

INTRODUCTION

As a group of educators who teach across the state and Teach Plus Indiana Teaching Policy Fellows, we are interested in how various discipline practices are enacted across Indiana, the effectiveness of these models, and the impact they are having on our students. Research has shown that suspensions and expulsions are not creating the behavioral change that educators and community members are hoping to achieve. Specific demographic sections of our students are disproportionately receiving these exclusionary discipline practices.¹ But how well are the alternative, positive discipline practices working in our schools? To find out, we conducted focus groups with teachers across the state. In this brief, we present findings from our research and recommendations for school and state leaders and lawmakers as they work to better understand and improve the implementation of various discipline practices to close equity gaps.

As we entered the final stages of our research, we were faced with COVID-19 and the restructuring of our school systems to include virtual/online learning. The disruption to daily life and learning our students and families have had to deal with over the past few months will certainly impact students returning to schools. After such an extended amount of time out of school, we will almost certainly see increased disciplinary needs. We will need to provide consistency and clear expectations in order for schools to once again become stable environments, especially for our most at-risk students. These concerns also impacted the findings and recommendations included in this brief.

Findings

1. Teachers want to see a balance between traditional disciplinary practices and positive discipline frameworks.
2. Teachers want professional development to be meaningful and connected. Professional development is more effective if it is tied to a school/district-wide consistent structure and implemented with fidelity, resources, and long-term commitment.
3. Teachers believe that consistency and communication are key when it comes to school discipline regardless of what practices are used.

Recommendations

1. Each school and district must carefully study the IDOE's Model Policy Document to identify key elements for implementation while also considering what schools need to establish and implement positive school discipline frameworks.
2. The IDOE should conduct a statewide culture and climate survey to better understand schools' needs and make the results publicly available to inform decision making.
3. The state should create comprehensive guidance to inform school and district staffing decisions on mental health personnel, positive discipline coordinators, counselors, and push-in teachers.
4. The state's comprehensive guidance to support schools should also include robust professional development facilitated by highly qualified trainers who actively engage teachers in alternative discipline programs.

INDIANA BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Indiana Legislature has put forth various measures in an effort to reduce the inequity in school discipline. In 2009, the Indiana General Assembly passed House Bill 1419 (now known as HEA1419). This legislation required the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) to develop a “model evidence-based plan for improving discipline and behavior within schools.”²

Almost a decade later, the Indiana Legislature passed HB 1421 (2018) which aimed to build on HEA1419 by asking the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) to create a new “Research-Based Equitable School Discipline Model Policy.”³ This Model Discipline Policy was intended to help districts to further the following goals, similarly to HEA1419: Reduce out-of-school suspension and disproportionality in discipline and expulsion; limit referrals and arrests by law enforcement to only protect the health and safety of students and school employees; include policies to address instances of bullying and cyberbullying on school property.⁴ Resources made available as a result of HB1421 include a new model discipline plan, templates for continued best practices in school wide discipline analysis, and a data tracking aid to continue best practices in school wide discipline analysis.^{5,6}

Between June and August 2018, the IDOE conducted a survey of Indiana school corporations, collecting a total of 155 responses from 141 different school districts (representing 48.7 percent of the total traditional school districts in the state) in response to HB 1421.⁷ The results highlighted professional development opportunities offered in positive discipline, types of discipline practice used, and instances of model discipline practices being implemented by districts. It noted that 72.3% of respondents worked for a district that incorporated a positive discipline framework, and at least 67.7% participated in a specific alternative discipline practice. Still, over 95% of these respondents reported using out-of-school suspensions, one of the most common traditional and punitive discipline practices. The results also revealed that there was virtually no difference in the utilization of exclusionary discipline practices such as expulsion and detention between districts with or without a positive discipline framework. In our focus groups, we asked questions to get a deeper understanding of these survey results and of the districts' decisions around alternative and traditional discipline practice implementation.

METHODOLOGY

Between February and March of 2020, we conducted focus groups with 34 educators across seven districts. The participants reviewed the findings from IDOE's survey in conjunction with HB1421 to see if and how positive discipline practices were being utilized. They also examined their own practices and experiences as these pertain to equitable discipline and positive reinforcement.

The participants were a demographically diverse group of teachers from a variety of districts/schools that offer various types of discipline practices (See Table 1).

Table 1. Types of Disciplinary Practices/Strategies

Traditional Discipline Practices - ie. zero tolerance policies, detention, in-school suspension, out of school suspension, expulsion
Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Strategies - According to CASEL: self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, self-management, and responsible-decision-making. ⁸
PBIS Strategies - Providing positive incentives to reward positive behavior based on school wide expectations. A three-tiered approach. ⁹
Trauma Informed/Responsive Discipline Strategies - Staff/admin cultural understanding that trauma affects students' ability to learn, and incorporates co-regulation techniques into classroom and office discipline.
Restorative Practices - Non-exclusionary practices including conflict mediation between peers and between staff and students

FINDINGS

1. Teachers want to see a balance between traditional disciplinary practices and positive discipline frameworks.

Teachers believe that both traditional (exclusionary) and alternative disciplinary practices (Table 1) need to be incorporated to best address students' behavior. One teacher explained that when utilizing different types of discipline practices, we must *"use what is best for the individual child."*¹⁰ One model does not negate the other, but rather they must be implemented in tandem. One teacher stated, *"Both approaches are necessary in order to create a sustainable learning community."*¹¹

Discipline should not be "one size fits all," but issued on a case-by-case basis with a mix of traditional and positive school discipline. Teachers feel that a minority of the student body cause difficulties when it comes to severe disciplinary issues. Another teacher put it this way: *"Personally, I would like to see a balance that teaches there is a consequence for everything we do both as children and adults. This does not have to be a 'discipline' but a consequence ... If we can learn how to impose these consequences while growing those deep relationships to where the children feel loved at the same time, real changes will be able to take place."*¹² For schools,

this would mean that a positive discipline framework is set in place for school-wide expectations while the use of traditional discipline methods is still leveraged in circumstances deemed necessary. Overall, teachers and schools desired the autonomy to make disciplinary actions that will help them to create a balanced structure between traditional (exclusionary) and positive (Table 1) disciplinary practices.

2. Teachers want professional development to be meaningful and connected. Professional development is more effective if it is tied to a school/district-wide consistent structure and implemented with fidelity, resources, and long-term commitment.

During our focus groups, we heard from numerous teachers that professional development (PD) on alternative discipline practices supports their efforts to build positive relationships with students. When asked how the PD has been helpful, one teacher replied, *“It has opened my eyes to rising situations our students face and has given me more tools in my educational belt.”*¹³ Another teacher agreed, saying *“I have developed skills in creating a space where people can come together and solve their own problems.”*¹⁴

However, teachers noted that PD could be more effective if it were aligned with school/district-wide expectations. Teachers also noted that while alternative practices are necessary, they are not being utilized enough in schools. Lack of teacher buy-in and resources were cited as obstacles preventing positive discipline practices from being effective to their fullest extent. One focus group participant shared, *“Often there is lack of training or lack of buy-in. Sometimes lack of time or resources also causes schools to fall back to traditional discipline practices.”*¹⁵

Teachers believe that all staff should be provided with positive discipline professional development. One such teacher suggested that schools, *“Provide quality training for all staff, not just the teachers. Be faithful to the process. Follow up with staff regularly to evaluate.”*¹⁶

3. Teachers believe that consistency and communication are key when it comes to school discipline regardless of what practices are used.

Our focus group participants noted that regardless of the framework (See Table 1), a model was not successful unless implemented consistently and with accountable communication between all stakeholders. One educator noted that schools must *“implement something consistently and connect it to the school wide goals”*¹⁷ to increase fidelity among staff.

Low fidelity of implementation caused by lack of teacher/administration buy-in or a lack of access to resources can create a mistrust in the effectiveness of alternatives to traditional discipline practices. To address this issue, a focus group participant said their school must *“give us time to practice. And keep returning to it. Don't just move on to the next thing. For instance, I want to learn about something and then immediately try it out - and have time to do that.”*¹⁸ Another educator added that administration should *“devote more resources and time to train ALL stakeholders. Provide time to come together, develop a plan, and follow through with implementation.”*¹⁹ This deficit in implementation by administration and teachers reduces the efficiency of positive discipline frameworks and contributes to negative feedback and lack of teacher buy-in for the framework.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Each school and district must carefully study the IDOE's Model Policy Document to identify key elements for implementation while also considering what schools need to establish and implement positive school discipline frameworks.

The IDOE has created a comprehensive resource in their Model Policy Document. This document lays out a plan for a positive framework that includes elements such as having a School Climate and Equitable School Discipline Committee or hiring a Positive Discipline Coordinator. However, this plan is not something that should be rushed. It is imperative that schools and districts take the time to study positive discipline models and effective implementation. By following the example of this model plan, schools and districts can ensure positive discipline becomes a lasting part of our educational culture. For the implementation to be truly successful, teachers must be key participants in creating and maintaining this structural system. One teacher said, *"Cultural shift takes time, but it is worth it."*²⁰ Once schools fully buy in, the seeds of positive discipline will take root among teachers and students in the school, creating a longer lasting shift in disciplinary practices.

Recommendation 2: The IDOE should conduct a statewide culture and climate survey to better understand schools' needs and make the results publicly available to inform decision making.

A focus group participant noted it is important to *"determine the specific needs of your community and respond to those issues."*²¹ This particular insight is especially true when it comes to the IDOE's knowledge of what specific schools and districts need in regards to staffing of teachers, adding support staff (mental health personnel, positive discipline coordinators, counselors, push-in teachers, etc.), and providing robust and applicable PD. In their pursuit to support schools across the state, the IDOE should conduct a statewide culture and climate survey. An annual facilitation of this survey will inform both school and district leaders similarly as the IDOE's Survey of School Discipline did with state leaders in 2018.

This issue was raised by Teach Plus Fellows in 2019, suggesting "a more comprehensive teacher satisfaction survey such as North Carolina's Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL) to ensure that results for each district and school are easily accessible online."²² Every school is different, but there are commonalities among groups of schools. To better address these common problems, the state must first ascertain what they are and how they can respond to them in a way that best fits the schools' needs. This should not be an evaluation piece, but rather a way for schools and educators to be heard, while also informing the state of gaps, inequities, and needs.

Recommendation 3: The state should create comprehensive guidance to inform school and district staffing decisions on mental health personnel, positive discipline coordinators, counselors, and push-in teachers.

Schools must ensure there are sufficient support staff such as mental health personnel, positive discipline coordinators, counselors, and push-in teachers. Regarding challenges in student discipline, one teacher responded, *"Students need more intensive levels of support in behavior and therapy. We need more social emotional learning."*²³ In a recent study by the Fordham Institute (2019), teachers

report that the current discipline practices did not work for a small percentage of the student body.²⁴ Instead, these students would greatly benefit from increased support services, but many schools are unable to provide effective help to these students due to the limited resources and support available. Access to an adequate number of well-trained mental health professionals, trauma-counselors, mediators, and other support personnel in the school will allow students with severe needs the opportunity to receive proper care.

We acknowledge this is a resource-intensive approach, and schools should consider this as an option based on their needs. We recommend each school and district to utilize data from the statewide culture and climate survey in Recommendation 2 to inform staffing decisions as they implement positive discipline frameworks. In order to develop a plan for caseload management and staffing, we cannot rely solely on the anecdotal evidence gathered from individuals. In addition to data from the climate survey, the state should also ensure that any decisions and supports are backed up and validated by research. This would allow schools to answer the question of what is the appropriate amount of mental health personnel and other professionals needed to adequately support a school or district.

Recommendation 4: The state's comprehensive guidance to support schools should also include robust professional development facilitated by highly qualified trainers who actively engage teachers in alternative discipline programs.

One challenge of implementing a new discipline approach is making sure teachers and administrators have the tools to be successful. Without vigorous and recurring professional development, teachers find it hard to implement new discipline practices with fidelity. Principals and administrators must provide opportunities for teachers to attend insightful and robust PD that fully motivates teachers to buy into alternative discipline practices. High-level professional development will allow teachers to connect with colleagues, apply new strategies in the classroom, and create a safe learning space for themselves to better understand alternative discipline practices and how to best support students.

Teachers who are implementing new programs should be given protected time to research, collaborate, and practice strategies. A participant in our focus group agreed and said, *"We need to pick a strategy that we believe and fully implement it in a way that is conscious about the time that people have. Revisit the ideas, include student input."*²⁵ Teachers will buy into new discipline programs if the administration is showing it to be a long-term priority and not just another mandate. From here, school leaders can then provide incentives for teachers who are implementing the framework well and elevate them as examples for the rest of the staff.

The exact PD needs of schools and districts should be ascertained from the statewide culture and climate survey administered by the IDOE and the data disaggregated by schools and districts. Incorporating the survey data would allow for teacher voice in PD planning and will help increase teacher buy-in and chances of success.

CONCLUSION

The IDOE needs to facilitate a statewide culture and climate survey to help determine what supports schools need in implementing discipline strategies, restructuring staffing, and reinvigorating professional development. Teachers require the aid of support staff such as mental health professionals to help determine which practices are best for certain students and to provide support to struggling students who are repeat offenders. Similarly, teachers also desire strong professional development from qualified and trained professionals in order to feel confident in their ability to effectively implement positive discipline frameworks.

The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in students spending months in situations that are unfamiliar to them, potentially living with a greater sense of fear than they have previously known. Alternative discipline frameworks, which focus on helping students to heal, rather than on traditional punishment, will be even more imperative than before. Our recommendations seek to equip teachers with everything they need to be successful in the practice of positive discipline: a plan for implementation, support from the state, support from trained professionals, and finally knowledge and training. We look forward to working with IDOE and state and district decision makers in helping to bring these to fruition.

AUTHORS, TEACH PLUS INDIANA TEACHING POLICY FELLOWS

Adam Bogs
Archer Bunner
Molly Glassey
Jennifer Love
Andrew Lutz

Yohan Chang (Indiana Policy Coordinator)

ENDNOTES

¹ Kenny, Kara. (2019, Nov 8) Black students disciplined at higher rates in Indiana schools. RTV6. Retrieved from <https://www.theindychannel.com/news/call-6-investigators/black-students-disciplined-at-higher-rates-in-indiana-schools>

² Indiana Department of Education. HEA 1419 (2009) History & Requirements. Retrieved from <https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/school-improvement/hea-1419-2009-history-requirements.pdf>

³ Indiana Department of Education. (2019) Research-Based Equitable School Discipline Model Policy. Retrieved from <https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/news/research-based-equitable-school-discipline-model-policy-2019-april-5.pdf>

⁴ See endnote 3.

⁵ Indiana Department of Education. (2010) Indiana's Model Evidence-Based Plan for Improving Behavior and Discipline within Schools. Retrieved from <https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/school-improvement/evidence-based-plan.pdf>

⁶ Indiana Department of Education. (2010) HEA 1419 Evidence-Based Plan for Improving Behavior and Discipline in Schools Year 1 Guidance. Retrieved from <https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/school-improvement/year-1-guidance.pdf>

⁷ Indiana Department of Education. (2018). Positive Discipline Survey. Retrieved from <http://iga.in.gov/legislative/2020/publications/agency/reports/idoe/#document-144d1a63>

⁸ Desautels, L., Oliver, B., (2018) PK- 12 Social-Emotional Learning Competencies. Retrieved from <https://www.doe.in.gov/sites/default/files/sebw/sel-competencies-final.pdf>

⁹ Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Retrieved from <https://www.pbis.org/pbis/getting-started>

¹⁰ Question: "What do you feel is the right balance between the use of positive discipline frameworks and the use of more traditional discipline approaches?" Open response question.

¹¹ See endnote 10.

¹² Question: "What advice do you have for school and district leaders when it comes to implementing positive discipline frameworks and balancing the use of traditional discipline practices?" Open response question

¹³ Question: "Have these professional development opportunities been helpful? If not, why not?" Open response question

¹⁴ See endnote 13.

¹⁵ Question: "If your school has implemented a positive discipline framework but continues to rely on traditional discipline practices, what are the reasons that prevent your school from utilizing more positive discipline practices?" Open response question

¹⁶ Question: "What advice do you have for school and district leaders as it relates to professional development on positive discipline and restorative practices?" Open response question

¹⁷ See endnote 16.

¹⁸ See endnote 16.

¹⁹ See endnote 16.

²⁰ See endnote 16.

²¹ See endnote 16.

²² Teach Plus Indiana. (2019) The Rate of Retention: A Proposal for an Indiana Report of Teacher Supply and Demand. Retrieved from https://teachplus.org/sites/default/files/publication/pdf/indiana_report_of_teacher_supply_and_demand.pdf

²³ Question: "When it comes to student discipline what are the challenges at your school?" Open response question

²⁴ Griffith, David and Tyner, Adam. (July, 2019) Discipline Reform through the Eyes of Teachers. Fordham Institute. Retrieved from <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/discipline-reform-through-the-eyes-of-teachers>

²⁵ See endnote 16.