Putting Plans into Action

AN ADDENDUM TO

Ending Racial Discipline
Disparities: An Educator's Guide
to School-based Change

AUGUST 2017

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An addendum to Ending Racial
Discipline Disparities: An Educator's
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A special thank you to the teachers at the pilot sites who drove this work and shared their experiences and key takeaways.

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Discipline disparity group pilots

Why school-based change?

Instead of being used as a measure of last resort for serious offenses, Minnesota schools frequently suspend students for nonviolent infractions, such as "attendance" or "disruptive disturbance" — a vague category that disproportionately impacts students of color, particularly black students.[1] For example, in Minnesota, black students make up 12 percent of the student population but 41 percent of the suspensions.[2] While some might mistakenly believe that this disproportionality exists because students of color misbehave more often, the research suggests otherwise. In fact, a number of studies have found that students of color are frequently penalized more harshly than their white peers for similar offenses.[3] As teachers who see the short- and long-term impact of these exclusionary discipline practices, we know that it is essential that we act now to disrupt this system and utilize multiple levers for change.

As teachers who believe that eliminating racial disparities in discipline practices at our schools is critical to our students' success, we began implementing changes in our schools using the action guide ***Ending Racial Discipline Disparities: An Educator's Guide to School-based Change***. We knew that along with state policy change, teacher-led, school-based change could have a direct and immediate impact on the lives of our students. And so, we have dedicated this past year to researching, analyzing, and reflecting on student discipline policies and using what we learned to inform changes to our practice throughout the year.

Our process

Over the course of the 2016-2017 school year, nine Discipline Disparity Groups (DDGs), comprising four or five educators from each school site, began planning to reduce racial disparities in discipline and increase the use of alternatives to exclusionary discipline using the process from the Action Guide that was created by teachers in the spring of 2016.

Of the DDG pilot sites,[4] four were Minneapolis and St. Paul Public Schools, three were from other metro area school districts, and two were charter schools. To varying degrees, DDGs followed the steps in the Action Guide by planning, evaluating data, and receiving training on alternatives to pushing students out of the classroom, such as restorative and trauma-informed practices.

Shifting mindsets and changing behaviors are core to this work but can be challenging and messy. Some of us were able to fully implement our plans as written, while others struggled with obstacles along the way. The process revealed common factors that were critical to the success of our action plans. For the sake of our students and our fellow teachers, we took stock of what worked and what didn't, and have chosen to share our reflections publicly so that others can learn along with us. This addendum highlights our takeaways from the DDG pilot sites and lists key recommendations about the Action Guide steps and common factors that were critical to the success groups achieved.

What we learned

While each of our schools has unique characteristics and circumstances that contributed to successes or obstacles, a common set of factors for success emerged. Some steps in the Action Guide proved to be absolutely essential, while others were helpful but not critical in achieving our goals.

The most critical factors in our success were:

1. Engaged school leadership
2. Dynamic use of data
3. Ample time and training

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[1] Minnesota Department of Education. (2015-2016). Student Discipline Data Report. Retrieved (6/15/17) from: http://w20.education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/DataTopic.jsp?TOPICID=133.

[2] Minnesota Department of Education. (2015-2016). Student Discipline Data Report. Retrieved (6/15/17) from: http://w20.education.state.mn.us/MDEAnalytics/DataTopic.jsp?TOPICID=133.

[3] Skiba, Russell J. (2014). Are Black Kids Worse? Myths and Facts about Racial Differences in Behavior. Retrieved (1/15/16) from: http://www.indiana.edu/~atlantic/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/African-American-Differential-Behavior_031214.pdf.

[4] DDG pilot sites include: Anne Sullivan Communication Center, North High School, Franklin Middle School, Riverview Westside School of Excellence, Valley View Elementary School in Columbia Heights, Roseville Area Middle School, Roseville Area High School, Prodeo Academy, and Hiawatha Leadership Academy Northrop.

Engaged school leadership

What Success Looks Like

Administrators believed in the urgent need to address racial discipline disparities and decrease the use of exclusionary discipline practices, and chose to sign on to the action plan early. They were open to making school-wide policy and practice changes and were actively involved in their implementation. Administrators were the most critical leaders to invest, as they had power to grant or deny the other two factors — data and dedicated time.

Teacher leaders drove the work:

1. Administrator buy-in was necessary but not sufficient to bring about school-wide change. Additional teacher leadership was an important factor among schools that achieved success.

2. Teachers with formal leadership responsibilities, such as instructional coaches or Professional Learning Community (PLC) leaders, were critical to the DDGs' progress because they often had access to data and greater flexibility in their schedules. These factors enabled them to work with teachers to, for example, try a new restorative technique or oversee a classroom while a teacher worked to repair a relationship with a student. In many cases, these teacher leaders were able to leverage relationships with classroom teachers across grade levels, which helped bring more teachers into the process.

3. Informal teacher leaders, especially those who had long been a part of the school community, leveraged their relationships in ways that further strengthened buy-in and helped DDGs progress toward their goals.

Behavior deans or specialists were actively involved, if these roles existed within the schools.

A designated data specialist (with previous data experience or willingness to learn along the way) oversaw data collection and analysis at the school level.

Common Barriers

Some of the reasons administrators were not actively engaged included:

- They did not believe there was an issue with disproportionate discipline or that there were viable alternative solutions to exclusionary practices;

- Teachers had difficulty convincing their administrators that this work aligned with current strategic plans and priorities, so administrators were reluctant to take on "one more thing"; and

- A lack of access to and relationships with administrators prevented buy-in prior to the start of the school year.

When administrators were not on board or only passively allowed DDGs to meet, DDGs struggled to:

- Access and analyze data;

- Hold school-wide staff meetings to discuss data trends or other aspects of the DDG work; and

- Make necessary changes to school-wide policy or practice.

Tip from DDGs

As a first step in order to gain or increase administrator buy-in, ask for permission to survey the staff regarding their understanding of and opinions on school climate and discipline policies and practices. One DDG successfully increased administrator buy-in when survey results revealed many misunderstandings about the discipline policies and practices. Gathering data in this way, along with sharing statistics (see page 7 in the *Action Guide*) and examples of alternative discipline practices from the *Action Guide*, helped win administrator support and ensure this DDG successfully engaged the entire school staff in this work.

"The support of our school leadership was critical to a policy shift that dramatically changed the conversations teachers were having with students about behavior. We changed our referral process to be centered on a "restore sheet." This sheet listed questions designed to lead to deeper conversations about what happened, why it happened, and what should be done to repair harm caused, instead of just sending students out of the classroom."

Mary Lambrecht, math teacher on special assignment at Anne Sullivan Communication Center, Minneapolis.

Dynamic use of data

What Success Looks Like

1. Access to data was essential to identifying areas for growth. In the best circumstances, DDGs had access to data that tracked all student time out of the classroom, along with incident details, disaggregated by race, in addition to suspension data.

2. The full DDG engaged in regular (at least quarterly) reviews and analysis of the data.

3. Staff developed a system for sharing data and progress toward SMART goals with the whole school.

4. DDG members disaggregated school behavioral data to examine all trends, such as total referrals or suspensions by race, infraction, or teacher. Some groups went deeper, evaluating factors such as time of day, or even students' skin tone.

5. The most successful DDGs synthesized data trends to provide information to staff members in an accessible way. They infused this data into their staff conversations, professional development, and discipline policies.

Common Barriers

1. A number of DDGs did not have access to data, which hindered their ability to set SMART goals or assess their progress toward them.

2. Some groups reported that administrators were hesitant to give access to data for fear of negative public scrutiny or misunderstanding data privacy rules.

3. Other groups found that there was no centralized tracking mechanism for many of the kinds of data they were hoping to analyze or very little detail for classroom removals that did not result in suspension.

4. Groups that did not have access to or were not using data to inform their work had very little to reflect upon or use to adjust their approach to practice, policy, or professional development throughout the year. DDGs that did not dynamically use data:

   • Could not compare information across classrooms or grade levels related to total referrals or suspension by race, infraction, or teacher.

   • Were left with only anecdotal information about trends and progress.

Tip from DDGs

Consider reviewing behavior data to identify additional subconscious biases, such as the skin tone or size of the child receiving the referral or suspension. Prodeo Academy's population is almost entirely black students, so disaggregating the data by race would not have revealed disproportionate discipline rates. The DDG was able to assess whether adultification and/or colorism was impacting discipline by reviewing its data relating to skin tone and size. Colorism has been well-documented in studies and refers to members of the same race or ethnicity being treated better or worse, based on their skin tone. For example, one study found that black girls with darker skin were three times more likely to be suspended than black girls with lighter skin.[5] Adultification refers to the subconscious bias in which people perceive black children as being older and therefore less innocent and more responsible for misbehavior than their white peers.[6] Prodeo explored whether there were trends in student size that would reveal biases similar to adultification bias.

"Even though we struggled to create a school-wide data review process, a group of classroom teachers at my school periodically reviewed our behavioral data, especially concerning students who were frequently referred out of the classroom. We looked for patterns in time of day, student-teacher interactions, and potential triggers and then designed interventions. For a number of students, the positive impact of these interventions was noticeable."

Teresa Fenske, fourth-grade teacher at Valley View Elementary School, Columbia Heights.

[5] Hannon, Lance. (2013). The relationship between skin tone and school suspension for African Americans. Retrieved (6/30/17) from: https://www.csun.edu/sites/default/files/ColorismSuspension.pdf.

[6] Epstein, Rebecca. (2017). Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood. Georgetown Law: Center on Poverty and Inequality. Retrieved (7/7/17) from: http://www.law.georgetown.edu/academics/centers-institutes/poverty-inequality/upload/girlhood-interrupted.pdf.

Ample time and training

What Success Looks Like

1. DDGs that developed their action plans over the summer were able to present a clear picture to their administration, make adjustments to the plan based on administrator feedback, and get approval before the school year started. Most DDGs that had full plans going into the school year were able to secure all-staff time during back-to-school professional days. Some groups had planning time during conferences focused on school climate; other groups met on their own throughout the summer, or attended an E4E-Minnesota Action Guide event.

2. Dedicated weekly or bi-weekly meeting time throughout the year was critical so DDGs could:

   • Review data;

   • Reflect on qualitative information and implementation of the plan; and

   • Adjust accordingly.

3. Designated time to share data trends with the entire staff facilitated productive discussions that brought about positive changes to discipline policies and practices.

4. Several groups that had significant success had a full-time staff position devoted to implementing and training staff on alternative discipline practices, such as restorative justice techniques. Schools paid for these positions through grant funding or school-based budget arrangements.

Common Barriers

1. Often, DDGs struggled to secure regular meeting time because they:

   • Lacked school leadership engagement in the DDG work; or

   • Were unable to align the DDG work with other initiatives such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) or school equity teams.

2. DDGs that did not have dedicated meeting time and those that did not get far in the planning process during the summer struggled to:

   • Set SMART goals;

   • Review and analyze data throughout the year;

   • Make mid-year adjustments or change school-wide policy and practice; and

   • Move the work forward in a meaningful way.

Tip

Attend a U.S. Department of Education Teach to Lead conference and bring an administrator from your school with you. A dedicated group of educators and the principal from Riverview Westside School of Excellence attended the Teach to Lead conference, where they worked intensely for three days to further develop their plans using a logic model. They received critical feedback and workshopped their ideas along the way. This enabled them to leave with a solid action plan, each step linked to a person responsible for executing it by a specific date.

Recommendations

Based on the common factors that led to success for groups that piloted the *Action Guide,* the following recommendations should be a priority for district, school, or teacher leaders.

1
Engaged school leaders

Work relentlessly to get the right people on board from the beginning, including:

- Administrators who believe change is needed and are actively involved;
- Teacher leaders, both those with formal leadership roles and responsibilities and other well-respected teachers; and
- Educators with a variety of skill sets, especially behavior, restorative justice, and data specialists.

2
Dynamic use of data

Fully leverage behavior and engagement data throughout the *Action Guide* process by:

- Gaining regular access to behavior and engagement data;
- Creating or selecting an existing system that allows for easy data entry and analysis;
- Exploring the data to identify racial disparities and other trends; and
- Sharing data trends in real time to facilitate staff-wide conversations about adjusting practice and professional development needs.

3
Ample time and training

Work with school (and potentially district) leadership to secure key resources early in the process, including:

- Dedicated pre-planning time and regular time throughout the year;
- High-quality, ongoing training on alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices; and
- If possible, a full- or part-time staff member dedicated to restorative justice or other alternatives to suspensions who can create job-embedded training and practice for the whole staff.

As educators who led school-based action over the past year to make change on this issue, we ask our fellow educators to join us. We need you to advocate for equitable school discipline policies and practices within your classrooms and schools, and at the state policymaking level. Now is the time to step up, share your experiences and the supports you and your students need, and empower your students to speak their truths. We call on legislators and school administrators to listen to the voices of educators who are exploring and identifying ways to keep all students in our classrooms and to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

"Restorative justice training improved communication with students in my school and pushed staff to think about how these techniques could work with our current behavior curriculum. Due to limited funds for training, we were unable to have ongoing training throughout the year, but I was able to find and share some helpful resources. Given the initial positive impact, this coming year, we were able to secure funding for additional training next year."

Maggie Borman, first-grade teacher at Hiawatha Leadership Academy Northrop, Minneapolis.
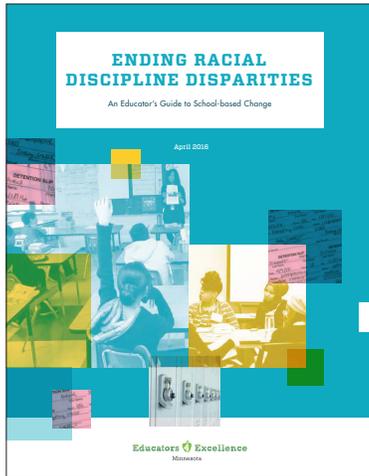
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is an addendum to *Ending Racial Discipline Disparities: An Educator's Guide to School-based Change*

You can read and download the original report from April 2016 at **e4e.org/chapters/minnesota**