

Why do Minnesota schools need trauma-informed, restorative practices?



Kim Davidson, a second grade teacher in northern Minnesota, recently had a conversation with her class about the things going on in their lives that make it hard to focus in school. Their responses reflect the experiences of many students in Minnesota. Six had parents in jail and one had just lost a sibling to sudden death. Several were in tears. Davidson asked, "what would you want to tell adults about what you go through?" One girl said, "that I worry." Davidson asked, "what if the adult tells you just not to worry? The girl responded, "I would say it's a really big worry."

The behavioral intervention problems occurring in Minnesota schools are the direct result of several decades of mandatory policies from the state and federal governments that were supported by well-meaning stakeholders. The overreliance on exclusionary practices is the result of several structural problems. It is not the fault of a single group, person, or political party. Educators, administrators, and politicians want to help students, but they are stifled by a failed system. The solution will require the work of all of us. The conversation must focus on removing policies and changing practice, so educators can help students learn.

THE PROBLEM

Educators are trapped at the intersections of mandatory disciplinary procedures, a lack of effective professional development and resources, and unconscious bias. As a result, current exclusionary disciplinary practices are harmful to students, educators, schools, and classrooms. They magnify harmful racial inequities and fill the school-to-prison pipeline.

- Budget cuts result in fewer support services, burgeoning class sizes, and less professional development. This means educators do not have the resources to prevent problematic behaviors.
- Well-intended anti-weapons policies have morphed into mandatory, severe punishments for even minor infractions. This is worsened by pressures of mandatory testing under NCLB.
- Mandatory punishments and exclusionary tactics harm all students and are ineffective in promoting school safety.
- Exclusionary disciplinary practices are racially biased and create an unjust school-to-prison pipeline.

THE SOLUTION

It is possible to balance the need for school safety and use more effective "disciplinary approaches that can help address the underlying social and psychological causes of misbehavior." (*McMorris, Beckman, Shea, Baumgartner, & Eggert, 2013, p. 4*). Trauma-informed approaches to classrooms, coupled with restorative justice practices can keep our schools safe, our students focused on learning, and interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

- Funding should be provided for all adults working with students to learn trauma-informed practices.
- Schools should plan for a transition away from exclusionary interventions and toward the full-scale adoption of a restorative culture.
- These steps should be supported with direct support for class size reduction and an increase in school support staff.

From Exclusionary Interventions to Trauma-Informed, Restorative Practices

We encourage Minnesota to change the practices that have led to the over-reliance on exclusionary interventions (primarily suspensions and expulsions). This is a necessary step to improve school safety, close achievement gaps, end structural racism, and build stronger schools.

WHO IS BEING HARMED?

Exclusionary interventions harm ALL students in a school community. However, students of color, special education students, and LGBTQ students receive a disproportionate number of exclusionary interventions. There is no evidence that these groups are more disruptive or misbehave at higher rates than other demographics of students. Policymakers should consider the following findings:

1. Exclusionary interventions harm ALL students, not just suspended or expelled students. Morris (2014) has warned “that high levels of out-of-school suspension in a school over time are associated with declining academic achievement among non-suspended students” (Perry and Morris, 2014, p. 1082-3).
2. There is a racial bias in the way administrators and schools use suspensions and expulsions (Losen and Gillepsie, 2012.)
3. Minnesota ranked as the state with the sixth highest racial divide when compared to the other states on the “risk of suspension between Blacks and Whites” (Losen and Gillepsie, 2012, p. 18). Minnesota should be appalled that “one out of every five or six Black students is suspended, but only about one out of every forty White students” is suspended (Losen and Gillepsie, 2012, p. 20).
4. Young Black males are more likely to be suspended or expelled from schools than any other group (Skiba & Peterson, 2000; Skiba et al., 2007, as cited by Howard, Flennaugh, Terry, Sr, 2012).
5. It has been confirmed that 12% of all African American female pre K-12 students received an out-of-school suspension, which is six times the rate of white girls and more than any other group of girls and several groups of boys. (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2011-12 school year, p. 15)
6. The National Council on Disability (2015) reported that “students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension (13%) than students without disabilities (6%)” (p. 11). Also, students who qualify for services under IDEA account for 25% of “school-related arrest” even though they represent only 12% of the public school population (NCD, 2015, p. 11).
7. Non-heterosexual youth, particularly gender-nonconforming girls, are up to three times more likely to experience harsh disciplinary treatment by school administration (as cited by Mitchum and Moodie-Mills, 2014, p. 2).

DO TRAUMA-INFORMED, RESTORATIVE PRACTICES WORK?

Yes, when districts and schools commit to on-going training for all staff. Also, it can take 2-5 years to build the foundation for these programs to work. Schools that have implemented these programs with fidelity have witnessed:

1. a reduction in harmful and violent behavior (Armour, 2013; Mirsky, 2003; Tyler, 2006).
2. increased student respect for teachers and paraprofessionals, across varying racial and ethnic groups (Gregory et al., 2015, p. 18; Mirsky, 2003).
3. a decreased racial-discipline gap (Armour, 2013; Baker, 2009; Fronius et al., 2016, p. 19; Gonzalez, 2012; Gregory et al., 2015, p. 18; Suvall, 2009).
4. increased student connectedness and improved school climate (Gonzalez, 2012, Mirsky 2003).
5. improved student academic achievement (Gonzalez, 2012).