are not followed.”

## ***Restorative Justice***

- “Students must be held accountable or their unacceptable actions will persist. Restorative justice does not work.”
- “Restorative approaches do not work in many situations. It is good to practice it, but more punitive forms of discipline need to be enacted too.”

- "Our school has focused on restorative justice and student conferences instead of any real consequences, and the students see that as getting away with bad behavior, so they continue."
- "The restorative justice program is a farce and should be discontinued until a thorough study of its effectiveness can be completed. It has done more to demoralize teachers than any other program."
- "I think spending time building relationships has been huge in reducing suspensions. We have implemented Leader in Me this year to teach students leadership skills. We have also implemented restorative circles in all class rooms to build a stronger community overall. This leads into restorative conversations when discipline issues arise. We have seen great improvement so far this school year."
- "I am an advocate for the use of restorative practices, restitution, and prevention techniques. I oppose suspensions and believe that no student should be "thrown away." These are children, and they need our support, not a punishment. OSS and expulsion limits my students' access to food (as we provide breakfast and lunch at no cost to our students). A suspension isn't just exclusion from school. It may be an exclusion from food."
- "I am firmly in favor of trauma-informed practices and restorative justice. The main cause of many discipline issues in schools is the lack of reflection of staff on how they are creating the issues they struggle with, and a change of staff attitude and tone does tremendous things for the productivity of a classroom. I work in a transfer school for kids who have struggled in other schools and are looking to make up for lost time and turn their lives around."
- "Restorative justice has led to a huge decrease of suspensions. I fully understand the arguments for this approach. However, I strongly feel that this approach is failing students, particularly students of color, because it is reinforcing the idea that there are little or no consequences for negative behavior. Things do not work like this in the real world, outside of school. So it is better to teach students that there are real consequences for misbehavior at a young age, rather than have them learn that the hard way with the criminal justice system."

### ***In-School Suspension (ISS)***

- "Students should be counseled by admin or support staff when in ISS."
- "OSS has been used less because of the extensive paperwork required by administrators. It is just easier to do an ISS, even if it warranted more."
- "The effectiveness of ISS and OSS depends on the student and his/her family. For well-disciplined students with strong family support, being given ISS or OSS is enough to curtail any future discipline problems."
- "Even if an ISS is issued, there's no one watching or holding the student accountable for working on school-related work, staying off their phone and games, etc."
- "The effectiveness of ISS is COMPLETELY dependent on how it is run. An effective ISS needs components that include listening to the offender, counseling, NO FUN, and classroom work."
- "My school added in-class suspension, which is a joke. They sit in the back with an hourly clipboard to check off if they are doing work silently. It sets kids up to fail and puts more work on teachers."
- "I think lunchtime detention without electronics is MUCH more effective than any in- or out-of-school suspension. Students lose socialization time AND phone time. Both are HIGHLY coveted by teenagers."

- “The ISS is such a joke at my school that many students purposely do things to be sent to ISS just to get out of regular class for a few days. I believe ISS could be a deterrent for minor behavior problems if students did not feel so comfortable.”

## Out-of-School Suspension (OSS)

- “Either we want higher test scores or we want lower suspension rates, but we can’t have both.”
- “Suspensions are generally not helpful to the student that is suspended, but they help maintain order in the school or classroom.”
- “Our entire approach is ineffective. Students feel that ISS and OSS are both “holidays” from class. Therefore, neither helps to deter future inappropriate behaviors.”
- “The problem with our system right now is that the CA Ed Code makes it difficult to suspend without a long paper trail to show that corrective action has been taken.”
- “I feel suspension is just a punishment. It does nothing to deal with the causes of behavior. I don’t feel it deters the suspended student or other students from engaging in future misbehaviors.”
- “OSS is completely ineffective. I have had students purposely act out to try to get suspended so they can avoid school. It is far better to get counselors and parents involved to help the child see the need to be in school.”
- “In-house and out-of-school suspension are effective deterrents for 90% of students, but the other 10% need additional support and just cycle between severe consequences. For these students, we need more mental health services and counseling.”
- “A lot of research says that suspending chronically disruptive students does not improve the students. Most teachers agree. However, teachers want to know when does the line get drawn where students who value their education get the right to have a classroom free of disruptive students.”
- “We follow a city-wide discipline code that does not allow for out-of-school suspension except in extreme cases. This policy is not helpful at all, and forces schools to keep discipline problems in the classroom. The policy is more harmful to good students that want to learn and are unable to . . . It is discouraging for good students.”
- “At one school where I worked, we had about 1700 students enrolled . . . on any given day the school would publish a suspension list that ranged between 200-300 students. EVERY DAY. Kids would be kicked out for serious things like fighting, but also for ridiculous things like violating the uniform policy by not tucking in their shirt. It was INSANITY.”
- “Consequences for bad behavior should fit the behavior and be beneficial for the school. All too often, a student who gets in trouble for disrespecting a teacher is put in ISS or OSS, where they get a mini vacation. Then they return to class without an apology or resolution with the teacher. Then it is on the teacher to make sure the suspended student is caught up academically. Suspension alone just doesn’t carry weight with some students and parents.”
- “I am fortunate to work in a school where parents, students, teachers, and staff work collaboratively and respectfully to help each child succeed. I am able to request support from the social workers present in our building when I see destructive patterns of behavior. We do not use suspensions (ISS or OSS) as a consistent consequence. Rather, we try to establish a secure and positive relationship between home and school. Our students are not perfect, but there is an underlying trust. Often, within our population, we find that behavior problems are linked to learning disabilities or a lack of structure at home. We try to problem-solve rather than punish.”

- “Several questions in this survey mentioned students using illegal drugs at school. I feel strongly that education, treatment, and positive interventions should be offered on those occasions, rather than suspensions. Schools should help students find the resources they need. Likewise, when students are found to be engaged in sexual activity, the first response should be to provide additional education to both students and parents about appropriate sexual expression and safe sexual contact. Repeated offenses should escalate the discipline or trigger discussions of alternative placements. But the first infraction should be met with more education rather than punishment.”

## **Alternative Learning Centers (ALCs)**

- “It would be incredibly helpful to have more alternative settings for students who struggle emotionally.”
- “The chronically disruptive students should go to an alternate school or center so that students that want an education can receive the best education possible.”

## **Chronically Disruptive Students**

- “I wish there was an effective way to redirect students who have learned how to fail, and have been told over and over again that school is not for them.”
- “When you have students with behavioral problems in your classroom, it is nearly impossible to teach. You begin to despise your job and want out. If the administration does not back you up 100%, you can chalk up the year as a wash.”
- “The majority of students are in school to learn. However, the repeat offenders make the learning environment consistently disruptive and undermine the teacher's ability to teach and the students' ability to learn. It is depressing to say the least. For everyone. Including the repeat offenders. It is so very sad. Going to school makes me sad.”
- “If multiple teachers are struggling with the same student disrupting class, that student shouldn't be in a general ed classroom. I don't think people realize how hard teachers work and how much we put up with. If a student is consistently disrupting the entire class, administration needs to take them out of the class for more than one or two days. We can't do our job correctly if a student can't meet the expectations of the school.”
- “Last year, my site was held hostage by a small number of students with chronic behavior issues. Many measures were taken to stem the tide, but when you have inconsistent consequences (or no consequences) for the students, parents who blame instead of taking responsibility, and a top-down message that suspensions must be brought down, it makes for a challenging situation. When we lost our Behavior Enhancement class, that forced most of the very challenging students back into a general ed class. That is a huge problem; a lack of specially trained teachers to work with those students who struggle emotionally.”
- “I appreciate the intellectual arguments on both sides of this conversation: I understand that students may have past trauma to explain their behavior and that we should try and address the root causes, and I also understand that one student's misbehavior shouldn't disrupt the learning of others. But I don't have enough patience for consistent misbehavior, and I have yet to see anyone propose a solution that is practical and works. And by practical, I mean . . . I'm a teacher. I know and love my content, and I want to focus my energy on helping students learn. I am NOT a psychologist or a police officer. I cannot be expected to police or counsel these extremely troubled and defiant children.”

## Students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)

- "By creating and following ridiculous behavior plans for individual students, we are allowing them to think that the world revolves around them. It's a prison pipeline."
- "Special education students get away with murder . . . Special education behavior is far and away the largest driver of problems in the general education classroom. Mainstreaming has been a miserable experience."
- "Overall, as a special education teacher, I DON'T agree that some students should be in the regular education classroom, because their behavior completely disrupts the learning environment for others. It's doing them a disservice to not be receiving more help, and it's a disservice to other students and teachers that have to put up with it on a regular basis without being properly trained in dealing with behaviors. I am specifically talking about students that are "emotionally disturbed."
- "The number of special needs students has increased over the last five years, and the number of behavior problems in the general education population has soared. There has been insufficient funding to see that the social/emotional needs of these students are met. In order to effectively help them integrate into the gen ed population, we need to hire many more mental health professionals and provide much more therapy than we do right now. It's a disservice to all students. The students with the problems are not getting their therapeutic needs met, and the other students have their learning disrupted very often."
- "I was in a classroom with several students on IEPs and on specific medications for behavior issues, as well as bipolar disorder and violent tendencies. If these students were on their medications, the day went very smoothly. However, more often than not, they would miss a dose of medicine or intentionally not take it, and the entire day would be a battle to keep control and teach as effectively as possible. I think in these situations, it is unfair to ask the teacher if we have tried "this strategy" or "that strategy" prior to having administration interfere. I know administrators are only following the protocol put forth to them, but there are times when students need to be removed immediately so the learning and safety of others is not impeded or at risk."

## Criminal Justice Involvement

- "OSS does NOT cause criminal activity. Criminals are often given OSS, but that does not cause the criminal action."
- "I answered "I don't know" for a lot of questions because I think the issue is quite complex. My gut says that we should be addressing underlying issues rather than telling a child not to come to school for a week."

## Bias

- "African American boys are punished to the extreme in comparison to other demographics. Everybody knows this is a true statement, but NO ONE does anything about it."
- "I, personally, understand the difference between bias and reality. Our administration really took a back seat and turned it around on us . . . 'What have you done to cause the student to act like this?'"

- "I feel that these issues are systemic. They are tied to racial and ethnic tensions that date back decades. I also feel that lack of connection to the community and students' families exacerbates the issues."
- "Minority (black) students are always accused and receive harsher punishments much more often than their white peers. Working in a predominantly white school, I see that other minority students are never accused or punished in the way black students are."
- "There has been little consistency in discipline in any of the schools that I have taught in, it is not always racial, gender or special ed designation that led to the bias. Often it was just that an administrator liked the student or like the parents or was afraid of the parents."
- "If a student whose parent is an active and vocal member of the PTA has a child who misbehaves, that child is less likely to receive a punishment commensurate with the crime. If a child who misbehaves has a parent that is not active or visible, sometimes those punishments exceed the weight of the crime."
- "I am frustrated with the biased/unbiased issue . . . I truly feel we discipline fairly and equally across the spectrum of students on my campus. And as a teacher, I feel like it has been put to us that we are the problem because we are racist when that could not be farther from the truth . . . It is counterproductive and puts all teachers off."

## **Lack of Resources**

- "Educators are frequently asked to be social workers and counselors."
- "I have 29 students and NO other adults in my class all day. Another adult presence would be amazing!"
- "There was a question that asked: What can a school do to improve discipline? I answered hiring more social workers. If hiring a Dean to enforce discipline was an answer choice, I would have put that first."
- "My school works hard to consistently address behavior concerns. Even with the support of administration, I feel that we are understaffed in addressing behavioral issues, which sometimes results in chronic behavior issues remaining in the classroom."
- "Some students were homeless and had little support from parents. Some parents need parenting classes. Often these kids have had problems due to their life situation that they didn't ask for. We are limited in what we can do for them. Honestly, schools need more funding for social workers on campus even in elementary school."
- "I believe some infractions deserve severe consequences, and I believe repeated infractions deserve progressively harsher consequences. Having staff to provide counseling, parent interaction, and alternative disciplinary and remediation requires money. But no one wants to hear the simple answer: train people better, pay people better, create workdays that don't absolutely wear people down."
- "The biggest factor, for me, when dealing with discipline in the classroom is class size. It is almost impossible to deal effectively with the diverse needs of 34 students, especially with students who have behavioral issues and need additional discipline and attention. Either the better-behaved students get less attention because the students with behavioral issues take up more time and focus, or the students with behavioral issues get less attention (for example, sending them on errands just to get them out of class so everyone else can learn)."

- “Having taught for many years at different schools with different grade levels and demographics, it’s hard to come up with one truth about discipline. I think each school and community is unique. A couple of high schools I taught at were in desperate need of full-time mental health professionals to support students whose parents couldn’t afford it or didn’t know how to find the appropriate resources and help. For these students, there is no amount of ISS or OSS that would have helped. They just needed one-on-one professional help. Suspensions may have helped students who had one infraction, but the schools that I worked in did not have a long-term solution or next-step (at least from my perspective) for students who repeatedly committed the same offense.”

## ***Lack of Parental Support***

- “Cell phone use by students is out of control. Parents don’t help because they are the ones texting or calling their children during the school day!”
- “Children will push limits to where they can, based on the level of administrative consequences. When administration does not have the same consequences for all, you will lose against the child and parents. I have found in my recent years of teaching that parents have become more interested in going against teachers and administrators, and enabling their children to act inappropriately, rather than supporting us.”
- “The administrators do not have the teachers’ backs when a student is violent or disruptive, possibly because their own supervisors don’t have theirs. The parents are, for a very large number of our poverty-stricken students, absent or ineffective at disciplining their children regarding successful school behavior, which helps the students remain trapped in a cycle of low achievement. Parents threaten to sue when school rules are enforced.”
- “I work with at-risk youth and spend countless hours working to help them become better people. Hours and hours go into “motivating the unmotivated child.” If push came to shove, my school district would back the parent and student over myself. This year I have documented every situation to protect myself. It is not teaching. It is monitoring behaviors. I really can’t blame the kids because no one cares about them until they get to me. Their home lives are awful and dysfunctional. They have never been told no.”

## ***Other***

- “We have a policy where we take up cell phones at the door, and it is the best thing we do for student discipline.”
- “Classroom management and the ability to create connections with students is a huge factor in managing overall behavior. Many teachers struggle with this skill.”
- “Students who can’t read and don’t perform at grade level are more prone to misbehavior. If students experience success, they are less likely to get into trouble. School is the issue. Discipline is a symptom.”
- “It appears that schools are less like to suspend students for behaviors that would have warranted such a consequence in years past. In my opinion, this is primarily due to . . . wanting to keep kids in school, so as not to have to admit there is a problem we either need help with or can’t handle, and so as not to inconvenience the parents or the voters.”

## ENDNOTES

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16. That said, we relied on professional judgment in a few cases. For example, at least one of our multipart questions involves a follow-up question that varies depending on teachers' initial response, so it's not clear what magnitude of difference should qualify as "statistically significant."
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30. There is a possibility that some teachers changed states, schools, or grades taught. Final eligibility depends on the information collected from participating teachers during the initial screening survey.