

The Seven Do's and Don'ts of School Discipline Reform

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DO worry about racial discrimination and implicit bias when determining punishments for students who misbehave.

Group 1. Advocates for fair school discipline are right to be alarmed by the dramatic racial disparities. Schools nationwide suspended 2.7 million students in 2015–16—100,000 fewer students than 2013–14. But African American male students represented a quarter of all students who received an out-of-school suspension in 2015–16, despite making up only 8 percent of enrollment. Multiple studies have found that educator bias explains some of these disparities.

DON'T assume that racial bias alone explains disparities in discipline rates.

2. The same studies that find evidence of racial bias in disciplinary actions also find that such bias only explains some of the disparities. Differences in student behavior are also a major factor. That is not because of the race of the students, but because, tragically, different racial groups face different kinds and degrees of trauma, abuse, and deprivation, many of them associated with poverty.

DO show empathy for kids whose misbehavior is due to difficult life circumstances.

3. Educators need to understand the truly tough circumstances that some children face outside of school and do their best to help them cope. Identifying appropriate mental-health supports is particularly important. Addressing the underlying causes of student misbehavior can go a long way toward nipping it in the bud.

DON'T engage in the soft bigotry of low expectations.

4. It's just as important for empathy not to turn into excuses for behavior that is out of line or compromises students' academic potential. All students need to learn how to control their impulses and behave in acceptable ways, as well as cultivate an attitude that reflects motivation and engagement.

DO find ways to address misbehavior that lead to positive changes and protect opportunities to learn.

5. Long suspensions reduce learning time for those being punished and may not improve their behavior. It's worth trying in-school suspension for nonviolent offenses, with supports for students so they can behave better and continue learning the valuable skills and knowledge that schools exist to teach them.

DON'T just send disruptive kids back to their classrooms.

6. Those who break rules can't be our exclusive concern; their classmates also have the right to learn. We must protect their learning environment to stay on track and close achievement gaps. [Research also shows what common sense indicates](#): One or two disruptive students can erode the learning of an entire classroom. It should alarm us that in 2015–16, [43 percent of educators reported classroom misbehavior that affects their ability to teach students](#), according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

First Hyperlink: Katrina's Children: Evidence on the Structure of Peer Effects from Hurricane Evacuees <https://www.nber.org/papers/w15291>

Second Hyperlink: Despite Focus on School Shootings, Classroom Violence is on the Decline — and 5 Other Key Facts from a New Federal Report on School Safety <https://www.the74million.org/despite-focus-on-school-shootings-classroom-violence-is-on-the-decline-and-5-other-key-facts-from-a-new-federal-report-on-school-safety/>

DO address "suspension factories.

7. A 2013 report by researchers at The Civil Rights Project at UCLA found that thousands of public schools suspend more than a quarter of their students every year. And that is still the case for too many schools today—a sign that they are careening out of control on disciplinary measures. While it's bad to ignore schools with such high rates of suspensions, it's arguably worse to respond by simply commanding that they get their numbers down without providing massive amounts of support.