

Exploring Disparities in School Discipline



INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE OF THE GUIDE

A high school principal sits down for a conversation with the parents of Latino students suspended from school for fighting. The parents want to know why their children were suspended for more days than students from other racial/ethnic groups who participated in the same fight.⁵

Teachers working on a school climate improvement team are concerned about some classroom management issues that have recently emerged, such as a colleague who is sending a high percentage of students of color to the office and another classroom where minor incidents involving students of color seem to be escalating at a higher rate than for White students. They talk about what they've heard from students and look at some of the data the school collects on office referrals to see what the numbers tell them.

A district engaged in studying its discipline data finds that a number of schools that have a high proportion of students of color also have high suspension rates. Digging deeper into the data from a particular school that the community is concerned about and involved in, the district finds no disparities in school discipline between the 95% of students who are students of color in that school and rate for the 5% that are White. However, they do find that because of the greater percentage of students of color, the high rate of exclusionary discipline at this school contributes significantly to overall disproportionality^a in the district.

A high school student who was born as a female and identifies as a male complains to a counselor that he was berated in front of his class by the teacher for arriving late and then kicked out of class, but other males who come in late, including one who came in after him, were allowed to stay.⁶

A local newspaper publishes a story on discipline issues within the district. Readers are surprised to learn that although students with disabilities represent only 12% of the student population, they comprise 58% of those placed in seclusion or involuntary confinement, and 75% of those physically restrained at school to immobilize them or reduce their ability to move freely.⁷

The existence of disparities in school discipline and the harmful consequences of punitive and exclusionary discipline have been well documented.⁸ Schools and districts may already have policies in place that guide staff in making decisions about how to handle disciplinary issues and are likely to be collecting some kind of disciplinary data. In recent years, leaders in education, health, law enforcement, and juvenile justice, as well as student and family groups, advocacy organizations, researchers, and professional

associations have begun to examine school disciplinary data to paint a more complete picture of how exclusionary disciplinary policies are implemented in school and districts. They have produced reports that document the harmful and educationally unproductive consequences of these policies, particularly for students of color, students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ), and students with behavioral and cognitive disabilities.⁹

There are strategies for reducing exclusionary discipline,¹⁰ but they are often implemented in a manner that does not reduce discipline disparities.¹¹ Although schools and districts are attempting to address disparities, their work may focus on only symptoms and symbols rather than the underlying causes. This guide is designed to help you systematically examine *the underlying causes of exclusionary discipline and disparities* in a manner that goes beyond symptoms and drives more toward meaningful action and systemic change.

Many excellent resources exist that demonstrate the pervasiveness and consequences of exclusionary discipline and discipline disparities; describe exclusionary discipline issues in general; summarize the current research; call educators and communities to action; and identify multitiered strategies that can reduce exclusionary discipline, promote student self-discipline, and enhance safety, support, engagement, attendance, and conditions for learning. *Addressing the Root Causes of Disparities in School Discipline: An Educator's Action Planning Guide* is meant to supplement these other resources by focusing on how schools and districts can use their data to identify disparities, understand the root causes of those disparities, and develop an action plan to address the root causes so that all students have opportunities to learn, succeed, and thrive.



Resource 1: Glossary

This resource defines key terms that are underlined in the guide. It also describes how the terms apply to addressing discipline disparities and includes references for further information.

FOUNDATION FOR THE GUIDE

This guide builds upon *School Climate and Discipline: A Guidance Package* (available at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/index.html>), issued by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) in January 2014, as well as The School Discipline Consensus Report (available at <http://csgjusticecenter.org/youth/school-discipline-consensus-report/>) released by the Council of State Governments Justice Center in June 2014. Both documents emphasize three important areas:¹²

Climate and prevention

Schools that foster supportive conditions for learning and positive school climates can help to engage all students in learning by preventing problem behaviors and intervening effectively to support struggling students and those at risk of academic and behavioral problems.

Clear, appropriate, and consistent expectations and consequences

Schools that have discipline policies or codes of conduct with clear, appropriate, and consistently applied expectations and consequences can help students improve behavior, increase engagement, and boost achievement.

Measurable equity and continuous improvement

Schools that build staff capacity and continuously evaluate and then improve a school's discipline policies and practices are more likely to ensure fairness and equity and promote achievement for all students.

You, too, can use these materials and other freely available resources such as the Supportive School Discipline Webinar Series (available at <http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/supportive-school-discipline-webinar-series>) as you work on addressing the root causes of disparities in your school and district. The guidance package, for example, describes schools' civil rights obligations and overarching principles to follow and suggests resources for schools and districts working to identify exclusionary discipline and eliminate disparities. It highlights useful strategies and best practices, suggesting that schools and districts that want to eliminate disparities would benefit by using proactive, data-driven, and continuous efforts, including gathering feedback from families, students, teachers, and school personnel to prevent, identify, reduce, and eliminate discriminatory discipline and unintended consequences.¹³

Schools and districts also will benefit from consulting the Title VI *Dear Colleague* letter (available at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201401-title-vi.html>) issued January 2014, which explains legal obligations under federal civil rights laws to administer discipline in a nondiscriminatory manner and provides a framework for assessing whether discipline policies and procedures are consistent with federal law.

Both the guidance package and key provisions in *Race to the Top* also emphasize strategies such as the following to help maximize effectiveness and planning:¹⁴

Examining the impact of disciplinary policies and practices on students, especially students of color, students with disabilities, English learners (EL), students who are LGBTQ, students at risk for dropping out of school, those experiencing trauma and social exclusion, or those involved in behavior incidents, to identify any unintended disparities and consequences

Assessing whether students with particular personal characteristics (e.g., race, sex, disability status) are being disproportionately disciplined, whether certain types of disciplinary offenses are commonly referred for disciplinary sanctions, whether specific teachers or administrators are more likely to refer specific groups of students for disciplinary sanctions, as well as other indicators that may reveal disproportionate disciplinary practices

Regularly collecting data about all discipline incidents (consistent with applicable privacy laws), including the activities of any school-based law enforcement personnel such as arrests or referrals to the police and courts

Establishing procedures for the regular review and analysis of data to detect possible patterns that should be further investigated

Engaging the community in the entire review, analysis, and planning process, with an emphasis on being as transparent as possible while respecting privacy rights as findings are disseminated publicly

Developing corrective plans, then implementing, monitoring, evaluating, and regularly revising the plans that result from data analysis and policy review

Although the focus of this guide is narrower than that found in these strategies, we have infused some of them into the approach provided in this guide. Where we think you might benefit from learning more, we'll provide links to other resources.



Find out more

ED's National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments
(<http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/environment/discipline>)

The Equity Project (<http://www.indiana.edu/~equity/>)

The National Clearinghouse on Supportive School Discipline
(<http://supportiveschooldiscipline.org>)

OVERVIEW OF CORE ISSUES

Identifying disparities in school discipline and their root causes is crucial to taking informed actions that are effective and sustainable. Following the guide's direction, you will learn how to disaggregate disciplinary data by gender, race, ethnicity, disability, and sexual identity, and for other subgroups. When disparities exist, you will learn how to identify and understand the factors that contribute to them by conducting a root cause analysis. Understanding the drivers of disparities and mechanisms that lead to disparities in your school or district will allow you to develop actionable strategies for addressing discipline disparities, with the goal of meaningfully reducing and eventually eliminating them altogether.

Some schools and districts already have begun to assess and address exclusionary discipline and discipline disparities. For example, the National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) has hosted a series of webinars on discipline and school climate issues that include voices of practitioners describing their initiatives to address exclusionary discipline and discipline disparities. Common state and local efforts include revising codes of conduct, using data to educate staff, implementing trainings on new practices aimed at reforming discipline, and developing action plans that incorporate multitiered interventions such as PBIS, social and emotional learning, relationship-building strategies, and restorative practices.¹⁵

We try to avoid significantly adding to the work you're already doing; rather, we hope the guide can assist you in leveraging successful efforts—either your own or borrowing from the work of others—and help you deepen and better coordinate your efforts when

necessary. Whenever possible, the proposed processes employ data-informed approaches that are already used in many schools to improve outcomes.

The guide will help you identify and understand the following trends and their roots, which relate to exclusionary discipline in general and disparities in school discipline in particular.

What is happening? How many students are being disciplined more harshly than others, subjected to disparate and exclusionary discipline, and in what ways?

How is it happening? What are the processes that lead to disparate and exclusionary discipline?

To whom is it happening and at what rates? Are there disparities? If yes, who is experiencing them, how big are the problems, and what are the degrees of the disparities?

Why is it happening? What are the short- and long-term factors that drive exclusionary discipline and discipline disparities?

What factors do not directly relate to exclusionary discipline but contribute to the disparities in exclusionary discipline? Disparities may have roots in actions taken or not taken long before a school responds to a perceived infraction with exclusionary discipline. Similarly, the roots of disparities in school discipline may be found in domains that do not appear to be directly related to discipline. For example, the causes of disparities in school discipline may be found in school climate and culture as experienced by some or all students and in the absence of supports for creating a safe, inclusive, and productive school community. Places to look include attendance policies and practices; pedagogical, curricular, and extracurricular policies and practices; and assessments, screenings, and intervention decisions.

What can be done to eliminate disparities in school discipline? Addressing this issue may require access to information other than existing data (e.g., conducting student and parent focus groups) as well as reviews of existing policies and the impact of their implementation.

A root cause analysis provides a structured process for looking beyond symptoms to understand the underlying causes of a problem. Root cause analyses are not new; they have been used in business for many years and more recently in fields such as education to understand academic failure. A root cause analysis is a systematic process for identifying the deepest underlying cause or causes of a problem. If you can identify and eliminate root causes, then you can eliminate the problem. The goal is to avoid making changes that are expedient, but incomplete and inadequate. As one government agency describes it, root cause analysis gets you past just putting out fires and onto finding ways to prevent them.¹⁶

Data—both quantitative and qualitative—are essential to the root cause analysis process. When data are collected in a transparent and objective manner, and when effective

communication about the data is supported, schools and districts can have productive, data-informed discussions about disciplinary policies and practices.

Keep in mind that because schools are complex social systems, the identification of a single root cause of disparities in school discipline may not be possible or even desirable. The examination in which you will engage as you work your way through the stages outlined in this guide will most likely reveal several root causes or clusters of causes.

Look for the whole story

Some root causes may not be evident by examining discipline data alone. It's important to look for patterns in the data that go beyond individual cases, but you can't stop there. Examples of root causes that may not be immediately apparent include the impact of educator and administrator stress, a lack of support for educator understanding of student behavior, educators' need for skill building to prevent and address troubling behaviors that evoke punitive responses, explicit bias or implicit bias, or the lack of staff skills in using positive approaches and de-escalation techniques. Critical issues such as these can be revealed when you ask the right questions, take time for deep and honest conversations, systematically conduct surveys and interviews, and gather input from a wide range of stakeholders in the school, district, and community.

Look across multiple domains

The root causes of disparities in school discipline exist in a range of domains, including the following:¹⁷

Procedural matters: Procedural matters refer to actions taken or processes implemented based on policies, guidelines, and protocols involving interactions between students and school personnel. An example of a procedural matter that can contribute to disparities in school discipline is how school personnel respond to tardiness. School policy may dictate that all students who are late for class should be treated the same, but if there is a consistent issue that is affecting a group of students (e.g., delayed bus service from part of a city or town), then that policy may disparately impact those students.

Practices: Practices include instructional, administrative, and other operations, including training and staff development. An example of a practice that can contribute to disparities in school discipline is instruction that disengages some students. Perhaps some teachers do not call on students with an emotional disturbance.^b If this happens, students with an emotional disturbance may become bored and their disengagement may contribute to problematic off-task behaviors. Thus, teachers (in this illustrative case) may disproportionately send more students with an emotional disturbance to the office, contributing to a disparity in discipline.

School climate and culture: School climate involves how students, families, teachers, educators, and other school staff interact and experience the school environment, their explicit and implicit norms and values, and the school or district's history. An indicator of a school climate problem is when responses by students of color in anonymous surveys indicate that they don't experience respect. School culture involves the norms, beliefs, assumptions, and rituals of the school, which can be exclusive and contribute to the isolation or disengagement of students who are excluded.

Systemic factors: These factors refer to the leadership, the school's or district's organizational structure, as well as staff and student competencies. An example of a systemic factor could be the categorical placement of ELs in remedial or lower track classes. Such placements can lead to boredom and disengagement, perhaps resulting in more ELs skipping class, being tardy, and talking back to teachers, any of which might lead to the application of exclusionary discipline.

Staff attitudes and beliefs: Attitudes can include biases—explicit and implicit—and beliefs. One example of biased belief could be when adults believe that the only way to improve student behavior is to use punitive and exclusionary techniques to teach certain students a “lesson” by sending them to the office more or excluding them from instructional opportunities that other students receive.



Outside your control? Maybe not.

External factors, including poverty, are often suggested as an explanation for why discipline is more exclusionary and disparate in some schools. However, after comparing schools with similar demographics, researchers have consistently found that school practices enabled some schools to avoid or reduce exclusionary discipline and disparities, while in other similar schools it remained stubbornly high.¹⁸

Although you may not be able to address such external factors, schools and districts can address the impact of them on student behavior and learning. Poverty-related mobility provides an example. To understand how mobility is being addressed, you can ask a question like “Does the school or district have policies and procedures to address the impact of poverty-driven mobility?” The impact of within-district mobility can be mitigated by having common language for social and emotional learning, common behavioral expectations, and common routines across all schools within a district.¹⁹

Dig deeply and have deep conversations

It's important to understand that time pressures and limited data can grind a worthwhile process to a halt before it has gone as deep as it should to uncover true root causes. It's equally important that teams not allow discomfort or fear to hinder deeper conversations and the exploration of issues that are related to the community (e.g., culture, race, social class) and school (e.g., staff skills, school culture).

Much has been written in recent years about how to have meaningful, productive, and courageous conversations in education. Although we can't cover all that ground in the scope of this guide, we give you our best recommendations about how to conduct these deeper conversations while linking you to resources where you can find out more.

GET A STRONG START

Before you begin work, read through this guide to get an understanding of the tasks involved in identifying, analyzing, and addressing the root causes of disparities in school discipline. Think about how ready your school or district may be to engage in this work and what you can do to enhance readiness. Many schools and districts already are examining discipline data. You may find that educators and other stakeholders will welcome a process for figuring out what to do with what's being learned. Others may need some introduction to the issues, and the process described here is aimed at supporting students, staff, and the community in understanding not only the importance of dealing with discipline disparities but also the advantages of doing so.

Leadership committed to fully supporting this work is vital for both an effective process and for change to occur. High-level support in schools and districts provides legitimacy; access to the necessary resources for collecting, reporting, and using data; and the authority to prioritize resources to change policies and practices after root causes of discipline disparities are identified.



Find out more

In addition to reviewing the guidance provided by ED and DOJ and other national resources suggested in the Introduction, you also might find it helpful to review the *Implementation Checklist for School District Superintendents and Other District Leaders* (available at <http://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/ImplementationChecklistforSchoolDistrictSuperintendents.pdf>). This checklist serves as a companion tool to the *School Discipline Consensus Report* (developed by the Council of State Governments) that education leaders can use to help assess and guide their efforts in promoting positive outcomes for youth and their families. The checklist is organized by goals and key expectations at the district level to provide oversight and support to school administrators, educators, specialized instructional support staff, and other adults working in schools. It's designed to prompt discussions about how other district and school activities, such as developing school improvement plans and instructional improvement plans, can be integrated and aligned with efforts to improve school climate and reform school discipline policies and practices to help meet the district's goals.

Although the *School Discipline Consensus Report* itself is lengthy, the checklist helps you locate the places within the report where supporting content can be found for each goal and recommendation. You can use this checklist as a starting point for your assessment to help guide your examination of critical issues, tapping into the report to glean background, strategies, and lessons learned by others. Later on, you can use the checklist to help build the details of your own action plan.

Start from your own existing, strong foundation

Many schools and districts already are engaged in ongoing work to improve school climate, learning conditions, and support for students. This guide is meant to supplement and support your effective efforts, not supplant them.

For example, thousands of schools across the country are implementing multitiered behavior frameworks, such as PBIS. Blending a schoolwide, multitiered process for proactively addressing behavior with the tasks outlined in this guide for examining disciplinary practices can help schools and districts gather and act upon the best information they need to make clear decisions. Similarly, many schools and districts already are collecting and using school climate data to improve conditions for learning and engagement.



Find out more

The Technical Assistance Center on PBIS was established by ED's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) to define, develop, implement, and evaluate a multitiered approach to technical assistance that improves the capacity of states, districts, and schools to establish, scale-up, and sustain the PBIS framework. Emphasis is given to the impact of implementing PBIS on the social, emotional, and academic outcomes for students with disabilities.

For a gateway into resources, see www.pbis.org.

See also Recommendations for Addressing Discipline Disproportionality in Education by Kent McIntosh, Erik J. Girvan, Robert H. Horner, Keith Smolkowski, and George Sugai at <http://www.pbis.org/school/equity-pbis/recommendations>.

For a list of useful articles and resources, see Equity & PBIS at <http://www.pbis.org/school/equity-pbis>.

Resource 5: Supportive Data Resources also has a list of PBIS resources to use such as data-gathering tools, including a guide, Using Discipline Data within SWPBIS to Identify and Address Disproportionality: A Guide for School Teams, which can be found at <http://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/ImplementationChecklistforSchoolDistrictSuperintendents.pdf>.

NCSSLE provides technical assistance to states, districts, schools, and communities on making school climate improvements through measurement and program implementation so that all students have the opportunity to realize academic success in safe and supportive environments. NCSSLE has hosted several webinars on a variety of discipline and school climate topics and developed several helpful products that feature examples from the field. To access these resources, visit <http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/>.

Restorative practices, when applied to school discipline practices, can stem the school-to-prison pipeline. With the potential of teaching conflict resolution skills, fostering understanding and empathy, and building stronger relationships in schools and communities, restorative justice has proven to be an effective alternative to punitive and exclusionary responses to problem student behavior. For more information, see <http://www.neglected-delinquent.org/events/ssd-webinar-series-stemming-school-prison-pipeline-applying-restorative-justice-principles>.

Build a team to do the work

Before you even begin gathering data, you should bring together a team to do the work. We think a team approach is optimal, even necessary, whether you are working in a large, urban district, or a smaller, rural one. Looking at data and having the kinds of meaningful and sensitive conversations you need to have to address racial, ethnic, and cultural issues can be enhanced by having as many perspectives and as much experience at the table as possible. Solutions will be better realized through coordination, collaboration, and stakeholder investment.

If possible, start with an existing team

Many schools and districts already have existing teams or task forces formed for schoolwide planning, implementing grants, addressing school climate, safety, promoting academic improvement, addressing student wellness, and other areas of school improvement. Rather than create a new structure that could potentially create confusion and fragmentation while marginalizing your work, consider expanding an existing team or creating a subcommittee or work group from an existing group. While doing this work, it's important to ensure that the team is willing to expand its membership and agenda to make the reduction of exclusionary discipline and discipline disparities a priority. If your school has several teams each focused on different academic, behavioral, and community components, it may be advisable to combine overlapping functions that relate to student support and school climate. Multiple symptom-focused teams consume valuable time and resources and can cause management and coordination problems.

Figuring out how to best build the team you need may take a little thought and conversation up front, but the effort will save you time and money and potentially strengthen and enhance everyone's work.

People needed

It's vital to have at the table people with diverse perspectives that represent your entire school community, who should all have significant opportunities for input and decision making. This team can and should include students, educators, administrators, paraprofessionals, volunteers, bus drivers, other support personnel, and families—anyone who may be involved in or affected by the school's approach to school discipline.

Although school resource or law enforcement personnel should not be involved in school discipline, you may want to include them when defining roles (i.e., confirm their focus is on safety issues). If they have been engaged in disciplinary practice that may be contributing to discipline disparities, it will be important for staff to discuss situations where these personnel are involved in activities that contribute to or involve discipline. In addition, they may help the group distinguish between behaviors that are troubling (e.g., vulgar language) and those that involve safety (e.g., carrying a weapon), as well sharing what might be community roots of some student conflicts (e.g., gangs).

Root cause analysis requires a level of mathematical and statistical skill that not everyone may possess, so it will be important to have team members who can bring this

skill to the table. Consider recruiting mathematics teachers or district staff who specialize in research and evaluation to the team.

Including students on the team can be a powerful strategy for infusing meaningful youth voice into your process. Who can better describe the impact of discipline practices than affected students? Youth involvement on the team also opens up opportunities to develop actionable strategies “with” them, rather than doing things “to” them or “for” them. Involving youth as partners in delving into the data and creating an action plan will make the plan more relevant while increasing the likelihood that the strategies will be accepted, adopted, and become part of their everyday lives.²⁰ Another way to expand youth engagement is to recruit students with strong mathematics skills who may be seeking an additional challenge, as long as they are brought into the process at a point where personally identifiable student information is not available to them.

It is important to welcome diverse parents, families, and guardians to be active and effective participants on the action teams in order to express their views and provide important input on disciplinary matters that affect them. This work may require a schedule that accommodates diverse family participation.

It’s just as vital to include all of the diverse members of the community who have a stake in supporting students’ success. Team members should be broadly representative of your school or district community. Along with family and community members, it also could include local health and mental health professionals, child welfare advocates, and members of courts and juvenile justice agencies who not only bring important knowledge and experience in working with youth to the table but also may bring real-world experience and resources to your action plans.

At various points in the process, school staff and other stakeholders may need to take time to have difficult conversations about their beliefs regarding behavior, discipline, punishment, and resource allocation as well as attitudes about bias and diversity. The team may benefit from these discussions starting up front to lay the groundwork for the entire process, with regular check-ins about important topics meaningful to your school or district.



Find out more

Working under a school climate improvement grant from ED, the Iowa Department of Education produced a detailed toolkit called ***Decisions in Motion: IS³ Toolkit 2 Addressing Discipline***. Among the many useful topics is guidance on setting up an action team. Download the toolkit at <http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/IS3%2BToolkit%2B2.pdf>.

A publication by The Dignity in Schools Campaign called *A Model Code on Education and Dignity* also provides guidance on how to meaningfully involve students, families, and other stakeholders in your efforts. Download it at http://www.dignityinschools.org/files/DSC_Model_Code.pdf.

Additional resources are available at <http://www.dignityinschools.org/resources-youth-and-parents>.

Who will facilitate your meetings? It is often useful for someone other than those directly engaged in the work to facilitate meetings. The facilitator can monitor the process and ensure that progress is being made while the team can remain focused on analysis and decision making. You may have people in your school or district who can facilitate, or you may reach out to someone in the community who has the right skills.

Skills needed

The team needs people who bring a range of knowledge, experience, perspective, technical skills, interpersonal skills, and legitimacy. Don't dismiss someone out of hand because you're unfamiliar with them or don't think they have the exact skills and experience needed. Some people will have multiple skills; some will specialize. Some skill sets can be more easily found in your school or district; for others, you may need to search out in the community. Look for the following:

- People who may be well versed in a variety of issues related to school discipline, school safety, student engagement and support, mental health, restorative practices, and disparities.
- Staff who collect and track the various types of data you need.
- Individuals skilled in analysis and comfortable with quantitative and qualitative research methods, including those with the necessary mathematical and statistical skills and perspectives to aid in the work (e.g., mathematics teachers, district research or evaluation staff).
- People with experience or training in having "courageous conversations."
- Natural leaders from the community connected to your school or district.

Not everyone invited to help needs to participate in the entire process. Decide who needs to be involved every step of the way and then recruit the support of other key people at critical junctures. Ideally, everyone will possess the kind of interpersonal and effective teamwork skills needed to address sensitive and sometimes thorny issues, but an important part of your process may be to do some training in relationship and skill building to facilitate trust and effective teamwork.

Direction needed

Assume that with some training, reading, support, and practice, everyone on the team can actively participate in the team's work.²¹ However, because people may be more invested in the issues on which they're primarily focused, it will be important to emphasize that addressing disparities is a priority—one shared by many communities across the country. It also may be important to help them think about how exclusionary discipline affects attendance and performance, and to point out that the lack of academic challenge and support may contribute to behaviors that lead to disciplinary referrals, including attendance problems.²² You also can ask how they would feel if it were their child who was directly experiencing disparate or exclusionary discipline and its consequences, in terms of decreased learning and even having to repeat a class or grade. Similarly, you may, as some districts have done, analyze the relationship between exclusionary discipline and

poor results on statewide tests. Doing these things may help reduce resistance. Bringing both the team and school community together around the common goals of supporting all students to succeed and improving positive school climate can be helpful.

What to do after the team is convened

Prepare for the first meeting:

Establish common ground—Don't assume everyone will be familiar with all the discipline issues you'll be discussing. Bring everyone up to speed at the first meeting so they're all starting from the same place.

Provide basic data in a clear and understandable manner—In addition to discussing some of the preliminary discipline data from your school or district, place issues in context by comparing them with state and national data as well.

Highlight promising examples—It's useful to highlight promising strategies and outcomes from other successful efforts so your team knows the job of reducing or eliminating disparities is doable.

At the first meeting:

Agree on guidelines—Mutually agreeing to keep team discussions confidential, treating each other respectfully, honestly and directly tackling sensitive issues such as race and sexual orientation, and using data for problem solving, not blaming, will set the right tone.

Start important conversations—Meaningful, productive conversations should be launched and modeled at this first meeting, including the development of agreements for how sensitive issues and conflict will be handled. Build plenty of time into the schedule throughout the process so everyone has ample time to express his or her thoughts and feel heard.

Delineate roles and distribute leadership—Roles, responsibilities, and expectations are important to clarify. Support shared leadership and active engagement of every team member.

Talk about the elephant in the room in a productive manner

Discussions about the disproportionate impact of disciplinary policies may touch on sensitive racial, ethnic, and cultural issues and can elicit defensive reactions and concerns about school safety and classroom management. Addressing the root causes of disparities and discipline practices requires engagement in discussions that may be challenging for some. These are conversations that we sometimes shy away from because they are sensitive. Among the subjects that are difficult to talk about are race/racism/ethnocentrism, gender, discrimination, and prejudice. To have these types of conversations, we sometimes need to create safe spaces with people who are willing to be open and take risks to talk about these important subjects.

Engage in “courageous conversations”

Meaningful, productive dialogue about difficult issues is sometimes called “courageous conversations,” a process for the engagement in and facilitation of dialogue or conversations about difficult, challenging, or sensitive topics through an open, honest, and strength-based approach. Such conversations facilitate problem solving by focusing on creating an environment of trust that is nonconfrontational and respectful.²³

In a school or district setting, teachers, administrators, students, and families can have difficult, yet rational and productive, conversations that may lead to solutions about such things as differential treatment that may be based on race/ethnicity/language proficiency, class placements (“tracking”), participation of families, and other issues. These issues are sometimes discussed behind closed doors but not always openly and inclusively take all perspectives into consideration. These conversations also may include basic, foundational discussions about the purpose of discipline as well as people’s understanding, cultural experience, beliefs, and attitudes regarding discipline practices. Such discussions will help teams think and talk more openly about how discipline is used and when its use is appropriate.

Before your team gets started, think about how to support honest, safe, and productive conversations about race, ethnicity, implicit and explicit bias, and disparities—conversations that emphasize growth, not guilt. These conversations must be structured and facilitated to build understanding and promote equity, while allowing all participants to share their perceptions. With planning and thoughtful facilitation, your school or district team can thoroughly and nondefensively examine how disciplinary policies and practices are implemented and experienced, logically leading to how to address the root causes of disparities when you reach Stage 3 in this guide.



Cultural and Linguistic Competence

Your team's work to understand the root causes of disparities in school discipline and the solutions you develop are likely to depend on cultural and linguistic competence (CLC). CLC refers to the beliefs, behaviors, knowledge, skills, and systems through which individuals and organizations demonstrate understanding of and empathy and respect for the values, historical context, expectations, language, and experiences of a diverse population. Cultural competence is about acting humbly and respectfully and not assuming that your knowledge and expertise trumps that of others.

Cultural competence refers to a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, organization, or group to enable the individuals within the setting to interact effectively.²⁴ The word culture is used because it implies the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes the thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a demographic group (e.g., a group defined by race, ethnicity, religion, sex, socioeconomic class, or nationality). The word competence is used because it implies the capacity to function effectively in cross-cultural situations.²⁵

Linguistic competence refers to the capacity of an organization and its personnel to communicate effectively and convey information in a manner that is easily understood by diverse audiences, including persons of limited English proficiency, those who have low literacy skills or are illiterate, and individuals with disabilities.²⁶

With appropriate CLC-related policies, structures, practices, procedures, staff training, and dedicated resources, schools can do the following:

1. Expand the understanding of teachers, administrators, and school staff of their students, students' families, and the community.
2. Promote individual and organizational assessment, which can encourage changes in counterproductive attitudes (e.g., bias, stereotyping, and prejudice). Carrying out a CLC self- or organizational assessment in your school or district can unearth factors related to the root causes of achievement and disparities in school discipline.
3. Stimulate interest in discovering and celebrating the diversity of all individuals in the school.
4. Help stakeholders develop the skills to diffuse and prevent the tensions that may arise in diverse settings.
5. Develop partnerships with students, parents and other caregivers, and the community to establish the following:
 - Instructional approaches that engage students with diverse learning styles
 - A school climate that is perceived as welcoming and fair
 - A school climate that promotes positive cultural identity²⁷



Find out more

Visit the National Clearinghouse on Supportive School Discipline at <http://supportiveschooldiscipline.org/learn/reference-guides/cultural-and-linguistic-competence>.

To find assessments to use, go to the National Center for Cultural Competence at <http://nccc.georgetown.edu/resources/assessments.html>.



Find out more

Carter, P., Skiba, R., Arredondo, M., & Pollock, M. (2014). *You can't fix what you don't look at: Acknowledging race in addressing racial discipline disparities*. Bloomington, IN: The Equity Project at Indiana University. Retrieved from http://www.indiana.edu/~atlantic/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Acknowledging-Race_121514.pdf

Francis, K., Martinez, K., Gonsoulin, S., Walters, M., & Willis-Darpoh, G. (2014). *Meridian Public School District professional development training*. Washington, DC: OJJDP's State Training and Technical Assistance Center.

- Courageous Conversations: <http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/Courageous%20Conversations%20-%20Final.pptx>
- Culturally Responsive Teaching: <http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/Culturally%20Responsive%20Teaching-Schools%20-%20Final.pptx>
- Importance of CLC: <http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/Importance%20of%20CLC-%20Plenary%20-%20Final.pptx>
- Parent and Community Engagement: <http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/Parent%20and%20Community%20Engagement-Final.pptx>
- Standing Up to Implicit Bias: <http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/Standing%20Up%20to%20Implicit%20Bias%20-%20Final.pptx>
- Singleton, G. E., & Linton, C. (Eds.) (2006). *Courageous conversations about race: A field guide for achieving equity in schools and facilitator's guide to courageous conversations about race*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Tools for Change. (n.d.). *Alliance building resources*. Retrieved from <http://www.toolsforchange.org/resources/Alliance%20BuildingR.html>

For individuals who are interested in facilitating or cofacilitating these conversations, the following discussion guides prepared by American Institutes for Research (AIR) may be helpful. These discussion guides are intended to help foster dialogue between and among school personnel. The guides provide templates for facilitators to plan and conduct meaningful conversations with staff members about issues pertinent to the provision of culturally and linguistically competent educational services for all youth. The discussion guides (available at http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/Anaheim_Discussion_Guides_FINAL_DRAFT.pdf) cover the following topics:

- Discussion Guide 1: Standing Up to Bias: Mine, Yours, Ours
- Discussion Guide 2: Who Are We? Exploring Issues of Racial and Ethnic Identities
- Discussion Guide 3: LGBTQ and Cultural Competence: Addressing Bias and Fostering Well-Being
- Discussion Guide 4: Stories of Culture, Heritage, and Legacy: The Immigrant Experience in America
- Discussion Guide 5: The Importance of What We Say and What It Means: Issues of Language and Language Access in Diverse Communities
- Discussion Guide 6: Courageous Conversations and Leadership of Cultural and Linguistic Competence

STAGE 1: DIGGING INTO THE DATA

Do disparities in school discipline exist in our school or district?

BACKGROUND

The Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), conducted by ED's Office for Civil Rights, has documented that students in certain racial or ethnic groups as well as students with disabilities are disciplined more than their peers. Among the findings:²⁸

- **Disproportionately high suspension and expulsion rates for students of color:** Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students for the same offenses. On average, 5% of White students are suspended, compared with 16% of Black students. American Indian and Alaska Native students also are disproportionately suspended and expelled, representing less than 1% of the student population but 2% of out-of-school suspensions and 3% of expulsions.
- **Disproportionate suspensions of girls of color:** Although boys receive more than two out of three suspensions, Black girls are suspended at higher rates (12%) than girls of any other race or ethnicity and most boys, and American Indian and Alaska Native girls (7%) are suspended at higher rates than White boys (6%) or girls (2%).
- **Suspension of students with disabilities and ELs:** Students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension (13%) as students without disabilities (6%). In contrast, EL students do not receive out-of-school suspensions at disproportionately high rates (7% suspension rate, compared with 10% of student enrollment).
- **Suspension rates by race, sex, and disability status combined:** With the exception of Latino and Asian-American students, more than one out of four boys of color with disabilities (served by IDEA)—and nearly one in five girls of color with disabilities—receives an out-of-school suspension.

PURPOSE OF STAGE 1 TASKS

The CRDC data suggest how pervasive disparities in school discipline are. The first stage of your analysis process starts with gathering basic data to help you identify disparities that may exist in your school or district. It is critical then to understand who is being disciplined, the kind and extent of the discipline used, the rationale behind disciplinary actions, and what affect the disciplinary actions have on students. To understand all of this, it's essential to examine school and district data. We suggest using the following set of [Big Risk Questions](#) to guide you through this examination.



The Big Risk Questions come from Resource 4: Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool introduced on page 27.

Big Risk Question 1: How many students are subjected to disciplinary action?

- How does the total number of students subjected to one or more disciplinary actions compare with the total number of disciplinary incidents?
- What percentage of students have been subjected to more than one disciplinary action?

Big Risk Question 2: To what extent are students in specific demographic groups (e.g., American Indian or Alaska Native students, students with disabilities) experiencing exclusionary discipline (i.e., suspension, expulsion, or referrals)? Which student demographic groups are at the greatest risk for exclusionary disciplinary action?

- What percentage of students in each racial/ethnic group experience exclusionary discipline?
- What percentage of students in each racial/ethnic group experience exclusionary discipline compared with White students? Are any demographic groups overrepresented? A risk ratio value of 1.0 indicates equal representation, values between 0 and 1 indicate underrepresentation, and values greater than 1 indicate overrepresentation.
- Is there a gap between the risk rate for each of the racial/ethnic minority groups and White students? If so, how great is the discipline disparity in each case? A gap value greater than 0 indicates higher risk than White students, a value less than 0 indicates lower risk than White students, and gap value of 0 indicates equal risk (or no risk) compared with White students.

Big Risk Question 3: What is the rationale behind disciplinary actions taken against students? Is disciplinary action taken uniformly regardless of the type of offense or does the severity of the action taken vary?

- What kind of disciplinary actions are most common—punitive or positive?
- What are the most common infractions?
- Where are infractions taking place?
- How are infractions most commonly discovered?
- Who reports infractions the most?
- Who typically responds to incidents?
- Who or what body typically determines what disciplinary actions are taken against or positive interventions implemented for a student?
- What disciplinary actions are most commonly associated with each infraction?
Is disciplinary action applied consistently by the type of infraction?

Big Risk Question 4: How have exclusionary disciplinary practices influenced student outcomes? Is the school pushing students out or is the school and/or district maintaining responsibility for educating students despite the disciplinary actions taken against them?

- How many school days are lost to in-school and out-of-school suspension?
- Where are students going after being suspended, expelled, or referred?
- To what extent are school disciplinary practices contributing to the pipeline to prison?

It is important not only to identify whether disparities exist and determine their nature but also to mobilize the school community to address disparities. Mobilization efforts should be based on effective social marketing techniques, which employ successful strategies developed in the business world to realize social goals (e.g., smoking cessation). A common element of these techniques is addressing the fact that different members of the school community are at different levels of understanding and motivation regarding disparities and exclusionary discipline.



Find out more

Tools on social marketing can be found on the website of the National Clearinghouse on Supportive School Discipline: www.supportiveschooldiscipline.org.

Every school and district collects discipline data differently. Some use sophisticated electronic systems, while others use paper and pencil to track incidents. Some collect a vast amount of discipline data, including a detailed breakdown of infraction types, while others collect very little. Either way, it's essential to confirm what data are collected and how to access them, especially as you work on your root cause analysis in Stage 2. Collecting quality data is the first essential building block of your root cause analysis. We help guide you through this task and other important data gathering tasks in the following pages.



Resource 2: Discipline Data Checklist

This checklist helps determine and track which data you collect. It includes a summary of data likely to be needed to conduct your root cause analysis. This list conforms to the contents of Resource 4, the Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool, which we describe later.



Resource 3: Data Mining Decision Tree Tip Sheet

This tip sheet can help you think through additional data needs and how to find what you need.

The following series of tasks walks you through collecting and analyzing the right data to identify disparities in school discipline. You will probably be able to use data your school or district already collects to at least begin to determine the extent of these disparities. Keep in mind that if you identify high rates of exclusionary discipline and disparate patterns in disciplinary practices, they should be examined and addressed, even if they do not appear to rise to, in legal terms, a discriminatory or intentional level.

Start With Data You Have

You probably already have some data you can use. This stage also will help you figure out what information you have and what else you need to know. You might need help getting access to additional data and information. Think about the following:

- Who else in your school or district can aid your data search?
- Can you tap someone in the community or at a local college or university to help you find more data?
- Are you already collecting data through proprietary or customized student information systems or other activities that involve PBIS (e.g., schoolwide information system [SWIS]) or school climate (e.g., school climate survey)?
- How can you use what you learn about the problems of gathering or analyzing data to help build a better data collection system in the future?

Building a better data collection system can become part of your Stage 3 action plan.

OVERVIEW OF STAGE 1 TASKS

The focus of Stage 1 is to gather and examine school discipline data to do the following:

- 1.1 Determine data needs
- 1.2 Designate data gatherers
- 1.3 Identify the data you already collect
- 1.4 Determine additional data needs
- 1.5 Ensure data privacy and quality
- 1.6 Disaggregate data
- 1.7 Analyze data for disparities
- 1.8 Develop preliminary findings and identify disparity issues
- 1.9 Prepare to present preliminary findings



As you work your way through the Stage 1 tasks, we'll let you know when it's time to do the following:



Check the Data Mining Decision Tree Tip Sheet (Resource 3) and make a decision about data collection.



Take time to plan, support, and have courageous conversations.

STAGE 1 TASKS

1.1 Determine Data Needs

Data can be both facts and statistics about the number of things (quantitative data) and the qualities of things (qualitative data). When turned into useful information, data provide a way of telling your story and can be used to help people have conversations about what is occurring while also providing important baseline information (a starting point) so you can later determine if change happens. *Quantitative data* may include information your school or district collects on how many students are sent out of class and for what reasons or how many students are suspended from school in a given year. They also can include quantification of individuals' perceptions or attitudes (e.g., data on school climate and attitudinal surveys). *Qualitative data* can be information drawn from reviewing policies, rules, and regulations; from conducting interviews or focus groups (e.g., "Why do you feel that discipline is unfair?"); and from structured observations of schools (e.g., what is on the walls) or school artifacts (e.g., what messages does the school newsletter give).

You will use quantitative data (much of which your school or district probably already collects) to help you identify disparities in your root cause analysis. In particular, you will be able to use your numeric data to calculate the rates of discipline disparities based on your data, using comparisons that are best suited to your circumstances.

Data can help you answer the following questions that relate to understanding disparities, how big the problems are, and the degrees of disparities:

- How many students are suspended (in-school and out-of-school), expelled, or subjected to corporal punishment annually?
- What are the top five offenses for which students are suspended and expelled? What are the demographic characteristics of the suspended and expelled students and what is their representation within the school population?
- Which student demographic groups are at the greatest risk for disciplinary action? In terms of the total number of disciplinary actions taken by your school or district, which student demographic groups are being disciplined at higher rates than others (or have a higher percentage of disciplinary actions relative to their peers)?
- Are disciplinary actions taken uniformly by infraction type or do the severities of the actions taken vary? In terms of the types of offenses to which your school or district attaches sanctions, which demographic groups are being disciplined at higher rates or have a higher percentage of disciplinary actions relative to their peers?
- In terms of the types of discipline assessed for each category of offense, are any demographic groups more likely to receive harsher punishment (e.g., out-of-school suspension as opposed to in-school suspension or three-day suspensions as opposed to one-day suspensions)?
- Are any demographic groups more likely than others to be referred to law enforcement? Are any more likely than others to be referred to law enforcement for particular infractions?



Resource 4: Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool

To help answer the Big Risk Questions, we've developed the Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool, a user-friendly resource that guides you through collecting and analyzing discipline data, then generating your own school's or district's risk profile.

You can use this tool in a variety of ways. The tool can be used as-is, modified, or serve as a model for designing a tool that can more easily integrate with or import data from an existing school or district database or student management system. The tool also can be used in concert with existing data collection efforts, such as PBIS. For example, you may already be using a tool such as PBIS SWIS to collect student behavior data for decision making and can use the Discipline Disparities Risk Assessment Tool as a checklist to make sure you're gathering the right discipline data to inform your efforts.

Through a series of Microsoft Excel worksheets, this tool enables you to do the following:

- Collect and input detailed school, student, and discipline incident data to help identify disparities.
- Track and aggregate individual disciplinary histories to identify disparities.
- Disaggregate data so you can see what is happening to subgroups by race, gender, EL status, disability and disability type, and types of actions.
- Review data for common quality concerns and resolve any outstanding issues.
- Generate simple risk profile graphs of your data results that can be shared or used to track your progress over time.



The tool has detailed instructions to help you work through the various worksheets. Key worksheets will automatically populate as you enter data and information.

Look for this icon throughout Stage 1 when we highlight useful tools, including specific worksheets from the Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool.



Protect student privacy

To protect confidentiality, subgroup data should not be reported when there are fewer than 10 group members.

For additional information, see *Data De-identification: An Overview of Basic Terms* (available at http://ptac.ed.gov/sites/default/files/data_deidentification_terms.pdf).

1.2 Designate Data Gatherers

The team should review and discuss the Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool to become familiar with the kinds of data you need to collect to answer the Big Risk Questions. Then, you'll need to identify an individual who knows where and how to gather the data or a small group of people, perhaps a small subcommittee of the larger team, responsible for gathering data for the team to review.

If you're combining several efforts, such as root cause analysis, PBIS, social and emotional learning, school climate, bullying prevention, restorative practice, educational equity, school turnaround, or Race to the Top tasks, think about designating a person to

be the central point of contact to help coordinate and lead data collection. Besides making things more organized, this approach can keep all stakeholders aware of what's going on with assessment results in different areas, as well as promote cooperation and understanding of how various efforts relate to each other.²⁹

1.3 Identify the Data You Already Collect

To best use your resources, we recommend starting your data collection by pulling together what already is in your school or district's data system. This information is likely to include data that each school and district already collects for ED's CRDC, which covers school characteristics, programs, services, and student outcomes. Most student data for the CRDC are disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, EL status, and disability.³⁰ You also may have additional discipline-related data you're collecting because of federal grant requirements (i.e., IDEA Part B, School Improvement Grants) or as part of implementing different behavioral strategies such as PBIS. These additional data will be important for you to incorporate into your data collection. You also may be collecting your own discipline-related data internally within your school or district that may be useful.

Understanding what your state laws and regulations require may help you discover new sources of discipline data and information. Washington state provides an example of what may be required by state law. Washington requires the disaggregation of data by subgroups of race, gender, grade, and homelessness and foster care status. Washington also requires schools to track behavioral infractions by code (e.g., bullying, tobacco use, fighting) as well the interventions applied (e.g., short- or long-term, emergency, expulsion). It also directs principals to "determine that appropriate student discipline is established and enforced" and calls for, at a minimum, an annual review of standards and enforcement that includes "certified employees" in a school building. Recent law in Washington directed the state education agency to convene a task force to develop data collection standards for "disciplinary actions that are discretionary and...that result in the exclusion of a student from school."³¹ In Stage 3, you may want to tie elements of your action plan to efforts that are underway in your state (e.g., the Washington state task force developing data collection standards on exclusionary discipline).

It also will be best if you can examine multiple years of data for the following reasons:

- Data for one year may be distorted by specific events or a particular source of error.
- Multiple years of data can confirm the lessons drawn from one year.
- Multiple years of data may help you determine trends.

You may or may not have multiple years of data in different categories, but don't let that stop you. If you only have data for one year, you can still proceed with useful analysis, which we describe as you move ahead in the guide. Any and all data you gather and examine will help you get a good start.



Resource 5: Supportive Data Resources

This tip sheet describes the type of data your school or district may already be collecting under federal grants and initiatives as well as behavioral strategies, such as PBIS or restorative practices, which can inform your disciplinary analysis.



Check in on your Data Mining Decision Tree Tip Sheet (Resource 3).

1.4 Determine Additional Data Needs

As you collect data, some gaps may become obvious. How you fill those gaps will depend on the other kinds of information your school, district, or state already collects. This area is where it's important to have leadership in your school and district on your team actively supporting the effort so that you can obtain easy access to the data you need or the resources needed to pursue the information.

It also can be helpful to learn from the experiences of another school in your district or another district in your state that collects the kind of data you are seeking. For instance, you may want to find out the steps your school or district would need to take to collect data on alternative interventions, such as referral of students to the school's student support team or to a counselor, teacher advisor, or agency partner. In some states, juvenile courts have undertaken data collection, tracking youth referrals for disciplinary offenses from schools. Tap the expertise of the partners on your team to find out what other kinds of data might be available to you.

It's important to stay focused, however, on trying to answer the Big Risk Questions and not get distracted pursuing too many other lines of inquiry. Having too much data and information at this stage could overwhelm your team, potentially stalling your efforts and undermining progress.



Check in on your Data Mining Decision Tree Tip Sheet (Resource 3).

Additional Data Sources

Federal data sources

Federal agencies provide a range of products for gathering additional data, including school climate surveys, [fidelity assessments](#), and evaluations of educator practice. The most relevant products for schools and districts working on disparities in school discipline are listed in Appendix 1 of ED's Guidance Package, *Directory of Federal School Climate and Discipline Resources*; see Data, Measurement, and Reporting starting on page 27: <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/appendix-1-directory.pdf>.

The *Directory* also lists federally funded projects that analyze school climate and disciplinary practices, including studies, clearinghouses of evidence-based practices, and federal surveys with relevant items and scales; see Federal Surveys, Research, and Analysis starting on page 48.

ED collects data on disciplinary incidents and disciplinary removals under the Gun-Free Schools Act, the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act, and IDEA. For a detailed description of what states are required to report under each of these statutes, see the *Forum Guide to Crime, Violence, and Discipline Incident Data*: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011806.pdf>.

State data sources

Some states require schools to provide disciplinary data for accountability reports or longitudinal data collection initiatives. Certain states create school safety and school discipline reports or use the data for workgroups and task forces. Find out if your state has any additional data collection requirements that may add to your efforts by checking the Compendium of School Discipline Laws and Regulations, another item in the ED and DOJ School Discipline Guidance Package. Go to <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-discipline-laws-regulations-category> and search under the Monitoring and Accountability category.

1.5 Ensure Data Privacy and Quality

You must be careful to protect the privacy of students as you gather and examine data about them. This confidentiality is important within the team as it works and later when you share findings with your school, district, or community. Data collection and sharing must be consistent with applicable privacy laws, including removing students' personally identifiable information.³²

You also want to ensure that the data you use for your root cause analysis are valid and reliable, terms that we define later. Data quality will strengthen your findings and enhance trust later on when you share your findings with broader audiences.

Data privacy

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is a federal law that protects the privacy of student education records. The law applies to all schools that receive funds under an applicable program of ED (<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>). You should review FERPA, as well as applicable state laws, to help guide your data collection and reporting efforts.

To ensure student privacy, data should be de-identified as described in Data De-Identification: An Overview of Basic Terms (http://ptac.ed.gov/sites/default/files/data_deidentification_terms.pdf). One rule of thumb when disaggregating and reporting student subgroup data is to employ exclusionary rules when there are fewer than 10 students in a disaggregated subgroup. That is, do not present data for a subgroup if it is composed of fewer than 10 students.

In addition to protecting student privacy, you also should have a clear understanding of rules and regulations related to maintaining privacy protections for school and district staff. For example, some teachers unions negotiate privacy protections that appear in teachers' contracts.

Data reliability, validity, and quality

When delving into root causes, you want to have, to the best extent possible, data that are valid and reliable. Reliability involves a number of factors: data are as current as possible, derived from reputable sources, based on adequate samples, have sufficient response rates, and are gathered using sound, accepted methods. Consistency is the main measure of reliability.³³ Validity involves whether the data you reliably collect can help you learn about what you want to measure. Your data may have gaps or contain variations or inconsistencies for a variety of reasons. For example, if you want to know about individual attendance, you need individual attendance data and not just school data. Or if you want to know how families feel about something, you have to address bias caused by interviewing only one type of family member (e.g., parents who are regularly involved in a parent-teacher organization). Not doing so creates what is called a selection bias, which can lead to your drawing the wrong conclusions from your findings. So, before you can draw conclusions from the data, you need to know if there are problems with the data quality. For example, you may have too much of certain types of information and not enough of other types (e.g., limited data on the consequences of disciplinary actions).



The Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool helps you review data concerns

Worksheet 4 (Review Data) of the Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool guides you through how to review data for common quality concerns such as the following:

- **No data:** Some data may not be collected or you may not be able to connect the data to student demographics.
- **Missing data:** A data set may not be complete.
- **Duplicate data:** One piece of data may appear twice in a data set (e.g., a single disciplinary infraction counted more than once), which misrepresents the total number of infractions.
- **Erroneous data:** Data may have been entered incorrectly. You may find patterns indicating that some reporters (individuals or people in a certain role or school) are less reliable than others.
- **Biased data:** Explicit and implicit biases can affect perceptions and result in some counts being higher or lower than they should be. Self-report data may be biased by the reporter's attitudes or situation.
- **Changing items or definitions:** Some data elements may change from year to year or between schools; standards for interpreting scaled scores may change.

Although you should be aware of these challenges, you can still use the data you have to identify disparities and, in some cases, make improvements in data collection that allow you to get what you need moving forward. In addition, there may be data experts on your team, in your district, or at a local college or university who can help address problems with data quality through [data cleansing](#), capturing missing data, [weighting](#) some data, identifying survey or report items that are more susceptible to implicit bias, or developing follow-up studies with intentionally selected samples of students to enhance your understanding of disparity-related issues. It's important to communicate data-quality issues and the methods available to address the problems, both to improve data collection in the long run and to help people draw conclusions from the current data. In the short term, you can create proxies for incomplete data. For instance, you may compute individual attendance data for a sample of disciplined or nondisciplined students of different ethnicities or reach out to parents who do not belong to the parent-teacher organization. You can address systemic data quality problems in your Stage 3 action plan.

1.6 Disaggregate Data

Some of your data may be only currently available as aggregated data. For example, you may have information about your entire student body, showing the total number of infractions documented in a school year. Your quantitative disciplinary data may show that 5% of students received suspensions in a given school year. Compared with data from other schools, you may draw the conclusion that these data indicate no cause for concern. When you disaggregate that 5%, however, and break it down to examine the data by gender, race, EL, and disability status, you will be able to see whether students from these subgroups are being suspended more often or for lower level infractions than students not in those subgroups.

Disaggregating data means breaking down the data into subgroups so that you can examine data by race, sex, disability, age, EL status, grade level, and sexual orientation (if data are available). You also may want to look at other subgroups, such as students receiving free or reduced-price lunch or those considered mobile, or by grade or class. Disaggregating your data can help you to understand, for instance, that the risk of suspension may be greatest in ninth grade for African-American males.

Disaggregating data helps to identify concerns and eventually solutions because it highlights problem areas and enables you to explore issues such as the treatment of subgroups of students, as in our example, or different subgroups' risks for being suspended. Because data disaggregation is a requirement under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as amended in 2001 and has been recommended as a tool for academic improvement, your school or district may already be familiar with this process. Similarly, because the CRDC requires disaggregated data on discipline, some disaggregated data may already be available to you.

What to disaggregate

Disaggregation can include examining data by subgroups of students or other defining units, such as classroom, grade level, school, or even cluster (e.g., feeder schools for a geographically based high school).

The following data should be disaggregated during Stage 1:

- Disciplinary data by subgroup, including disciplinary referrals (if available), suspensions, number of days suspended, expulsions, corporal punishment, and referrals to law enforcement.
- Data collected on school-based law enforcement officer activity, including, as appropriate, data on school-based arrests, citations or tickets, searches, and referrals.



Check in on your Data Mining Decision Tree Tip Sheet (Resource 3).

It's important to continue digging deeper by combining categories, which is sometimes called cross-tabulation (e.g., Black male students who have disabilities) or by disaggregating subgroup data (e.g., examining the experience of students with different kinds and combinations of disabilities; the experiences of different Asian or Latino populations). Or you can combine categories such as Black students with emotional and behavioral disorders. You also may choose to explore your data based on your understanding of your school's or district's demographics, or by drawing on the expertise of individuals with a deep understanding of students from particular racial and ethnic groups in your community or students who are LGBTQ.

Absolute Numbers and Risk Ratios

Absolute numbers are important because they provide a sense of the magnitude of a problem and the share of the problem experienced by particular subgroups (both of which can be clearly displayed in pie charts).

However, absolute numbers alone can be misleading. In most cases, it also is important to create a simple metric that indicates the likelihood that certain subgroups of students will experience disparate disciplinary outcomes. This task can be done by using ratios (e.g., risk ratios or odds ratios) or by determining the percentage of students in a subgroup who experience different types of exclusionary discipline.

Keep in mind that when real numbers are low, percentages can be deceptive or meaningless. For example, if a school has two expulsions one year and one the next year, reporting that the school experienced a 50% drop in expulsions is a misuse of percentages. But small data points can reflect a concern if both expulsions were Black male students and the total population of Black males in the district is small.



For more information on calculating disparities in school discipline, see the "Two Common Methods for Calculating Disparities in School Discipline" sidebar on page 34.

Two Common Methods for Calculating Disparities in School Discipline

There is no universally accepted standard method for characterizing or calculating overrepresentation in school discipline. The methods used most commonly by jurisdictions, researchers, policy analysts and advocates to measure discipline disparities vary widely. A useful way of identifying disparities is to assess the risks for exclusionary discipline (e.g., one or more suspensions, length of suspensions) experienced by different groups in a school or district. Although there are many methods available for measuring risk, we highlight two common methods in the following table: risk ratio and risk gap. Using these methods can produce metrics that you can use to communicate the extent of a disparity and to monitor change over time. Each method has both strengths and limitations, which we indicate. Therefore, we suggest you calculate and analyze both. We also suggest that you look at suspension rates. This will help you focus on the levels of use. This is likely to be important in Stage 3 when you prepare to assess progress in reducing disparities as well as reductions in the use of exclusionary discipline.

Method 1: Risk Ratio^a

Purpose: The risk ratio can be used to represent the likelihood of a specific or set of disciplinary action(s) (e.g., one or more suspensions) for a target demographic group (e.g., Black students, Hispanic male students) in relation to one or more peer groups.

Risk Ratio Calculation: The risk ratio is calculated by dividing the risk for a disciplinary outcome for a specific demographic group (i.e., the **Risk Index**), to the risk for a comparison group (e.g., White students, all other students).

Illustrative Question: What is the likelihood that Black students will experience one or more suspensions compared to White students?

This illustrative question can be calculated using the following example:

$$\frac{\left(\begin{array}{c} \text{Number of Black students} \\ \text{(unduplicated count)} \\ \text{subjected to one or more} \\ \text{suspensions} \end{array} \right)}{\left(\begin{array}{c} \text{Total number of} \\ \text{Black students} \end{array} \right)} \div \frac{\left(\begin{array}{c} \text{Number of White students} \\ \text{(unduplicated student} \\ \text{count) subjected to one} \\ \text{or more suspensions} \end{array} \right)}{\left(\begin{array}{c} \text{Total number of} \\ \text{White students} \end{array} \right)}$$

Risk Ratio Interpretation:

- A ratio of 1.0 indicates the risk for disciplinary action for the target and comparison groups is equal.
- A ratio greater than 1.0 indicates that the target group is at greater risk for disciplinary action.
- A ratio less than 1.0 indicates the target group is at a lower risk for disciplinary action.

Advantages:

- The risk ratio allows for direct comparison between demographic groups to identify potential disparities.
- The risk ratio is a metric that can be tracked over time for the purpose of transparency and continuous quality improvement.
- The risk ratio, in contrast with the risk gap (below), is more useful in quantifying differences in low-incidence events such as arrests.

^a OSEP Technical Assistance Center. (2014). *Using discipline data within SWPBIS to identify and address disproportionality: A guide for school team*. Retrieved from http://indiana.edu/~pbisin/pdf/PBIS_Disproportionality_Data_Guidebook.pdf

Limitations:

- The risk ratio does not reflect whether discipline is high or low in frequency.
- The risk ratio may not be stable when based on small numbers. The risk ratio does not work for comparing groups when the total for one group is zero.
- The risk ratio may be a poor indicator of progress over time. For example, (a) in schools with very high disparities, small changes in the comparison group can dramatically change the risk ratio and (b) risk ratio can increase even when the risk gap improves.

Method 2: Risk Gap

Purpose: The risk gap can be used to represent the **difference** in receiving a disciplinary action or a set of disciplinary actions (e.g., one or more suspensions) between a target group (e.g., Black students or Black male students) and a comparison group (e.g., White students or White male students).

Risk Gap Calculation: Subtract the likelihood of students from a comparison group receiving a disciplinary action from the likelihood of students in the target group receiving a disciplinary action.

Illustrative Question: To what extent do Black and White students differ in the likelihood of receiving one or more suspensions?

This can be represented by the following example:

$$\left(\frac{\text{Number of Black students (unduplicated count) subjected to one or more suspensions}}{\text{Total number of Black students}} \right) - \left(\frac{\text{Number of White students (unduplicated student count) subjected to one or more suspensions}}{\text{Total number of White students}} \right)$$

Risk Gap Interpretation:

- A risk gap of 0.0 indicates that the risk for the two groups is equal.
- A positive risk gap indicates that students in the target group are more likely to receive a disciplinary action compared with students in the comparison group.
- A negative risk gap indicates that students in the target group are less likely to receive a disciplinary action compared with students in the comparison group.

Advantages:

- The risk gap allows you to calculate a gap when the total for a comparison group is zero.
- It is a metric that can be tracked over time for the purpose of transparency and continuous quality improvement.
- It appears to be useful for measuring high-frequency events (e.g., teacher referrals).

Limitations:

- The risk gap is not usually useful in examining extreme but low-incidence events.

Every method for calculating disparities in school discipline has limits. Therefore, be intentional in figuring out which measures to use. There are other methods for calculating disparities (risk index, alternate risk ratio, composition index, E-formula).



If you want to learn more about these measures, they are described in the following resources:

- Data Accountability Center. (2011). *Methods for assessing racial/ethnic disproportionality in special education: A technical assistance guide*. Rockville, MD: Westat. Retrieved from http://www.isbe.net/spec-ed/pdfs/disproportionality_ta-guide.pdf
- National Clearinghouse on Supportive School Discipline: www.supportiveschooldiscipline.org



Tools to help disaggregate data

The Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool disaggregates some of your data for you.

Your school or district also may have other resources to help you disaggregate data. For example, they may have processes and tools to disaggregate academic data that could be adapted for use in disaggregating discipline data. These resources also could include access to analytical software or accountability staff, data contractors, and community volunteers, such as local college or university researchers, all of whom can help disaggregate and analyze data. If your school or district has a statistical package such as SPSS and someone trained to use the software (e.g., a mathematics teacher, data intern, or member of the district research office), then you can access tutorials for using these programs for disaggregation.

To find out more about disaggregation, go to <http://www.spss-tutorials.com/disaggregate-data/>.

You should be able to identify disparities and conduct root cause analyses with readily available data. But if critical data are missing in your school or district, you can carefully identify and seek data to plug gaps by conducting special studies. For example, you could examine the records of suspended students to determine the offenses for which they were suspended, and then connect suspensions to student demographics. In this situation, you also could use what you learn about gaps to improve future data collection practices by incorporating improvement strategies into your Stage 3 action plan.

1.7 Analyze Data for Disparities

Now it's time to see what your data say about what happens to students as a result of your disciplinary practices. When examining discipline data and practices to determine if disparities exist, look for patterns. For example:³⁴

- Are students being subjected to differential treatment based on race/ethnicity or other characteristics? For example, a school may find that Black, Latino, and American Indian students are suspended at a much higher rate than their White peers—sometimes at double the rate.
- Are policies neutral on their face (e.g., rules are the same for all) and administered in an evenhanded manner but have a disparate impact such as a disproportionate and unjustified effect on students of a particular race? For example, a school may find American Indian students who must travel farther to school than their peers are suspended at higher rates.
- What are the demographic characteristics of disciplined students and what is their representation in the school population? For example, a school may find 20% of secondary school students with disabilities were suspended in a single school year, compared with fewer than 10% of their peers without disabilities.
- Which student demographic groups are at the greatest risk for disciplinary action? For example, a district may find LGBTQ youth are up to three times more likely to experience harsh disciplinary treatment than their heterosexual counterparts.
- Do different subgroups of students receive different consequences or interventions for the same offense? For example, a school may find students of color are suspended for talking back while their counterparts are not.
- Of the total number of disciplinary actions taken by your school or district, which demographic groups are being disciplined at higher rates than others (or have a higher percentage of disciplinary actions relative to their peers)? For example, a school may find although absolute rates of suspension for males are higher than females in general, there is a difference in the rate of exclusionary discipline between Black, Latino, and White females, and the disparity in rates among Black, Latino, and White females is even greater than the disparity in rates between Black, Latino, and White males.
- Are certain types of disciplinary offenses more commonly referred for disciplinary action than others? If yes, are these offenses experienced differently by different subgroups of students? For example, a district may find that after adopting a policy calling for one-day in-school suspensions for “use of electronic devices” that African-American students receive this punishment more frequently than other students.
- When types of discipline are assessed for each category of offense, are any demographic groups more likely to receive harsher punishment (e.g., out-of-school suspension as opposed to in-school suspension or three-day suspensions as opposed

to one-day suspensions)? For example, a school may find that African-American students are referred to the office and receive one-day suspensions for “use of profane or vulgar language” while White students receive no disciplinary actions for similar infractions.



Use the Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool to discuss the Big Risk Questions

Worksheet 5 (Analyze Data) of the Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool introduces you to a structured analysis of data in response to the Big Risk Questions. Certain fields will autopopulate as you input data and generate simple visual graphs of your results. These graphs can be useful conversation starters.

Use data to calculate impact

In addition to identifying disparities, you also want to understand the impact and consequences of exclusionary discipline and disparities, which may be important in mobilizing support for addressing disparate discipline practices. Here are some sample indicators that you can collect data on (some of which the Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool also helps calculate) that help describe the magnitude of problems and some of the corresponding consequences:

- The most common infractions for which students receive exclusionary discipline;
- The percentage of students removed from school (not just counts of incidents);
- Lost days (and hours) of instruction when students are out of class for in-school suspension, or out of school for a suspension, disaggregated by subgroup;
- The number of students in the district removed from school each day on average during the school year, disaggregated by subgroup
- The cumulative number of lost days for individual students (e.g., 20% of disciplined students lost more than 20 days of instruction during a school year);
- The costs to the district associated with lost average daily attendance;
- Taking into account all forms of exclusion from instruction, the number of students being repeatedly disciplined
- Days of lost instruction because of suspension connected to student achievement, dropout rates, and other outcomes
- The number of students referred to law enforcement during a school year, disaggregated by subgroup;
- The number of students who became involved with the juvenile justice system following the school's or district's referral of the student to law enforcement or juvenile court;
- The number of students who are secluded or restrained, disaggregated by subgroup; and
- The number of students removed school through referral to mental or behavioral health services.



Capture juvenile justice referral data

You may not currently be tracking the number of students who become involved with the juvenile justice system after the school or district refers them to law enforcement or to court. To understand the educational and economic impacts of these referrals and develop strategies for reducing this involvement, schools and districts should better understand the short- and long-term impact of juvenile justice system involvement³⁵ and try to access and analyze these data. In some parts of the country, juvenile court systems already are gathering such data in recognition of the shared impact of too many students being referred to juvenile court instead of staying in school. Including juvenile justice stakeholders on your team can provide a doorway to helping you get started on collecting this information.

1.8 Develop Preliminary Findings and Identify Disparity Issues

Stage 1 concludes with you developing of a set of initial conclusions that describe your understanding of any disparities that emerge from your data. These conclusions include the disparity issues you will explore in Stage 2 and plan to address in Stage 3.



Use the Risk Profile section of the Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool

If you are using the Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool, the Big Risk Questions worksheets will automatically generate graphs and charts to help you answer key questions about your disciplinary practices.

Although your preliminary data analysis can be conducted using routinely available software programs, making sense of the data will require the expertise of your team reviewing and thoroughly discussing your findings together. The more your team applies its knowledge and expertise and drills down into the data to determine if the numbers reflect what's really happening, the more robust your preliminary findings will be.



Remember that you can reinforce the power of your data analysis by assessing the different indicators of discipline disparities as explained in the sidebar “Two Common Methods for Calculating Disparities in School Discipline” on page 34.



Discussing preliminary findings and issues related to disparities provides opportunities to engage in courageous conversations.



Resource 6: Action Plan Template

At this point, you may start to fill in a blank template we've provided to begin developing a summary of your data collection questions, data sources, and findings. In Stage 2, you can continue using this template to document your root causes. In Stage 3, you will use this template to document your action strategies along with measures and evidence of success.

Sample Preliminary Findings

The following are sample preliminary findings based on the real experiences of district practitioners answering the question “Are there disparities in our school district?”³⁶

- There were 329 disciplinary referrals in the current year. Seventy-eight percent (257) of teacher and staff disciplinary referrals were for the following four categories of behavior: disrespect, class disruption, insubordination, and tardiness to class.
- Data show that suspension rates were disproportionately high for Black and Latino males, who make up only 15% of the student population but account for 30% of suspensions.
- Data show that the odds ratio for an American Indian male student receiving more than one suspension was 2.5 times that of White males and four times that of White females.
- In-school suspensions were used for shorter time periods for White males and all females than for Black and Latino males.
- Students with disabilities were much less likely to be suspended and much more likely to be sent to the special education teacher than nondisabled students for similar infractions. Nondisabled students were much more likely than students with disabilities to receive detention or in-school suspension. When suspended, 15 students with disabilities received out-of-school suspension and none received in-school suspension.

These following sample preliminary findings are from the experiences of other district practitioners answering the question “What do we know about discipline in our school district?”³⁷

- Multiple disciplinary referrals for Latinas were clustered among a small number of teachers of ninth-grade basic education classes.
- Black students with a history of minor disciplinary problems in middle school continued to have disciplinary problems in ninth grade.
- Students who were absent or tardy to school tended to have more disciplinary referrals.
- Students with poor academic skills tended to have disproportionately higher disciplinary referrals.
- Students who had repeated one or more grades tended to have disproportionately higher disciplinary referrals.

1.9. Prepare to Present Your Findings

With many stakeholders involved in your work thus far, you have benefited from diverse viewpoints, insights, and experiences that have informed your process. You have a preliminary set of findings on disparities based on the best data you have available, yet you will need to test these findings to make sure you’re headed in the right direction. You also want to begin gathering more qualitative data to deepen your understanding of what the statistical findings show; this task will involve deeper conversations—even interviews and focus groups—with individuals in your school, in your district, or people out in the general community who were or are affected by disciplinary practices.

How you present the data matters. It is important to package the issues and implications in ways that humanize them, help people see that there are solutions, and encourage

them to take action. This work might happen in conversations with staff about data suggesting the need for additional training in classroom management, or it might be at the district level when discussing data implications of how discipline is being meted out. Some members of the community may mistrust schools or educators for historical or current reasons and have little faith that change will happen. Transparently sharing your results, meaningfully engaging community members in courageous conversations, and discussing strategies for real change together could begin to move everyone toward more positive solutions.

For all the stakeholders involved in schools, districts, and the community, buy-in is not a one-time event. Rather, it is an ongoing process in which individuals and groups increase their understanding and investment in addressing the challenges of exclusionary discipline and disparities in school discipline. Studies of school and organizational change suggest that every individual in the school community is at one of the following eight stages of readiness shown in the following table to address disparities in exclusionary discipline in a sustained manner.

Levels of readiness for change

Level 1	Lack of Awareness	Being unaware of disparities in school discipline and their impact
Level 2	Awareness	Becoming aware of the importance of disparities in school discipline and their impact
Level 3	Urgency	Feeling a need to address disparities in school discipline
Level 4	Looking for Answers	Searching for ways to address disparities in school discipline systematically and in a manner that improves learning for all students
Level 5	Resistance	Resisting possible solutions
Level 6	Weighing the Choices	Rationally weighing choices and balancing the pros and cons of different choices
Level 7	Intellectual Acceptance	Changing their attitudes so that they are ready to support the plan for systematically addressing disparities
Level 8	Full Acceptance	Implementing policy and practices that systematically eliminate disparities in school discipline

Source: Osher, Dwyer, and Jackson (2004),³⁸ adapted from a model based on Daniel Yankelovich, *Coming to Judgment* (1991).

When talking about findings, be sensitive to individuals' likely level of readiness and focus on helping them reach a greater level of understanding and commitment to eliminate disparities and support the academic success of all students. If your analyses identify several disparities, for example, and you are concerned with overwhelming your school or district with the results, consider how best to present the results or prioritize what you share from the start.

Different audiences may be interested in different findings. Some individuals may need to understand the impact of disciplinary practices on their major concerns (e.g., too many students are losing too many days of instruction and falling behind, increasing their risk for dropping out) so that they are ready to develop meaningful strategies for change (e.g., we need to keep students in class so they learn more, which will improve their learning outcomes and strengthen our overall climate). Your audience also may benefit from seeing how your data look within the context of national or state data as well as what other schools and districts are doing to reduce exclusionary discipline.

Be open and transparent as you share what you've learned and find ways to capture what people share with you as they learn about your findings. Don't be defensive, and take their thoughts and suggestions seriously. Be sure to tell people what's going to happen with what they've told you, perhaps sharing the next steps in your root cause analysis process. Let them know you'll be coming back to them again to get their input on your action plans and maybe in the future as plans are implemented to find out how things are going and what could be improved.



Find out more

Readiness: Assess Your School's Potential for Change

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/101240/chapters/Readiness@-Assess-Your-School's-Potential-for-Change.aspx>

It is critical to know whether you or a school or district organization is ready, willing, and able to implement a particular program or practice. Drivers of readiness include motivation of staff and leaders to adopt new programs and practices; general organizational capacity; and intervention-specific capacities. The brief, *Willing, Able, Ready*, establishes key components of readiness and describes what readiness looks like during different phases of implementation (<http://supportiveschooldiscipline.org/sites/ncssd/files/ASPEReadiness.pdf>).

White Paper: Readiness for Change, ICF International ([Files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED535400.pdf](http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED535400.pdf))

School Change Readiness Tool (www.antiochne.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/SchoolChangeReadinessTool.doc)



Use the findings generated by the Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool to promote conversation

The Big Risk Question worksheets of the Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool will autogenerate graphs based on your answers to the Big Risk Questions. These graphs can make good conversation starters.

As you develop preliminary findings, you may want to act on them immediately. However, although action is important, there's still more work that needs to be done. You want to act smartly, efficiently, and in a manner that gets to the causes of disparities so that you avoid fruitless efforts or efforts that may exacerbate disparities. You need to know more. You're now ready to move on to Stage 2.

STAGE 2: GETTING AT THE ROOTS

What are the root causes of disparities in school discipline?

BACKGROUND

In Stage 1, your team analyzed disciplinary data, identified disparities, and developed some preliminary findings. Now the team should ask probing questions about why certain disparities persistently occur. This step is critical for getting beyond simple solutions (e.g., we'll just reduce the number of students who are suspended) to understanding the mechanisms that create and drive disparities. This understanding will lead to identifying underlying causes that you can act upon.

Disparities are systemic, the product of multiple decisions—conscious or unconscious—that precede the decision to apply discipline. Root cause analyses are necessary to identify the key processes and drivers that contribute to disparities.

Stage 1 largely focused on examining the numbers—your quantitative data. To grasp the “why” behind those numbers, you will now dig deeper while also making strategic use of qualitative data. This work can include review of your school or district policies, regulations, and procedures, as well as looking at relevant state laws. You also will gather input from students and their families to illuminate the impact disciplinary practices have on them.

The causes of disparities may be due to disciplinary policies, regulations, and procedures; the school culture; or the actions of a few staff. It's also possible the causes of disparities—and potential solutions—may be rooted in processes with origins earlier in students' school history that do not appear to be directly related to discipline, such as the following:

- **Lack of access** to challenging curricula and engaging extracurricular opportunities. For example, some groups of students may have diminished access to rigorous curricula because of administrative decisions about student and teacher assignments;
- **Lack of active invitation** to opportunities in the school setting. For example, some students may not be invited or feel welcome to join clubs; and
- **Lack of access to extracurricular opportunities** based on how they are structured. For example, activities may be scheduled at times and in locations that require access to private transportation, which is not available to all students.

Imagine, for example, a school that disproportionately suspends EL students. Interviews with EL students who were and were not suspended as well as some teachers and parents suggest that student behaviors that lead to removal from class are in part attributable to EL students not receiving sufficient academic support and their frustration with academic expectations being tied to skills that they haven't had adequate opportunity

to master. Further examination of these issues could explore the allocation of instructional resources and the preparation of teachers to address students' academic needs. When, as suggested in this example, students' academic frustration is a root cause of disruptive behavior, helping teachers better understand and address students' needs and providing students with additional instructional support can contribute to reducing behaviors that trigger exclusionary or disparate discipline.

PURPOSE OF STAGE 2 TASKS

The focus of Stage 2 is to determine *why* there are disparities in school discipline in your school or district. In this stage, you will do the following:³⁹

Generate possible causes and explanations.

You will move from your initial list of preliminary findings from Stage 1 and develop a more definitive list of possible root causes upon which you can act.

Validate your conclusions.

Your team needs to decide how it will either validate or discount the explanations you generate in Stage 2 so that the interventions you propose in Stage 3 are relevant for the identified probable causes. You can do this work by continuing to mine your data, digging deeper into the data you already have reviewed, or seeking other data to validate your hypotheses. Access to the right data and information is crucial at this point, as is your team's ability to reach consensus about which explanations fit and should lead to action strategies.⁴⁰

Finalize your list of root causes.

After your list is determined, you will move on to Stage 3, which guides you through developing action plan strategies for addressing the root causes the team identifies.

OVERVIEW OF STAGE 2 TASKS

The focus of Stage 2 is to do the following:

- 2.1 Generate possible causes and explanations.
- 2.2 Collect and review qualitative data to validate your conclusions.
- 2.3 Conduct a root cause analysis.

STAGE 2 TASKS

2.1 Generate Possible Causes and Explanations

After you've gathered initial data about discipline patterns in Stage 1, it's time to begin exploring the potential underlying issues influencing patterns of disparity. Researchers and other experts have identified likely issues in which patterns of disparity can arise. You can use the following list of potential issues to help your team consider all potential sources of disparities revealed in your data. Some of these root causes may occur to your team, and others may not. By asking whether each item listed here may be a possible source of

disparity, you are ensuring a more comprehensive examination of underlying issues needing attention when you develop an action plan in Stage 3.



When reviewing the list of potential issues, take time to sustain meaningful conversations with careful facilitation.

Do the disparity patterns you see potentially have their basis in any of the following issues?

Longitudinal issues

- The factors that contribute to disparities often start early in a student's education.
- Disparities in discipline may be the culmination of a series of routine decisions that, when considered in isolation, appear sensible (e.g., how school staff respond to behavioral problems or chronic absenteeism).

Climate, conditions for learning, and learning environment issues

- Students at risk for academic and behavioral problems may be assigned to classes taught by less experienced teachers.
- Students of color and students with emotional and behavioral challenges may experience fewer opportunities to engage in class (e.g., being called on less frequently) than their peers.
- Students at risk for academic and behavioral problems or students of color may not feel emotionally and physically safe, connected, supported, challenged, engaged, and socially capable to succeed academically compared with their peers.

Capacity issues

- Teachers, staff, and schools may have limited capacity (because of a lack of skills, systems, or administrative support) to respond to student behaviors related to hunger, mobility, exposure to violence, loss of a parent, and other adverse childhood experiences.
- Schools and teachers may not have all the tools, training, or support necessary to effectively engage the families of vulnerable students because of language barriers, lack of cultural competency, or other related reasons.
- Schools may lack the systems and resources to address the barriers to student learning to which poverty and trauma contribute.
- Teachers may have limited capacity (because of a lack of training or administrative support) to manage classroom behaviors without relying on punishment and exclusionary discipline.

Intervention issues

- When students of color and students with emotional and behavioral challenges demonstrate challenging behavior, they may receive less supportive and more restrictive interventions than their peers.

- School police and security officers may be involved in matters that do not directly relate to the physical safety of the school.
- The school may not help students or staff to develop their social and emotional skills in a way that enables them to monitor and manage their own behavior.
- The behavior of students who have been suspended or otherwise removed from the school may be monitored more by school staff than that of other students.
- Students may be inappropriately identified as having special education needs. This identification may lead to placement in classrooms that focus primarily on behavior and to grouping students in a manner that reinforces problematic behaviors. Inappropriate identification of students for inclusion in special education contributes to disparities.



For more information

See the sidebar on “The Need for Appropriate Disability Identification” on page 48.

Bias issues

- Explicit and implicit biases can impact decision making.
- Explicit biases can be either the product of prejudice or of [attribution bias](#). Attribution bias is when individuals make perceptual errors assessing what they observe such as student behaviors based on a limited understanding of factors that lead to the behaviors in question. Attribution bias results in individuals prematurely arriving at a biased conclusion. An example is assuming a student who is persistently tardy is oppositional, when the student is late because of unreliable transportation or because he or she has to care for a sibling in the morning.
- Implicit bias can be a product of people’s socialization, what they see and don’t see, or the reinforcement of stereotypes through the media or private conversations. Implicit bias occurs when individuals express judgments and behave based on subconscious attitudes toward other people, things, or groups. Implicit biases are involuntarily activated among individuals who do not see themselves as biased—particularly when they are under stress, time pressure, or are dealing with ambiguous events.
- Implicit bias may affect discipline when school staff members apply their discretion in more “subjective” infraction categories, such as whether a particular student behavior is interpreted as defiant, while others are seen as innocuous.



For more information

See the sidebar “The Role of Implicit Bias in Disproportionate Discipline” on page 49.

Policy issues

- The school code may be vague, inconsistent, or offer conflicting rules related to exclusionary discipline, which can increase the likelihood that subjectivity and implicit bias affects decisions related to these issues.
- The school's or district's interpretation of zero tolerance policies may contribute to exclusionary discipline and disparities.
- Police may criminalize what might otherwise be considered adolescent misbehaviors.

Attitude, knowledge, and behavior issues

- Educators and security personnel often lack awareness of the harmful consequences of exclusionary discipline and referrals to juvenile courts. For example, a teacher may suspend a ninth-grade student for one day as a disciplinary measure and not understand that this suspension could contribute to a greater likelihood of the student's disengagement from school, leading to further problems—even potentially involvement with juvenile justice—which might in turn affect the student's completion of a college application that asks if he or she has ever been suspended, expelled, or arrested.
- The normative response to behavior in the school may be reactive and punitive.
- Personnel may make decisions based on implicit bias, leading to unanticipated impacts on students.



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The Need for Appropriate Disability Identification

Research suggests that students of color are both under- and overidentified as having educational disabilities that require restrictive placement. Research confirms that this process can contribute to diminished learning opportunities, behavior problems, exclusionary discipline, increased dropout rates, and arrest.⁴¹

Students with disabilities are twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension (13%) than students without disabilities (6%). With the exception of Latino and Asian-American students, more than one out of four boys of color with disabilities (served by IDEA)—and nearly one in five girls of color with disabilities—receives an out-of-school suspension. Students with disabilities served by IDEA represent a quarter of students arrested and referred to law enforcement, even though they are only 12% of the overall student population.⁴²

In light of heightened concerns about disparities in school discipline for students with disabilities, schools and districts should delve deeper into disability data. This examination should begin with making sure that students identified as disabled are correctly identified, in terms of whether they have a disability, and, if they do, their type of need.

Students of color, ELs, and students with disabilities are often treated as discrete groups. However, many students fall into more than one group. In addition, students with different types of disabilities may be subjected to discipline differently. Further, there is significant evidence regarding the overrepresentation of students of color and ELs in special education, along with legal action families and advocates have taken based on this evidence. Contributing factors to overrepresentation may be the lack of cultural and linguistic competence of school staff, which may lead to unnecessary referrals for special education in subjective special education categories such as emotional disturbance.⁴³

Policies and practices related to disability identification should be examined to achieve appropriate identification, as well as interventions that help students develop the skills to manage themselves and remain in the classroom with their nondisabled peers. The goal should not just be decreased or increased labeling of students. Your analysis should examine how the cultural and linguistic competence of staff affects decisions related to disability identification. Further consideration should be given to consequences of disability identification (e.g., segregated placements and experiences) and the effects of stigma on students' experiences.⁴⁴ Keep in mind the following critical issues:

- Emphasize appropriate and timely disability identification and provide strength-based, individually tailored services, not greater or lesser rates of identification.
- Recognize that racial disparities exist in disability identification, acknowledging that problems exist with both over- and underrepresentation.
- In schools and districts where a significant number of students identified as having an emotional disturbance are suspended or expelled, there may be a broader problem with the school or district's approach to providing supports for students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. The problem may include inappropriate identification or inappropriate or inadequate services.
- Some schools have lower expectations for students labeled with an emotional disturbance or as having an intellectual disability, which can result in self-fulfilling prophecies.

Because most students with disabilities spend 80% or more of their school day in a general education classroom, your school or district may want to consider additional training and support for general education teachers. Such training should address how to prevent and respond to students' challenging behavior.⁴⁵ You may want to include training and support for general education teachers in your action plan in Stage 3.

The Role of Implicit Bias in Disproportionate Discipline

It's likely that implicit biases—attitudes or stereotypes that affect how individuals understand, act, and make decisions in an unconscious manner—affect behaviors and decision making in your school, district, and community. Such biases can be either favorable or unfavorable. Implicit biases are involuntarily activated, without the individual being aware they've been activated. They are pervasive and robust. Although everyone possesses implicit biases, they do not always align with our conscious beliefs. One does not have to be a racist or someone who intentionally discriminates to harbor implicit racial biases or biases related to gender, sexual orientation, and disability. Although implicit biases develop over a person's lifetime, they are reinforced by experiences (and influenced by the media), how we process these experiences, and how those around us reinforce what we experience. The good news is that implicit biases can be unlearned and replaced with new associations, particularly when groups commit to enacting and supporting change.

Bias, like discipline disparities, is not an easy subject for some people to hear about or discuss. Although there is a strong scientific basis for working to understand implicit biases, doing so can lead to school-community conversations that sometimes trigger defensiveness. Some people may feel they're being blamed. As we noted in Stage 1 of this guide, those seeking to facilitate conversations about implicit biases in schools may find it useful to draw on the lessons from “courageous conversations.” These conversations should be strength-based, planned, fact-based, respectful, honest, focused on actions for improvement, and meant to build collaboration and raise emotional intelligence.⁴⁶ Engaging in such conversations supports everyone in school communities to hear and act on feedback that challenges current practices but, more importantly, leads to improvements in student achievement and well-being.



Find out more

You also may find it useful for members of your team and school community to take a free assessment of implicit biases, available at: <https://implicit.harvard.edu>.

2.2 Collect and Review Qualitative Data to Validate Your Conclusions

The data your team reviewed in Stage 1 paint a first draft but provide a limited picture of disparities in school discipline. To develop a more complete understanding of what happens to students disciplined in your school or district, you need to examine what drives your disciplinary practices. If your team hasn't already done so, you can now collect and review a range of resources and information—considered qualitative data—including as much as possible of the following:⁴⁷

1. Written policies at the school level, including student codes of conduct, parent handbooks, and teacher manuals;
2. Written policies at the district level, such as definitions of terms related to discipline, what happens to suspended or expelled students, and rules regarding students referred to the juvenile justice system;
3. Applicable state laws, including definitions, grievance procedures, and regulations related to zero tolerance policies;

4. De-identified copies of student disciplinary records and disciplinary referral forms (records and forms for individual students and disaggregated data based on records for subgroups of students);
5. Surveys related to conditions for learning and school climate;
6. Summaries of conversations, interviews and focus groups with students, families, administrators, teachers, counselors, support staff, school resource officers, other law enforcement officers, relevant contractors, and agency partners; and
7. Correlational data on the relationships between disparities in school discipline and attendance, educational achievement and (if available) experience of academic challenge, participation in curricular and extracurricular enrichment opportunities, types of services provided, and response to previous disciplinary infractions.

Collection of this information must be carried out in a careful, intentional manner. Do not simply seek out people who are easy to work with or documents that are easy to find. It's critical to gather the most representative sources of information and data possible. This work can be done by creating a sampling frame—a list of the different categories of people you need to speak to—that specifies how you will ensure that those you speak with are representative of the broader school, district, and community. For example, by randomly selecting individuals in each category listed in your sampling frame or by seeking input from a range of members in a particular subgroup, you can address selection bias by not just speaking to parents who volunteer at the school or students who are members of the student council.

Sample Findings Based on a Qualitative Data Collection

A review of the types of materials listed previously may result in findings such as the following:⁴⁸

- Forty-eight percent of the 300 students who participated in focus groups report they do not have a caring connection with any teacher or school staff member.
- Students who have been expelled multiple times say they experience school staff as not caring about them.
- Parents from one neighborhood report that limited transportation options can make it difficult for their children to arrive at school on time. Transportation difficulties also hamper parent participation in school activities and meetings.
- Parents praise the youth mentoring program at the YMCA for the homework help provided to students. They also report positive experiences with the local community mental health agency.
- Teachers report that “disruptive” students lack required reading and mathematics skills for high school and come to class “not prepared to learn.” Teachers identify many disruptive students as Black or Latino. They request more remedial and individualized instructional time for these students, as well as more administrative support and more training in classroom management and teaching diverse student groups.

Reviewing these policies and data sources will help your team understand how your school's or district's practices related to attendance, classroom instruction, curricula and extracurricular enrichment, transportation, student support, and discipline may contribute to disparities. More importantly, you need to understand the *impact* of those practices—especially those that relate to exclusionary discipline and disparities in school discipline—on students. One way to do this is to ask students, families, and concerned community members. If you routinely have conversations with students, families, and community members, you have a good basis for extending conversation to these important issues. You may find, for example, in talking with students, that some teachers and administrators implement disciplinary policies in ways that don't conform to the written policies. Such practices need to be examined. Your conversations about discipline can help you engage important stakeholders, build trust, and further demonstrate your intention to take action.



Think about how you can have meaningful conversations with more people to learn about the impact of discipline on students and families.

Compendium of School Discipline Laws and Regulations

State laws, or how your school or district interprets those policies, may affect disparities. Disciplinary codes, laws, and regulations vary significantly from state to state and district to district. For example, some districts interpret zero-tolerance laws and regulations broadly, using the concept to define sanctions related to infractions such as tardiness, noncompliance with school uniform codes, or ill-defined “disrespect.” You already may be familiar with your state laws that guide your discipline policies, but it may be useful to check in on them again now to see if anything has changed or to look at state laws with fresh eyes, now that you're focused on the root cause analysis process. In addition, if state or district policy is the problem, you may want to see whether your own district or school policies exacerbate the problems by how state or district policy is implemented.



Find out more

To view school disciplinary policies by state, visit the [Compendium of School Discipline Laws and Regulations on the website of the National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments](http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-discipline-compendium) (<http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-discipline-compendium>).

The compendium is organized to help state and local policymakers and school personnel better understand school discipline laws and administrative regulations for each of the 50 states, Washington, D.C., and the U.S. territories of Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. For each state and jurisdiction, discipline-related laws, regulations, and government-sponsored websites or resources are listed. The laws and regulations for each jurisdiction are categorized by type of discipline (e.g., in-school discipline, out-of-school and exclusionary discipline, school resource and safety officers).

2.3 Conduct a Root Cause Analysis

There are many ways to conduct a root cause analysis. You already may have a process for performing a root cause analysis that is different from the method described here. We encourage you to use the method that works best for you and your school or district. Whatever method you use, we urge you to document your process and results.

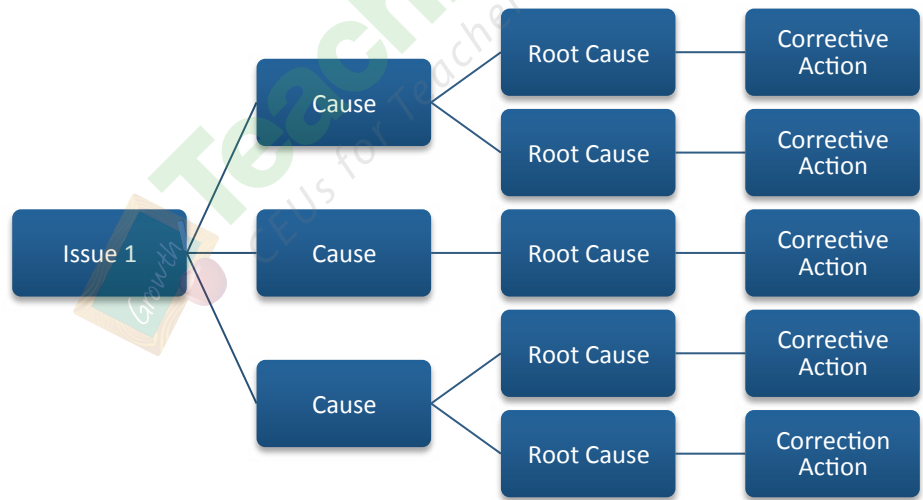
The Diagnostic Tree

A tree diagramming process is commonly used in business, health care, and marketing to identify root causes and determine possible corrective actions. Developing a diagnostic tree can help you analyze a red-flag disciplinary issue to understand finer levels of detail and identify causal issues. The structured nature of the tree diagramming process is designed to reveal information in an organized way, not to restrict creative thinking. The following is a sample tree diagram that shows how root causes can lead to strategic interventions, which we call action strategies.



Resource 7: Root Cause Diagnostic Template

As you begin work on conducting your root cause analysis using the tree diagram shown on this page, use the blank template to start entering the issues, causes, and root causes you identify. Later in Stage 3, you will fill in the corrective actions or action strategies your team identifies.



The tree diagram guides you through the following levels:

Issue

This first level is sometimes called the “red-flag” issue. These are the issues you identified in Stage 1. For example,⁴⁹ a high school in a rural community in Wisconsin examined its data and discovered that many students were arriving at school late in the morning, resulting in numerous office referrals for tardiness. A closer look at the data revealed that more girls than boys were late and that a significant percentage of students who were late and referred to the office were American Indian.

Causes

The second level moves to the next degree of detail, the possible causes of the problem. Continuing with the example from the Wisconsin high school, when the assistant principal talked with students and teachers about the possible causes of students arriving late to school, he uncovered the following:

- Some students said they had trouble getting to school by 7:45 a.m. because their home was far from school.
- Some students said they were late because they had to take one or more younger siblings to school before coming to high school.
- Some students said they were late because the time before school starts is the only time they get to hang out with their friends.
- Some teachers said they regularly argued with the same students, not only because the students were consistently tardy in the morning but also because they were unprepared for class.

Root Causes

At the third level of the tree, you will begin to form broad hypotheses about the possible root causes of the problem. When a team from the Wisconsin high school began determining possible root causes for the causes identified in the previous step, they discovered the following:

- **Distance Issues:** Some students who lived far away were arriving late because the buses often didn't run on time. In some instances, when a bus arrived early at a stop, the driver didn't wait for students to get to the bus before leaving.
- **Social Issues:** For many students in this rural community, school was the only place to see their friends face to face. For some female students, taking care of a sibling was a major factor in getting to school late in the morning; for other students, connecting with friends first thing in the morning was more important than getting to class on time.
- **Relationship Issues:** Many of the school's teachers were new and unfamiliar with how to connect with American Indian students. Students who didn't feel that teachers were making an effort to connect with them were more combative. Teachers didn't realize that some of their students were really struggling with the curriculum, and some of these students hid their discomfort with bravado.

Corrective actions

An examination of root causes should logically lead to action steps (which you will develop in Stage 3) that can be taken to remedy the original problem. In this example, the team devised the following corrective actions:

- **Distance Issues:** The school bus schedule was adjusted so that buses would pick up students five minutes earlier every morning. The new schedule was disseminated to

students and families in a variety of formats, including text-message reminders and tweets to students. Bus drivers received a short training on the need for keeping the bus on schedule (including how consistency could help to reduce disciplinary problems) and the importance of waiting for students if the bus arrived at a stop a few minutes early.

- **Social Issues:** To give students a chance to connect first thing in the morning and address some of the academic needs identified, the assistant principal received permission from the district to start the high school day 30 minutes later (at 8:15 a.m.) and to designate the first 30 minutes of the day a period for homework and remediation. From 7:45 a.m. to 8:15 a.m. every morning, the school's common area opened for students to gather together, and teachers were in their classrooms with the doors open, available to answer questions and help with schoolwork. Small teams of teachers also were able to use this time for planning sessions to discuss how to address the needs of struggling students.
- **Relationship Issues:** The school reached out to the Tribal Community Center, inviting staff and parents to talk with teachers about their culture and how to build relationships with American Indian students. Community Center staff and parents also were invited to serve as volunteers at the high school in the morning, partnering with teachers and other school staff to greet students as they entered the building.

Within just a few weeks of these changes being introduced, the number of students designated tardy and office referrals for student misconduct decreased significantly. The assistant principal reported that most mornings the school's common area was full of students who were not only socializing but also had their books and notebooks open and were working on school work together. Tensions dropped, and teachers and students reported having better relationships with each other.

Understanding how discipline affects students and overall school climate can require a deep level of analysis, the details of which are important for devising corrective action strategies. Some students may be labeled troublemakers and be disciplined for simply being present when a negative incident occurs. Teachers and staff sometimes make judgments about a student's guilt or innocence based on his or her previous behavior, which is a form of attribution bias, or based on assumptions about race or ethnicity, which could be a form of implicit bias. Similarly, if Black students receive harsher disciplinary actions than White students for the same infractions, implicit bias may be contributing to the root cause. Exploring strategies to dismantle racism, address explicit and implicit bias, and strengthen the cultural and linguistic competence within your school or district may be most helpful.

Your plans also should address your school's or district's level of readiness and capacity for making changes. Ultimately, the strategies featured in your action plan will depend on what is feasible and which root causes you can modify. As noted earlier, although some factors, such as poverty, are outside your school's purview, your school or district can take action to address the needs of students who have experienced the adversities of poverty.

This action can include professional development to address attribution biases and lowered expectations for students who are poor.

Now you are ready to move on to Stage 3, developing actionable strategies based on your root cause analysis.



Use Resource 6: Action Plan Template

Take a moment to fill in information about root causes in your Action Plan Template. Make sure your conclusions link to data sources.



STAGE 3: CREATING AN ACTION PLAN

How will you address the root causes of disparities in school discipline?

BACKGROUND

Now you're ready to use what you've learned about who is being disparately disciplined and the associated processes and drivers to develop an action plan for making changes to reduce—and eventually eliminate—disparities. Your plan of action also will describe how your school or district will monitor your plans and regularly revisit data collection so you can continuously improve your efforts and sustain them over time.

Many schools and districts already are deeply engaged in changing codes of conduct, disciplinary practices, and approaches to building positive school climate. For example, many schools in Maryland are using PBIS and restorative practices to help teachers better manage classrooms and provide alternatives to suspensions, resulting in dramatic drops in reported behavior incidents and suspensions.⁵⁰ Similar results have been found in Chicago and Cleveland through the use of social and emotional learning (SEL).⁵¹ Yet another example involves youth in Michigan using their school-based Teen Advisory Council to change school climate, concentrating on peer mediation to support students in learning how to “disagree without being disagreeable.”⁵² Still another example involves some districts that are starting to embed lessons on implicit bias, equity, and justice into professional development, to aid teachers in understanding how they can best meet the needs of diverse students within the context of promoting achievement for all students.⁵³ Where you go from here depends on your findings, but your action plan can incorporate existing efforts in which your district already is engaged, such as Race to the Top, No Child Left Behind, PBIS, character education, SEL, school climate, educational equity, restorative practices, and others as long as the complementary initiative is being well implemented and realizing results.

PURPOSE OF STAGE 3 TASKS

Addressing disparities involves changing policies and procedures as well as adult attitudes, knowledge, and behavior. Your action plan is likely to emphasize an entire suite of strategies such as providing training and supports for all school staff, eliminating problematic practices, and creating and applying fair and equitable policies for all students, as well as employing positive behavioral approaches, SEL and support, restorative practices, and mental health support.

The key to your action plan is identifying interventions that address the drivers and root causes of disparities in your school or district, as well as selecting evidenced-based approaches, programs, or practices that your school or district has the capacity to implement effectively. Effective implementation includes providing adults with the

supports they need to master new approaches and practices and providing students with the supports they need to succeed academically and manage their behavior.

Developing a clear and sustainable plan of action can honor the effort everyone has put into this process, incorporating everyone's voice, experiences, and ideas. It also helps to build trust prior to tackling the change process and keeps the lines of communication open to discuss what's working and what needs to be adjusted.

OVERVIEW OF STAGE 3 TASKS

The focus of Stage 3 is developing an actionable set of changes to begin reducing and eventually eliminating the root cause of disparities. In this stage, you will do the following:

- 3.1 Share your findings with the community in a manner that enhances the community's readiness to address disparities.
- 3.2 Develop a sustainable action plan that addresses the root causes of disparities.
- 3.3 Implement your action plan.

Stage 3 Plan Development Ideas and Resources

Although the focus of this guide is on conducting a root cause analysis, we know there are many important aspects of creating, implementing, evaluating, and monitoring an action plan that you may need to consider as you move forward in your work. We are not able to cover all these content areas within the scope of the guide, but in this section, we will provide links to additional resources for you to explore should you want to know more.

Resources and topics will touch on the following:

- Results and accountability frameworks to help you select and implement action strategies;
- How to identify and select evidence-based practices and interventions;
- Implementation planning and analysis;
- Evaluation and monitoring practices; and
- Communications resources to bolster public engagement.

Look for special resource sidebars as you work your way through Stage 3 tasks.

STAGE 3 TASKS

3.1 Share Your Findings With the Community

Before finalizing an action plan, your team should engage the community in a conversation about the results of your root cause findings and analyses. Ideally, you've engaged students, families, and other community stakeholders as part of your team from the beginning. Including these community members, as well as others who have a stake in building positive school climate (e.g., school staff, mental health professionals, and child welfare, court, law enforcement and juvenile justice representatives), means that many

important voices already have been heard throughout the process. Now it's time to engage others who have not been included and speak to a wider audience. This means talking "with" (not "to" or "at") the internal audience of the entire school or district, as well as with external audiences, including a broader range of parents and the larger community.

Disseminating disaggregated data without explanation or context would be inadequate, and possibly harmful, so some preparation is needed before sharing your findings. The readiness resources we provided in Stage 1 can be useful here. Even though you may have ongoing relationships with staff and community members and may be routinely engaged in conversation with them, you need to describe the specifics of the team's process of examining discipline data as well as how you reached your conclusions. A significant part of the process in Stage 3 is to gather feedback to help you shape the action plan so it reflects reality and the proposed implementation strategies are meaningful.



This will be one of the most important places for meaningful conversation in your process. You will be talking to a wider circle of people—whether within your school, district, or community—and you want them to clearly understand the work you're presenting. You want to take the time for people to give you their thoughts and ideas, while communicating clearly what you're going to do with those thoughts and ideas. People will want to know when they can expect to see your final results and how they can continue to have input as plans roll out.

Communicate the following basics:

- A short summary of the process;
- Critical issues explored by the team;
- Data issues such reliability and validity and how any challenges were addressed;
- Key findings (as transparently as possible while respecting privacy rights);
- Strategies being considered; and
- What happens next, including when a draft plan will be made available for review and how people can provide input.

The materials or results you share and disseminate need not be lengthy. In fact, shorter and more concise is better.



Use Resources 6 and 7

Remember to fill in your chosen action strategies in your Action Plan Template and Root Cause Diagnostic Tree.



Find out more

Chapter 3 of *Using Data to Improve Schools: What's Working, an American Association of School Administrators Guide*, examines data, public engagement, and communications (http://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Policy_and_Advocacy/files/UsingDataToImproveSchools.pdf).

Data dissemination experts recommend the following strategies for sharing your data:⁵⁴

3.1.1. Present Data Strategically

Determine your purposes for sharing the data:

- What do you want different audiences to know and be able to do as a result of being exposed to the information? For example, the purpose of sharing data with school staff could be to elicit their commitment to implementing strategies to address disparities. When sharing data with families, the purpose could be to inform them about your efforts and enlist their support in continued assessment of progress.
- Be sure to have effective and engaging communicators share your information, with your data analysts standing by to answer questions.

3.1.2. Determine Which Data Should Be Presented

Based on the description of your purposes and audiences, determine how data can be reported. Provide essential information to ensure an open, transparent process that will help solve problems and enable the audience to understand the key issues and to engage meaningfully with the content while protecting the privacy of students.



Refer back to the section [Ensure Data Privacy and Quality](#) on page 30, including the listed resources, to help guide you.

3.1.3. Determine How and When to Present the Data

- Consider carefully how the data you have gathered can be transformed into useful information for each audience.
- Choose the best format for presenting the data, given your audience and purpose. Does the audience respond best to written documents or to presentations at meetings? You may need to present information in a variety of ways. For example, you can hand out a simple one- or two-page take-home fact sheet at a meeting with families at which you also provide a Q&A session on your results and plans. School board members may want to see more in-depth reports.
- What will work best to communicate the essential messages for each audience? Review some of the information previously summarized in the textbox on page 20 about cultural and linguistic competence to help you. Consider tables, graphs, narrative text, illustrative stories, examples, and quotes. Remember to do the following:
 - Provide data in a form that audiences can use.
 - Determine which data are most relevant for each audience.
 - Keep the level of detail manageable and relevant for each audience.
 - Report information on subgroups of interest to stakeholders, especially disaggregated data.

- Provide resources to assist understanding and interpretation of the data, such as graphical representations to show data, websites, or issue briefs.
- Share overall results as well as disaggregated data.
- Consider how you can mobilize stakeholders using effective social marketing techniques that employ successful strategies developed in the business world to realize social goals (e.g., smoking cessation). Acknowledge that various members of the school community are at different levels of understanding and motivation regarding addressing disparities and exclusionary discipline. Tools for addressing guidance for social marketing are available on the website of the National Clearinghouse on Supportive School Discipline (<http://www.supportiveschooldiscipline.org/>).



Remember to use the graphs generated through the Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool for both education and conversation starters.

3.1.4. Anticipate Data-Related Questions and Challenges

- Describe the scope of your data collection.
- When appropriate, share data with students, staff, and administrators in advance of broader dissemination to get input on the “face validity” of the data and to anticipate challenges that may be encountered.
- If sensitive or challenging issues are involved, prepare the audience by honestly describing some of the issues early on, as well as how the school or district will address them. Focus on solutions, not challenges. Neither lay blame nor be defensive.

3.1.5. Think Long-Term

- Discuss how to improve data collection to address data challenges, as well as plans for continued data gathering and analysis over time. This exemplifies transparency in the use of data for measuring progress and continuous quality improvement.
- Refer back to the Discipline Data Checklist (Resource 2) you completed in Stage 1 as well as the Data Mining Decision Tree Tip Sheet (Resource 3) to see if any gaps remain.
- Develop and use a reporting format that can be maintained and will allow comparison of results over time.

3.1.6. Support the Use of Data for Quality Improvement

Describe how the data can be used for identifying evidence-based strategies or interventions; adding contextual adaptations of evidence-based programs; and planning the implementation, evaluation, and monitoring of your work.

More Stage 3 Resources

A variety of materials can help you understand how to select, implement, and evaluate evidence-based strategies. You may wish to dive deeply into some of these materials or select what you need in a more targeted way. We provide the following links so that you can select the materials most relevant for your work.

The National Clearinghouse on Supportive School Discipline (NCSSD) has a webpage (<http://supportiveschooldiscipline.org/planning-implementing-and-evaluating-evidence-based-interventions>) devoted to planning, implementing, and evaluating evidence-based interventions. It includes links to the following:

- Getting to Outcomes—A 10-step approach for strategic, results-based accountability. The framework helps you assess your capacities; determine the fit of strategies; and, after developing a plan, evaluate, continuously improve, and sustain your efforts.

Additional guidance on selecting effective interventions within the NCSSD website as well as through the federal youth.gov (<http://youth.gov/>) website.

A series of three issue briefs to help deepen knowledge on readiness, progress monitoring, and adapting to different contexts.

The Active Implementation Hub provides materials and short online lessons about implementing evidence-based practices (<http://implementation.fpg.unc.edu/modules-and-lessons>). Among the many resources offered, you may find the following especially relevant to your Stage 3 work:

- The Hexagon Tool—Use to select evidence-based practices.
- Practice Profile Planning Tool—Aids in the identification of essential functions of evidence-based programs.
- District Capacity Assessment—An assessment used to align resources with intended outcomes.
- District Initiative Inventory—Walks you through a review of past and current programs to identify successes and challenges, including resource commitments.
- Implementation Drivers and Planning Series—These reports and tools for educators support the action planning process through understanding needed capacities and infrastructure for program success. Tools help you assess and track your efforts as well as improve your work as you move ahead.

3.2. Develop an Action Plan

Your team will engage in two levels of planning:

Short- and intermediate-term strategies aim to change the drivers and mechanisms identified in your root cause analysis. These strategies also may address changing disciplinary practices and enhancing teachers' classroom management skills. Examples could involve implementing restorative practices in high schools or revising the code of conduct to exclude willful defiance as a reason for suspension or expulsion.⁵⁵

Longer term strategies aim to improve disciplinary practices, including improving data collection and further improving school climate and engagement. Specific strategies could

include taking additional steps to improve student attendance, connectedness, and social and emotional competence. You want to develop a menu of interventions for your action plan that demonstrate logical links connecting your data to the root causes you identified and then select the effective strategies that can be implemented effectively in your school or district.

Your team may feel overwhelmed by data and findings. It's important to prioritize your actions, starting by identifying those low-hanging fruit that can produce quick wins that strategically move the work forward. Remember that some of these root causes will take time to reduce and finally eliminate. You could break down some of your strategies into smaller, more manageable pieces and build short-term goals, benchmarks, and outcomes into your action plans so your team, school, district, and community can quickly experience success. Steady, demonstrable progress on your overall plan is a laudable aim.



Organize by proven principles

Consider grounding your strategies in the following principles outlined in *How Educators Can Eradicate Disparities in School Discipline: A Briefing Paper on School-Based Interventions*.⁵⁶

Principles of Conflict Prevention

Research suggests that to prevent unnecessary discipline and to prevent the overrepresentation of particular groups of children and adolescents in school discipline, educators can equitably offer all students the following:

- Supportive relationships—Forge authentic connections with all students.
- Academic rigor—Promote the potential of all students, hold high expectations, and provide high-level learning opportunities.
- Culturally relevant and responsive teaching—Teaching that responds respectfully to students' real lives.
- Bias-free classrooms and respectful school environments—Create inclusive, positive classroom and school environments in which students feel fairly treated.

Principles of Conflict Intervention

Research suggests that when discipline problems arise, educators can engage in the following equity-driven behaviors:

- Inquiry into the causes of conflicts.
- Problem-solving approaches to discipline.
- Recognition of student and family voice and their perspectives on conflicts' causes and solutions.
- Re-integration of students after conflict.



Find out more

Decisions in Motion: IS³ Toolkit 2 Addressing Discipline provides useful information on developing a plan to address discipline. Download it at <http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/IS3%2BToolkit%2B2.pdf>.

Meet the common challenges of planning to address root causes

The process of identifying root causes and developing effective best-practice interventions is challenging and can be derailed or misdirected by too narrow a focus on problem behaviors and biased ways of understanding data. As you develop your response to disparities in school discipline, be sure that the plan focuses on addressing the disparities students are facing. Consider the following as you develop your plans.

Move beyond simply reducing numbers

Schools and districts should focus not only on eliminating discipline disparities but also on reducing the use of exclusionary disciplinary practices by adopting positive approaches to school discipline. If the data show that your school or district is disciplining too many students from a particular subgroup, the solution is not simply to reduce the number of students from the subgroup who are disciplined. Although this approach is important, it's also important to enhance the overall school climate and student learning. Doing so goes beyond just keeping more students in school; students also need to have meaningful opportunities for learning and be actively engaged in learning.

Overcome a narrow view of data and root causes

You're trying to do a number of things in your work—address school climate, prevent disciplinary problems from occurring, look for and address problems early on before they spiral into more serious problems, and provide the supports needed to prevent problems. This approach will likely require multitiered strategies—universal, early intervention, and intensive interventions—that improve academic instruction and conditions for learning for all students and that employ and align social and emotional learning, [positive behavioral interventions and supports](#), restorative practices, and development of capacity in relevant areas.

Confront bias

Being aware of possible implicit bias and attribution bias in decision making is critical for ensuring that your action plan is effective. These challenges can be openly addressed by the team and by analyzing school-based root causes. Periodically examining your problem-solving and decision-making processes for bias and keeping these processes open and transparent should help to eliminate both attribution and implicit bias.

Ensure continued support

Improving your school or district's disciplinary code and its implementation may require changes in staff responsibilities and levels of authority in the decision-making process. The active and ongoing support of school and district leaders remains critical.

Use best practices

Your action plan should draw on best practices that your school or district has the capacity to implement and sustain. It's also critical that the best practices you select be properly aligned to address the drivers and mechanisms that are the root causes of the disparities in your school or district. Many best practices explicitly define the types of students they have been demonstrated to positively affect. Not using a best practice or using it for the wrong students can be ineffective or even harmful.



Find out more

For more information on implementing best practices, go to <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/program-implementation>.

3.3 Implement the Action Plan

Your action plan should be the result of consensus among key stakeholders. The team should be able to demonstrate the following:

- Sound problem solving was used in developing the plan.
- Decisions were evaluated to avoid bias.
- Mechanisms will be put in place to ensure that the plan will be implemented equitably.

For example, if the action plan features implementing alternatives to suspension such as behavioral counseling, restorative justice, or student-teacher facilitated problem solving, ensuring that these techniques are applied without bias is critical and may require careful training and data-gathering from the individuals making disciplinary decisions.

Two types of training are generally needed to effectively implement a plan. First is the awareness training that should be provided to all staff and made available to other stakeholders to enable everyone to understand the changes and initiatives that will be implemented to improve school climate and address disparities in school discipline. This training should include or be informed by an understanding of child and youth development, as well as cultural and linguistic competence.⁵⁷

More intense training and support is required for those who will implement the changes and initiatives. This support includes, for example, enhancing teachers' skills related to addressing challenging behaviors in the classroom, preparing school counselors to provide behavioral counseling and other supports, guiding staff responsible for recording disciplinary data in new strategies, providing school resource officers with a menu of standardized and graduated sanctions to use, and providing training and support to staff who are implementing restorative practices. Administrators in charge of discipline may require training to fully understand the root causes identified, as well as appropriate alternatives to suspension. Changes in disciplinary policies and practices should be part of all relevant trainings to ensure that "old practices" do not reemerge among some staff.



Find out more

In addition to the implementation and evaluation resources we've highlighted in the Stage 3 Resources sidebars, you may want to look at Step 5 (<http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/IS3%2BToolkit%2B2.pdf>) of the Decisions in Motion: IS³ Toolkit 2 Addressing Discipline, which outlines how to develop a monitoring plan.

A Training Plan Template at the aiHub also can help you develop training programs: <http://implementation.fpg.unc.edu/resources/training-plan-template>.

What happens now?

We know that a lot of thought, activity, and resources go into implementing any action plan. We do not have the capacity within the space of this guide to tell you everything you need to know about monitoring your plan as it rolls out, evaluating your work, and continuously improving what you're doing going forward. We know some of you are using these processes already in the course of the work you are already doing. We also would direct your attention back to some of the resources we have noted elsewhere in the guide to help you.



Find out more

Step 6 of the Iowa Toolkit (<http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov//sites/default/files/IS3%2BToolkit%2B2.pdf>) focuses on “knowing if we’ve made a difference.” Also, return to the Implementation page of the NCCSLE website for more resources at <http://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/program-implementation>.



TeachME
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CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The work you're doing is critical to helping your school or district improve learning outcomes and life opportunities for all students. You and your team have engaged in a thorough process, beginning with identifying disparities in school discipline in Stage 1, looking deeper to determine root causes in Stage 2, and developing strategies to reduce and ultimately eliminate disparities by strategically addressing root causes in Stage 3. This work is hard, but support is available through this guide and through the online resources identified throughout the guide.

If you have identified the correct root causes in Stage 2 and appropriate strategies and interventions in Stage 3 and your school or district has the capacity to implement them fully and effectively, disparities should decrease. It is important to collect data on the quality of implementation and outcomes—including the reduction of disparities—to be sure you are on the right course. You can repeat the three-stage process outlined in this guide—and reuse the Disciplinary Disparities Risk Assessment Tool—to continuously review and refine your data, analyses, and action strategies.





"This course was developed from the public domain document: Osher, D., Fisher, D., Amos, L., Katz, J., Dwyer, K., Duffey, T., & Colombi, G.D. (2015). Addressing the root causes of disparities in school discipline: An educator's action planning guide. Washington, DC: National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments."