

Examining Disciplinary Data to Reflect and Ensure Equity

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The examination of our practices and process within our educational systems to examine discipline is crucial to addressing the disparity that commonly exists in the implementation of exclusionary practices for students of color and students with disabilities. Addressed within this brief article are strategies to examine disproportionality and a possible model which can support creating equitable access and a systematic process for supporting students to receive disciplinary action.

Research has shown over and over again that exclusionary discipline is common in schools both in the past and in current academic settings (Gerlinger et al., 2021). Many educational settings have adopted zero tolerance policies which have perpetuated exclusionary practices (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Rates of out-of-school suspensions are decreasing (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2018). However students with disabilities, as well as students of color, continue to be excluded and punished in educational settings at rates two to four times higher than white students (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights).

When we look at discipline, no evidence exists that black students misbehave at rates any different from white or any other students. Riddle and Sinclair (2019) and Skiba et al., (2014) have revealed that school level variables such as principal perspectives on discipline, show to be some of the strongest predictors of disproportionality (Scott & McIntosh, 2022). Furthermore, students with disabilities get suspended two and a half times more than non-disabled peers U.S.

Government Accountability Office, 2018). To address this issue a model is used which can be used to examine a school's disciplinary data to help examine and ensure equity.

“Plan-Do Study-Act” Model

The “Plan-Do-Study-Act” model (Deming, 1986) is commonly used for school teams when thinking about formalizing a plan for addressing equity. This plan is broken down into four steps:

1. **Plan:** Addressing equity is a systemic issue that must be examined from a broad data-based approach to confirm if there are issues which are consistently taking place across the educational environment. In the plan stage, Deming (1986) suggests schools to consider not only behavioral data such as suspensions and disciplinary action, but also the academic achievement and least restrictive environment for students of color and students with disabilities. Teams should be looking at the data within the system. By using this system's approach school teams are better able to see trends in the data that practices are not equitable across race and/or disability. When special attention is paid to individual subgroup data within a district, school teams can reflect on potential disparities and plan to ensure that schools focus on equity in decision making. Schools that focus on equity in disciplinary action consider factors such as ethnicity when LRE is determined for students with disabilities, and large percentage of students of color and/or disabilities are not receiving suspensions or more severe disciplinary action. Often these exist when considering special education labels, exclusionary practices (LRE, suspensions, disciplinary actions) ethnicity, or within student academic achievement. The team will categorize what the cause of the concerns are. Are common antecedents able to be

identified? Once the concerns and antecedents are classified, the team will make goals as well as establish an action plan.

Deming further suggests that disciplinary data be examined from a "power vs. purpose" lens. This lens requires schools to consider who has the power and what purpose this power has on school policies. Using the perspective of "power vs. purpose" when examining rules, policies, and expectations allows for careful reflection on the intent and if an unintentional bias exists within the core foundation of discipline. Seek to understand if the reason for a rule, policy or school expectation is truly tied to a direct match with educational outcomes or if these components are just focused on a personal or schoolwide preference. Changing those underlying rules, policies, and expectations to ensure the focus is on educational outcomes is the foundation for ensuring a consistent and level system for all students. The final aspect of the Plan Stage is for schools to categorize and prioritize their change efforts to ensure equitable practices in discipline for students of color and for students with disabilities. The team must also decide how to track progress of disciplinary data to ensure equity goals are being met.

- 2. Do:** In the next phase of Deming's model for equitable practices, the school takes action or the "Do" phase (1986). The examination of data and equity issues and selection and implementation of an intervention should not be completed in isolation. Effective working groups cannot be completed with only administration or with select individuals, but should become a topic of broader conversation and understanding within the school staff where honest but objective conversations can take place. In the Do Phase, it is crucial that a school selects a focus for professional learning in equity-based discipline

and secure training opportunities so school staff feel confident in their discipline practices. Having open dialogue around the underlying issues and the selected intervention can help individuals to create change which leads to systemic improvements. During this Do Phase, school systems should still focus on data analysis to guide the team to consider if the intervention is working or if other interventions are needed to discover any new biases in equitable discipline.

- 3. Study:** After the intervention is implemented in the Do Stage, a continuous monitoring of progress system is conducted in the Study Stage. The goal of the Study Stage is to look at overall trends in the data to provide feedback to all school staff about the improvements to ensure equity. Instead of singling out anyone at school or grade level, schools focus on ways to support individuals as they develop their own understanding of equity in discipline procedures. Consistently providing feedback about the growth towards equity change and improvements within data is a way to support personal development and focus on the individuals as a component of the system. School teams can support the staff in the Study Stage to reflect on their own underlying beliefs about discipline and the alignment with actual classroom practice. When school teams consider the changes needed so that the system integrates an equity mindset into discipline, they look to the data to determine if adjustments are needed and continue to provide support to the staff to reach this goal. An important step within this stage is to focus on fidelity of implementation. Ensuring that all staff are working together to support the intervention and putting it in place consistently to support students.

4. **Act:** Finally, within the Act Stage school teams evaluate the change process to an equity mindset as a whole. They refine their systems approach and ensure that equity interventions are core to the discipline practices of all staff. A plan is in place for new employees to be trained on the expectations for discipline and understanding their own biases to people of color and students with disabilities. Schools should incorporate the training and expectation of the intervention for any individual who may enter into the system. Deming (1986) suggests that school teams have systematic plans to determine the next priority in the change process to be more equitable in discipline and academic achievement. The continuous cycles of review lead to more iterations of the Plan, Do, Study, Act process. Data collection and review is key in this stage to assess targeted areas of concern and the goals that were created in the Plan Stage are implemented with mastery. During the Act Stage, a critical review to determine in any regression to practices before the intervention are addressed immediately.

This model of Plan-Do-Study-Act (Deming, 1986) provides a continuous cycle of improvement for monitoring and evaluating equitable practices. This model is based on refinement of practices and the development of a streamlined system for data-based decision making around policies and practices which can ensure equity.

Critical Reflection and Moving Forward

Research is continuing to evolve in terms of understanding how to use interventions and supports around exclusionary and discipline. It is critical that we consider local policies on the discipline and decide what changes need to be made in terms of disparity. One important step

school can start with is training all staff in the area of educational justice and equity (Swanson & Welton, 2019).

In order to create change, schools need to move away from exclusionary practices and implement interventions like they do for academics (Camacho & Krezmien, 2020). Evidence based practices that focus on prevention instead of punitive approaches will improve school climate and decrease the use of suspensions.

Additional Resources to Further Learning and Implementation around Equity

- [Addressing Inequities in School Discipline](#) presentation from PBIS website
- [Using Discipline Data within SWPBIS to Identify and Address Disproportionality: A guide for School Teams](#) from PBIS
- [School Discipline Resource Collection](#)
- [Discipline Resources](#) from the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments
- [Discipline Toolkit for Educators](#)

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